



## MY NAME IS NICHOLAS

“What is the purpose of human life?” His words burned in my ears. He said he’d kill me if I answered wrong. I closed my eyes. So this was it? My life depended on me figuring out why I wanted to keep it in the first place.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. I have to give you some background information first. My name is Nicholas.

In twenty-first century English I go by Nick and Nicholas and for members of the forty-third century Scorstavian race it’s Nikkolash. I am writing this account in twenty-first century English because it is your native tongue. I’ve translated most of the clichés, measurement units, and phrases common to other times and places into those with which you will be more familiar. In most places it’s a paraphrased translation of my original excursion. I tried to keep my words as close to the original as possible, but in some instances updating the syntax was preferable. This is all in an attempt to help you understand the story as easily as possible.

In the time and place that our story begins, I was by all accounts as average as possible. I was five feet nine inches tall, nineteen years old, with a downright plain face: not ugly, but certainly not handsome. I had a knack for boats and a penchant for planting, but by all accounts I was a pretty average guy. At least, that was how I viewed myself at the time.

I had dark hair, brown eyes, and lightly olive colored skin, the type of person you would be unable to classify by ethnicity no matter how hard you tried. I was a citizen of the great city of Athens, living the middle class life of the soldier with a mid-sized olive orchard behind my mid-sized home. To be more specific, at the beginning of this story I was in the middle of deserting the great army of Athens, so I suppose I was a citizen of nowhere. Which is fitting, because

nowhere is exactly what I found myself in the middle of. My name is Nicholas Alexander, and this is my story.

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The Great War in Troy quieted behind me as I crept toward the beach. The fighting was done for the day, and the Trojans had returned to their fortress. I heard the cries of men dying. Screams of pain and loss hung in the night sky around me, each memory of the death of a friend was brutally branded in the blood-soaked sand. All around the camp, men were putting out their torches for the night, the look of desolation on their faces. Whether or not Helen was beautiful enough to launch this crusade, she certainly wasn't beautiful enough to merit its continuation. I had reached the end of my rope. I had no companions left, no hope left, and I had an unusually average amount of courage to begin with, all of which was gone. It was replaced with fear and cowardice after three years of gut-wrenching war.

The sky was clear and the light shining from the stars ladled itself out onto every movement in the camp on the beach. My feet felt the first touch of icy cold water and the sheer pleasure of it increased my resolve to get away from this moral wasteland. Two-hundred and thirty-seven of our ships had been destroyed by Trojans sneaking aboard and setting them ablaze, and the debris from the last fifty still clung to the shore. I searched among the wreckage looking for a piece large enough to board as a raft, and found one only lightly suctioned to the sand. It was obviously the curved siding of a ship only just big enough for me to stretch out across it in every direction. I flipped it into the surf, hoping it would stay intact. If I could just circle around the bay, there were bound to be Trojans on the outskirts of the city who would help me.

The ship's detached siding held together and I clumsily clamored into the bowl of the makeshift boat. I rowed with my hands away from the shore as quickly and quietly as possible and looked into the sky hoping that the gods were not watching as I deserted my duty.

It wasn't until thirty minutes of rowing away from the shore that I chanced a look back at the camp. Only the flickering lights of torches not yet extinguished marked the Grecian presence. The remaining ships were anchored close to the shore, or run aground on the beach and their massive shadows blotted out much of the shoreline.

I gazed around trying to determine which side of the bay I should head towards to have the best chance of survival when suddenly the stars disappeared. It was as if the gods had blown them out and their light had been replaced by a thick swirling cloud.

Thunder rumbled within the cloud and flashes of lightning crackled from one inner edge to another, but no strikes ever extended past the surface of the dense mass. I whirled back around to get a glimpse of the shoreline, but all trace of it had disappeared. The only things that existed anymore were the boat, the endless ocean, this deafening cloud, and me.

Gradually, a man emerged from the cloud, which peeled away from his body. His flesh was shimmering and bright, so bright that I had to squint in order to take in his appearance. It looked like his entire body was made of lightning. It was as if a single bolt of lightning had the exact form of the most wonderfully proportioned man I had ever seen, but the surface of his skin had jagged bits sticking out a fraction of an inch. It's difficult to explain without seeing it for yourself, but it was as if he were both a man and a bolt of lightning at the same time.

He wore a white knee-length tunic with a braided gold rope securing it around his waist and no other clothing. His hair was a flash of metallic colors, at one moment bronze, the next gold, and the next silver. The cloud arced around his body creating a pocket for him to stand in,

and as casually as a man asking for the time he said the most frightening thing I have ever heard in my life.

“I will ask you one question. If you answer correctly, you will live. If you answer incorrectly, I will strike you from existence. There will be no memory of you on this earth, and those you have loved will forget they ever knew you. Refusing to answer will result in the same. No one has ever answered correctly. The question is this: What is the purpose of human life?”

I stared at him a moment. He was absolutely motionless. I tried to ask a question, but he was immovable.

I closed my eyes. So this was it? My life depended on me figuring out why I wanted to keep it in the first place. The terror instilled in me by this man overwhelmed me. I thought of trying to run away, but the intensity in the man’s eyes dissuaded me. I would have to find the answer. With great effort, I relaxed my body, laid back in my little boat, and thought. What were my options?

The first answer I thought of was conquest. My entire life as a soldier thus far had revolved around military superiority. The domination of other states and keeping Athens the one pure Ionian nation was the purest of intents.

My heart began to race as I considered this thought. Surely conquest was our purpose as people. We were meant to dominate one another, to consume one another, and the successful consumption of another was the fulfillment of our existence. I began to think through the answer and discovered only one slight flaw. Eventually, we will be consumed, if not by another person then by death, and our conquest will have been in vain. Everything we had previously brought under our control would be released and return to being governed by the laws of nature. Conquest was a finite goal, and I needed to find an eternal goal, an infinite purpose.

I searched for another answer. If conquest could be defeated by death, then the legacy of your conquest, the eternal quality of it must be the goal. The purpose of life is to be remembered. We have to carve a mark into the stones of this earth that will in some way outlive death, resist the natural erosion, and live forever. If that is correct then the meaning of life in essence is to simply live, and whoever does that the longest lives the most purposeful life. I considered this for quite some time. This seemed to be the answer. The meaning of life is to be remembered for your life. I was about to deliver my answer when a curious thought popped into my head.

*No one has ever answered correctly.* I was unsure of how many before me had been caught in this cloud, and how many before me had been forced into this dark challenge, but I had to assume that many before me had given this answer. The desire to be known, to leave a legacy, is the most primal desire of men. How many before me must have said that their purpose was to be remembered, only to be met with the exact opposite fate? This thought, once it had come to full fruition in my mind, convinced me to look for another answer.

Pleasure. Perhaps the purpose of life is to simply enjoy it while you can. I thought about what brought me pleasure: strong drinks, beautiful women, good food, peaceful waters, and consuming anything that allowed me to escape the pain of this world. My heart pounded loudly in my ears. I didn't think about this too long. I knew from experience that pleasure didn't last. Either the ever increasing appetite made the pleasure unpalatable, or the cruel forces of life stole them away.

My mind began to wander back to my friends in Sparta. I saw Jutas standing next to his wife, his children running around in front of him. Maybe the purpose of life was family. To love a woman and child and eventually to carry on your family name was as close to eternal as

anyone could get. But still it was not enough. Eventually your blood would dilute. Your family name would die and you would be left forgotten.

I thought and thought, pondered and pondered. Every time I arrived at a reasonable answer, I would reasonably defeat that answer. Every idea I had died on the battlefield of my mind. That was when the true answer completely winded me.

Death. Every answer had ended in death: death of ideas, or death of legacy, death of love, or death of life, it made no difference. And finally I came to my conclusion.

The purpose of life is death. Life exists only as a contrast, a precursor, to death. Every life, every idea, every love, and every thought eventually ends in death. My job was to find the purpose of a man, and a man does not exist except to fulfill a purpose, and the only purpose that every man will most assuredly fulfill is death. We live so that we can die, and everything in life is a natural attempt to resist our natural conclusion.

So there it was. I had my answer. An answer no man before me would have given.

I gazed into the being's eyes, the hopelessness of my reality fully resting on my face.  
“The purpose of human life is human death.”

He froze. Even the light emanating from his body stopped flickering. His neck slowly twisted so that his eyes were perfectly in line with mine. “Correct,” he whispered. “Correct,” he said aloud. “Correct!” he shouted. Then in a booming voice, deep and constant, he began to speak just loud enough to make me uncomfortable, but not so loud as to make me cover my ears, “Nicholas Alexander, you among all men have correctly gleaned the purpose of your existence. It is in death that the answers to all of your unanswerable questions lie. It is in death that understanding life can be obtained and only once the purpose of death has been fulfilled can the

purpose of your life change. Do you understand?" In saying all this the being had not moved, and his eyes were still locked with mine.

"N-not really," I responded shakily, after my tongue had detached itself from the roof of my mouth.

The lightning man tilted his head, and his eyes narrowed. His voice became quiet, almost a whisper. "Do you want to change your purpose?"

"Yes," I said.

"Correct," he whispered again. "Now we are off. You have quite a journey ahead of you, Nicholas. Brace yourself."

The cloud began to move in around me. Lightning flashed, and my improvised boat disappeared. My feet lifted into the air and the cloud began to swirl. It engulfed me. I couldn't see anything except dark gray and flashes of lightning.

Just when I thought my body couldn't handle any more nausea, everything halted and I was standing on the flattest whitest stone I had ever seen. I looked, and everything around me shone brightly, so brightly, in fact, that my eyes snapped shut. I squinted them open enough to see the lightning-man standing in front of me smiling from ear to ear.

## CHAPTER 2 – Welcome to the Syllogy

“Don’t be afraid to open your eyes Nicholas. If you don’t, we’ll never get anywhere.”

The man sounded lighthearted, almost jovial. His entire demeanor had changed from what it was on the beach of Troy. Here, wherever here was, he sounded like a regular person. I opened my eyes to take in his appearance again. They stung initially from the brightness, but shortly, the pain receded, and I could see everything clearly.

The man who stood in front of me had changed. His skin still shone slightly, as if his body contained light, but it was more of a twinkle or a shimmer than a steady stream like before. He looked much less like a bolt of lightning and much more like a man, though his rough edges still remained, but softer than they had been. His hair and dress were the same as well, but there was less flash in the gold around his waist, and the metallic glimmer of his hair seemed to gleam more slowly. His appearance was royal and welcoming instead of spectacularly frightening. The place I stood was as flat as an altar and extremely white. It looked like a beach only instead of loose sand I was standing on hard rock.

The man saw me eyeing the substance and said, “That’s concrete. One of your human inventions actually, you haven’t gotten there yet. Don’t let it bother you too much. Just take a look around!”

I did, and what greeted my eyes was the most beautiful sight that’s ever been seen. On my left was a sharp drop off about two hundred feet to the canopy of a huge jungle.

Instead of the usual green, there were treetops of every color scattered throughout. There were some orange and red a few purple and even a powder blue here and there. Its effect was a wavy look on the top of the jungle. Contributing to this were a few huge poles that jutted up out of the trees. They looked like massive silver masts of ships with vines draping up and down them

as ragged sails. On the right was a colossal white wall that extended into the clouds and was long enough that I could not see where it ended ahead of me or behind.

A fifty-foot opening was carved into the wall and filling the opening was what looked like a mix of blue fire and blue mud, but it was contained and solid, filling the hole, never spreading beyond it. I looked back at the man and asked, “Is this Olympus? Am I in the presence of the gods?”

“Pssh, please. Those *gods* you worship are the rejects of this place. They just get a kick out of you thinking they are all knowing and super powerful.”

“Then where are we?”

“Believe me when I say that you wouldn’t understand.”

“Ok... who are you?”

“Oh my, where are my manners?” He was so cheery now I couldn’t help but smile a bit. “I am,” at this point he made a sound that most closely resembled a ship crashing into a rock wall and filling with water if it were to happen all in one second. “But I don’t expect you to be able to pronounce that, so just call me Chak.”

“Chak?” I said slowly. “Alright. Well, you already know my name... so... what is this journey that you mentioned earlier?”

“Oh don’t worry about that. We’ve got some time. Right now why don’t we have a look around? I realize that there are probably a ton of questions running through your head, but the best way to answer them is to spend some time acclimating yourself to this place. Why don’t we go into the city and find you something to eat? You must be starving after that journey.”

“Alright,” I said, a little bit dazed. I walked toward Chak, and now that I got to see him up close he was much smaller than I first thought. To be fair, he was still much taller than me,

but I guessed that he only reached about six and a half feet, which, in comparison to the fifteen he had been in Troy, felt downright short now. He turned toward the blue goo archway and passed through it like nothing at all. Gritting my teeth and hoping for the best, I followed.

As I walked through, the most wonderful joy came over me. It infected my entire body and wiped away all my fears, doubts, and questions about this place. Suddenly I was full of energy and could feel every part of myself right down into my toes. It was so pleasing that I let out one big laugh. Chak laughed also.

“I know how you feel. It gets me every time as well. So what shall we eat?”

The question made me realize how hungry I was, and the awareness of my body that came from walking through the blue goo made it all the more necessary. It was a strange feeling to be extremely hungry but not worry about it at all. The joy that enveloped me had the thought, “I sure am hungry, isn’t that wonderful?” running through my mind.

Chak looked around and I did the same. The city that lay before me seemed to unfurl like a cloak after having been bundled up and lying in dirt. Little specks of something or other floated off of it far into the distance and the longer I looked the farther I could see. Directly in front of me was a cobbled stone street that closely resembled the roads we had in Athens. To the left and right, as far as the eye could see, there were white buildings of varying heights some with designs resembling the Athens that I knew. One building had beautiful white columns all around it.

“That one is modeled after the Parthenon. It’s going to be built in Athens in about six hundred years according to your timeline. Of course that’s happening right now since you’re here and not there. Also in a place called New York, on earth, they’re building that one over there.” I looked in the direction he was pointing and a tall brown building that was full of little

square holes sat nestled in between a cluster of buildings that completely dwarfed it by comparison. “Yep. The empire state building. The Americans brag about that one a lot.”

I looked up at his face completely baffled.

“I know you don’t understand. Don’t worry about it.”

I shrugged and looked back in front of me. The cobbled street slowly became wider and flatter as it wound into the city, and only then did it dawn on me that there was no one else anywhere around. I asked Chak about this peculiar fact.

“They’re there. You just can’t see them yet. I promise that will make at least a little bit of sense once you settle in. So what about that lunch, huh?”

Chak started walking at a rather brisk pace and I jogged along with him to keep up.

“We’ll go back to my place and I’ll fix you something. I think I have some of your food around somewhere.”

We walked down the cobbled street a bit then took the second left turn available. One right, another left, then a long straight stretch followed by a staircase down a few feet, and one more left. We arrived in between two buildings that reached about fifty feet in the air and were extremely close together. Nestled in the small connecting wall between them was a plain looking purple wooden door. We entered the door to an odd sort of room that had huge metal shields covering three of the walls and the remaining wall had three doors lined up in a row. We entered the middle door and I saw what I now know to be a forty third century Scorstavian kitchen, but at the time I thought it was a Spartan torture chamber.

Thankfully, the joy of the blue archway kept me from passing out as Chak moved from contraption to contraption preparing two very different meals. The one he gave me ended up being a leg of lamb prepared in a kingly fashion for an extremely expensive banquet back home

in Athens. The meal he ate looked like purple goop with a few solid chunks of rotten fish mixed in.

He explained to me that it was a cuisine in his world that would be an average lunch. I suppose in twentieth century American terms it was like a ham sandwich. Chak said little else as we ate. I did my best to eat politely, but my hunger got the better of my manners and more than a few flecks of food fell from my face. When I had finished my meal Chak stood up and cleared the eating surface – I hesitate to use the word table – and sat down across from me. He stared right into my eyes with a glimmer in his. I was going crazy with anticipation.

“For the next few minutes,” he said, “you can ask all that you want, but then I must tell you the reasons for which I have brought you here, and the tasks you must complete before leaving. Do you understand?” I nodded. “Then go ahead and ask.”

My head swam in thoughts, so it took a moment to pick one out of the storm.

“What did you mean when you said that I couldn’t see the people here *yet*? Will I be able to see them soon?”

“Yes, sort of. The beings that inhabit this place are invisible to humans at first. I can’t really explain why that is, but once the humans know what they’re looking for, and start looking for them, the inhabitants become more visible. The more you know about what you’re looking at and the more focused you are in that endeavor the more clearly you will be able to see the creatures who live here. To make them fully visible and audible they have to want you to see them. So you can get a glimpse of them, enough to get around here, but to see them fully they have to make the final connection.”

“Why can I see and hear you?”

“I overrode some of the rules to get you here. We can do that kind of thing on occasion. But that gets into what I will tell you in a moment, so just hold that question in the back of your mind for now.”

“Alright. Well the other big question on my mind is: Where are we?”

“That is an excellent question and one of which you will understand very little even after I tell you, but I’ll do my best. There is a lot more in this universe than you are aware of. There are other dimensions and other realms that humanity, as a whole, will never reach. A select few, like you, will get to see a bigger portion of the picture. This realm is called ‘The Syllogy of the Universe.’ This city in particular is the capital of the Syllogy and bears the same name. Basically, this realm is every time period that exists on earth combined, and inhabited by Umbili like me who are like messengers for the Higher-ups. We all have different jobs, skills, and personalities, but all have the same basic goal, to do the will of the Higher-ups.”

“Higher-ups?”

“Don’t even bother trying to fathom them. They are to me what we are to you, and to be honest I don’t really even understand you. The Higher-ups are the ones in charge of everything, here and on earth. The gods you thought were real in Athens are really just creatures from this place pretending to be Higher-ups. The Higher-ups are the real deal.”

It didn’t faze me too much to learn that the gods of Athens were not really in control. They always seemed weak to me. I always suspected that there must be something more powerful than them, and the feeling given to me by the blue goo made it even easier to let go of the gods of Athens.

“Okay, well then I guess that brings me to the question you told me not to ask. Why am I here?” I asked it hesitantly, honestly a little frightened as to what the answer would be.

“For that I need to tell you a story.”

## CHAPTER 3 – The Story

“This is going to be hard to explain,” said Chak, “At this moment, you aren’t in time as you know it. Time exists differently here than it does on earth.

“First let me tell you that there are three types of time. There’s linear, which moves in a straight line, cyclical, which runs in a circle, and stagnant, which is time that doesn’t move.

“There is a realm of the Syllogy of the Universe that keeps all these types of time. A garden. Time grows in that garden. You see, on earth you only live in time, it’s intangible, but in a certain place here in the Syllogy of the Universe, time is physical as well, and this physical place controls the intangible time everywhere else in the Syllogy. The intangible quality of time in the Syllogy only exists in the minds of its inhabitants.

“This garden is an unfathomable place and Umbili, that’s what our race is called, can’t enter the garden where time grows. But one of us tried to. An Umbili named Mendrax tried to get into the forbidden time garden. Unfortunately, he succeeded in his attempt. To put it mildly, he messed stuff up. Mendrax went crazy using the power of the garden, as crazy as Teleon!”

Who’s Teleon?” I asked.

“It’s just an expression. Don’t worry about it. Mendrax, went mad and used the garden to travel through time and space to change whatever he wanted about everyone’s present, past, and future. He changed earth, and he changed the Syllogy.

“It’s hard to explain to you. Being a human and all, the things he changed that had such a massive effect on you probably seem almost normal. But he fractured humanity. An important change that he helped to cause was the meaning of life for humans. The meaning of life for humans was not originally death; Mendrax’s meddling made it so.

“The Higher-ups obviously found out about what he did. They assembled their forces and captured Mendrax, but something went wrong there too. Because of the changes that Mendrax had made while in the forbidden time garden, he took powers for himself he was never meant to have. He even managed to imitate some of the attributes of the Higher-ups.

“Imagine a young child suddenly being given immense physical strength, but not having the mind to control it. This was Mendrax with these new powers. The power he took consumed him, and even worse, made him impossible to kill. Because of this, the Higher-ups quickly quarantined the area around the garden so that Mendrax couldn’t leave it anymore. They trapped him there with his greed and his power, but the damage had already been done. The human purpose had already been changed. The Umbili no longer had their purity, and worst of all he began poisoning linear time.”

“What do you mean by that? *He began poisoning linear time,*” I asked.

“How can I explain this? First let me explain what the different types of time are. When you, a human, choose to do something, sometimes you are stuck with it. When you decide to cut off your arm, your arm is not growing back. That is a stagnant choice. That’s a choice that resides in stagnant time. The effect is locked in time and nothing you can do will bring your arm back as the linear part of time marches onward. Stagnant time is very much like the past. It is locked in place and does not move or change.

“Other times in the human world a result of a choice can be changed. You can, on occasion, change your mind and the only thing lost in that choice is time itself. If you choose to live in Athens, you can later move to Sparta, and the only downside of living in Athens was that you lost the time that you could have lived in Sparta. If you choose to study swordplay, you can later focus your learning on battle strategy. The only thing you lost in that choice was time spent

studying one or the other. These are linear choices. Most choices fall in this realm. Linear time is very much like the present, at any moment you can make a choice to change the present, and the present is the only thing you have any degree of control over.

“Other times in the human world, you get a glimpse of a cyclical choice, a choice whose effects almost lie in cyclical time. You repeatedly become hungry and can choose different ways to satiate that hunger based on the moment, but no matter what, some time down the road, that choice will confront you again. You can choose to cut your hair a certain length, but it will grow back and you will be faced with the same choice again. Cyclical time is most similar to the future: constantly changing, but never really changing at all.

“These aren’t perfect examples, because you really only have linear time on earth, but we have all three perfectly here. The other thing to note is that linear time is the core, or the mixture, of the other two. Linear time is the most important.

“Mendrax began poisoning linear time and little of it is left in the garden. We think he did it to ransom the world to the Higher-ups for his escape, but we’re not sure. Whatever the reason, the delicate balance of time that exists in this realm is being thrown off balance. Now, thanks to Mendrax, all of our choices are slowly dividing into either stagnant or cyclical ones. The choices that once were linear are now becoming permanent decisions or recurring situations. Small things like where to eat lunch have become either set decisions that we can’t change or complete chaos so that we can never make up our mind, we just keep changing it and go hungry. Life as we know it is devolving. The effects right now are small, but the Higher-ups are sure that they will get worse.”

“When did all of this happen?”

"Well, like I said, time is different here, so 'when' is a strange question. Mendrax broke into the forbidden garden about three years ago and the Higher-ups trapped him there a few weeks later. We noticed the devolution of time days after he was trapped and I was charged with the task of finding a human who could help us. I've been sent by the Higher-ups to your world in different time periods to different people trying to find someone who was aware of the imbalance that Mendrax had caused. I had to find someone who could grasp the hopelessness and evil of his change. You are that person."

"Woah! Slow down Chak. What do you mean, I'm that person? How do you know?"

"You answered the question!"

"So what?! Who cares? That doesn't mean I'm the right guy!"

"Yes it does. Don't you understand? No one has ever answered that question correctly before."

"Well, how many people have you asked?"

"Six-hundred and sixteen."

There was a poignant silence. Chak had killed six-hundred and sixteen humans before me – just wiped them off the face of the earth. He erased them from the memory of their loved ones. Chak looked at me and I knew he could tell what I was thinking.

"I had no choice," he said. "When the Higher-ups give a command I am bound by my existence to follow it. I can't *not* do what they tell me. That's a choice Umbili have never had, except once. I didn't enjoy it. When you were killing men on the beaches of Troy, did you enjoy it?"

“No. I only did it so that they wouldn’t kill me. It was eat or be eaten, kill or be killed. I guess that is the kind of thing Mendrax wants to see happen on earth.” I looked at the floor as I spoke.

“Yes it is. And it’s sort of the same with me. The Higher-ups just don’t have to kill me; they’ve got some power that stops me from resisting. Obedience to them is a part of me, knit into my being. It’s one of the things that makes me what I am: an Umbili. Thankfully, they are trustworthy and they never lie. They told me that the fate of the humans I did away with was already decided and their time had come. I believe them.”

“How do you know you can trust them?” I asked.

“Because they are good Nicholas. They are very good. It’s their nature to do what is good and what is right. If they say something is right, we can trust that it is. Beyond that, the Higher-ups owe nothing to anyone. They created everything. It is only because they are good that anyone is alive to begin with. It’s their goodness that allows us all to take another breath!”

“I don’t think killing people is right or good,” I said hotly.

“I know. I won’t be able to convince you, it’s a conclusion you have to reach on your own. When you get to know the Higher-ups, you just know that they are right in what they choose to do. I can’t explain it better than that. It’s the same reason I know they were right in choosing you,” he said.

“So, why did the Higher-ups want you to find,” I hesitated, thinking of the right way to indicate that someone else was the right person, then gave up after glancing at Chak’s face, “me,” I finished, defeated.

“Well, before Mendrax had been trapped, he took some of the Umbili with him. The fact that Mendrax had found a way to disobey the Higher-ups intrigued many of our kind, and he told

them that, if they desired to, he would give them the ability to disobey the Higher-ups as well. There were about six hundred Umbili total back then, and about a tenth of them went with Mendrax. We can't change allegiances now though. Those who chose Mendrax soon had that freedom taken away from them and those who refused him were never offered it again, so we no longer have a choice in the matter. There are powers that I don't understand at work. You may not realize this, but as a human you have certain powers that we Umbili don't have and don't understand."

"Really? What powers?"

"Well, for one thing, you can disobey the Higher-ups. You don't have to do what they tell you, and there's a lot more power in that than you may realize. For another thing, we may outweigh you in physical strength, but in strength of will, you are far superior."

"That's it, disobedience and will-power? Those are the two spectacular gifts I have that brought me here? A bratty two-year-old has disobedience and will-power!"

"There are many other gifts you have that you will have to discover as you go, but there's one more the Higher-ups instructed me to tell you about. The problem is, I really don't understand it, but perhaps you will. They said to tell you that your greatest strength lies in your ignorance. Your ignorance will light the way. Does that make any sense to you?"

I thought for a moment. My ability to be ignorant seemed worthless. If anything it would be a hindrance to me instead of a strength. My ignorance could only mean that I wouldn't be prepared for something that I should be prepared for. "No," I said flatly. "I don't see how being ignorant could possibly be a gift."

"Well, I hope you figure it out. You were also chosen from amidst all the humans available because you have a greater sense of Mendrax's actions, and a greater ability to reason.

You figured out the purpose he had given humanity but had tried to hide. You can sense him where others can't. You have the gift of discernment, and that's why you were chosen."

"Alright. Let's say I believe you and I accept that I am the right person to be here. What is it that you want me to do? Why did you bring me here?"

"Good question. As I've told you, this world is deteriorating. When Mendrax began poisoning linear time and thus removing linear choices, he put a countdown timer on all of us. Eventually this world will do one of two things: freeze or burn. If the stagnant choice wins out over the cyclical choice, we will freeze. Eventually all action will be locked in time, and life will cease to exist because we cease to choose. If the cyclical choice wins out over the stagnant, this world will become like a loop that gets smaller and smaller the more it gets repeated. Eventually everyone will be locked in constant repetitive choice until we cease to exist because we cease to do anything but choose. It's dizzying to consider but true nonetheless. The Higher-ups have told me that we normally rest in a delicate balance between stagnant and cyclical, but because of Mendrax's poison, the balance becomes more and more delicate each day, and it's just a matter of time before something, or someone, tips the scales and choices, and thus life, become meaningless."

There was a long silence when Chak stopped talking.

"Ok."

"Ok?"

"Ok. I'll help. What is it I need to do?"

Chak smiled. "I knew you would agree. There's something unusual inside you Nicholas Alexander. The Higher-ups were wise in their selection method. Here is what I've been told to

tell you. You need to travel to Mendrax's garden, the time garden where he was trapped. It's in an exiled land in the far west at the end of the great river."

He stood up and walked over to a small display case that lined the wall. On it was a medium sized platform on which rested a little purple crystal. It had a protective glass dome around it. Chak raised the dome carefully away from the crystal and picked up some long metal tongs. He lifted the crystal off of the display with the tongs and told me to hold out my hands. I did so, and he laid the crystal into them delicately. It was cool to the touch.

"This is a seed of linear time, the last one we have. We need you to plant this seed in the forbidden garden of time and..."

He paused and looked seriously at me like he was trying to say something, but couldn't.

"And what?"

"And according to the Higher-ups, everything will be fixed. Mendrax's power over the garden will be taken away and he will finally be defeated."

"And you believe the Higher-ups? How do you know they aren't manipulating you?"

"I have no choice in the matter."

"I should have known. Alright! I accept your mission. Let's go."

"Slow down a little Nicholas. Before we leave we need to visit Brew. She'll give us equipment for our journey."

"You're coming with me?"

"Of course! A bunch of us are actually. We can't let a rogue human loose in the middle of the Syllogy of the Universe. No offense."

"None taken," I said. "I don't have to obey the rules like you do. You're allowed to be suspicious."

## CHAPTER 4 – Dr. Cornelius Spencer Lee

“So,” I said, “where is this Brew woman that we are supposed to meet?”

“Oh, about that, you really shouldn’t refer to Umbili as ‘men’ or ‘women.’ We’re not human, and some of us are a bit touchy when a human puts us on their level. I don’t really mind, but I know Brew will take offense. She’s been kind of emotional lately, and she’s been having mood swings like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Ok. What should I call you?”

“In place of the word ‘human’ say ‘Umbili’. It’s both formal and informal, and both singular and plural. And in place of ‘man’, or ‘woman’, say ‘dude’ for males and ‘dade’ for females.”

“What about he and she or him and her?” I asked.

“Those are still acceptable, because there are still male and female Umbili, just not men and women. Humans are distinct creatures from Umbili, the Higher-ups designed you in those two categories, man and woman, for special things.”

At this point in my life I didn’t know that I would be bringing the word “dude” back to earth in the 1880’s and popularizing it, but it just goes to show you that you can never be too careful with your language.

“What about ‘people’ and ‘person’?” I asked, hedging my bets.

“Personhood isn’t a distinctly human quality. Even the Higher-ups are personal beings, but they sure aren’t humans. A lot of Umbili don’t understand that though, so it’s probably best to leave those alone,” said Chak.

“Fine. Where is this Brew dade that we are supposed to meet?”

“She lives on The Walk of Life.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a street name. It’s about a quarter of a mile away. I think we can walk there. It will be good practice for the journey ahead; plus, you’ve had too many surprises today to deal with the excitement of a car. It’s probably not safe anyway considering Mendrax built them all.”

“Was I supposed to understand that?” I asked.

“No. Don’t worry about it.”

We walked out from between the two buildings that marked the entrance to Chak’s home and took an immediate left. We walked through the empty streets, but Chak appeared to be weaving through an invisible crowd. I found it odd, since there was no one else around, but then I remembered what Chak had said about humans not being able to see Umbili without concentrating on where they were, and never being able to see them clearly until they chose to let you do so. I asked him if there were other Umbili around, and he shouted back over his shoulder, as if trying to overcome a large crowd with his voice, “Yes they’re all over this place. Excuse me dude. Look hard directly in front of you. Try to feel them pushing past you.”

The moment he said this, I felt a large shoulder collide against mine.

“You didn’t mention that I couldn’t touch them before being aware of them.”

“Oh. I didn’t?” he shouted back. “Then I guess it’s a good thing you’re figuring that out now.”

Another shoulder bumped up against mine, and something hard banged into my knee.

“On second thought, I’m going to try not to see them right now. We’ll try the whole ‘seeing the Umbili thing’ once we get to Brew’s,” I shouted back, feeling rather silly since it was dead silent on the street from my point of view.

“Okay!” Chak yelled.

“So, can these people, I mean Umbili, sorry, see me even though I can’t see them?”

“Sort of. They see you transparently, and the more you see them, the more opaque you become. You’re basically a ghost to them, but a ghost that they’re not afraid of because they know you’re a human,” he yelled.

Strangely enough, now that I had begun to notice the Umbili, it was harder for me not to notice them. It’s interesting how many things work that way. You do fine without knowing, but once you get a glimpse of it, you can’t go back to the way you were. I did alright at ignoring them, but I still felt a bump or a jostle every once in a while and a few knocks to the head, which I could have sworn were intentional blows.

Eventually we took a turn off of the busy main street and went about thirty feet down the new road only to find a huge watery canal interrupting it. A beautiful boat with red siding bobbed up and down in the water. It had an ornate carving of something winged attached to the bow, and a long wooden rod descended into the water fastened to the boat by a ring.

“Wow,” I said. “That is gorgeous.”

“You really think so? Eh, public transportation.”

“Are you kidding?” I said as he climbed into the boat. “I can’t believe how intricate this design is.”

I approached the edge of the water and ran my fingers along the hand carved vines that twisted and twirled up and down the edge of the boat.

“Are you coming?” Chak asked impatiently.

“What? I thought we were walking to Brew’s.”

“We were,” he said, “but I got tired of you grunting every time someone hit you on the head, plus there was a major accident at the intersection of Ben and Jerry that I didn’t want to

have to deal with. Blame it on Teleon I guess!” He laughed. “We’ve been having a lot more car accidents since Mendrax left. It’s causing a bit of civil unrest. We’ll take the canals to Brew’s back door.”

“Ok.” I said, not entirely sure exactly what Chak had just told me, but climbed into the boat anyway. As soon as I sat down on the middle bench, Chak pushed off from the dock using the long stick.

“You know, boats are sort of a hobby of mine,” I said.

“Really? Is that why you stared so longingly at this one?”

“There’s something graceful about the way boats glide on the top of a still water. There was a small lake near my home in Athens where I would go with some of my friends. We would just sit on the shore and watch the boats. It was peaceful. Some of the best memories I have are on that shore. That’s where I met,” I hesitated.

“That’s where you met...?”

“Never mind,” I said quickly. I didn’t want to mention Pathena. He probably knew about her already, but if he didn’t I wanted to keep it that way. I changed the subject quickly. “Can you read my thoughts?”

“No. What made you think that I could?”

“Well, when you showed up in that cloud in Troy you knew quite a bit about me.” The boat suddenly rocked back and forth as Chak shifted his weight, plunging the stick onto the other side.

“It’s called research Nicholas. The Higher-ups told me most of what I needed to know about you. Nicholas Alexander. Olive orchard. Soldier. Single. No children. Parents dead.

Average. I can't read your mind. The Higher-ups can in certain situations. They are strange folk."

"Can Mendrax hear my thoughts?"

"Oh, hearing! That reminds me. Put these in your ears. They'll translate everything you hear into Greek for you so I can stop speaking it. You've got a really confusing language," said Chak, handing me what looked like two flesh-colored pebbles. I quickly figured out how to put them in my ear and repeated my question.

"Okay. I got it. So, can Mendrax hear my thoughts?"

"Can you hear me okay?" he asked. I nodded. "Good. Well, I honestly don't know if he can hear your thoughts. I guess we'll find out when we get there. I wouldn't be surprised if he could. I bet he's got a ton of powers that no one is aware of, and he's just biding his time waiting for the right moment to use them."

"Why do you think he did this whole thing? I mean, if it's going to destroy the world, why did he do it? Won't he get destroyed with it?"

"I don't think he realized it would eventually destroy the world," Chak said, "and when he did finally realize it, he was too insane with power to comprehend that ending the world would be a bad thing. He just worships chaos and himself now. He is completely crazy, though he doesn't seem so. If you were to talk to him, he would seem completely normal."

A long pause followed this and I lost myself in thought through the rhythm of the boat's rocks. After a few moments Chak broke the silence. "We're almost there. Do you see that dock up ahead? The one attached to the bright green dome?"

I looked in the direction of Chak's pointing finger. There was a series of tall buildings and interrupting their flow was a single stand-alone dome about thirty feet high.

"That's Brew's place. She's expecting us. When we get there, you tie up the boat, and I'll go greet her and get the formalities out of the way. Just come in the blue door when you're done."

"Okay," I said.

Wood struck wood as we docked the boat. Chak immediately jumped out and walked briskly up to the blue door and entered. The door closed just as I was clambering out of the boat onto dry land, and a curious thought came over me. I was unsupervised in another world.

I wondered what else was special about the Syllogy of the Universe that Chak wasn't telling me. I looked around trying hard to see if there were any Umbili around. I figured that I would at least catch a glimpse of something odd if there were, so I concluded that I was alone. I picked up a rock and tossed it into the canal. A plop followed by a splash met my ears, but nothing else happened. I waited in anticipation of something odd occurring. I glanced around for another rock to throw and spotted a small bug on the ground. It looked like a common beetle. I picked it up and held it in the palm of my hand, studying it. Everything about the beetle appeared normal. I held it right in front of my face and peered into its jet black eyes, hoping to read its mind.

"You're not strange at all, are you?" I asked it. "You're just a stupid little beetle, not a care in the world."

"And might I inquire as to whom it is you are calling unintelligent?"

I whirled around looking for the source of this voice. It had a warm quality to it that invited you to listen closely, but a hard quality that made you scared of what might be said. There was no one around me. I looked back at the beetle.

“Did you hear something? Is there a dude somewhere here that I can’t see?” I asked the beetle in the closest thing to a baby voice that I have ever come to imitating.

“No I am afraid that there are no Umbili present in the immediate area. You were merely startled by the fact that I am speaking to you.”

I looked up from the beetle thinking that someone must be standing in front of me. With my other hand I reached out and waved it around, expecting to make contact with some invisible mass.

“What are you doing? You look rather maladroit at the moment.” The voice seemed to be coming from the beetle. I peered into its beady little eyes.

“Are you talking?” I whispered to it in amazement.

“Oh so it does have deductive reasoning powers. I was beginning to worry. Indeed I am conversing with you homo-sapien. What might be your appellation?”

I stared at the beetle’s tiny mouth, unable to speak and unsure of what it was asking for.

“Your name good sir, what is your name?”

“Uhhhhh, Nicholas.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance Uh Nicholas. My name is Doctor Cornelius Spencer Lee.”

“Doctor?”

“It’s an honorary title,” said the beetle. “You sir, are a human, not many of which manage to walk the fine shores of the City of the Syllogy of the Universe. Might I inquire into the nature of your visit?”

Again I was slightly confused by the beetle’s words.

“Why are you here?” Dr. Lee asked.

"Oh! Well, it's a long story, but in short, I'm here to save the world." I felt stupid saying it, but even stupider saying it to a beetle. "Not to change the subject or anything, but how are you talking?"

"The same way you are I suppose. Air passes over my vocal chords in a manner specified by my brain and my lips and tongue interrupt the flow at certain intervals to produce speech."

"That's not really what I was asking."

"I know it wasn't, but it was a silly question to begin with." Dr. Lee seemed to be rather a know-it-all sort of beetle. "So you're here to see Brew?"

"Yes," I said suddenly remembering why I was standing there. "That reminds me, I've got to go inside, so if you'll excuse me—"

I started to lean down to place the beetle back on the ground.

"Oh bring me along. I'm a good friend of Brew's, and it saves me having to fly in the door after you. It is so tiring."

"Alright." I walked across a small patch of grass toward the blue door, opened it, and entered. Inside was a single open room with green walls that were slightly see-through—I now know that they were tinted windows—and rows and rows of beds stacked on top of each other three high along the outer rim of the circular room. In the center of the room was a jungle of contraptions and machines made from materials I have never seen on earth. I still don't know exactly what they do. I saw Chak standing in the middle of the room next to a huge conical fixture. He was deep in conversation with the air next to him.

A haunting sight then met me. In the bed nearest me a pillow rose into the air and removed itself from its pillowcase. It then laid itself back down at the head of the bed and the

pillowcase flew itself across the room to a pile of soiled bedsheets. I was staggered. I walked over to Chak and asked, “Did you just see that?”

“What?” Chak asked.

“That pillow just uncovered itself.”

Chak started laughing loudly. “No it didn’t. That was Flye.”

“Flye?”

“Her actual name sounds like the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings.” He said it in the Umbili language and I could definitely hear the resemblance. “She’s an Umbili. You’ll meet her later. She’s part of the group I told you was coming along for the ride. There are about fifteen Umbili in this room actually. In fact, this lovely dade is Brew.”

Chak gestured to the air beside him. Understanding that Brew must be standing there, I focused hard on the empty space. After a few seconds a fuzzy outline of a petite woman began to form in front of me.

“Quit squinting kid. It’s rude.”

The voice startled me and I lost my concentration. The outline became fainter. Instead of focusing intently, I took a step back and took in the area around the outline. As I did, Brew’s body became more opaque. I could still see through her, but I could also see a dim gray light emanating from her small body. Her skin was not jagged like Chak’s, but smooth. She was about my height and wore a gray jumpsuit that tucked into a pair of brown leather boots. Around her waist was a gold rope, just like Chak’s. Her hair was similar to Chak’s, but instead of changing color it was a steady bronze. It twinkled in spunky pixie-like spikes, which gave a playful quality to her cute features.

“Can you see her yet?” Chak asked.

“Yes I can see her; she’s just kind of transparent and fuzzy.”

“Brew!” said Chak. “Come on, just let him see you fully. There’s no point in wasting time with this half awareness.”

“Not ‘til he apologizes for squinting! I don’t like squinty humans.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly.

“That’s better,” she said. Immediately she became fully opaque and I heard a small *pop* as she did. “So this is the guy huh? Why is he so short?”

“I didn’t get to choose the human based on height. I had one qualifier, and he qualified,” Chak said.

“He seems a little screwy. I betcha not even Teleon squints that much!” Brew replied. “But, whatever. Let’s get to work. I have all of your gear over there,” she flipped her hand toward her left shoulder, “and I think”—she made two distinct, but hard to duplicate, noises—“are coming back from the showers now, so we can introduce him to the gang in a second.”

Dr. Lee cleared his throat, as loudly as a beetle can, and gave an indignant sigh.

“Is that my buddy doc?” said Brew looking around. I held him up and he flew over to Brew, landing on her shoulder. “How you been boy?”

“I’ve been quite well madam. You’ll want to take care with this one. Make sure to use small words. He doesn’t catch on very quickly.” The doctor pumped as much disdain into his voice as he could. “Still, he has a charming ignorance about him.”

Brew glanced up at me and I slapped a big dumb smile across my face.

“I see,” she said.

“So, how do you two know each other?” I asked, gesturing to the beetle.

"Oh we're old pals," she said. "He came flyin' in here one day hopin' I would save him and his family from a bug bomb somebody had set off over in the Gumption building. Boy, I hauled over there, but turns out his whole nest was gone, so I sorta adopted him, let him use the library and such. He got all smart and moved on, but he still visits me every once in a while, don't ya doc?"

"Indeed," said the beetle. "Everyone needs a friend in life."

She started walking toward the equipment she had mentioned, speaking loudly to the beetle as she went. Chak and I fell in a few paces behind her. I leaned over to Chak and whispered, "Is she alright? She seems sort of," I looked for the right word, so as not to offend, "energetic."

"Ha! You haven't seen anything yet."

"I'll take your word for it. One other thing Chak, just so I don't look like a fool later. What's a doctor?"

## CHAPTER 5 – Back Through the Blue Goo

“...so you see, that’s when a guy named Hippocrates is going to come up with an oath that outlines the ethics of being a doctor. That’s kinda where it all starts.”

Chak was finishing giving me a history of doctors and what they were when we finally reached Brew. She was standing in front of a pile of stuff, the most striking of which was a long thin boat. It looked as if it could seat twelve comfortably with six rows of benches. It was made from a red colored wood, and had been so heavily polished that the sides could be used as a mirror. There were a variety of weapons scattered throughout the pile of gear, some of which I recognized and some completely foreign to me. Sitting in front of it all was a backpack, the opening of which was spread as widely as possible.

“Are we going to be using that boat?” I asked.

“Yeah. Ever since Mendrax turned we’re stuck with this slow outmoded transportation. Stinks don’t it,” said Brew.

Chak interjected to explain. “Mendrax was the Umbili who oversaw all of the technology for the Syllogy before he turned. When he left the Umbili realized that he had sabotaged all of his inventions in the Syllogy. Car engines were exploding, maculators were transporting people to the wrong places and burning their hands when they did, airplanes were dropping out of the sky. It was chaos. The Umbili had to go back to square one with new builders and find new designers to build all new items. We’ve built that boat especially for this group and we’re not using any tech Mendrax had a hand in, just incase.”

I looked more confused than ever.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just complaining about how we’ve been sent back to the Stone Age!”

"I'm just about to get everything packed up," interrupted Brew. "Anything you need to include in the pack Chak?" Brew was rather excited about the process of packing. I glanced down at my belt where I had wedged the linear time seed for safekeeping. I pulled it out and nudged Chak in the ribs. It was the first time I had touched him. His body was hard as steel and my elbow informed me of this fact. He looked down at me and I offered him the seed.

"No, no. You keep that on your person. When we get you changed I'll give you something to put it in." I shrugged and wedged the seed back into my belt. "I think we're fine Brew. You go right ahead and pack."

"Right," she said. She proceeded to lift the boat over her head, as easily as if it were a feather, and pointed the stern into the backpack. She muttered a few words and plunged the boat down into the open bag. Amazingly, it fit with room to spare. The easiest way to explain it would be to say that the boat shrank as she fed it into the bag, but that would not be entirely accurate.

The boat did not change shape or size, nor did the bag, but the larger somehow fit into the smaller with ease. I watched in amazement as Brew did the same with half of the rest of the pile. Four large rolls of fabric, ropes, swords, bows and arrows, stakes, a large supply of a variety of foods, about thirty different pieces of clothing, a bundle of red liquid in plastic bags with tubes on them, and much more slipped into the pack, and no one said a word about it.

I was stunned by the nonchalance with which Chak was treating the situation, and did my best not to look flabbergasted, but simply appear as if this were every day operation for me as well. The last thing to go in was a metallic green ball with strange writing printed on the outside. This was the only object that had trouble fitting into the bag. It seemed as if the ball was fighting against Brew's attempts to force it through the opening, but eventually the flap was closed, the

bag was cinched up and only a few weapons and pieces of clothing lay on the floor where the pile of supplies had previously been.

“We’re ready. Is everyone here?” she said.

Chak glanced around counting on his fingers as he did. It was weird watching him count empty spaces, since I couldn’t see anyone in the group. “Wait, where is Shishu?” he asked.

“Oh he’s waiting for us at the city gate,” Brew chimed in.

“Excellent. Then all we need to do is get Nicholas here cleaned up, and we’ll be off,” Chak said. He took a few steps back and held out his hand waiting for me to pass in front of him. “After you,” he said.

I followed his lead and walked off in the direction he had gestured. A few feet away I saw a door and Chak nodded at it. We went through. In the next room there was nothing but a silver ball on the wall and a stack of folded clothes in the corner. A suit of armor sat next to it. “When you finish getting undressed simply stand in front of that,” he pointed at the silver ball, “It’s called a shower. It will spray water at you so that you can clean yourself off. Then get dressed and put on your armor. I’ll have a sword waiting for you outside. See you in a bit.” Chak exited the room and I did as he instructed. Removing my battered Athenian armor and tattered clothes and tossing them in the corner, I carefully placed the linear time seed on top of the new clothing I was to wear. I showered and dressed.

The new armor waiting for me was unlike anything I had ever seen. For one thing, it was incredibly light. Once I had the full chest piece and armguards on I twisted back and forth to see if it would rub anywhere uncomfortably. From the inside it felt as soft as silk, but when I smacked my hand on the outside it was completely solid. There was no helmet to wear, but there was a pair of leather boots similar to the ones Brew was wearing. I slipped them on my feet and

walked around. It was strange to have my feet fully enclosed, since I had worn only sandals up to that point, and I took a few laps around the room to get used to the feeling. The last thing I donned was a small leather pouch dangling from a long silver chain. Before slipping the time seed into the pouch, I examined it closely. It was about the size of a walnut and looked like a big purple diamond.

“All this fuss for this little thing?” I mused. I shrugged and dropped the seed into the pouch. I considered draping it around my neck, but thought it would get annoying, so I wound the chain around the belt inside my chest piece, leaving the pouch hanging at waist level. If I wanted to put it around my neck later I could. After this, I joined Chak in the main room where he, Brew, and Dr. Lee were waiting patiently.

“Well you look down right spiffy,” said Brew.

“It fits really well,” I said. “What is it made of?”

“It’s a type of metal that the Higher-ups gave us here in the Syllogy,” said Brew. “Think of it as gold. It’s the most valuable thing in this place. You’re wearing about half of all of that stuff that exists, so don’t get it dirty, ya hear?”

I nodded.

“Let’s get going,” said Chak. “Shishu is waiting after all. Not that keeping him waiting matters much.” He leaned down to pick up the bag that Brew had packed.

“I can carry that,” I offered. He laughed.

“Oh, be my guest. Thank you for being so helpful Nicholas,” he said in between chuckles. I leaned over and grabbed one of the straps, intending to swing it up over my shoulder. A completely immovable bag met my efforts. I tried as hard as I could to lift the bag, but it had

such immense weight that I couldn't get it to budge from the ground. I heard Chak and Brew laughing behind me. I turned around.

"You knew I wouldn't be able to lift that, didn't you?"

"Didn't you see how much stuff I put in there? What? You thought that they just stopped weighing anything once they were packed?" Brew said.

Chak walked over and swung the bag over his shoulder effortlessly. "Why don't you leave the equipment to me from now on," he said, obviously trying his best not to laugh. "You just worry about that seed, ok?"

Brew trotted by me following Chak toward the exit, and I heard a throat being cleared behind me as she did. The doctor buzzed by my head and Brew and Chak stopped and looked back.

"Madam," he said, hovering in front of Brew's face, "I know this might be an imposition, but having learned of your quest, and feeling a great sense of gratitude toward the Umbili, I would humbly ask if you might consider me as a companion on your venture."

She stared for a second. "You wanna come with us?" she said.

"Indeed."

"You know how dangerous this is gonna be doc? You wouldn't survive it!"

"All the same, I feel it is my duty to repay you for your kindness to me over the years, and would be truly grateful if you would allow me to assist you in any way that I can."

"Whaddoya think Chak?"

Chak thought for a moment, and then he shrugged. "It's his life to lose. He's not going to cost us any supplies. Sure. Why not?"

"Ok doc. Chak said yes. Looks like you're in. Just don't get in the way, ya hear?"

"Oh thank you madam. You shan't regret this."

"Nicholas, pick up that sword and let's go," Chak yelled as he turned toward the exit again. I glanced around and saw a shiny blade resting near my feet on the floor. I snatched it up and slid it into the sheath in my armor then hurried after Chak and Brew. It felt strangely good to wear a sword again. Back in Athens my sword had always felt foreign to me, but here in the Syllogy of the Universe slipping the sword into the sheath made me feel finished, complete.

An excitement overwhelmed me as I jogged behind the two Umbili and the beetle. They opened the door and headed toward the boat I had tied to the dock. As we crossed the lawn toward the dock I glanced back at the green dome and the door we had exited, and my voice caught in my throat as I watched the door open and nearly close four more times behind me. This must be the gang that Brew had mentioned.

"Um, Chak?"

"Yes Nicholas, what is it?"

"When are you going to introduce me to the rest of the group so I don't feel like I'm being haunted?"

"You'll meet them when we get back to the drop off. It'll be easier when we're all assembled and you can meet Shishu then too. Don't worry about it until then."

The phrase *Don't worry about it* was really starting to get on my nerves, but I held my tongue as I climbed in the boat, and felt it rock back and forth as other invisible Umbili boarded after me. I sat silently as Chak guided the boat down the canal, around countless turns and straightaways, eventually bringing it to a halt near the entrance to the city. We clambered out of the boat and walked down the road only a few paces before I could see the blue goo archway in the wall ahead. As we came to the entryway I stood back as Chak and Brew gushed out of the

city and onto the cliff edge that I had been standing on just hours earlier. Dr. Lee followed Brew closely, and then I watched as the still unknown Umbili passed through the archway as well.

First, a huge frame pushed through the blue substance, and I saw the outline of a seven-foot tall behemoth, with arms the size of tree trunks. Next, what looked like a medium sized female form went slowly and cautiously through the blue goo. She seemed to hesitate as the substance enveloped each new body part. Following that I heard two loud splats as two identical beings had evidently charged the archway at full speed. They were short, but I couldn't see much else about them physically because the outline created by the blue substance was only there for a moment before filling in solidly again.

Finally, a slender but muscular form of the most beautiful woman I have never seen strolled confidently through the mass; never changing its pace. After a long pause I realized that I must be the only one left, so I walked quickly through the goo, anxious to feel the utter joy it had provided me before. Again the warm fuzzy feeling came over my entire body and I felt completely calm, ready to meet this rag tag group of Umbili that Chak had assembled.

The first thing I saw on the other side of the blue archway was Chak smiling at me and Brew's back as she conversed with a dense fog hovering next to her.

"Would you like to meet the gang?" Chak said.

"Of course!" I said.

"Alright Umbili, line up!" He made two very distinct noises and then said, "Would you please be still for a few minutes so that Nicholas here can see you?"

Chak gestured toward the edge of the cliff saying, "They're all there, but let's go one at a time since you're still new at this. I'll tell you what to call them along with their actual names because you won't be able to pronounce them. This dude on the end is," he made a sound that

seemed like a drum roll and a herd of elephants stampeding, the beat quickened then stopped abruptly. “Just call him Thrump.”

I looked at where Chak was pointing and focused on the white sky behind his finger. Instantly, I heard a *pop*, and my vision was completely obscured by the large frame that had passed through the archway first. He obviously had unlocked my view of him right away because I had no transparent view of him as I had with Brew.

He was a giant by anyone’s standards. He wore armor only on his chest and the bare skin of his arms was jagged like Chak’s. He had a slight green tinge to the light that lived in his skin, but his light was much less striking than any Umbili I had yet met. He was bald on top, which added to the menacing presence provided by his body, but he had a genuine smile that wiped away any fear of him. I could tell that, from a distance, he was quite intimidating, and I was sure he could crush anyone like a bug if he wanted to, but the look on his face gave me the impression that he never wanted to. I smiled back at him and said, “Hello Thrump.”

“Hi,” he replied. His voice was deep and low, but still inviting. From this one word he sounded, and I mean this in the best way possible, slightly stupid. I gave him a quick nod and directed my attention to the next space that Chak was pointing to.

“This dade is Flye. She’s the second one who came through the archway. You saw her putting her pillow case in the laundry earlier?”

Again, the moment I focused on the area, Flye came into view with a *pop* and I looked her up and down making sure that I could see all of her. Her hair was a striking fiery red and was pulled elegantly into a ponytail with a yellow butterfly clipping it in place. Everything about her conveyed an awkward discomfort. She stood with one arm gripping the elbow of the other, and her head was tilted down in an attempt to avoid eye contact with me. She wore a floor length

tunic, and her skin had a slight orange tint to it. It was smooth like Brew's and she had on clunky boots that were obviously not her usual footwear. Even without hearing a word from her, I knew she was shy. I took note: shy Flye.

"Nice to meet you Flye," I said.

"Nice to meet you too," she said meekly. It was almost inaudibly quiet. A small smile curled around the corners of her mouth, but she looked away, almost frightened of eye contact with me. I sensed it wouldn't be a good idea to pry anything else out of her, so I moved on to the space next to her.

"These two Umbili are," Chak made the same two distinct sounds as earlier. Hearing them for the third time, their names sounded like the rushing of wind when you swing a bat quickly through the air. Fwik's had a punctiliar ending added to it. "Call them Fwik and Fwish."

For a moment before seeing them, I could hear fidgeting and bickering. After a few short moments of hearing this argument and getting a hazy outline of two short Umbili struggling with each other, two loud *ops* brought Fwik and Fwish into view. They looked like the same person at first glance but on further examination, the one on the left, Fwish, was female, while Fwik was male.

They were both dressed in extravagantly ornate and intense armor from head to foot. The most notable aspects of their armor were the shoulder guards that were large and arced high off the shoulder. Both Fwik and Fwish had a slightly blue tint to their skin and carried long whips. Fwik's skin was jagged like Chak's and Thrump's, but Fwish's skin was not. I understood then that male Umbili have jagged skin, while females have smooth. Both Fwik and Fwish had the exact same spiked hair that pointed straight into the air and looked almost like a continuation of their skin in terms of color and texture. The only thing that made it clear that it was hair, and not

skin, were the few stray locks that hung down from the rest of their uniformly upward facing mop.

“What? Huh? You scared? You intimidated?”

“Look at him Fwish. He’s a fish outta water. He’ll be a fun one to prank.”

“Don’t even think about messing with us.”

“My sister and I will mess you up if you make us. Got it?”

“He’s not kidding. We’ll go crazy on you!”

Fwik and Fwish were talking rapidly and fidgeting quite a bit.

“I wouldn’t dream of messing with either of you. It’s very – er – nice to meet you both.”

“Ok,” said Fwish. “He’s cool.”

“Yeah I guess he’ll do,” said Fwik.

“*They’re* a bit energetic,” said Chak, referencing my earlier comment about Brew. “Just make sure you don’t get in front of them and you should be alright. If it weren’t for how handy they are with those whips they wouldn’t be here. We’re going to need them if it comes to fighting,” he whispered.

“We heard that!” they said in unison.

“Let’s move on. This last Umbili is the ever stunning Plink,” said Chak.

I directed my attention to the next empty space and heard a *pop* as Plink appeared. Right away I heard the sound of a perfectly round rock, falling into a perfectly still bucket of water. You know that beautiful, round plopping sound that it makes? Plink had said her name properly.

“I realize you can’t say that, but I find it a much more beautiful name than *Plink* so I thought I’d share it.”

At just a glance I could tell why Plink was concerned with her name sounding beautiful; she was the most gorgeous creature I had ever laid eyes on. Brew's petite, precise cuteness paled in comparison to the perfectness of Plink's flawless face. Her eyes were deeply misty and mesmerizing. Her tightly curled, golden hair hung down just past her shoulders and a few strands sprung spiritedly in front of her face. Her skin was the smoothest of them all, and it looked creamy but hints of a fair pink faded in and out of view. She wore a loose fitting white tank top that hung down over her chest, exposing a sliver of flat stomach muscles that descended into two perfectly symmetrical hips. A fine weave of chainmail pants clung closely to her waist and became steadily looser the further down her lengthy legs they descended. Slung around her waist was an odd sort of sword-like weapon. It had a short cylinder in the middle with two blades extending out on either side of it. Strapped to her back was a crossbow and quiver full of bolts. She had a confidence in herself that needed no explanation, it simply radiated off of her.

“Uh. H- hi... uh... Pl- uh Plink.” My mouth was dry and my powers of speech escaped me.

“Hello Nicholas Alexander. It will be a joy to get to know you on our journey,” Plink said, in her confident silky voice.

I swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Don’t worry,”—there was that phrase again—“she has that effect on most human men,” said Chak.

All of the Umbili had the same golden rope tied around their waist in varying heights and lengths. Chak’s was the shortest and only went around his waist once, while Flye’s rope encircled her ten or fifteen times.

“There’s only one more for you to meet.” He walked over to where Brew was chatting with a dense grey fog. “This is Shishu. He’s an Umbra. Basically an Umbra is what sometimes happens to an Umbili when they die. It’s pretty difficult to kill an Umbili, but every so often when one dies they turn into one of these instead of just dying. It’s complicated. Just think of Umbra as dead Umbili ghosts and you’ll be fine.”

Chak was speaking about this so matter-of-factly that I felt sorry for Shishu, even though I couldn’t see him. Chak seemed to have little regard for Shishu’s feelings and I was unsure of what to do as I stared into his smoke when a faint *pop* sounded and Shishu’s body appeared before me. He was all white. Not a shinning light kind of white, like Chak, but a thick, pasty, powdery kind of white. He wore a white robe with a hood that obscured much of his face, and his eyes were empty of any emotion. His feet and hands were different as well. They seemed to simply be split off ends of his arms and legs. They looked almost like a fleshy type of straw or hair, and he was perched on the extremely fine tips of his straw-like feet. Imagine the frayed ends of a thick rope and you’ll get the idea. He had a rope around his waist too, but it was silver instead of gold. He stared at me blankly, his mouth straight and emotionless.

“Chak. We need to go,” he said in a monotone, and I looked around at Chak.

“Right you are. Well now that Nicholas can see everyone, we’ll worry about getting to know them along the way. You know what to do Shishu.”

“Yes,” he said. In one motion, he reached forward, grabbed me around the waist, threw me over his shoulder, and dove off the edge of the concrete cliff.

## CHAPTER 6 – As Far as the Eye Can See

I was falling into a dense jungle with a dead white Umbili attached to my waist. I let out a yell as I cascaded into the foliage, but when we were about thirty feet away from the ground, our descent began to slow. I felt Shishu bend his legs as he gracefully landed on the jungle floor in complete silence. He then placed me gingerly on my feet and said in his emotionless monotone, “Wait here.” He bent his legs to an extreme angle, lowered his head, and just as his hundreds of spindly hair-like fingers touched the ground, he rocketed from his spot and soared back up the cliff and out of sight due to the colorful treetops.

I glanced around at the jungle. Not many realize this, but from the inside, all jungles are pretty much alike. They are hot, but shaded, and full of trees. The only two differences that I could see about this jungle and any on earth were the concrete wall to my back, which led up to where the group was standing, and the fact that this jungle had a variety of colors spread through its trees instead of the standard green and brown. I sat in the clearing for a few moments when I heard a familiar buzzing in my ear.

“Doctor Lee?” I asked.

“Indeed it is. Did you enjoy the ride Nicholas?”

“Oh yeah, it was great. I always enjoy it when I get flung off of a cliff without warning,” I shot back sarcastically.

“No need to get snippy. We’re simply using a sink or swim sort of method. Luckily you swam.”

“Oh great. And what happens if I had sunk?”

“Then I suppose Chak would have made a few more trips back to earth to see if anyone could answer that question in the same manner that you did.”

“How do you know about that?” I asked.

“Brew filled me in,” he said quickly. “Pretty impressive I must admit: deducing your true nature and all. I would enjoy analyzing your thought process some time about—”

“What’s so impressive about it?”

“Well, few beings can detach themselves from their own situation in the way that you did and admit that their life really is worthless. No one wants to think of themselves as a nobody. Everyone wants to matter in some way, to someone.”

I thought of Pathena when he said this.

“It takes a special kind of person to be so, shall we say, reason-driven.”

“I don’t think there’s anything special about it. I’ve been average my whole life. The fact that I’m reason driven has never helped me out until it brought me here.”

“But it did bring you here.”

I hadn’t yet thought about this. What had Chak said back in that storm? *Do you want to change your purpose?* I didn’t get any time to think about it because at that moment the trees above us broke and Shishu descended gracefully with Flye over his shoulder. Again he took off back up the cliff and brought back Brew, followed by Fwisch, and Plink. After the dades came Fwik, Chak, and Thrump pulled up the rear. Seeing the massive frame of Thrump perched on Shishu’s shoulder was a particularly amusing sight.

“Alright troops. We’ve got one sight-length to cover before sundown. So let’s get moving. Fwik you’ll be in front, and Brew you will be in back, Nicholas make sure you stay between the two of them. Shishu and Thrump, you guys hang out in the middle and watch the peripherals. Everyone else, fill in the gaps. We move as a group. Fwik, Fwisch, you two will have to control yourselves. Do not get too far ahead, understood? Let’s go.”

Chak threw his hand forward and started walking. The key members of the group fell into their designated places and I slunk back towards Brew's end of the pack. The group, as a whole, kept a brisk pace. I was definitely walking as fast as I could through the jungle to keep up, but they weren't moving so quickly that I had to jog. Fwik and Fwish had a tendency to burst into a run every now and then, and we could see them stop a ways up, running in place, waiting for the rest of the group to catch up to them. Everyone else seemed to trudge along except Shishu. Shishu bounded places. One stride for him was like a long jump for anyone else. I asked Chak about this, and he explained that Umbra can jump great distances as they weigh almost nothing.

"At times it can seem like they are flying, but they just have great hang time. A falling leaf can do what they do, and wouldn't take up as much space," Chak chuckled.

I was shocked by his words. "Why do you talk about them so passively, so angrily?" I asked, trying to admonish him for his lack of tact.

"What do you mean?"

"You talk about Umbra like they're not people, or Umbili, or whatever. You talk about them like they're a lesser animal rather than an equal."

"They *are* a lesser animal," Chak said with a little sneer in his tone. "Remember, an Umbra can only be created in very rare cases. It's a punishment as far as I'm concerned. Umbra deserve to be treated less than fairly. They've earned their lower status. They shouldn't have gotten themselves killed."

"It seems to me that they are better than you," I shot back haughtily. "They can jump farther anyway."

"Watch the way you speak to me human." Chak sounded scary for the first time since I had met him in Troy. "You need to remember your place a little bit better here Nicholas. Simply

because you were chosen does not mean you know everything, and you have developed quite a head about yourself in the short time you've been here.”

“I'm sorry,” I quickly replied. I had obviously struck a nerve. I tried to change the subject. “So how does the sun work here? Does it decide not to come up every once in a while?” I asked.

Chak relaxed as if his previous outburst had never happened. He immediately resumed his jovial instructor attitude. “It works a lot like it does on earth. Eventually, on earth, people will start measuring time in hours. It's twenty four hours per day on earth, but using the same measurements here it's twenty seven.”

“Ok, and you mentioned a ‘sight-length’ earlier. What's that?”

“It's a distance measurement. It's how far you can see standing still in the Syllogy of the Universe. Since our world is flatter than yours, you can see farther. Your world is shaped like a ball, but ours is shaped like a curved disc. The radius of the curve is larger which means farther sight. One sight-length is about the same as fifteen miles.”

“What's a mile?” I asked.

“Don't worry about it. We'll deal with the distances, you just keep up and don't lose that seed.”

“Fine. One more question. Why do we have this big group of Umbili to take me to Mendrax's realm?”

“Well this trip is going to be more than just a casual stroll Nicholas. For one thing, Mendrax knows that we are trying to fix what he's broken. He'll be sending the Umbili that chose to follow him to try and stop us at any cost. For another thing, here in the Wilderness of the Syllogy, there are other beasts around. Umbili and some animals, such as Dr. Lee, inhabit the

city, but outside the city walls there are all sorts of dangers that could harm a human like yourself.

“Essentially, each one of these Umbili has a special skill that will be useful in getting you safely to Mendrax’s realm. And thirdly, it’s an adventure, and one that will bring glory to whomever is involved. These Umbili seek the chance to have the glory of the Higher-ups bestowed upon them for successfully saving this world. That’s why this group is here.”

Hearing this made me look at Flye. I could see everyone’s purpose here but hers. Fwik and Fwish obviously had battle skills and quickness. Chak had said as much earlier. Thrump’s massive size and muscle would come in handy; Shishu had already proven his worth in getting everyone down the cliff. Brew’s planning, packing and supplies made her a must, and Plink’s beauty and obvious battle prowess would no doubt be useful at some point, but Flye seemed so plain. She was like a frightened little girl caught up in a voyage much too big for her. I looked at Chak out of the corner of my eye as we continued to make our way through the jungle, trying to pry into his mind and discover her purpose. He was intent on the group as a whole, and after tripping over my own feet, I decided to put my thoughts to rest for the time being and focus on my surroundings.

We walked for a long time, long enough that I started to be hungry. There were a few scattered conversations amongst the group but for the most part we trudged on in silence. My feet became heavy and tired and what little sunlight that had been peeking through the treetops soon faded away. In the dim light that still clung to the air, it became difficult to see where to place my feet and their tiredness did not help the situation at all. I began to feel like I was back in Athens marching with the legions. Just when it became almost too dark to continue, I spotted a huge blackish something ahead of us. We appeared to be headed for it, and once closer, I realized

it was the base of one of the large gray spikes that I had seen jutting up out of the jungle when I first arrived. There was a clearing of trees about one hundred feet in every direction from the spike and Fwik, Fwish, Shishu, and Plink were all sitting near it when the back end of our group finally arrived.

Chak strolled up and stripped the pack off of his back. It fell extremely quickly to the ground with a loud *clunk*. He opened it and pulled out three clear balls and tossed them in the air. Just as they reached the height of their upward climb they stuck in the air and began to glow. He then pulled out the four large rolls of fabric and I realized that they were tents. He tossed two to Plink and two to Thrump, both of whom caught them easily, and he continued to dig around inside the bag. Thrump and Plink proceeded to set up the tents rapidly. I tried to offer help only to realize I would have been a hindrance. The tents were massive and once Plink had finished assembling her first one, I walked over to it. It was a ten-foot tall box with a twenty-foot floor plan in both directions. I peered in the flap and saw hammocks strung from wall-to-wall. A grid of metal pipes covered the walls, and various bags and knick-knacks were tied to the grid in different places.

I exited the tent to see that all the Umbili had gone about different tasks, making me feel particularly useless. I saw Fwik and Fwish darting around in the trees collecting sticks into a pile just next to the large gray spike, Shishu was assisting Thrump with the other two tents, Brew and Flye were unpacking different miniature versions of the contraptions I had seen in Chak's kitchen back in the Syllogy, and Chak was talking upward at the large gray spike. I walked over next to Chak and peered up into the night sky. I could see Dr. Lee buzzing around the pole.

"Is he there?" Chak shouted up to the Doctor.

"I don't see anyone on any level."

"Okay. New moons always bring out the wild animals. He's probably on a sedation tour to deal with it. I can go up there later tonight and send the message myself. I'll check in with the posted Umbili at the City of Falling Water."

"Very well then," yelled Dr. Lee.

"Mind if I take a look?" Shishu had silently appeared behind us.

"I don't care," said Chak. "Do whatever you want."

Shishu bent down and shot upward like a rocket. He flew into the darkness out of sight, and I heard a small *clink* sound indicating that he had grabbed the spike fairly high up. I waited. A few moments later, he came barreling back to the earth and landed gracefully next to Chak.

"The bug is correct. There is no one."

"Thanks," Said Chak patronizingly, and I could almost hear him add *for telling us what we already knew.*

I turned around and saw Fwik and Fwish constructing a pyramid with the sticks they had collected. Fwish pulled a small rock out of her belt, laid it down next to the sticks and, in one swift motion, slung her whip around her head striking the rock, which emitted a huge spurt of flame onto the pyramid. It caught instantly, and Fwik was knocked off his feet at the ignition. Fwish picked up the rock laughing, and Fwik regained his balance and then charged at his sister, knocking her to the ground. They rolled around exchanging blows and shouting at each other, but everyone else carried on without taking notice. This seemed to be normal behavior for the two of them.

Flye and Brew had advanced to preparing the meal, and I could see Flye glancing at me every so often with a timidly quizzical look on her face. Half the time I would pretend not to notice, but when I did catch her eye she would look back down at her work quickly. Brew was

chatting at her, mindlessly, and I could tell that she was not listening. Flye appeared to be either perpetually embarrassed, scared, or lost in thought, and again it made me wonder why she was here on an—as Chak had described it—adventure. She just didn’t seem the type.

Plink glided over to me and said, “She’s a nice dade, and very useful. You just need to give her some time to warm up to you.” Apparently my study of Flye had been noticed.

After my tongue dislodged itself from the roof of my mouth due to the shock of Plink speaking to me I asked her, “What do you mean *very useful*?”

“Oh, you’ll see. So, did Chak explain why you are here?” Plink’s silky voice was calming.

“Yes, most of it. Unfortunately, he doesn’t even entirely know why I’m here. He said I have special gifts as a human that Umbili don’t have that I would have to learn as I went along. Do you know what gifts I have?” I asked.

“Well you can disobey and you already proved that you have a great capacity to reason.”

“Yeah, Chak told me those two.”

“You also obviously have a sense of Mendrax that other humans don’t, which must be helpful. And the Higher-ups said that your ignorance will be your greatest strength!”

“How on earth will that help?” I asked.

“Well you’re not on earth now, are you?” she said smoothly. We shared a small silence then she spoke again.

“I don’t know what it means, that’s just what they said. I’ve also heard stories of humans being able to move things with their mind. Is that true? Can you do that?”

“Not that I know of, but maybe it’s something that I can do here that I couldn’t do on earth,” I said.

"Here," she said, drawing her unfamiliar weapon from her hip and holding it in the palm of her hand, "try and move this from my hand." She shook with excitement.

I stared hard at it, willing with all my might for it to rise into the air. Nothing happened.

"It's not working," I said.

"Try again!" She had suddenly turned into a giddy little girl.

I stared at the object again trying to get it to do anything but lay in her hands. Again, nothing happened.

"I don't think I have that power," I said.

"Well, that's a shame. I was excited for a moment there," her smooth tone was back. In a flash the weapon was back on her hip. "Maybe you'll figure out some other powers you have along the way. Wouldn't it be terrific if you found out you could disappear in one place and reappear in another, or jump like an Umbra, or," she stopped speaking abruptly and a deeper pink color than the rest of her skin filled her face. "That would be interesting," she finished abruptly.

I couldn't be sure, but I thought she had glanced at Shishu for a moment.

Another small silence, in which I caught her gaze and a small smile curled the corner of her mouth. I was dumbstruck for a moment. This was Plink's gift and curse. With a look she could make a male mind completely empty but for her face.

"That's the look I use when I'm about to grab an enemy by the throat," she said serenely.

Again, I was caught completely off guard, but shaken out of my spell. I quickly looked for words to say, but the only ones that came out were, "That'd work."

She laughed. "Oh, it does." I caught her eyes again, but this time there was no magical spell working on me, just friendship.

“I’m glad to finally be on this journey,” she said. “We’ve been waiting so long for the correct human to join us so that we could embark on the mission set to us by the Higher-ups. I’m glad it was you Nicholas. You seem very kind.” She bowed her head slightly, with another beautiful smile, and walked away toward one of the tents she had set up.

I looked back over at Flye and caught her eye again. Apparently she had been watching me talk with Plink. I walked over to where she and Brew were cooking and the wonderful aroma of fresh bread met my nostrils. I sat down in the dirt next to them and listened to Brew talk about nothing in particular. I leaned over to Flye, who recoiled from me slightly, I tried not to take notice. “Do you think *she* even knows what she’s saying?” I asked under my breath. Flye gave a small laugh looking at her work, but made no response. Eventually Brew asked me, “Nick which one do you like better, Snorgag or Crampshue?”

I stared at her blankly.

“Oh that’s right, you haven’t gotten there yet on earth. Ya’ know the Scorstavians taking over that planet is the best thing that’s ever gonna happen to you humans.”

I nodded along, still completely lost. “I’m making you beef cutlets with bread and rice, since if you ate Umbili food you’d probably vomit. You better like it, cause I’ve been practicing the different human cooking through the centuries for about a year now waiting for this trip and I gotta say your time period makes the least sense. You guys eat yogurt with everything. I find the stuff repulsive and I can’t imagine a good reason to cover up the taste of lamb with some yogurt spread, but whatever rocks your fancy I guess. Flye how’s that rice cookin’?”

“Fine,” she said quietly, not looking up.

“Good. Now then Nicholas, we’re about ready here so why don’t you go round up the gang, except for Shishu, and we’ll start eating.”

“Ok. Why not Shishu?”

“Umbra don’t eat, but actually I’m guessin’ Thrump will want him to be here anyway so I guess you can bring him too.” Brew spoke quickly as she spread out a cloth on the ground and laid eight dishes on top of it.

I walked off in search of everyone, and found Chak, and Thrump talking to each other with Shishu standing silently next to them. Fwish and Fwik were recovering from their wrestling match and sat on the ground in front of one of the tents, leaning against each other and breathing hard. I found Plink kneeling behind one of the tents looking at the ground. Dr. Lee was sitting on her shoulder talking to her. With a little prompting, they all came and grabbed a dish that Brew and Flye had prepared, and the whole group sat or stood around the fire eating. A few conversations were going on between Thrump and Shishu, Chak and Flye, and Brew and no one.

I inserted myself into Chak and Flye’s discussion.

“He’s just a town loon Flye! He’s a crazy man wandering the desert outside The Settlement. You really think he’s gaining some following and leading some sort of rebellion against the Umbili?”

“No I don’t think that’s what he’s doing. From what I’ve heard, Teleon isn’t as crazy as some Umbili make him out to be. What if he’s just a good teacher, someone who knows the Higher-ups better than even we do? What if we should be giving him a hearing in the City of the Sylogy instead of using his name as a euphemism?” she spoke rather sheepishly, never really making eye-contact with Chak.

“Where are you getting the idea that he’s a good teacher. Haven’t you heard about his weird salute his followers do?” said Chak.

“You mean this?” said Flye. With her right hand she smoothly and briefly covered her eyes, then her right ear, then tapped her chest twice with her middle finger. “I think it’s rather poetic. ‘Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and into the heart the plans of the Higher-ups have not penetrated.’ Have you ever heard or seen the Higher-ups? Doesn’t it make sense?” asked Flye quietly.

“You know I haven’t. No Umbili currently alive has, and certainly no human,” said Chak.

This shocked me I thought that Chak had gotten his orders straight from the Higher-ups. Now it turns out there was a different mode of communication.

“But Teleon talks about a time when they will,” said Flye. “He seems to think he’s a part of it. And not everyone in the Syllogy is as convinced he’s a loon as you are Chak.” This last statement had a little more force than the rest of her words.

“Flye, you know I respect you and your gifts, but I think you’re way off on this one. Teleon’s no different than any of the other ‘prophets’ the Settlement keeps pumping out.”

Flye smiled and said more to herself than to Chak, “If only.”

I couldn’t keep silent any longer.

“So Teleon is a man?” I asked.

“Yes, he’s a crazy man, and nothing more,” said Chak definitively. Flye was still looking at the ground.

“I thought there weren’t any men in the Syllogy?” I asked.

“There’s a colony of them in a city called The Settlement. That’s a long story. It’s not important. You don’t need to worry yourself with fairytales about Teleon, Nicholas.” He may have said this to Nicholas, but he was looking intently at Flye and clearly conveying the message *Don’t you go distracting him with fairytales about Teleon either.* “You just focus on that seed.”

We quickly got off the subject of Teleon, to my dismay, and chatted about the sleeping arrangements, the food, and Brew's haircut. The conversation dwindled and we ended up finishing our meals in relative silence. Then Chak directed us to our respective tents and explained the shifts for keeping watch. Shishu and Thrump would be first, and Plink and Fwik would each take turns with them throughout the night. After explaining all of that, he raised his arms. The glowing balls each descended to the ground, extinguishing their light along the way. The camp was dark, silent, and still, save for the crackling fire, which blazed on through the night.

## CHAPTER 7 – The Morning Star Has Risen

I woke up and it was still dark. I looked around in my tent, and saw Chak, swinging slightly in his hammock. The light that emanated from his body was much dimmer when he was asleep, and most of it was covered with a blanket. Fwik was in a ball on the floor next to his hammock, which was twisted up into a knot. It was obvious that he had fallen out of it from violent movements while sleeping. I blinked my eyes a few times and sat up. It was no use trying to fall back asleep now, so I donned my armor and oriented myself, trying to find the door of the tent. Outside the fire was just as full as it had been when I went to sleep, and Thrump was sitting next to it, staring into the red embers intently. Shishu sat next to him. I coughed and they both looked up, obviously startled at my presence. Thrump smiled comfortingly, but Shishu's face remained stern.

“You must sleep Nicholas,” said Shishu.

“He’s fine. There will be plenty of time for him to rest. What woke you up Nick?”

Thrump spoke slowly and specifically. He didn’t ever say a word he didn’t mean to say, and I could tell that what I had previously mistaken for stupidity was actually clarity of speech and forethought.

“I – uh – I don’t know… Just couldn’t sleep I guess,” I said.

“Oooo. Maybe Teleon is haunting his dreams,” said Thrump in a spooky voice, smiling wide and nudging Shishu.

“I’m unsure Teleon has such abilities,” said Shishu dispassionately.

“It’s a joke Shish! Come and join us by the fire Nicholas,” said Thrump.

I walked over and sat down.

“What do you really think about that Teleon guy?” I said casually to Thrump, hoping he’d give me more answers.

“Oh, I don’t really know. He’s an enigma among Umbili. We just hear gossip and rumors about a crazy guy in the desert. A few take him seriously though, like Flye. We talk about him like he’s the boogie man sometimes, and a raving lunatic others.” Thrump shrugged as he finished. I looked at Shishu hoping he would add something.

“I am undecided about the man,” he said simply.

“We were discussing the plan for tomorrow,” said Thrump.

“Really? What is the plan? How long is it supposed to take to get to Mendrax’s realm?” I suddenly felt awake with questions.

“The journey should take seven days,” said Shishu.

“Of course, that’s only if we aren’t hindered at all, which I doubt will be the case. Mendrax will not be kept abroad for long,” Thrump added.

“I thought he was trapped in his realm.”

“He is, but his followers can travel into the Wilderness of the Syllogy and beyond. When I say Mendrax will not be kept abroad, I mean *his will against us* will not be kept abroad. His followers will execute his will out here.” Thrump seemed worried about Mendrax’s followers.

“But they’re just Umbili right? I mean we’ll be able to take them on, what with the group of Umbili we’ve got.”

“Our group is sufficient. But not overly so.” Shishu’s sentences never lasted longer than two seconds.

There was a silence, fragmented only by the crackle of the fire.

“So... what’s that spike for?” I asked, gesturing to the base of the spire where we had set up camp.

“This is one of the communication towers for the Higher-ups,” said Thrump, “They leave messages for us here, and we send messages to them. Each tower is supposed to have an Umbili operating it at all time. They act as intermediaries between us and the Higher-ups. They’re never really there, but that’s okay. We can send messages ourselves if we want to, and there are fewer miscommunications that way. The towers we have planned stops at are expecting us at certain times. If we miss a stop or are more than a day late, they will communicate this to the Higher-ups so that they are aware of our progress.”

“So that’s how you always talk to them? When Chak says that the Higher-ups *told him* something, he meant they left him a message... like in writing?”

“Yep, but the written Umbili language is quite vivid. They get their point across,” said Thrump.

“And you said we’re updating them on our progress. You mean they can’t just see us? I figured they were always watching sort of like a mystical power. From the way Chak describes them, they are everywhere at every time.”

“I suppose some Umbili think of them that way, and they might be right. I can’t speak about the Higher-ups’ true natures; I just know that they told us to talk to them through the towers. If they preferred a different method, I suppose we would comply, but this is the one they currently require of us. Of course, until you fix this world with that seed, our methods of communication are limited.”

“Right,” I said considering the weight of this revelation. I knew I was helping change the whole world; it just hadn’t sunk in until that moment. What if I failed? Was I the world’s only

hope? From the way these Umbili talked about it, we had only one shot. I stared into the fire thinking hard.

“Nicholas, what did your life consist of on earth? From what did we extract you?” It was the first time Shishu had started a conversation instead of ending one. I looked up at him. His face was just as hard as it had always been, but his eyes were searching me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What did you leave behind?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“I do not believe you. No matter how empty your life, you must have left something.”

Shishu was searching for something specific. I thought of my life back in Athens. My vineyard, my life as a soldier, my boat, it was nothing to me. I thought of Pathena, and looked at Shishu. He could see it in my eyes. This was what he was looking for. *Whom had I loved on earth?* That was the question he was actually asking.

“Why don’t you tell me something about yourself first? Right now you know more about me than I know about you,” I said.

“Shishu doesn’t talk about his life, or his afterlife as it were,” said Thrump, grinning and nudging Shishu in the side again. Amazingly, Shishu smiled.

“I find the details of my existence unnecessary. Those who know have reason to know, those who do not, have not,” said Shishu.

“What if I would like to know? Is that reason enough to learn? I’m curious about you. I hope that’s ok.”

“I have not encountered this before.” He paused, considering if my curiosity was a good enough reason to share about himself. “As a human you will never fully understand what I will

tell you, but since you ask so politely, I will answer questions. Of what would you like to know?"

"How did you die?" I asked quickly, hoping that if I asked it fast and casually enough he would start answering. It didn't work.

"That question I will not answer. What else might you like to know?"

I sighed. "Well, how about your life? What did your life look like before you became an Umbra?"

"It looked much like Chak's life I suppose. I believe that might be why he resents me. He fears the possibility of the same fate befalling him. I had a partner. We lived in joyous complement. I rose and slept to do the work of the Higher-ups. I was a normal Umbili."

"A partner? Joyous complement?" I asked.

"I'd rather not attempt to explain partnerships to you," said Shishu.

"Please? It will drive me mad if you don't explain it now," I said.

He searched my face. "Very well. Partnerships look somewhat like – what do you call them on earth – marriages. It's easiest to explain partnerships by showing the similarities and differences between Partnerships and marriage."

He began to loosen up as he spoke, almost like he was preparing to give a lecture. His speech became less formal and I started to get a hint of the true personality waiting behind the stony exterior.

"You see, we do not have marriage in the Syllogy the way you should on earth. Partnerships are more similar to what some humans call 'soul mates,' though humans don't actually have any such thing. You see, humans sometimes confuse the emotions that often accompany marriage, with marriage itself. That's not what marriage is at all. Marriage is

supposed to be a much more mysterious union and a firm, volitional commitment. Unfortunately, marriages on earth actually do end up being thought of like partnerships much of the time.

“Partnerships are for two Umbili to share for all eternity, but a marriage on earth ends at death. Marriage is a choice and commitment, a covenant, meant to teach about The Higher-ups relations with humanity, while partners are established by our very nature. They are precisely determined by the Higher-ups’ choosing. Partnerships are more rare here, and much less dependent on the will of the Umbili in question. Marriages take work to maintain, but partnerships do not.

“Also, partnerships are much less essential to our society’s structure than marriages are on earth. It is normal to have a partner, and normal not to. Marriage should be more highly revered, respected, important, and life-changing than partnerships. Chak and Brew are partners as determined by the Higher-ups, but I don’t suppose you realized that because it does not define their daily lives the way a marriage should on earth.”

“Chak and Brew are married?” I asked.

“No. They are partners. Have you not been listening?”

“Sorry,” I said.

Thrumpt chimed in, “Partnered Umbili are just as common as non-partnered Umbili. There are only three Umbili in our group who have partners: Chak, Brew, and Plink.”

“Where is Plink’s partner?” I asked.

“He is on a mission for the Higher-ups,” said Shishu.

“Well shouldn’t he be here? If Plink has a husband, shouldn’t they be together?” I asked.

“This is why Shishu didn’t want to get into this Nicholas. You cannot think of partnerships in the Syllogy as the same thing as marriages on earth. They were designed entirely

differently, even though they look similar in certain eras, they shouldn't. Marriage is a man's willful, intentional devotion to a woman in the face of any opposition, and a woman's equal devotion back. They take work! Partnerships are not volitional, they simply flow from an Umbili's being. Marriages teach about the Higher-ups relationship to humanity, partnerships do no such thing. Trying to equate them will result in confusion. Plink's partner has work to do for the Higher-ups. It's that simple. The Higher-ups made the partnership, so that's completely reasonable," said Thrump.

"Ok. Ok," I said. "Well, what do you do now Shishu? I mean, now that you're an Umbra?"

"I still do what the Higher-ups request, but the duties they give me have changed because my skill set has changed," Shishu said holding up his spindly fingers to illustrate his changed skills.

"Huh," I murmured thoughtfully. Shishu was good at giving non-answers and I decided to abandon my line of questioning. I turned to Thrump. "So, where are we headed tomorrow? You mentioned a plan."

"We're hoping to make it to the waterfall on Canyon Ridge tomorrow. There's a small city there that will give us provisions and shelter. Too bad it's not later in the journey when we will truly yearn for a soft bed, but it's better than none at all," said Thrump.

"So it's just a sight-length away?" I asked.

"Yes, about. We should be getting there right around sun down tomorrow if we stay on—" He stopped speaking suddenly.

"I heard it as well," whispered Shishu.

"Heard what?" I asked.

“Shh.” Thrump picked up a log from the fire and held it in front of himself like a torch. He slowly crept away from the clearing toward the trees behind Brew’s tent. Shishu glided behind him. He turned toward me and whispered, “Do not move.”

Suddenly a huge four-legged something burst in from the darkness, flew past Thrump and Shishu, and landed next to me in the clearing. It was the size of a small horse, and its most notable feature was its long green glowing teeth that extended far past its bottom lip. It whirled around snarling and Thrump acted immediately. He dove onto the creature wrapping up its hind legs in his huge arms. It thrashed and clawed at his face, and I stumbled back, falling to the ground in the process.

Shishu leapt swiftly into the air and momentarily joined the night sky above, but he quickly returned, landing on top of the creature’s head with a loud thud. Shishu and Thrump were struggling to keep the creature contained. As they fought they moved toward the fire. It wasn’t until Thrump stepped into the middle of the fire that he let out a yell and let go of the animal’s hindquarters. This gave the creature just enough time to squirm free of Shishu and turn to face them.

I could see it more clearly crouched in the light of the fire. It looked somewhat like a jungle cat, but with stripes of glowing green fur, the talons of an eagle, and one large hump on its back like a bison. It made loud hissing and spitting noises, but the translators in my ears worked perfectly in giving me the message.

“Mendrax will reign supreme. The morning star has risen and its light will blot out the sun.” The animal was repeating this over and over again as he circled around, teeth bared against Shishu and Thrump who were sizing up the enemy for the best place to attack.

The creature acted first. It launched at Shishu's face, talons wide and ready to tear at him, but it met a surprise when it flew right through Shishu's head. I made a note. Umbra could evidently become intangible at will. The creature flipped around in mid air, and landed shakily at the edge of the clearing, continuing to chant the whole time.

Thrumpt acted again. He rushed toward the creature, and it tried to jump out of the way. It almost worked, but Thrumpt reached out and managed to grab one of its hind legs. He swung it around and slammed it into the jungle floor. The ground shook slightly when he did so, and Shishu joined in, picking up the torch that Thrumpt had dropped. He gripped it like a bat and swung it hard into the creature's head. It staggered around dazed slightly, but its off-balance movements helped to evade the following swings from Shishu.

It staggered toward me and I drew my sword instinctively. As it neared me it regained its wits and it reached out with one talon, swiping at the bag containing the seed. It missed and hit my breastplate square in the center. When the animal's talon's touched the special metal of my armor, it howled in pain and reeled back, keeping its injured talon off of the ground.

Shishu and I both struck at the same time. I lunged forward in a stabbing motion at its body and Shishu brought his flaming club downward onto its head. The effect was instant, and the animal collapsed to the ground, letting out a piercing wail of pain. It dragged itself forward obviously crippled. Glowing green blood leaked from its side where I had pierced its skin.

Suddenly, a loud *CRACK* met my ears and something was wrapped around the animal's neck. Another *CRACK* and his back left foot was being pulled off of the ground. I looked around and saw Fwik and Fwish standing by the doors of their tents, whips out. The creature snarled and tried to bite at the whips, but he was clearly caught. Thrumpt reached forward and grabbed the

animal's free back leg and hoisted it into the air, so that it was dangling there. It thrashed around pitifully, but the whip secured around its neck prevented it from doing any damage to anyone.

All the while it kept repeating, "Mendrax will reign supreme. The morning star has risen and its light will blot out the sun." Fwik pulled hard on his whip to try and disrupt the chant, but it was no use. None of the blows supplied to the creature had interrupted the flow of his repetitive message.

Shishu stood directly in front of the creature's face and asked, "Are you alone?"

The creature snapped at him with its long teeth, and kept repeating its chant.

"Are you alone?" Shishu repeated, more forcefully.

It was no use. The animal had been programmed to say one thing and one thing only. Plink was awake now and walked toward the animal. She gently pushed Shishu out of the way, centered herself in front of the animal, and reached toward her hip. In one swift motion, Fwik's whip went slack as the animal's head left its shoulders and fell to the ground. The chanting stopped and Plink returned her weapon to its home.

Chak's head emerged from his tent. "What's all the noise about?" he asked as he clambered out from the flap. I looked around and the entire camp was awake, some more alert than others. Dr. Lee was buzzing around wildly on the edge of the clearing as if looking into the jungle to see if more attackers were on their way.

"Just a pest control problem," said Thrump, "but Mendrax obviously knows we've found a suitable human, or he wouldn't have sent this Felavis." He tossed the rest of the animal to the ground next to the fire.

"Well, we all knew he would find out eventually, we just hoped it would be later rather than sooner. We just have to be on guard, that's all," said Chak.

He sounded worried. "The sun will be up soon. Let's just pack up and get a head start on making it to Canyon Ridge."

The mood of the group was depressing as they packed up the camp. Brew fitted everything nicely into the pack and just as there started to be some natural light in the air, we were off. Thrump and Plink were assigned to stay close to me as we walked and they both seemed jumpier than usual. Thrump would periodically grab my arm and stop dead in his tracks; it really hurt. Plink was similarly over-precautious, keeping her crossbow out the entire time and one hand on her hip weapon. Evidently, I was the only one fine with the situation that had transpired back in the camp. I thought that these Umbili looked like a perfect match for whatever Mendrax would try to throw at them.

We walked and walked, stopping periodically for breathers, but not much of anything exciting happened as we did. I had noticed that the group always became unusually quiet when our journeys would commence, but would talk non-stop when we rested. My only conversation on the move came in the form of Doctor Cornelius Spencer Lee.

He was a curious bug and the more we talked, the more I sensed that he was just as lost in this whole escapade as I was. Once I broke through his screen of pretentiousness I found him to be a level headed and logical individual, which made our conversations enjoyable. Simply working through ideas logically with each other passed the time as we walked and it kept my mind off my aching feet.

Even more interesting to me, Doctor Lee knew a lot about proper logic, so he would give me names and systems for concepts I had already thought about but didn't know what to call. I discovered there was an entire language and structure to logic that I had never tapped into, and later found out would be invented in Greece not far from my hometown in Athens. He talked

about the construction of a logical argument and the defining of axioms and premises, which I found fascinating.

“So you’re saying that a true argument is only created when the inferences and the conclusion come from a set of axioms and not when it points to them.”

“Precisely. An axiom must be stationary and self evident with minimal thought. Your axioms should prove something, they shouldn’t need to be proven.” He was buzzing excitedly as he spoke.

I silently processed the information.

This relates back to what I spoke of earlier when mentioning the relationship between premises and conclusions. Your argument is strongest when your premises are axiomatic!”

“So what would be an example of a proper logical argument?” I asked.

“Let me see. Very well, let me think of something basic. Ah, we’ll use our surroundings! Premise one: All trees have trunks. It’s axiomatic. You and I both know this to be true without further discussion. Premise two: All conifers are trees. Therefore, the conclusion is, all conifers have trunks. Do you get the idea?” he said.

“Yes, I think so. But what good is it to say that conifers have trunks?” I said.

“That’s an extremely basic example my friend. Using this method of reasoning, you can string together a chain of premises that inform each other and eventually reach some bigger conclusions about the world,” he said happily.

“Okay. We’ll have to work up to some of those,” I said still trying to understand fully.

“Indeed we will. However, for the moment we must postpone our discussion. It looks as if we are approaching our goal,” said Dr. Lee. I looked around to see what he was talking about. The trees and roots of the jungle looked thin a ways ahead of us, and a much clearer light was

shining through them. We quickened our pace to reach the light and when we did the trees disappeared behind us.

A hard line separated the open field before us and the dense jungle behind. It was as if the jungle had been planted and the straight line was the final row in a perfectly plowed garden. The oddity of it caused a picture of my vineyard to flash through my mind, but it disappeared quickly after a few large breaths of the cool air that filled the field. Far ahead I could see only the horizon that divided the deeply green grass from the blindingly white sky. A few blue clouds interrupted the whiteness, and they gave me an odd feeling of clarity which I had not felt my entire time in the Syllogy. The blue goo had taken away my worries about my situation, but the open sky ordered them all neatly in a row so that I could make sense of the task ahead. There would be obstacles ahead, but I knew that they would be dealt with accordingly, and they did not deter me from my goal. I reached toward my leather pouch and grabbed hold of the seed inside, feeling complete resolve to save this world.

## CHAPTER 8 – City of Falling... Water

The rest of the day passed by without any major event. We had stopped for lunch, and talked about the plan for the day ahead. The City of Falling Water was the name of the place on Canyon Ridge where we would be staying that night.

“That’s pretty much our only option isn’t it? I know it’d be nice if we could ride some jeeps down the canyon. Hey, it’d be great if we could just fly a plane all the way to the garden, but we’ve got to make do with what we have! We’ve got to take the donkeys,” said Chak in between bites of what looked and smelled like a solid pile of dung. *Apparently* it was actually quite delicious, I just couldn’t appreciate it. I was happy with what Brew had called a chicken salad sandwich. Although it could have done with some olives, I wasn’t about to complain about the quality of food. Compared to the rations provided by the Athenian army, this was fine dining.

“I guess so. Unless we wanna ride the waterfall down,” said Brew. Everyone laughed.

“Could Shishu carry us down like he did when leaving the Syllogy?” I asked.

“No. There is a limit to the height an Umbra can jump. The canyon is too deep for one Umbra to reach,” said Shishu.

“What if we paraglide down? I’m pretty sure The City of Falling Water has the gear, and we could get a few of the Umbili there to come with and bring the gear back,” Brew suggested.

“I don’t think Thrump or this backpack could paraglide,” said Chak. “They’re both too heavy.”

“He’s right on that. Also, I believe Flye is afraid of heights. But we could split the group. Those of us who can’t paraglide can walk down the canyon, or ride donkeys, and those who can paraglide could leave later and meet us at the bottom at midday tomorrow,” said Thrump.

“No. We stay together,” said Chak. “We’re taking the donkeys. That’s final.”

No one questioned it after that. Chak was the leader and his decisions were respected as such. We would take the donkeys down the canyon.

“What’s paragliding?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Said Chak, Brew, Thrum, and Fwik in unison. I was going to enjoy it when I got to say that to one of them.

Plink and Dr. Lee were having their own conversation on the edge of the group. I heard Teleon’s name mentioned again and listened in.

“I tend to agree with Chak, my dear,” Dr. Lee was saying.

“I think Flye has a point. And Shishu thinks there’s more to him than meets the ear,” said Plink. “I heard that he restored a blind man’s vision. No Umbili, not even the magnivates, have done something like that!”

“It was a human’s vision. Umbili anatomy is immensely more complex. I am confident the Umbili magnivates could remedy such a situation if they so chose. The magnivates know the minds of the Higher-ups better than a random man in the Settlement,” said Dr. Lee.

“What about the story about—”

“We’re moving!” I heard Chak yell in our direction. The conversation was over.

We packed up the lunch and walked on. The trees of the jungle grew smaller and smaller behind us, and just as they started to disappear I saw the glimmer of a building ahead of us. We were one sight-length away from the city. I looked up at the sun. It was still high in the sky, but our shadows indicated that it was past its peak. As we grew closer I noticed some interesting things about the town we were about to enter. First of all, it rested on the precipice of a huge canyon.

For those reading this account who have seen the Grand Canyon, it was about five times further across and twice as deep. A wide road led to the main gate of the city, which interrupted the massive walls surrounding it. Our group merged with the road and approached the main entrance, and from outside the wall I could see only five structures. Four were tall identical towers located near the center of the town. They were all the deepest blue color I have ever seen. They reminded me of the blue goo barrier we had left at the Syllogy. The other structure was a tall gray communication spire identical to the one we had camped at the night before, which was symmetrically located in between the four tall buildings surrounding it.

We neared the gate that interrupted the road at the city's outer limit. There were hazy outlines of four large dudes guarding the gate — I was apparently getting better at seeing Umbili. We stopped in front of them.

"We're here!" said Chak.

"It's good to see you," the noise of a shipwreck came out of his mouth next. "Is this the human?" The Umbili in the center left position was speaking. I focused on him intently, and I could almost see him fully.

"It is. Nicholas, you may call this dude Kliff. He's an old friend. Kliff, this is Nicholas Alexander."

I heard a small *pop* and Kliff became completely opaque.

"Gentledudes, reveal yourselves to the human," he said. "He deserves the respect of us all, for he will save our world."

Three more *ops* and I could clearly see all of the Umbili standing in front of us.

"Hello," I said. "So... what do we do now?"

"We say welcome, Nicholas. Welcome to The City of Falling Water."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth the massive gate behind him began to open. It was a slow process and I could hear the bustling of a crowd behind the gate. It opened to a wide plaza between the four buildings with the spire in the center. Through the middle of the plaza, splitting around the base of the spire, was a rushing river. The plaza was probably a thousand feet from corner to corner, and the river was about sixty feet wide. Off to the left I could hear the water churning, but the tower closest to me blocked my view. We followed Kliff toward the spire in the center of the plaza and I saw a small podium. We reached the podium, moving through the mass of hazy Umbili, and stopped for Kliff to speak.

“Dudes and dades of The City of Falling Water,” his voice was magnified by the object on the podium, and it echoed around the city, “This is Nicholas Alexander. He has come to save us. Make yourselves known to him, and celebrate. Celebrate the provision of the Higher-ups!”

All around the plaza there were *pops* coming from different Umbili, and a loud shout heralded the beginning of a celebration. Glowing orbs like the ones from the campsite flew into the sky, and with them raised a concomitant of concordant music. There were instruments of every kind. Guitars, tambourines, harps, cymbals, drums, horns and those were just the ones from earth. There were all kinds of native Umbili instruments that were, and still are, completely foreign to me, and some instruments from planets I’ll never see were there too.

It took a few minutes for all of the Umbili in The City of Falling Water to become fully visible to me, and dozens of them came and shook my hand and danced with me. I had to get Thrump to part the crowd so that I could get a breath of fresh air. He did so, and we left the plaza, walking downstream along the river.

It was dark by then and the party faded out behind me as Thrump and I walked toward the gurgling sounds I had heard earlier. We approached the cliff edge on which the city sat and saw the waterfall for which the city was obviously named.

It was a sheer cliff that plummeted two miles downward. I couldn't see the bottom because it was so dark, but the moon lit the rest of the landscape well. The huge hole stretched out before me and Thrump as we stood next to the waterfall staring into the night sky, admiring it in utter silence.

This was all too much to take in. All of these Umbili were celebrating and praising me for something that I hadn't even done yet. It was frightening to imagine letting them down. I reached down to the seed of linear time, and pulled it out of its pouch, turned it over in my fingers, and then held it up to the moonlight.

"It's so small," I said.

"What's that?" Thrump said loudly, attempting to be heard over the sound of the waterfall.

"Nothing," I shouted back, keeping my eyes on the seed. The purple of the seed blended in with the landscape. I couldn't imagine how that tiny little seed would somehow save this world. All I had to do was throw this thing into a garden, and all the wrong Mendrax had done would be righted? Would it really be that easy? I got lost in my thoughts and Thrump tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up at him, and the green light in his skin was eerie in the darkness. He jerked his head back toward the plaza. I shook my head and waved him away.

"You go ahead; I'll be back in there in a minute." He shrugged and walked away toward the music. I looked to the left and could just make out the city wall coming to an end as it met the cliff edge. This was definitely a strange place. I had not noticed it before, but so far all the

populated areas had large walls around them. I wondered if these had been built after Mendrax had been cast out or before. It didn't seem like it would have been necessary before, unless there was something worse than Mendrax out there waiting to break into these cities.

I gazed back out at the moonlit canyon again, took a deep breath, and suddenly felt a little better, as if some of the weight of the problem had lifted off my shoulders. As soon as I did, I had the unpleasant feeling of something wet being stuck into my ear. I turned toward the feeling and saw Fwik with his arm extended toward the side of my head. His finger was in my ear.

"That, my friend is a Wet Willie. You're welcome for the information. Nick my boy, my sister and I are going to educate you on the ways of the future. You see, when you come from, humor is dead. We will show you the meaning of true hilarity." Fwik had pulled his finger out of my ear and was sitting on a rock just next to me. He reclined back on the rock, interlocked his fingers behind his head and gave me a devilish smile. Just as he did, I felt my pants tug away from my waist and descend half way down my legs. A split second later, Fwish was kneeling next to her brother.

"Pantsed ya!" she said, and both of them doubled over in laughter.

"How is this supposed to be funny?" I asked angrily wrenching my pants up to their proper height.

"Oh believe me, from our point of view, it's quite hilarious," said Fwik in between fits of laughter.

"You have to understand Nicholas, comedy is all about perspective. What's funny for one is almost never funny for another, you just have to make sure you are the one, and not the other. Got it?" Fwish was quite pleased with herself and confident in her comedic ability.

“So you’re saying if I were to,” quick as a flash I snatched Fwik’s whip and held it out over the ledge, “take this, and toss it over the edge, it would be funny for me, because I’m the one, and not the another?” Fwik jumped to his feet and Fwish was close behind him.

“Believe me, you don’t want to do that,” said Fwish seriously.

“She’s right, you’ll most definitely regret it,” chimed Fwik.

“Oh come on, I think it would be really funny. You just have to remember, in this case, I’m the one, not the another,” I said, pretending to drop it and catch it again. I had them right where I wanted them.

In a moment, Fwik was on me. He had my hair in his hands and he was pulling me by the head away from the ledge. Fwish went after my feet, trying to knock me off balance. We struggled for a few seconds, and then, in an attempt to throw them both off of me, I heaved all of my body weight backwards. It worked like a charm. As soon as I did this, they both leapt off of me onto the ledge. I smiled knowingly, but then realized my mistake. In the short tussle I had lost perspective of where I was on the ledge. In just a short second the edge of the cliff passed upward in front of my eyes, and Fwik and Fwish were staring at me in amazement as I fell down the cliff.

“Fwik! Help! I’m – I’m falling!”

The waterfall beside me thundered as I fell, and I whipped around so that I was falling back first to view the cliff edge I had just left. Fwik and Fwish were peering over the edge with a look of horror, but I could only see them for a second before I lost their faces in the blackness.

Suddenly, I hit my head on something hard and my fall stopped. I opened my eyes. I wasn’t dead. Instead, I heard laughter erupting beside me. I looked around and saw Fwik and

Fwish rolling on the ground, rapidly running out of air from their heaves of laughter. I was back on top of the cliff's edge.

"Did you see his face Fwish?" Fwik was still rolling.

"Fwik! Help! I'm falling!" Fwish mocked in a high pitched voice, then rose to her feet quickly and fell straight back to the ground dramatically. I sat up.

"What was that?" I asked, a bit out of breath from the shock of falling off a cliff and landing back where I had started, safely.

"I can't- I can't breathe! That was just too perfect!" Fwish was still on the ground. Fwik had stopped laughing enough to position himself in front of me.

"We got you so good! A joke within a joke about teaching how to joke! We're going to be telling this one for years."

"Would you please explain to me what just happened?" I said, starting to get annoyed now.

"Right-o, right-o," said Fwik, slowing down his breathing so he could talk. "Do you know what this is?"

He reached behind a rock and grabbed something to show me. It was the metallic green ball that Brew had packed in the backpack when we originally left the Syllogy. Recognition sprang to my face.

"I saw Brew pack that into the backpack. No, I don't know what it is."

"It's called an Agnoscian Orb. Basically, this changes your perception of the world. It can make you see, or feel, or experience, whatever the wielder wants you to see, feel, or experience. All Umbili have something similar within them. That's why we can stop you from fully seeing us. We can control your perception to a degree. It's a gift from the Higher-ups.

These orbs do the same thing, but much more comprehensively. There're only a handful of them left you see. Mendrax stole most of them when he was exiled. They work fairly well on Umbili, but for humans, it's like a completely new reality."

"So you're saying you made me experience falling off the cliff, but I was really just standing right here the whole time?" I asked.

"Basically. You reacted as if those things were really happening, that's why you hit the ground, but you were really much farther away from the edge than you thought, and we weren't anywhere near you. Fwish and I never actually attacked you or gave you a Wet Willie or pantsed you. We just snuck up behind you, started up the orb, and watched the comedy ensue. You should have seen yourself, dancing around trying to get the non-existent me off your back. Quite hilarious."

I gritted my teeth and kept my composure while he laughed again. "So why do you have it? Shouldn't it be with Chak right now?" I asked.

"Don't be such a goodie-goodie. Take a leaf out of Teleon's book, and walk on the wild side for once! We're gonna put it back. Chak will never know that it's gone," said Fwish.

"Supposedly we're gonna need it later on. At least that's what Chak said the Higher-ups told him. We're just glad we have one with us 'cause it's gonna make the travel much more enjoyable." They both laughed, winked simultaneously, and started walking back toward the Plaza. "Come on Nick. People are going to start looking for you!"

I looked down at the seed still in my hand. I was gripping it powerfully. I could see in the moonlight that my knuckles had turned white. I relaxed my hand and shoved the seed back into its pouch.

"Enjoyable," I muttered. "Why do I have trouble believing that?"

## CHAPTER 9 – See Thrump Splash

I headed back into the Plaza and the celebration raged on. It seemed like it would go on all night and the energy of the place was infectious. I was the guest of honor and a big chair had been set-up at the head of the plaza. Umbili came by all night placing gifts around it. I was overwhelmed, but the gifts didn't matter much to me. I enjoyed the atmosphere most of all.

I danced some and then went and sat on a bench along the edge of the plaza. Different Umbili came up and shook my hand and made small talk, but it was a surface level interaction. No one fully understood what I was supposed to do with the seed around my neck; they were just excited by its presence and knew that I was going to save them all.

At one point Chak had come up to me and said, "Listen Nicholas," he paused as if searching for some specific words. He seemed to be trying to say something important, but then gave up. "Do you like the party?"

"Yes it's great," I said, looking around the plaza at all the Umbili I was to save.

The night wore on and the party thinned. After about six hours the music had died away and there were only a few pockets of Umbili still scattered around the plaza.

Chak came up to me and said, "Kliff has a few cottages reserved for us on the west end of the city. Grab your stuff and let's get going."

I jumped to my feet and walked with him to the far end of the plaza. We walked for a few minutes and came to a little dirt path leading away from the four huge towers. We walked just long enough for me to wonder how much further it was before approaching one specific log cabin. Kliff opened the door and the warmth of the place made me realize how sleepy I was. He gestured to one room and I was greeted by ten beds that were the softest I had ever touched. A

moment after my breastplate came off I was asleep, completely exhausted by the day. Chak sat down too and let out a long loud sigh.

"That's the stuff," he said as he exhaled, and as he did, his light dimmed. That's all I remember from that night.

I woke up the next morning and the bed had enveloped me. To the left and right I could see nothing but the white plush of comfort. A small window directly in front of my face indicated that the sun had begun to rise, and morning was upon us. I worked my way out of the bed I had become one with and fell straight to the floor.

"Mhrm- you ah eye Nick?" Chak rolled over and mumbled at me.

I groaned at him. He rolled back over and returned to sleep.

"I'm gonna go out," I said.

Chak managed to raise his hand and wave me away, unenthusiastically.

I crept out the door, slipping my armor over my head in the process and entered the main room I had briefly seen the night before. It was a large room with three couches arranged in a conversational manner with animal pelts and stones placed around the room for decoration. I glanced at a wall and saw an ornate fireplace with silver tongs and brush leaning up against it. Overall the mood was that of an affluent cowboy whose guest cabin had been leant to us — of course I didn't know that was the mood at the time since I hadn't yet heard of a cowboy.

"Good morning Nicholas," came a soft voice from the corner. Flye was sitting in an armchair, and I had completely missed her. "Did you sleep alright?"

I was shocked to hear her speaking, so it took a moment for me to reply.

"Yes. Great. I did. Just great. How about you?"

"I slept soundly, not very long though. I had come back earlier than the rest of the group and I woke up a short time after you all came in last night."

"Oh my, I'm sorry. Did we wake you?"

"No, no. I had just slept enough. Isn't it a glorious morning? I wish Teleon were here."

My interest was suddenly peaked. Every time the man's name was mentioned I felt the way you do after a big sigh.

"What do you know about him? I remember you and Chak talking about him, and Plink said he healed a blind man. He sounds fascinating."

"I actually have seen him once. He's remarkable. I'm convinced he knows the Higher-ups better than any Umbili I've met," she said.

"Are the stories true?" I asked.

"I believe so," she said sweetly with a smile. "Chak doesn't like him because of what he says about Umbra. That's also why he's such an outcast in the Settlement."

"What does he say about Umbra?" I asked.

"He says that they are noble creatures. Powerful and gifted. He teaches his followers to interact with them and treat them well. He says the same about Umbili, which is scandalous from the human perspective," she spoke quietly and simply.

"Why's that?"

"Humans in the Settlement don't like Umbili or Umbra. They stick with their own kind. Chak thinks anyone who teaches that Umbra and Umbili are equals can't be trusted," she said simply.

Flye was more conversational than I had yet seen her.

"Are you alright?" she asked me. "You were frowning just now."

“Yes, I’m, I’m fine,” I said. “I just- I thought you weren’t much of a talker. Frankly it’s just strange to be having a conversation with you.” Now she frowned. “Oh but not in a bad way, I’m happy to finally be getting to know you a little bit.” Her face softened.

“I am a morning Umbili. I love the way the air smells right after the sun hits it in the morning. It’s wonderful to see everything wake up and come to life.” She smiled and a few strands of hair fell from the butterfly clip holding her ponytail in place. Immediately, she reached up and re-secured the loose culprits. I smiled.

“So, what made you want to come on this trip?” I asked.

“Oh I didn’t want to. It was an order from the Higher-ups. I’m useful because of my foresight, evidently. I technically had the opportunity to refuse, but...” she trailed off.

“What do you mean, useful because of your foresight?”

“I can...” she hesitated, “see things. Things far away. They are hazy most of the time, but I can see over longer distances than most... and—” she stopped abruptly.

“And what?”

Immediately she looked down at her feet, she had apparently said too much. I took a step closer to her, and as I did her head jerked up and she looked me straight in the eye. Her eyes were a brilliant orange, reflecting the color of the light in her skin. They were wide and confused. She looked like a person who had just woken up and didn’t know where she was. Her eyes were wide and looked scared: scared of something she knew, and at the same time scared of what she didn’t know. It was strange, and I instinctively took a step backward. The moment I did, her face relaxed and she went back to being the calm, shy, Flye she had been before.

“That was odd, wasn’t it?” she asked. Apparently she at least remembered what had just happened, but now she was completely fine with it.

“Yeah, I’ll say,” I said. “You looked different for a minute.”

“Different? Different how?”

“I’m not sure. Scared I guess. You looked like you were afraid of something, but then forgot it a moment later.”

“I felt scared. I felt like something dark had just enveloped me, for only a moment.” For someone who had just been enveloped by invisible darkness, she was speaking incredibly matter-of-factly about it. “What did you do?” she asked.

“I didn’t do anything. I just took a step towards you. You were hesitating to finish your thought about what you can see, so I took a step toward you and you looked up at me... scared.”

“Yes I remember that too,” she said indifferently.

The oddity of the moment threw me off guard.

“Well... uh... you were about to say something, before... before that happened. You said you can see over longer distances than most and – something. And what?” I tried my best to casually get the conversation back on track.

“I can see over longer distances than most, and longer times than most. I can see shortly into the future. We all can do it to a certain extent, even humans. Haven’t you ever done something, and remembered doing that exact thing recently, or like you have a distant memory of doing the exact same thing before?”

“Yes. It’s a weird feeling. So you’re saying that when that happens I’m—”

“You’re seeing into the future. But just a little bit. Some cultures on earth call it Déjà vu. It seems like a memory, you get an odd feeling that you’ve seen or done something before. It’s just so small, and it happens so quick that you can’t process that it’s actually you seeing the future as it happens. Most beings can’t control that tiny bit of foresight, but I can, sort of. So

that's, that's why the Higher-ups wanted me to come with the group. They," she hesitated for a moment, "they, thought it could be handy." She looked back down at the floor. Her morning personality had obviously passed and she was sinking back into her usual timid self. I sensed it was time to leave so I mumbled a quick goodbye hoping that if I left quickly enough it wouldn't seem like an awkward exit.

Flye was right. The air outside was marvelous. A few deep breaths and I felt energized and excited about what was to come that day. I jogged down the path back to the plaza and found a few Umbili walking between the buildings. Some were wearing zoot suits from the American 20's, some were wearing Elizabethan gowns from the late 1500's, and others wore the wood and plastic based styles of the Scorstavian race. At the time I didn't know what any of these were, so it was strange to say the least. There were a few styles that I still don't know or recognize that are from other worlds and planets I'll never see.

Regardless of their style, all of the Umbili in the Plaza were just as friendly to me as they had been the night before, and they kept offering to help me find my way around.

"I'm alright," I would say. I honestly didn't know what I was looking for, but I just wanted to walk around and explore that new world on my own without anybody explaining it to me. I wandered along the river for a bit until I was within earshot of the waterfall. Then I turned around and decided to enter one of the four huge buildings. I looked across the plaza and decided on the building closer to the cabins we had slept in. I started walking across the plaza, and, as I did, I heard the sound of someone screaming.

It wasn't a scream of fear, but a scream of excitement, and it came from directly above me. I looked up and saw the body of an Umbili hurtling towards me from the sky in the center of the plaza, down through the blue clouds. I yelled, crouched down, and covered my head, bracing

for the impact. But the impact never came. Instead the dude continued to scream at the top of his lungs and I heard the screams get quieter, as if he had been sped away as quickly as he had come. I stood up and looked into the sky, and heard more yells, along with a few strange sounds that made absolutely no sense to me. Again, they came closer to me but this time from the side. I made a dash for the building I had chosen to enter and turned around to watch, as the Umbili fell into the plaza again.

He had a thick rope tied around his ankles and was hanging upside down swinging back and forth and bouncing at the full extension of the rope. It took a few minutes, but he eventually stopped swinging and was lowered to the ground. One of the Umbili in the Plaza, who was about Thrump's size, joined him when he stopped and helped him to get his feet untied. The dude looked extremely dizzy, and I recognized him as one of the Umbili from the night before.

"Glizz! What was that?" I shouted as I joined him and the Umbili who was now fiddling with the end of the rope and looking into the sky where it ascended out of view.

"Nicholas! What's up man? That? That's bungee jumping! It's so awesome. You have to try it! Oh this is great. Hey," he made the sound of a swarm of bees and turned toward the dude cinching up straps on the end of the rope, "do you think we could rig it up real quick for Nicholas to go? I forgot he's from like 1200 B.C. so he's never seen bungee jumping before. Would it be a problem? It would be so sweet to see the first human bungee jumper in the history of the City of Falling Water! Please," bee sounds again, "please? Let's do it. I'll pay, it'll be great! I can—"

"I don't see a problem with that. Let me radio it up to them. You take him up, I'll let them know he's coming."

“Really, it’s fine. I don’t have to do it. In fact I should be getting back to the cabin. I don’t want Chak waking up wondering where I am.” I was backing away as slowly as possible.

“No. Nick, you’re doing this. What would it say about the Savior of the Syllogy if it went down in history that he was also scared to bungee jump in the City of Falling Water? Seriously. You’re not backing out. I’ll call the cabin and let them know you’re with me. Fwish and Fwik and I are good friends. They’ll be cool with it, and they’ll totally trip when I tell them!”

He threw his arm around me and we started walking toward the front entrance of the building I had intended to explore. I don’t think Glizz realized that his association with Fwish and Fwik made me feel less comfortable about jumping off of a building with him instead of more comfortable. I laughed nervously.

We entered the main lobby and saw a room covered in marble. It reminded me of the architecture at home in Athens. There were even long white columns every thirty feet or so lining the walls of the entry room. We made a beeline for four sets of metal doors—elevators, though I didn’t know that at the time. From my perspective, Glizz had pressed a magical circle on the wall, shoved me into a metal box behind the metal doors, then stood next to me as it shook ominously for about a minute. Needless to say, I was extremely tense when the doors opened to a long thin metal bridge that extended across the plaza to one of the other buildings, 2,000 feet in the air. I looked at Glizz, terror dripping off my face. He laughed.

“You’re gonna love it man! The worst part is the wait to jump. Actually the jump itself is pretty terrifying too, and then there’s the part where you jerk back up the first time. It’s ok, it’s gonna be awesome. Just come on.”

He started walking out on the bridge. I didn't follow. I was frozen solid. He came back to the platform where I was standing and grabbed my hand, practically dragging me to the middle of the bridge where three other Umbili were waiting, one dude and two dades.

"Nicholas, we were so stoked when we heard you were doing this man!"

"Yeah, it's like a huge honor. Are you psyched?"

"Can't you tell he's scared out of his wits?"

The dade nearest me on the bridge obviously understood how I actually felt. She took a few steps towards me and grabbed my hand and elbow. It was a securing feeling, and it relaxed me enough to walk with her to the platform where they were all standing.

"Look Nicholas, you don't have to do this if you don't want to," she said, calmly and almost in a whisper.

I looked into her eyes, she was sincere, and I remembered having met her at the party the night before as well, though I couldn't remember her name.

"Glizz can come on a little strong, but if you want to just go back to the cabin and rejoin the group, you can do that."

I swallowed and looked around the platform. I saw the other three Umbili smiling and nodding their heads excitedly. They obviously couldn't hear what she was saying. I swallowed again, found my voice and said, "No. Glizz is right. I can do this. No problem!"

She smiled comfortingly and walked me over to where all of the equipment was. The other two Umbili set to work putting me in a harness and wrapping my feet together. I took off my breastplate, armguards, and sword and tucked the pouch with the seed tightly into my belt, wrapping the chain around the belt a few times. The one big rule was not to part with that seed,

so it was the one I was determined to follow. Glizz shoved a helmet on my head and started to buckle the chinstrap, but I stopped him.

“Look, if I’m going to do this, I’m going to do it right. You didn’t wear a helmet, did you?”

“Well no,” he said, “but I’m not a human. You are. What if you get hurt?”

“What if I do?” I asked. This silenced any further rebuttal.

A moment later I had been given a quick spiel about what to do when I reached the bottom, and everyone was backing away from the edge; I was being positioned right on it. My heart was pounding. I couldn’t hear anything it was so loud. I focused everything I had on making myself jump. I counted mentally, slowing my breathing. Five. I looked down at my feet and made sure they were lined up properly. Four. I clenched my fists tightly. Three. I closed my eyes and took one giant breath. Two. Something hit me hard in the back and I was falling.

For the second time since I came to this city I was freefalling down a long way with nothing to comfort me but my own screams. My hair was all around me, and I couldn’t tell which way was up. Just then, I felt a tug on my feet and my head whipped downward. I was slowing down and nearing the bottom of the first drop. That’s when it happened. With horror, I felt the pouch with the seed slip out from under my belt. I looked at my waist and saw the pouch come loose, just as I shot back upwards again. The chain around my belt kept the pouch from leaving my body, and because of the momentum, the pouch was laying tightly against my stomach, but the chain was getting looser by the second. As I flew upward I reached up grappling for the pouch. It traveled closer and closer to my head as the chain unwound from my belt, but every time I made a grab for it, a small rotation in my ascent or a gust of wind would move it just out of reach.

I summoned all my concentration and reached toward my belt so that I could find the chain. I caught the chain in my left hand just as it came fully undone and just as I reached the height of my ascent. Both my body and the pouch lifted into the air and were weightless for a moment. In that split second, I slung the chain around my hand so that it wound across my palm three times until the pouch made contact with my fingers. The second it did, I squeezed and I had the seed safely in my hands. That's when I started falling again.

Partly out of the joy of the free-fall, and partly out of my astonishment at the dexterity I just displayed, I let out a victory cry. I heard a few Umbili echo my cry and I looked down to see a group who had stopped to watch my jump. A few moments passed and I swung and twirled in the air while I waited for the large dude in the plaza to grab me and set me right side up.

I looked at the pouch in my hand. It was warm to touch. I draped the chain around my neck and got my bearings in the plaza. Just as I had found the correct building, Glizz came bursting out through the front door carrying all of the things I had left on the platform.

“Dude that was sick! Man, you’re crazy as Teleon!” He tossed me my armor, and I quickly strapped it on.

“I’m not a dude, Glizz. I’m a human. Remember? And who pushed me up there?”

“Whatever man. I say you’re an honorary dude for stepping up and showing off. Here’s your stuff. I called the cabin but nobody was there. I guess they’re already on their way back here looking for you.”

They were out looking for me. “Chak is going to be really upset when he finds me.”

“Whatever dude. I’ll back you up if he gets on your case. That was sweet.”

I heard a scream, and this time it wasn’t one of excitement. It was fear. It was coming from just outside the plaza, upstream toward the cabins on the outskirts of the city. Glizz and I

heard it at the same time, as did some of the other Umbili in the plaza, and we ran toward the source. As we reached the far end, I saw a small group of Umbili looking at the river further upstream. In the distance, a few boats were rushing toward us, three in total. One was much larger than the other two and it looked like it had a lot more passengers. The smaller boats were on either side of the larger, and there were dark shadows going back and forth between all three of them.

As they neared us I realized that the larger boat was the same one that had been packed in the backpack Chak carried, and the entire group was in it. The other two boats contained Umbra, but they were different than Shishu. Instead of a pasty, solid, whiteness, they were an inky, black from head to toe. I couldn't see them fully since they had not unlocked my view of them for me, but because I knew where they were and could see their smoke, as I had seen Shishu's in the beginning, they were nearly opaque. In essence they looked like half smoke half Umbra beasts and the effect was terrifying.

The Umbra were jumping between each of their two boats and swinging large clubs and daggers at the group with each pass. Thrump was standing in the middle of the boat, and making a grab for them as they jumped overhead. Periodically, one would land in the group's boat, and when this happened, Fwik and Fwish would wrap them up in their whips and sling them out again. Every so often an Umbra would turn incorporeal quickly enough to avoid the whips and then Shishu would engage them. Chak was standing in the middle of the boat, back to back with Thrump. He was giving commands like a general doing his best to keep the troops organized. Flye was hunched in a tight ball directly between Chak and Thrump, trying to use their bodies as shields from the Umbra. Plink and Brew were stationed at opposite ends of the boat, fighting enthusiastically as they could, but they were doing little damage over all.

They came close enough that I could hear the commotion and I started running downstream so as to stay slightly ahead of the group. I looked back over my shoulder as I ran, and the cluster of boats inched closer and closer to me.

That's when Thrump spotted me.

"Chak! Nicholas is on the shore," he yelled, and pointed. In the moment that he stopped focusing on the Umbra, he took a hard blow to the head from one of the dark clubs they carried. It was powerful enough to send him over the edge into the water. The river was moving swiftly and he was separated from the group, but he was obviously an incredible swimmer because he reached the bank with ease. Then his real power was displayed. He charged downstream so quickly that he overtook the boats running along the bank and caught me in a matter of seconds. He grabbed me around the waist and leapt with all his might off the bank.

He came down squarely on his target, the Umbra boat nearest us, and it shattered on impact. It stayed intact just long enough for him to shift his weight toward our boat, and he slung me over the side into the boat where I laid sprawled on the center bench. I looked around. There were two Umbra in the boat with us and three outside of it. Thrump was holding onto the side of the boat, which was tilting toward him, and he had another Umbra around the neck, dragging it along through the water with his free hand.

"Chak, the orb!" shouted a female voice. It was Flye.

Chak looked at her, nodded, and rummaged through the sack, which was sitting in the center of the boat. I looked around through the fighting and saw that we had just passed through the plaza and were on the downstream side away from the cabins, which also meant that at any minute we would plummet over the side of the canyon, down the waterfall. I wasn't sure what the plan was or if anyone else had even realized how close we were to the end of the river. Chak

pulled out the Agnoscian Orb and tossed it to Flye who caught it nimbly. She turned it around in her hands, and I felt the water get rough.

“Chak the waterfall!” I shouted.

“I know!” he yelled back. “Hold on! Everyone! Hold on!”

The bow of the boat tilted down and the stern raised out of the water; we were teetering on the edge of the waterfall, about to tip over the side. Flye grabbed the side of the boat with her right hand and sunk her left into the orb. It glowed bright green. The moment it did, all six black Umbra, and Shishu, stopped fighting, arranged themselves around the outside edge of the boat, and that’s when we finally toppled over the lip of the waterfall. The boat flew off the edge of the waterfall, and spun upside down in the spray coming off the edge. Everyone was holding onto the sides so tightly that no one flew out, and then the spinning stopped. The boat was still falling, and rotating around, but the right side up stayed right side up as we descended down the canyon parallel to the waterfall.

I realized then that the Umbra were arresting the fall. They were slowing the boat down as much as they could, and keeping it as steady as they could as we descended. When we hit the bottom of the canyon there was still a nice big splash, and a bit of whiplash, but we had made it to the bottom of the canyon relatively unharmed. I looked out over the edge to see how Thrump had fared being outside of the boat for the fall. He was still holding on, and treading water next to the boat, but he was obviously exhausted. We drifted away from the base of the waterfall, the Umbra still gripping the sides of the boat, and ran aground one hundred yards away from the place where we had just cheated certain death.

## CHAPTER 10 – Where There's Smoke

I looked around the river beach at the shabby group of wet individuals. The boat was overturned on the sand to empty out the water that had been trapped inside it during the fall. Chak, Plink, Fwish, and Fwik were all standing in a group talking. Thrump was reclining on the side of the boat, cradling an injured hand that he had received on impact, while Flye and Brew were inspecting the line of Umbra all standing perfectly at attention in one neat row. I looked around and realized that Doctor Lee was nowhere to be seen. I joined the group of conversing Umbili to point this out, but was silenced when I heard their topic of conversation.

“I don’t know what else we can do! He’s stuck with them. There’s no way to turn them all loose and then recapture them all except for him. You know the orb can’t discern that way. An Umbra is an Umbra no matter what!” Chak was practically shouting.

“I don’t care! I’d rather let them all go and die fighting than kill him!” Plink shouted back.

“Well it’s not your decision to make!” Chak retorted.

“Can’t we kill them without the orb?” asked Fwish in the most serious tone I had ever heard her use. “The legends talk about killing an Umbra with your breath. They say there was a provision made by the Higher-ups—”

“That’s an old wives tale. And even if it were true, Umbili can’t do it, only other species. Not to mention it’s incredibly dangerous for those other species when they try it. I don’t think even Doctor Lee has the mental focus required. The orb is the only way to get rid of the Umbra from Mendrax without risking our safety or accidentally releasing them,” Chak said.

“What about Shishu’s safety? What about his life?” Plink yelled.

“He doesn’t have a life! He’s an Umbra!” Chak shouted back.

“You pretentious cogsrap! Of all the—”

“I don’t have to explain my decisions to you! I was charged by the Higher-ups with leading this group to safety—”

“And Shishu is part of this group!”

“Only if you count the dirt on the ground as part of the group too! Shishu’s served his only purpose. After the drop-off he was completely expendable and—” Chak suddenly wasn’t standing up anymore. In the heat of the argument, Thrump had risen from his resting place, walked over to the group and punched Chak hard in the face. Chak stood up and glared at Thrump, anger and outrage shot between their eyes.

“How dare you speak of Shishu that way,” said Thrump steadily and confidently, though I could hear the anger being well veiled in his voice. “That Umbra just saved your life. He just saved all of our lives. He stopped you from possibly becoming a member of the race that you detest so greatly. How dare you speak of him like trash.” Thrump and Chak shared a tense silence in which it was obvious that Chak wanted to respond but didn’t want to be hit again. Thrump continued. “I think we should let Nicholas try.” There was a murmured agreement among the group and a silence long enough for me to jump in.

“Try what?”

“Try to kill those black Umbra, with your breath,” said Thrump.

“Come again?”

“There’s an old Umbili story of how the Umbra came to be,” said Thrump.

“Oh, oh! Can we tell it?” asked Fwik.

“Yeah, let us do it! It’s our favorite! Please, please, please, please!” said Fwish.

“Actually I was going to let Plink tell it,” said Thrump. “And you two are behaving like human children by the way.” Fwik and Fwish’s smiles faded.

“Right,” said Plink, “where to begin? The story starts in a time long ago, before the creation of Earth, before the creation of the stars, during the period of time when Umbili were still being created by the Higher-ups. Every day, more Umbili were being crafted and one by one, they were placed in the Syllogy of the Universe. The first few Umbili were roaming around and attempting to build the city the way the Higher-ups had told them to. Massive buildings were being built, incredible feats of engineering and architecture, and goodness and justice reigned supreme. But then the first attempt to rebel occurred. One of the first dades tried to resist an order from the Higher-ups; she tried to infiltrate the forbidden garden. Over the mountains of fire and the fields of ice, she traveled in secret to try and unlock the mysteries of time.

“Her partner discovered her schemes and followed one day behind her in an attempt to stop her from disobeying. He was too late to prevent her from trying, but it turned out that he didn’t need to. The Higher-ups caught her before she broke the locks of the Gate to Nowhere. The dude arrived in time to see her trial period where the Higher-ups determined her punishment for the disobedience, but all Umbili know what the punishment is: eternal death, eternal separation from the protection of the Higher-ups.

“When killing an Umbili, the Higher-ups send a ball of glowing green force through the Umbili’s body, which removes their life, body, and mind in one fell swoop. But the dude cared for his partner, and so, just as the Higher-ups were about to carry out the sentence, he stepped in front of his partner and accepted the blow from the Higher-ups himself. Strangely, the blow did not kill him; it transformed him. Its intent was to steal his life, which it did, but because the blow was not meant for him, it did not act the way it would have for his partner.

“It left him a white shell of who he was before. His light had been stolen from him. That piece of an Umbili that made him truly unique was ripped from his body and replaced by a colorless smoke. He became the first Umbra, and that ball of energy that passed through him became the first Agnosian Orb. The Higher-ups moved the time garden after that. At least, that’s how the story goes. But the story doesn’t end there.

“The legend goes on to say that the first Umbra lived by himself through the end of the period of creation, but eventually a few more Umbili were changed into Umbra, not by the Higher-ups punishment, but by dying sacrificial and noble deaths. That was around the time that the first human ever came to the Syllogy of the Universe. He was brought by the Higher-ups for an unknown purpose. He wandered the wilderness of the Syllogy for a time and eventually came upon a group of Umbra. Legend says that the first Umbra and the first man became entrenched in a heated argument, one that lasted days. Now the Umbra had never fully revealed themselves to the human, and so the man saw only a shell of them, a transparent outline entrenched in smoke.

“According to the stories, the man became so enraged with the Umbra during the argument that he summoned a powerful breath and used it to scatter the smoke of the Umbra. His rage gave him the breath to literally blow the Umbra away. That is what we are hoping you will be able to do Nicholas. Blow these evil Umbra away, but spare our friend Shishu.”

There was a poignant silence when Plink finished telling the story. All eyes were on me. A thousand questions about the new facts I had just learned swirled in my mind. There were other humans in the Syllogy before me? Where did they come from? What did the Higher-ups bring them for? There were other disobedient Umbili besides Mendrax? What made Mendrax different? Was Mendrax different or had everything I’d been doing been done before? Umbra could be killed. How do you kill something that’s already dead? How did the Higher-ups

accidentally create Umbra? The Higher-ups could make mistakes and accidentally kill something they didn't mean to? How, why, what did all of this mean? I forced all of these questions to the back of my mind and focused on the one important question currently at hand. How was I supposed to defeat these Umbra with a breath?

I exhaled slowly considering the power that laid in that simple action. "Ok. What do I do?"

"Nobody knows!" Chak yelled. "It's never been successfully attempted since this legendary story, and those who have tried ended up blowing themselves away. It's an unnecessary risk that we should not pursue! It's much safer to use the orb and count Shishu as one of the casualties of the war with Mendrax!" Chak was becoming irate again. A frown from Thrump silenced him.

"Chak it's my choice isn't it? Are there at least any theories as to what I should do? Should I get angry?"

"Speaking frankly I do not believe that anger is what fueled the power of the breath." I looked around. Doctor Lee was hovering just outside the group. He must have flown down the canyon side and found the group while Plink was telling us the story.

"What?" I asked.

"I said that I don't believe that it was really anger that fueled the breath that blew away the Umbra. I believe it was something stronger than that. Passion."

I looked deep into the little beetle's beady black eyes.

"Well, how do I make a passion-filled breath?"

"You can't. Passion isn't something you make, it's something that is. You have to have it already. It can be nurtured, but it cannot be manufactured."

“Well then we’re back to square one,” I said disappointed.

“Says who?” Dr. Lee asked.

“Says you,” I said. “You just said passion isn’t something I can manufacture, I have to already have it inside of me.”

“And who says you don’t already have it?” said Dr. Lee.

I thought a moment. What did I have passion for? Back on earth there were three things: boats, my orchard, and Pathena, all of which were gone now. What did I have passion for right now, here in the Syllogy? What was my purpose in life, now that I had left the place where my purpose was death? Dr. Lee could see the wheels in my head and I saw a little beetle smile appear on his face as I understood what he was getting at.

“The only thing I still have passion for is this seed, passion for getting the job done. The only thing left for me, for all the Umbili, in the Syllogy and the City of Falling Water, and everywhere is... is hope. I have passion for hope!”

“Indeed you do Nicholas, and I believe that within your passionate hope lies the ability to save us all. Not only from the terror of our world ending altogether, but also from this unpleasant prospect right here, right now. Let hope motivate your breath.”

I nodded confidently. It was so simple. Of course I could do this. I had hope. I had a passion for something much greater than the anger that the first human used to blow away the first Umbra. I had hope: the hope of completing the task and changing my purpose once and for all, just like Chak had said back in Troy.

I walked over to the line of Umbra standing in a neat row on the beach. The rest of the group fell in behind me, eagerly awaiting my attempt. I could feel the excitement on the little beach as I shook out my hands and stretched my sore muscles getting ready to try and blow

another being right out of existence. I could tell that even Chak was a little bit excited at the prospect of seeing this feat done right in front of him.

“If you feel yourself fading, stop right away,” said Thrump. I didn’t know what he meant exactly, but I nodded anyway.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, clearing my lungs and my mind. I then pictured myself driving the little purple seed into the ground of Mendrax’s forbidden garden, and I imagined a huge ugly lizard staring on terrified at my success. In my mind Mendrax sounded like a slimy lizard kind of name, so it made sense that he would be a huge slimy lizard. With the hope of success in my head, a fiery passion in my stomach, and resolve in my heart, I filled my lungs with a huge breath. When I was completely full of air I let it out steadily and as I did, I heard an ethereal whistling sound.

The sound grew steadily louder as I blew, and I found that the breath filling my lungs was going longer than any normal breath had ever gone before. If this had been any normal breath I would have run out of air after about thirty seconds, but this breath blew past the two-minute mark with no sign of stopping. It was a strange feeling to be so full of breath, but be breathing out at the same time. After a few minutes had passed, the tension remaining as evident as ever, the picture in my head started to change. I saw the huge slimy lizard whip away at my feet with his long slimy tail. His slimy tongue flicked in and out of his mouth and I heard his slimy voice whisper, “Failure is imminent.”

Suddenly I felt something slam against my body. It felt like a huge wave from the ocean trying to knock me off my feet, but the feeling didn’t pass like a wave would. It was a steady force pushing against my chest. I briefly started to lose my concentration and the slimy lizard in my head started to laugh.

I closed my eyes and pictured my hand driving the seed into the ground again, but the slimy lizard hand was pulling against my own, stopping me. I opened my eyes and saw the Umbra in front of me start to quiver. The beach around me disappeared and I watched as a breeze trickled through the smoke around his torso. I thought of the seed plunging into the center of a garden and felt the slimy lizard hands relinquish. As they did, the invisible wave trying to knock me off my feet disappeared and I felt a huge gust of power come from my mouth.

The Umbra started to thin. I saw bits of his transparent face tear away from the rest of his body. Slowly he rose higher and higher off the ground and the smoke grew less and less thick. And then, when I felt the need to take a breath overwhelm me, my vision went dark.

The beach erupted back into existence with a cheer. I had blacked out for only a second and I realized that I was on my knees. No one had even noticed I missed anything. Thrump was the first one to my side. He placed a hand on my shoulder while the celebration behind me subsided.

“Nicholas, are you okay?” he asked urgently.

“Yes. Yes I’m fine. Did the Umbra disappear?”

“Yep, it’s gone. You did it. I don’t think you realize how historic this moment is. You just confirmed Umbili legend. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes I’m fine. I’m a little bit tired now,” I said, standing up. The sight of the empty beach where the Umbra had been moments before revitalized my spirit. I turned around and everyone was beaming at me. Even Chak had a small grin on his face. There were pats on my back and I smiled at everyone on the beach.

“Well,” I said. “One down, five to go.”

## CHAPTER 11- Stirring Words

The fire crackled on the beach and we sat around it staring at each other solemnly.

Shishu, now released from the Agnosian Orb, hovered outside the circle; Thrump prodded at the fire with a long stick, and the rest of the group merely exchanged meaningful glances. Everyone was obviously wondering the same thing: "What are we going to do now?"

"It seems to me that the group has no choice but to pursue their planned course," said Doctor Lee. "You all knew that opposition from Mendrax would occur."

"Yeah, but doc, we didn't know how much he was gonna throw at us. If this is what we've had to deal with on day three, what else does Mendrax have waiting for us down the road?" said Brew.

"Are you saying you didn't realize that death was a possibility? Are you saying the Higher-ups did not warn you that this quest would be the most dangerous, the most heroic, the most legendary that any Umbili had ever undertaken? Are you saying you thought this trip was going to be a stroll through the blue goo a pop down The Falling Water River and straight back home to be snuggled in your cozy warm beds? No! May it never be said that the Journey of Nicholas Alexander was led by a group of cowardly Umbili! You will be marked in history as the bravest of your kind. You will be remembered as the Eight Great Warriors of the Syllogy. Your story will be told until the end of time itself.

"You will persevere! You will strive on! You will fight! You will succeed! You will reach the outcast realm of Mendrax the Malevolent, and you will show Nicholas the way into the garden of time! You will not stop! You will not give up! You will not doubt because you are the handpicked dudes and dades of the Higher-ups, and you will exceed their expectations! Do you hear? You are the chosen!" Doctor Lee buzzed around from face to face as he delivered this

overly theatrical speech. It had little effect on anyone in the group, except for Fwish and Fwik who were on their feet applauding. I couldn't tell if they were actually excited or if they were just trying to see how far the beetle would go with this slightly ridiculous encouragement. It seemed as though Dr. Lee thought he was campaigning for election.

"While I think the beetle has a loose screw somewhere, he's essentially right. We all knew what we were signing on for when the Higher-ups requested us. We all had the chance to say no. Realize the weight of this my friends. Never are Umbili given the chance to refuse a request from the Higher-ups! We all got that chance and we all turned it down. We knew that death was almost a certainty. Even if Mendrax has more waiting down the road, we'll be ready. So straighten up, set your mind, and let's all get some rest. We still have a long journey ahead of us." Chak sounded confident and authoritative, and evidently authoritative is what the group needed, because they all murmured their agreement and retired to their tents.

It was a quiet night as the group dispersed. The crackle of the fire was comforting and warm. I could hear crickets in the jungle singing their songs to the night, and an owl sat perched on the edge of the tree line, watching us. After a while, Brew, Plink, and Flye were the only ones left with me sitting around the fire. We shared the silence for a long time until I couldn't bear it anymore.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," they all replied. That was the wrong thing to say to me.

"Why does everyone keep telling me not to worry about it? What if I want to know? What if I want to try to learn about Umbili?" I said.

They just looked at me, clearly unpersuaded.

“Can you at least answer me this question: Why does a human have to be the one to plant the seed in Mendrax’s time garden? Why can’t an Umbili do it? I know that I can disobey Higher-ups and we can be ignorant, or some stupid reason like that, but why can’t a Higher-up just order an Umbili to take this thing to Mendrax’s realm?” I asked.

Plink, and Brew looked at each other, but they didn’t speak.

“Umbili can’t touch time,” said Flye.

Plink and Brew looked at her sternly.

“He has to be given some answers! You can’t expect him to comply in blind faith forever,” Flye said to the two of them, and then she turned back to me. “You understand a little about why Umbili have trouble making choices right?”

“Yeah, Chak said it was because Mendrax is poisoning linear time and linear choices. I don’t really understand what it means; I mean, we’re in linear time right now aren’t we?”

“No, we’re not quite in time at all right now. You haven’t really been in time since you set foot in the Syllogy. Time here exists in our minds more than anything else. All Umbili live outside of time, but make choices, create ideas, and think inside of time. The forbidden garden governs our time here, and Umbili can’t touch the time that grows there because it is linked to their own minds. It causes a paradox that short-circuits the Umbili mind. Understand?”

“So Umbili only experience time in their minds,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“And that’s why all of the things that were affected in the Syllogy by Mendrax poisoning linear time are issues of choice and thought for Umbili.”

“Correct.”

“And that’s why the Umbili world is starting to unravel and... go crazy... because it’s all happening inside their heads.”

“Right.”

“So this garden that Mendrax has is connected with the mind of every Umbili.”

“And Umbra,” said Plink.

“And Umbra,” I added, “and no Umbili or Umbra can touch time, or this seed, so you had to get a human to carry the seed and to put it into the garden,” I said.

“Yes.”

“So why couldn’t you just wear gloves or something? Why does a human have to physically carry it?”

There was a pause where all three looked at each other. They seemed to be straining to say something, but couldn’t get the words out.

“It would still be too risky. A single slip would end the quest. We needed something or someone else to carry it so that we increase our chances of actually making it to Mendrax’s realm,” said Flye at last.

“You sound like we have no hope of getting it there even with me carrying it,” I said.

There was a solemn silence after I said this. I could tell they were all thinking the same thing. I started to think through everything they had just told me. It made sense. That’s when I started to get angry.

“Was that so hard?” I asked.

“What?” they all said together.

"I think I pretty well understand it now. Why was it such a big deal to explain some stuff to me?" I said, getting louder and more frustrated. "I'm not stupid you know! I can think for myself!"

All three of them had a worried look on their face. They were backing up as I rose from the fireside.

"Nicholas," said Plink.

"No! This is getting ridiculous! All I ever hear is 'Don't worry about it.'"

"Nick!" said Brew loudly.

"You guys just don't get it. You don't understand how hard this is for me to deal with. You don't understand how much I'm taking on faith here!"

"Nicholas! Look at your hands!" shouted Flye.

I stopped.

I looked down at my hands. Both were shaking rapidly and I realized that I was holding two things. In one hand was my sword, drawn and pointed at the three dades sitting across the fire. In the other I was brandishing the time seed much like a sword itself. It was extremely cold to touch. Flye's shout had broken my rant long enough to realize that it was so cold it burned my hand to hold it. I dropped the seed and the sword on the ground, and all three Umbili inhaled sharply as the seed fell. The cushioned landing of the soft sand kept any damage from coming to it or the sword. I staggered backwards and dropped to the ground. I was suddenly exhausted.

Plink was the first one by my side. Brew was close behind her, but Flye was backing away.

"Nicholas are you alright?" said Plink.

"I'll go get him some water," said Brew.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I said. “I’m- I’m sorry. I didn’t realize what I was doing. It’s just... It’s been hard to cope with this, this whole... this whole thing. I just don’t know how to... how to...” I lost my dinner. Another long pause ensued as I regained my composure and sat back upright, wiping my mouth.

“You’ve actually been coping remarkably well Nicholas. A human of lesser character would have snapped long before now,” Plink said in a motherly tone, rubbing my back as she did. “You just need to get some rest.”

Brew returned with a cup of water and I took three big gulps. That’s when we all noticed Flye’s face. It was exactly like it had been back in the cabin in the City of Falling Water. She had an undeniable look of fear on her face, and her eyes were locked on the seed that had fallen to the ground.

“Plink! Get the seed away from her!” said Brew.

Plink started toward it, drew her knife and used it to knock the seed back to where I was sitting. I dove on the seed, grabbed it, and clumsily scrambled away from Flye to the other side of the fire, watching as she returned to her usual self. That’s when it dawned on me.

“It’s the seed,” I said. “When you get too close to this seed you get that look on your face. You freeze up.”

“Yes,” said Flye in the same matter-of-fact tone she had used this morning. “I didn’t want to worry you about keeping it away from me this morning, but I suppose you should know that too. You remember how I told you I can see farther than most? Well that seed sort of messes with my foresight. It makes me go a little haywire if I get too close. Other Umbili only experience that if they touch it, but because of my... gift... it affects me a little more strongly.”

“Oh. Okay...” I said hesitantly.

"It's not something you should be worried about. I just don't mix very well with time seeds," she said.

"Gotcha. I'll keep that in mind from now on."

"Right. Well, I think it's about time we got some rest," said Flye.

"Agreed," said Plink.

"I've got first watch, so I'll see you in the morning," said Brew.

We retired to our respective tents and I crept into my hammock being careful not to wake Chak or Fwik.

The next morning I woke to the smell of food. The tent was empty, so I clambered out of my hammock and found a fresh stack of clean folded clothes waiting for me. Brew had put them there this morning along with a note to leave the dirty clothing on the floor of the tent; she would get them later. I dressed and exited the tent into the cool morning air. Examining the group I could tell we would be traveling by boat down the river today. Fwik and Fwish were huddled together working on something quietly. Thrump and Shishu were readying the boat for the trip, securing oars to the side and cleaning out the sand that caked the inside floor. Plink, Chak, and Flye were nowhere to be seen, and Brew was finishing the breakfast preparation and packing up the kitchen.

Brew sounded the alarm for breakfast, and Plink, Chak and Flye emerged from the woods that lined the beach. We couldn't count on being in an area with firewood or animal life for a while, so they had been hunting and gathering wood. Chak had two small animals I didn't recognize, a medium sized wildcat, and a few squirrel like animals. Plink had a similar load and Flye had rigged a rope to drag wood around behind herself. Thrump immediately helped her when he saw the load and she thanked him and sat down to eat. Eventually we all gathered

around and dug into the meal together. Brew had prepared me something she had deemed the best breakfast of the twentieth century that consisted of pancakes with maple syrup, two fried eggs, and large flat slices of fried pig meat. I had to agree that it was quite delicious, if a little sweet, and she mentioned cooking up something way ahead of my time for dinner. With that in mind, I made sure to have seconds of breakfast incase I would soon be missing a meal.

At the end of the meal Chak came over and sat next to me. “Hey Nicholas, how... are you feeling today?” He stuttered halfway through this sentence.

“I feel pretty good,” I said. “But did you hear about what happened last night?”

“Yeah Brew filled me in. It’s okay; don’t feel bad about it. You’ve been doing well so far.” We sat silently for a moment. “How... was your breakfast?” Another stutter.

“It was great,” I said. The awkward chitchat wasn’t natural for Chak. I could tell he was having trouble coming up with subjects that didn’t have to do with battles or missions or journeys.

“Alright,” he said, he sounded almost disappointed, and then he stood up and started speaking to the group. “We best be off. We have to make it to the river spire by noon if we want to get back on track from our little misstep yesterday,” said Chak.

“Is that how we’re gonna refer to being hurled offa the largest waterfall in the universe from now on? A ‘misstep’?” said Brew.

“Yes I think that sums it up quite nicely,” said Chak with a grin.

With that, we tossed the tents into the backpack, did a quick sweep of the campgrounds and loaded up the boat. As we pushed away from the shore I could hear the sound of the waterfall in the distance getting quieter and quieter.

## CHAPTER 12- When the River Meets the Road

The twins had composed a song that morning about my defeat of the Umbra, and they firmly believed in singing to pass the time. That doesn't mean they were good at it. Fwik kept saying that our journey needed a theme song. The problem was that their songs weren't really songs, they were just a bunch of lines that all rhymed. Every once in a while they came up with a few funny ones, but for the most part they were annoying. At first it was fun to listen to them because they made a big deal at how badly they sang. They sort of talked the words to their song loudly with weird inflections in their voice.

“The Xander Boy hooray, hooray!

He blew the Umbra all away

And now we know just what to say

The legends true, it's no cliché!

And Shishu's saved. He is okay.

The human's going to save the day

So come rejoice and don't delay

You will not have to feel dismay

Mendrax he is going to slay

And hopefully he'll get to stay

And eat a cold ice cream sundae,

Or Cherries Jubilee flambé,

Or maybe one big, sweet buffet.

But we will never find a way

That any of us could repay

The Xander Boy hooray, hooray!"

It translates to English incredibly well I must say. I didn't really like the shortened form of my last name, though.

Their singing, combined with the cramped quarters, made the travel on the river enjoyable for about an hour. After that everyone in the group began to realize that the boat was a lot smaller when it had eleven bodies in it. Everyone had their own ways of coping with the boredom of the river travel. I think I coped the best out of all of us because I loved the boat itself so much. I would often sit at the bow and watch the water split as it hit the wood. Doctor Lee and I would talk about logic and being the outcasts. He told me a little bit more about how he came to know Brew, and how she was really like a big sister to him.

I told him more about my life back in Athens, and what it was like being a soldier. I told him about my olive orchard and the different kinds of olives I grew. I even told him about my dreams of building my own boat.

"It's been fantastic getting to know the man who will provide the Syllogy with salvation. Tell me, do you have any family?" asked Doctor Lee with a lighthearted tone.

"Well, not really," I said tersely.

"Ah, that is an answer that I'm afraid elicits more questions than it answers. I feel I must ask you what you mean by 'not really,'" said Doctor Lee.

"Well, my parents died when I was fairly young, I think I was ten years old. They were... I don't really know what happened to them. They just disappeared one day and then some members of the republic in Athens came to the orchard one day saying that they were killed in some sort of a military operation. They said it was sort of a raid by one of the other armies in the

Greek empire. I never got the full story, but I was old enough to take ownership of their property, so, that's what I did."

"Any other family besides that? No loved ones left behind on this expedition?"

"Well, no not really. That's sort of a long story."

"I'm not sure if you noticed Nicholas, but we have time for sort of a long story," said Doctor Lee with a big beetle grin.

I searched his tiny black eyes for a bit, and then noticed out of the corner of my eye that many other passengers in the boat had taken an interest in our conversation.

"You guys all want to know about Pathena I suppose?" I asked loudly to the boat at large. Everyone looked away and pretended they hadn't heard anything up until that point. It was one of those scenes where you expect someone to start whistling innocently.

"What?" said Chak. "What do you mean? What's a Pathena?"

Fwik piped up as well, "Yes, it's definitely the first time I've heard the word. What makes you think we would want to know about something called Pathena?"

"So how long have you all known about her?" I asked hotly.

They all exchanged glances. It was Flye who spoke first from the back of the boat.

"Well Nicholas, you sort of say her name in your sleep," she said.

"A lot," added Fwik, whom I could tell had been disrupted by this in the past few nights.

"We've all sort of been curious about it, but we didn't want to add to your," Plink paused searching for the right word, "stress."

"I guess I can tell you. Pathena is the only woman I've ever loved." That's when I got the idea to get back at these Umbili a little bit. I started out with the phrase, "you might not understand this, being Umbili and all," and then progressed to, "but I'll explain it the best I can.

You see, humans experience this thing called love, sort of like a partnership in Umbili terms,” I was being as condescending and sarcastic in my tone as possible.

“Love is this awesome thing that is hard to describe to Umbili since you’ve never really felt it the way that we humans do.” I looked around at them all smiling at me. They knew exactly what I was doing and it brought levity to the situation that none of us had felt since we first exited the forest on the way to The City of Falling Water. Fwik, however, didn’t get it at all.

“What are you talking about? We know what love is Nicholas! We experience it all the time!”

Everyone looked at him with a facial expression that said *seriously Fwik? Do you not know what sarcasm is?*

“But basically,” I continued, “it’s caring for someone, caring for someone more than yourself. I guess you could describe love as being willing to do anything for another person, maybe even if it costs you something.”

“It’s a commitment of the will to the true good of another,” said Dr. Lee simply.<sup>1</sup>

“That’s a good way of putting it,” I said. “A commitment of the will to the true good of another. Love is when you choose to put one person’s good above your own in every situation.”

At this point I decided to lay off the sarcastic teacher voice.

“That person was Pathena for me. She was wonderful, completely and utterly wonderful. She was beautiful, too. She had about my skin tone and this thick black hair that had a little bit of a wave to it and went almost down to her waist. She lived a few estates over from our orchard and we grew up together. I don’t know if she ever loved me the way I loved her though. She...

<sup>1</sup> Professor Theophilus, in “Homophobia, Part 1: Rage,” *Ask Me Anything: Provocative Answers for College Students* by J. Budziszewski

she helped me get through my parents' disappearance. That was the only time I thought she might one day love me back."

I paused to catch my breath. Everyone in the boat was hanging on my every word. After listening to the stories Chak and Doctor Lee had told me, I had picked up on some storytelling techniques that were coming in handy now. I would pause and drop my voice low at exactly the right moment to draw everyone back into what I was saying.

"We went through our formative years as close friends, but then I went off to be trained in war at fifteen, and when I came back two years later she told me about this man she was falling in love with. I didn't know much about him. He came to our area shortly after I started my training. She was deeply taken with the man. She described him as intriguing and mysterious, he always wore 'flowing black cloth' she used to say, and carried a golden scepter. Then one night, when I was back in the center of Athens to finish my training, he stole her away from me.

"I came back to our village and found out that he was a traveller involved in the slave trade. That was a year before the war in Troy began. After Pathena was taken, I searched for six months and I eventually caught up to the man in black. I came to a small farm just outside the city of Megara. The man had his entire caravan and traders there and had established a small trading post. I took shelter with one of the local farmers. He agreed to help me find Pathena.

"It took a few days, but eventually I located her inside of the man's camp. The farmer, his three daughters, and I arranged a plan to rescue her, but on the night that we were going to put our plan into effect something went terribly wrong. Two of the traders of the man in black burst into the farmhouse wearing long dark clothes just like their leader. They tried to take the farmer's daughters."

I paused for a moment and drew a long breath. “There was a struggle, but eventually the farmer and I were able to overpower the two traders and kill them. The farmer received a large gash in his leg, and eventually lost it as a result, I got away with a simple scratch.” I raised arm and showed the scar that ran across my forearm. “As we were cleaning up the mess of the fight we discovered who the two traders were. The one I had killed was a plain looking older man that I had never seen before. The farmer said it was a friend of his from a few years before. He lived on the other side of Megara with a wife and no children. But the trader that the farmer had killed was smaller and more slender. It was Pathena.

“I still don’t know how she went from being a captive to an accomplice, and after her death, I rigorously devoted myself to the army, and soon thereafter went to Troy to fight for Helen. The rest of the story I think you know. Pathena was the one true love of my life, and I,” I hesitated. “It’s my fault she’s dead.” It was the first time I had ever admitted that out loud. “If I had been there that night, if had been there to stop the man in flowing black cloth, maybe I could have stopped her from joining his trade... maybe she would have loved me back.”

I finished my story somberly, and an ethereal quiet filled the air. Even the river seemed to hush as the weight of my story fell. After a few moments Doctor Lee decided to speak.

“Well yes, I’d have say that unquestionably qualifies as a ‘long story,’” he said. “I must say I’m glad I heard it though, if only to say that I now know you a bit better my friend.”

There was a murmured agreement from the rest of the boat. I turned around to face the air as we traveled down stream. It was sort of refreshing to tell someone about all of this. I had thought about telling someone that story so many times while on the shores of Troy, hoping someone would remember me. It felt good to finally share it.

The quiet persisted for about an hour or so. We floated down the river, went through rough patches of water and still patches, but for the most part it was an enjoyable trip. The air was cool as it wicked upward off the water, and Doctor Lee would sit on my shoulder humming a way that only a beetle can. It was buggy but soothing. Eventually some real music started being sung. Plink, Brew, and Shishu led the pack when it came to real singers, and they taught me a few classic Umbili songs.

Their music had a gruff gritty sound for the most part, but every once in a while it would switch to smooth melodic tones with sharp percussive beats thrown in. Whatever the case it was interesting to listen to. The subject matter ranged from the Higher-ups, to nature, to partnerships, to playing sports. It went all over the place. Some songs were funny, others were thought provoking, and others had no lyrics at all, but the music shook up emotions inside your stomach, leaving the feeling of them in your throat.

The music went on a while and the sun passed into the late afternoon so that there were long shadows across the top of the water. It was about that time that the river suddenly stopped. A large dirt dam had been built across it, bringing the river to a halt suddenly, and it looked like a completely random spot for a dam. Across the top of the dam was a smooth dirt road, with grass descending down the sloped sides into the river. In the center of the dam, next to the road, was one of the huge metal spires that we used to communicate with the Higher-ups.

We all piled out of the river onto the dam. On the other side, the river continued on at the same level as on the upstream side. Evidently there was plenty of spillway between the two segments of river, and I looked around for some sign as to why there was a road there. I couldn't see any apparent reason, as the dirt road disappeared into a forest of trees on the right side of the

river and into an open desert heading toward the canyon wall in the distance on the left. As everyone disembarked, Chak started to speak.

“Alright everyone. We made good time today. Keep it up. Let’s set up camp quickly while we still have natural light. You know what to do.” Everyone set about the task of setting up camp. Plink and Thrump had the tents up almost instantly, Brew had the kitchen spread around with Flye’s assistance, Shishu had jumped to the top of the spire and was looking for an invisible someone inside it, and Chak busied himself cleaning out the bottom of the boat and flipping it over to drain. Again, I felt out of place and pulled out the time seed. I looked at it, nodded, satisfied that it was still there, and put it back in the pouch.

After finishing with the boat, Chak went into the spire through a small door. A few minutes later he emerged grumbling, “I think we might be wrong about having mediator Umbili. They’re never there! We might as well just plan on sending and receiving messages directly!”

I glanced over at Thrump, who had also overheard Chak’s complaint. I remembered Thrump’s similar assessment of the communication spires, and he winked at me.

Once camp was set up, we ate dinner, and, as promised, Brew had made a strange meal that was in the shape of a cube. It was a swirl of green, brown and yellow and had the consistency of a dense, moist cake.

“It’s crampshue!” she said enthusiastically as I poked at it. I hesitantly broke off a corner of the cube and placed it in my mouth. It was wonderful.

I smiled broadly and said, “Brew this is absolutely delicious! What’s in it?”

“You don’t want to know. It’s even strange enough to weird out Teleon,” she said.

I coughed a little at this remark, but the crampshue was so good I didn’t much care. It tasted like a sweet sort of beef dish, with a bold flavor. It hit you when you took a bite. We were

all sharing the same meal tonight, and a few of the Umbili obviously didn't appreciate this menu choice.

"It's the same reason I can't eat hotdogs," grimaced Plink as she poked at her meal without eating it, "I know too much."

"What's a hotdog?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," came the answer. I practically quoted along with her.

We finished our meals and retired to bed. Fwish and Fwik were on the first watch. They were eager to stay up playing with the fire they had built. Chak told them to keep their whips holstered unless a threat appeared.

"I don't want you keeping everyone awake with whip-cracks all night. Understand?"

They both snapped to attention and saluted.

"Absolutely sir!"

"Cross his heart and hope to die!" said Fwish, as she drew an x with her finger across her brother's chest.

"Stick a needle in her eye!" said Fwik and he jammed his finger into his sister's eye. She let out a howl of pain then punched her brother in the face.

"Maybe then you'll learn to cry," she said as her brother regained his composure.

"I'm glad you got the message," said Chak sarcastically as Fwik body slammed Fwish into the ground and they began to roll around. Chak leaned down to where they were and grabbed them by the hair, each in one hand, and lifted them into the air. "Because one more sound out of you two and you're going to need Brew out here with her medical bag. Got it?"

They both mimed zipping their lips shut and locking them in perfect unison. Chak dropped them back on the ground and walked away to his tent. Fwik and Fwish proceeded to make faces at each other. I followed him in and we each dropped quickly into sleep.

I didn't know how long I had been asleep before a bright light flashed in front of my eyes. I opened them and saw Chak, standing over me.

"We've got to go," he said tersely.

I jumped out of my hammock and pulled my armor on. It was still dark out. I looked around after him, but he was out of the tent in a flash. He was running from tent to tent telling the group to assemble. He was scared. He was being quiet in his attempt to get everyone out. He said to ditch the tents because we wouldn't need them anymore. He grabbed the backpack, flipped over the boat, tossed it into the downstream side of the river and ushered everyone in. The rest of the group was being quiet and complacent as well. I followed suit and hopped into the boat and we were rushing down the river. It was incredible to me how fast we were moving.

When we were far away, another bright light flashed back at the campsite, and I heard a war cry. I looked back and a fiery cloud rose alongside the metal spire. It lit the sky. Then the spire creaked. It was falling. It was falling fast and it was falling towards us. It was only then that I realized we had stopped moving all together. The spire hit the water and the sharply pointed tip came down right on the stern of the boat. It flipped upward and we all were scattered into the night. I could hear the boat shattering at the impact. I saw Pathena's face hanging in the sky lit by the moonlight. I was headed back down. I could see the metal spire waiting for me at the bottom. I closed my eyes and braced for the impact, and just as my body whipped against the hard metal, I woke up.

It was early morning in the tent, but there was a little bit of light in the air. It was the sort of dim light that you might confuse with late evening if it weren't for the cool air around you and the serene quietness.

I looked over at Chak. He was still asleep, so I slipped on my boots and breastplate and snuck out of the tent. I glanced around at the quiet campsite and at the different tents, and that was when I saw my first clue that something was wrong. One of the tents had been destroyed.

There were three firm canvas boxes standing proudly around the campfire, and one dilapidated pile of rubble, twisted metal sticking up from the mess, with little shreds of tent material scattered around it. It was such a shock to see the tent that way that I tried to let out a little yelp, but no sound came out because it was too early in the morning. My voice wasn't yet awake. It was one of the female's tents, but I couldn't remember if it was Brew and Plink's or Flye and Fwish's. I ran over to the crime scene and searched for where the entrance flap once stood. I pulled the canvas up and away as best I could to reveal the floor of the tent.

There was a strange glowing grey goo spread here and there around the tent floor, and I realized with horror that it was Umbili blood. Brew's blood. I searched around for any sign of similar pink blood but found none. They weren't there; Brew and Plink were gone.

I processed the information as quickly as possible. Someone or something had kidnapped Brew and Plink. Someone or something had injured Brew, which, from my understanding, was a hard thing to accomplish.

I couldn't wrap my brain around the situation. It was all too much to handle. I closed my eyes and opened them again; my vision was blurry. I was about to pass out. I had to stop it. I took a few deep breaths, but it didn't help. I gained my composure the best I could, opened my mouth, and screamed.

## CHAPTER 13- Double Standards

Chak came running moments after my scream. He saw me on my knees next to the remains of the tent and came to the same realizations I had. The white light inside of his skin burned more brightly than I had ever seen it. He tore through the tent fabric like it was tissue paper. I could spot the moment he saw Brew's blood. There was a momentary lapse in his rage, which was followed by a wail of agony. Thrump, Shishu, and Flye quickly joined the scene. They assessed it quickly and helped Chak away from the tent.

"Come on Chak. We have to figure out what happened."

"Don't worry. I'm sure they're fine."

"Brew and Plink are tough. They can handle themselves."

The usual comforting phrases were being tossed around. We regrouped around the dying embers of the fire and found Fwik and Fwish, curled up into two little balls; sound asleep in a patch of grass. The sight of this caused Chak to fly back into a rage. He picked up both Umbili by the hair just as he had done last night and slammed the two of them together. It made a loud sound like a thunderclap. The twins awoke when he had picked them up and were now yowling in pain. Chak threw them to the ground hard.

Fwik rolled over and reached for his whip and like lightning it was wrapped around Chak's arm. This was the wrong thing for Fwik to do, because Chak grasped the whip with both hands and yanked it upward. Fwik didn't have enough sense to let go until it was too late and he was suddenly flying straight up into the air. In this time, Fwish had gotten back on her feet and she was running around underneath her brother, arms outstretched, yelling, "I gotcha! I gotcha bro." Fwik barreled back to the ground and just as his sister was about to grab him in her arms, Chak delivered a solid fist to his stomach and knocked his entire body out of the way of Fwish's

grasp. He flew sideways for a few seconds before landing hard on the dirt road, skidding to a halt in a heap.

All of this happened in a matter of seconds. It was so quick that everyone else was more stunned by the grace with which Chak was beating the twins to a pulp than they were motivated to stop it. Thrump was the first one to come to himself and he stood between Fwisch and the advancing Chak.

“Chak. Calm down. You have to calm down. We need to talk—”

“I don’t want to talk! It’s their fault!” Chak was crying as he yelled these words at Thrump. He tried to get around the giant, but Thrump’s tree-like arms steadfastly prohibited him from reaching Fwisch.

“Listen. You can beat them up later. First we have to figure out what happened.” Fwisch made an indignant noise at this remark.

“I know what happened! They fell asleep on the watch and when they did, Brew was kidnapped!”

“Chak, don’t make me hit you. Just calm down, alright?” said Thrump in his slow soothing tone.

Chak took a deep breath. His light faded back to its usual intensity. When it did, Thrump stepped out of the way.

“Alright. Fwik, get your sorry little self over here,” Thrump yelled over his shoulder. Fwik staggered to his feet and moved as quickly as he could back over to Thrump. “What’s the last thing you remember?” Thrump asked him.

“Well, it’s hard to say. At the beginning of our watch we played Wakazo for about an hour.”

“What’s Wakazo?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” muttered Flye under her breath.

“Of course, I won about seven games in a row,” continued Fwik.

“Three,” said Fwish through a well-placed cough, and started laughing, but an angry glance from Chak quieted her.

“And then Fwish and I sort of decided that we didn’t both need to be up, just one of us, so we were going to take turns sleeping. It was really, really boring out here.”

“And we didn’t have anything to do!” Fwish added.

“Keeping watch might have been on the to-do list,” said Thrump.

“Yeah, well we were gonna tag team it an hour at a time,” said Fwik, “and it worked for one whole shift. Fwish went to sleep first, then I put her hand in a dish of warm water,” he started laughing, “and she,” another glance from Chak cut him short. “She woke up,” he said.

“And then Fwik got his turn to sleep, and I woke him up after an hour. It was really gelling. Of course *somebody* fell asleep when he wasn’t supposed to.”

“I was trying to come up with a substitute for cinnamon to put in your,” another look from Chak, “but I sort of nodded off and I guess...” He trailed off at the end of his sentence.

“So you have no idea what it was that took them?” Thrump asked.

They shook their heads in unison.

The sun was peaking over the horizon now and there was light spilling into the canyon. When it did it was more obvious where the two dades had been taken. The tent had been scattered into so many pieces, that a sparse trail of tent fragments littered the road and a few of them were on the left side of the river, the way that led off into the desert and canyon wall. Chak noticed this quickly in the light. We spent about thirty minutes searching the camp for more

clues as to where they went, or who took them. There was a bit more of Brew's blood on the outside of mine and Chak's tent. There was also the startling discovery of Plink's crossbow discarded on the bank of the river. That's when Shishu discovered the most horrific news.

"Chak!" he said, holding the backpack that rested every night outside of Chak's tent.  
"The orb. It's gone."

Chak froze where he stood, considering what Shishu had just said. The Agnoscian Orb had been taken with Plink and Brew.

"What are we going to do?" Shishu asked.

"What do you mean what are we going to do?" Chak yelled. "We're going to go after them!"

"Oh, so now that it's your partner in trouble, it's a no brainer that we'll be going to save them," Thrump said.

"It's not just the fact that Brew's there. We have to get the Agnoscian Orb too. We can't just go on without it. Brew is also our chef. How are we supposed to eat without someone who knows how to cook?"

"I can cook!" interjected Flye.

"I can too," said Fwik.

Everyone stopped momentarily and looked at him.

"What?" he asked. "I'm not allowed to like cooking?"

"That's not the point," said Chak. "The point is we have to go and get them."

"But how?" asked Thrump. "We don't even know where they are."

"They have to be at The Settlement."

"You're assuming they're at The Settlement."

“It’s a reasonable assumption. Name any other place on this line that they might be. The Settlement is the only town between Mendrax’s realm and The City of Falling water, and Mendrax’s realm is that way,” Chak said pointing downstream. “The trail goes that way,” he said pointing down the road to the left. “Right in the direction of The Settlement. I’ll bet you whoever took them stayed on the road the whole time.”

“We can’t just go off on a wild goose chase. We have to have some idea of what we’re getting ourselves into. We have to at least know what section of The Settlement they’re in. We also need to know how we’re going to get in. You know they’re not the most friendly to Umbili in most parts of that place. We’ll need a spy inside, or at least a distraction to get us in the gate.” Thrump was working through every obstacle that would meet them as it came to him.

“What’s The Settlement?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Chak.

“No. Tell me, right now. If we’re going to be going to this place, I want to know what it is. What do you mean they don’t like Umbili there?”

Chak sighed. “The Settlement is supposedly the town that the first human established. You remember the story of the human who blew away the Umbra? The legends say he set up a town here in the Wilderness of the Syllogy on the spot where he blew away the Umbra. I personally don’t believe it was actually the first human, but somehow a human town was built. It rests at the base of the cliff at the end of the road. That’s what the road was built for, so that the humans could easily get wood from the forest,” he gestured to the forest on the other side of the river, “for building their city. Umbili don’t go there because the humans who live there are so hostile to any creatures not like them. Talking animals don’t go there, the Umbili don’t go there, the Umbra definitely don’t go there, but we need to go there!”

Doctor Lee buzzed into view. "I am just as upset at the situation as you are Chak. I care very much for Brew. But you do need to calm down. I believe you are omitting a valuable resource that we have at our disposal."

"What are you talking about?" Thrump asked.

"As Chak has rightly stated, talking animals, Umbili, and Umbra never enter The Settlement because of the hostility they are met with. But our group is made up of one more species than the ones mentioned."

Shishu understood what he meant first. "Of course. Nicholas."

"I still don't get it," said Chak.

"Nicholas is human," said Shishu. "He can pretend that he belongs. He can subtly ask questions and find if Brew and Plink are there."

Everyone considered this thought for a moment.

"Sounds like a good plan to me!" said Fwik.

"Me too!" echoed Fwish.

"I- I don't know about this," said Thrump.

"What do you mean you don't know about this? This is the only plan we've got!" Chak said, clearly anxious to do something.

"Weren't you the one hesitant to put Nicholas into danger when he had to blow away the Umbra? Why are you so sure this time that we should hurl him into hostile territory alone? Are you really so selfish that your partner is more important to you than the orders of the Higher-ups? More important than the Syllogy itself?" Thrump sounded angry.

"Weren't you the one who out-voted me when it came to Nicholas blowing away the Umbra? Why are you so sure this time that we shouldn't let him try?" Chak retorted.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t do something I’m just saying I don’t think this is the best plan. Our very existence depends on keeping this young man safe until we reach Mendrax’s realm, and throwing him unaccompanied into The Settlement is downright irresponsible.”

“But it wasn’t downright irresponsible when he might blow himself away?”

“We were there to intervene if something had gone wrong. Here, we will be out of the picture. He will be completely on his own. There’s no way of keeping him—”

“I can’t lose her Thrump! I can’t lose her.”

“I’m not asking you to, I’m just saying we need a better plan. This one has too many risks.”

Doctor Lee cleared his throat as loudly as a beetle could.

“Might I make another observation? The fact that I talk is only obvious if I actually do so. Nicholas himself was confused by my ability and ready to attribute it to anything but me when we first met. Might I accompany him into The Settlement? I could travel quickly between our group and him to carry messages back and forth, and alert you Umbili should something go awry and Nicholas become... compromised... as it were.”

“Doc. You’re a genius,” said Chak.

“I didn’t get the honorary title for nothing,” said Doctor Lee. “Never fear. Dr. Cornelius Spencer Lee is on the job.”

## CHAPTER 14- Human See, Human Do

After the argument over how to get into The Settlement, we packed up the camp as quickly as possible and headed off down the road toward the cliff's edge. Thrump and Flye knew the most about The Settlement, and were giving me a crash course on how to fit in as we walked briskly down the road. Chak guessed it would take about two hours to get there on foot.

"It's large enough that you can get lost in the crowd. I'd say there are about 1,500 people there now. They've been reproducing for many years," said Thrump.

"The real problem you're going to have is fitting in with the time. The first human was from eighteenth century England, so they speak English and they dress differently than you're used to," said Flye. She walked behind Chak and opened the flap of the backpack that was slung over his shoulder. She pulled out a tangle of little silver wires.

"I can help you with the translation part. This is something Brew and I had been tinkering with in the lab for a few years now. We were testing precognitive abilities with microchips and seeing how to tap into foresight. Remember how I told you everybody can see forward a little bit? Well we were working on some other way of controlling it, and using my foresight as the guinea pig, and this little gadget sort of came out as a byproduct.

"It straps inside your mouth to your jaw and this little flesh colored wire goes up through the nasal cavity into the little part of the brain that deals with foresight. To put it simply, it recognizes what you want to say, long before you ever start trying to say it, and then it sends electric pulses into your jaw to translate what you wanted to say into whatever language you want it to come out in. But because this all takes place precognitively, the translation is in real time. So basically this little gadget translates what you say while you say it." I could tell Flye

was alive with passion when she talked about inventing, although at the time I didn't really understand a word of what she had said except the last sentence.

"So I wear that and it will make me speak English?" I asked.

"Yeah. I guess that's one way to put it," she said, obviously a little disappointed I hadn't understood the ingenious invention. "Once you put it in, you won't ever be able to take it out. I wear one all the time now actually." She opened her mouth and tilted back so I could see a little silver wire stretched along her orange teeth. "I've never tested it on a human, but it should work. The Higher-ups told me to bring it along, so I have to think it was for this reason," she said matter-of-factly. She handed the gadget to Thrump for him to put it on me, since she couldn't get close due to the seed.

"As far as what to wear, if you take off your armor, your underclothes will fit in with their time period well," Thrump said. "You won't be able to carry a sword, but I think we have an extra pistol. You can carry that for some protection."

"And what is a pistol?" I asked.

"Oh boy, that's right. Well," he paused and dug through the backpack just like Flye had and extracted two identical pistols. I know now that they were eighteenth century double barrel flintlock pistols, but back then I thought they were short, ornately carved, wood and metal clubs. Thrump held one up at arms length, aimed at Shishu's head, winked at him, and pulled the trigger. A thunderclap erupted from the pistol, and Shishu's cloaked head, in its intangible form, streaked slightly like smoke that's caught a breeze. Shishu became solid again, shook his head back and forth, and continued walking.

"Another broad name for it is 'gun.' It launches these little metal balls called bullets, really, really fast in one direction and they go and tear something up when they land."

“So it’s a really small but powerful bow and arrow for metal balls?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s probably the best way to think of it for now,” said Thrump. “Just don’t point the end with the hole at anything unless you want to make a hole in it. Remember, the end with the hole, makes the hole.”

“Gotcha,” I said. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Remember, you’re just going to get information. You’re not trying to save Plink or Brew. Just discreetly find out where they are. We want to keep you as far out of harm’s way as possible. Right?” said Thrump, asking his question at the end more toward Chak than me.

“Right,” echoed Chak mindlessly as he marched on down the road.

We walked on and they gave me other tips and bits of information I would need for this undercover operation. I listened intently, learning as much as I could about The Settlement, but only truly understanding about half of what they said. Chak was right on with his two-hour estimate and the morning was officially upon us as we came in sight of the city. About half a mile from the front gate we left the road and traveled over to a section of the desert-like terrain that had huge rocks, which provided some shade. Thrump installed the translator in my mouth, which was quite painful for a second and then it felt like nothing was there at all. He also handed me the earpiece. Chak was the one who gave me a final pep talk before I headed into the town.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he said. We all could tell he was quite disheveled at the moment, so no one commented on the brevity of his speech.

I nodded and headed off toward the city with Dr. Lee resting on my shoulder. It was only when I reached the huge door separating the city from the outside that I realized Thrump and Flye had prepared me for everything I needed to do except actually getting into The Settlement. I looked around at the entryway on the road and there was nothing there to even suggest a course

of action. I glanced at Dr. Lee who was peering up at the huge sand-colored wall. I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was. I was about to open my mouth when the door cracked open and I saw the town on the other side of the archway.

It crossed my mind again that all the cities had large walls and gates, and I wondered why that was momentarily, because they all seemed easily penetrable. The Syllogy had a blue goo that you could walk through without resistance, The City of Falling Water had a completely unguarded cliff edge and waterfall by which to enter the city, making their guarded gate slightly useless, and now The Settlement just opened their gate for a complete stranger no questions asked. I was about to bring this up with Doctor Lee when I realized the gate hadn't been opened for me.

I heard the sound of two horses beating their hooves on the dirt road behind me. I turned around and saw clouds of dust in the distance, and two horsemen riding toward the city, nearing me quickly. I darted in through the gate and glued myself to the wall to stay as far out of sight as possible. There were only two humans that I could see once inside the city and they were obviously waiting for the horsemen. They each held a rope with one end connected to a log for tying up horses just inside the gate.

Incredibly, they hadn't seen me. I edged my way around the end of the door and behind it just as the two horsemen entered the archway. The two of them were talking and I heard them dismount and hand the reigns to the two men who had been waiting. The in-ear translator Chak had given me my first day in the Syllogy worked perfectly here as well, because I knew that they were speaking English, but I could understand it as if it were Greek.

"The well is coming along nicely. I just wish that the child had been more careful about where he was playing. He set back construction by about four days."

"It's not as if it matters anymore Charles. The boy is fine and you have plenty of help to get back on schedule. It's a good thing Teleon was around to warn someone."

"Frankly, I'm just glad Teleon didn't worsen the situation," I heard Charles say.

Their voices faded as they walked away, and I chanced a peek around the door to see which direction they were going. I saw their backs as they walked directly into the heart of The Settlement, away from the door. They both wore long over coats, and had shoulder length brown hair that protruded from under tricorne hats that matched their coats in color. I couldn't see anything else about their appearance from the back but the other two men had left, so I snuck out from behind the door and followed them from a distance.

They walked further into the city and I started to see the signs of life. There were a few non-descript buildings no more than a story high on the outskirts of the city. As we went further in there were little shops and market stalls, and the buildings became more ornate and well made. Some reached three stories. We took a few turns here and there, and the final turn took us into a busy marketplace. This was obviously the commercial heart of the city. There were shops and stalls lining the large alley. The people crowding the area were dressed in a variety of styles.

It seemed that the more money one had, the slower they walked and the more layers of clothing they wore. The poorer in the bunch wore simpler clothes. I lost the two men in the hustle and bustle of the place and I realized that I was dressed more like the poor people, so I hunched my shoulders and frowned. Luckily, I hadn't bathed in two days and I had just walked for two hours on a dirt road, so I fit the part well.

The crowd was so thick that I took the first opportunity available to escape to an outside edge where the crowd was thinner so I could assess the situation more clearly. I scanned the crowd for any reasonable opportunity to ask about Brew and Plink. None presented itself. I

edged along the wall, keeping as far outside the crowd as I could and was confronted by a woman holding an ornately designed rug. She had bruises all over her arms, and by the state of her clothes and hair I could tell that she was a slave, and a poorly treated one at that. She was offering the rug to me and was halfway through pleading with me to purchase it when she stopped mid sentence.

Something changed in her face. Her eyes narrowed as she looked over my whole body and the interaction had just reached the point of awkward, when she startled me with her next word.

“Nicholas?”

## CHAPTER 15- The Task at Hand

I couldn't believe my eyes when recognition dawned on me.

"Pathena?" I asked incredulously. "What-? How-? Where-?" I couldn't finish any of my thoughts.

"Nicholas, what are you doing here now? How did you get here?" she asked in a hushed tone.

"I could ask you the same question," I said. It took a moment to breathe in the reality of the situation. "I thought you were dead. I knew you were dead!"

"Well, I'm not dead," she said.

"I can see that. But... how? How did you get here?"

"That's a long story," she said, looking over her shoulder, "and I'm supposed to be selling right now so I can't tell it to you. Pretend you're thinking of buying this."

I looked down at the rug and nodded approvingly, rubbing my hand on it.

"How did you get here?" she asked.

"I bet it's a longer story than yours," I said, implying that I couldn't tell her now. She understood. "I'm going to get you out of here. I have friends who can help."

"No!" she almost shouted.

"What do you mean 'no'? I can get you out of here. What have they done to you? Who made you—"

"I can't. It's not time yet. You're early. I - I can't!" she said loudly, and with that she turned and ran into the crowd leaving the rug on the ground at my feet. I tripped over it in an attempt to follow her and fell flat on my face. When I stood up I had no idea where she had gone, and it was no use trying to figure it out. There were just too many people. I looked around

frantically but just made myself dizzy, so I retreated to the wall again. I couldn't understand what was happening. The idea of Pathena being alive was hard enough to accept, but that she was here in this other place in the universe and that she was obviously trapped here by someone was even harder to wrap my brain around. I closed my eyes and breathed steadily in and out a few times.

Doctor Lee whispered in my ear, "We need to go back to the group. This is too strange to try and deal with on our own. We have plenty of time to come back and find Brew and Plink. We need to sort this out while we still have the chance."

I nodded and opened my eyes, then started retracing my steps back to the main gate of The Settlement. I saw a small brown lever protruding from the wall next to the door and pulled it without thinking. The door opened easily, and I practically sprinted the half mile back to the rocks where the rest of the group was hiding. I collapsed to my knees breathing hard and trying my best to form words. None came.

"What's wrong?" asked Thrump.

"Why are you back so soon? Did you find them?" Chak asked.

"What happened?" asked Shishu.

I was trying to answer these questions, but simply couldn't speak. I was gasping for breath.

"For the Higher-up's sake, give him some room! Let the man catch his breath."

To my surprise it was Fwish who was speaking. It was the first time I had heard her speak seriously, and I was grateful that she had chosen this moment to do so. It was unusual enough that everyone did what she said and backed away. Fwik then approached me with water, which I drank eagerly. After a few moments, my heavy breathing subsided, and I started to tell them what had happened.

“Pathena was in there. She was in The Settlement. We hadn’t gone one hundred yards into the place when we saw her selling rugs in the marketplace. She’s alive! She’s a slave! We have to help her!”

I stood up shakily, grabbing Thrump’s hand for support.

“Nicholas, are you sure you’re alright? It’s hot. I think your mind is playing tricks on you. You told us she was dead.”

“I know what I told you! I can’t explain it. I don’t know how she got here; all I know is that she’s here! She’s alive.”

“Okay. Okay. Nicholas. Let’s assume you’re right,”

“I know I’m right!” I shouted.

“Sorry. Since you’re right... what do you think we should do about it?” Flye was speaking calmly.

“Save her!”

“But how?” she asked.

“I don’t know! You’re Umbili aren’t you? Can’t you just charge in there? Storm the place? You’re stronger than humans. Just attack!”

“Do you even know where she is in The Settlement?” Thrump asked.

“Well, no. She ran off into the city. She told me she couldn’t leave. She had to stay, and I lost her.”

“Well it sounds like she doesn’t want to be saved,” said Chak.

“But I want to save her!” I yelled. There was a tense moment between the two of us.

“Nicholas. How can we save her if we don’t know where she is, why she’s here, or how to find her?” asked Flye.

“I don’t know, but we can’t just do nothing. I—” I stopped for a moment considering what I was about to say. “I love her. Can’t you understand? I love her. I can’t just leave her here. Not like this.”

Shishu spoke next. “I understand how you feel Nicholas, but sometimes we must let go of the ones we love. Sometimes we have to sacrifice what we want, and what we think is best, in order to do something better.”

“And what something better did you have in mind?” I shot back at him.

“As clichéd as this sounds... saving the world. Are you ready to sacrifice the world for the sake of the one you love? Because, at the present moment, saving her means losing her also. She is in this world, whether you like it or not.”

“What are you saying Shishu? I should just abandon her? Let her die here. Go on living knowing that I could have done something about it?”

“No Nicholas. I’m suggesting that you do something about it. Carry the seed. Complete the journey. Finish the job. The Settlement will still be here afterward, and we can worry about Pathena then.”

“That’s not an option. I have to help her. You’re all hypocrites! It was worth our time to save the ones you love, but suddenly it’s not worth our time to save the one I love. Is that it? Well, I can’t go on like this. I can’t go on knowing she’s a slave here.”

I turned and started to walk back toward The Settlement. “I’m going to find her! I’m going to help her!” I shouted over my shoulder.

“Nicholas Alexander you will stop!” Chak was speaking in the huge ominous voice he had used back on the shores of Troy. I whirled around, angrier than ever.

“No I will not! You can’t scare me with that anymore. You need me way more than I need you, do you understand? I see the way the Umbili look at me, and I hear the way they talk about me. I’m their last hope. You can’t intimidate me and control me anymore. Do you understand Chak? I’m not your slave, and I will not follow someone who does not know what it means to lead. A leader inspires confidence in his followers, not fear. You are a tyrant, and until I have saved Pathena I will not do anything you attempt to tell me to do. Remember, I can disobey, and I think I’ll exercise that ability right now!” I didn’t wait for a response; I just turned back around and stormed toward The Settlement.

It wasn’t until the halfway point that I realized someone was following me. Shishu, Flye and Doctor Lee were all making their way toward me, and gaining fast. I decided to wait instead of trying to outrun them and when they reached me I said steadily, “Don’t you dare try to stop me.” As I did I reached into the pouch containing the time seed, and held it high in front of me, poised to bring it crashing to the rocky ground and shatter into a million pieces. Flye saw what I was doing and backed a few paces away, but Shishu took a step forward, gently grasped my arm, and lowered it.

“We are not going to stop you Nicholas. We came to help you.”

“I thought you couldn’t help me. I thought you said I should stay the course, and finish the job.”

“I had to see to what lengths you were willing to go in order to save the one you love. I know what it means to love so much that you would lay down your life. I know from personal experience. I had to see if you were willing to sacrifice it all, and I’m here to try and make sure that you don’t have to.”

“You died... to save your partner?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And I came to help as well. I was instructed by the Higher-ups to help the human finish the job, and considering your resolve, I’ve decided that helping you save Pathena *is* the job,” said Flye.

“I am simply accompanying the greatest friend I have left in this little group,” announced Dr. Lee. I smiled. A short awkward pause followed these pronouncements of allegiance. Flye was the one who broke the silence.

“So what are we going to do?”

Immediately, I launched into planning mode. “Well I suppose we should start by finding Pathena. She’s somewhere in The Settlement. Security was relaxed, so it should be no problem to walk back in. Shishu, clear something up for me: I know that the humans in there don’t like Umbili, but what do they think of Umbra?”

“We are nothing to them. They hate Umbili, but Umbra aren’t worthy of a strong emotion. Umbra don’t ever go there simply because of how alone we feel: not because we would be treated badly, but because we wouldn’t be treated at all.”

“Good. Then you can come in with us this time.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea Nicholas? If they see you going around with an Umbra cloud following you, they will definitely mistrust you,” said Flye. “No offense,” she added, nodding toward Shishu.

“None taken.”

“Well, I’m not planning on being associated with him. I just need him to be able to get in,” I said. “No offense,” I added.

“None taken.”

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” I said. “Flye I need you to tap into your foresight. I need you to look ahead as far as you can and see where we actually end up finding Pathena, and see if you can figure out a way to get directions there. Dr. Lee, once she does that, you fly in and make sure she’s right. Make sure Pathena is where Flye says she is. You remember what she looks like right?”

“I suppose.”

“Well, once you find where she is for sure, you come back and take me to her. Shishu will follow me in at a distance. Once I get to her, Shishu can run up, grab us both and jump us out of The Settlement and back here. Any sort of disturbance we cause will be someone else’s problem because we’ll be out of there instantaneously.”

“That actually sounds good,” said Flye. “Of course it all hinges on whether or not I can find her ahead of time.”

“Yes it does,” I said hesitantly.

“I honestly don’t know if I can or not. It sort of depends on your resolve to find her, my concentration, and a good deal of luck. But I’m willing to try,” she said.

“Excellent. It sounds as if we have a strategy. Shall we put it into effect?” said Dr. Lee.

“I have one hesitation,” said Shishu. “What if we somehow interfere with an attempt to save Plink and Brew? What if our possible disturbance causes some disastrous consequences for our other rescue mission?”

Flye was the one who calmed his fears.

“Shishu, *what if’s* will drive you mad. Take it from someone who can see the future: focus on the task at hand, and let the *what if’s* sort themselves out.”

Her resolve with this statement resonated within the group. Focus on the task at hand.

## CHAPTER 16- Detours Detoured, Pascal Would Be Proud

At first, every part of the plan was going off without a hitch. Flye was able to pinpoint exactly where Pathena was inside The Settlement, Dr. Lee found it and mapped out a route for me to follow to find her inside. Shishu and I made it into The Settlement just fine and headed toward the building that Pathena was in. Flye had told me that no one would be there when we arrived, so we just had to bust in, grab Pathena and get out. It would be as simple as that. All was going beautifully.

We were making our way through the city at a remarkably fast pace. I was leading the way, weaving in and out of people in the market place. I was struck by how large The Settlement was, both in size and population. The further into the city we went the more we realized that it just kept going. There were always more people, and we could always see the cliff edge opposite us ascending upwards, but we never got any closer to it. I would check over my shoulder periodically, and see Shishu gliding through people in his smoke state. No one paid him any notice.

We reached a point when we were supposed to turn left out of the marketplace. I glanced over my shoulder to ensure that Shishu could see me make the turn.

As I was turning my head back forward, I got the inexplicable urge to turn right instead of left. I can't describe it any better than to say that my brain was telling me to turn left and every other part of me was telling me to turn right. Strangely enough, my brain lost, and I found myself walking right instead of left.

I looked back over my shoulder to see if Shishu saw me go the wrong way. He approached the corner, and took the left turn just as if he were following me on the path we had planned. This perplexed me because he looked like he was still following someone or something.

His face was set ahead of him just as it had been when we had made our way through the crowd and he had been watching my movements intently, but now he was watching no one.

I wanted to shout at him to make him realize he was going the wrong way, which was really the right way but not the way I had gone, but two things stopped me. First of all, it would have linked me with the Umbra who had just made his way through the marketplace, and we wanted to avoid that as much as possible. But more than that, my voice wouldn't let me call out to him. I realized this halfway through the thought. Even if I had attempted it, I knew I wouldn't be able to do so. It was as if my body knew exactly what it was doing, but it wasn't going to let me in on the plan.

Once I came to this conclusion, I gave up and decided to just do whatever my body told me to do. I walked up a short set of steps, and the crowd thinned. Another right turn, then another left and I found myself in a deserted little alleyway with one man standing in the middle of it facing me.

He was extremely ordinary looking, and I tried to walk past him, but my body decided to stop dead in front of him. I tried not to make eye contact with him, but my eyes decided to look directly into his. He was about my height with untidy black hair. He wore clothes similar to what I had seen Pathena wearing and he held his body with a relaxed confidence, but confidence that could easily go unnoticed. I almost want to say that his body conveyed that he didn't care about anything around him, but not because he didn't care, just because he couldn't be surprised by anything. His eyes were blue, striking, and deep. It was his eyes that captivated me, and they gave me a sense of calmness that I shouldn't have had considering that I had no control over my motor functions at the time.

We both simply stood there staring into each other's eyes. It was tense, but not awkward at all. I kept trying to say something, but I could never get my voice to engage. Who was this mysterious, confident, calming man who stood before me? The question rang in my mind over and over again when he abruptly and intently turned around and walked to the end of the alleyway, turning out of sight. The moment I could no longer see him something large fell in front of me, and hit the ground with a loud thud.

I started, in control again, and looked down at the thing in front of me. It was a disheveled, exhausted, and broken Plink. Her eyes were closed and her clothes torn and ratty. Her hair had lost its mesmerizing luster and had bits of debris in it, like it might get from being dragged on the ground. The soft pink light that emanated from her skin was as dim as I had ever seen it, leaving her practically white. All of her weapons were gone, and, for the first time since I had known her, she looked truly frail.

I knelt down next to her limp body and tried desperately to wake her up. After a few seconds with no success I looked around the alley and up from where she had fallen. It was as if she had plummeted straight out of the sky.

I took a breath and looked for anything to give me a clue about what to do. I tried to look for the weird things, things I didn't have on earth. I looked for invisible Umbili on the rooftops. I looked for trees that were colors other than just brown and green. I looked for white skies with blue clouds. I looked for lightning skin, and talking beetles. I searched for four legged animals with fangs and talons. I looked for the strangely calming man who had just left the alleyway, but he was nowhere to be found. I looked for what an Umbili might overlook, and buried in the wall next to me I found it.

A glassy black circle was set into the wall. I didn't know what it was, but it looked out of place in the sandy, brown, brick surroundings. I darted over to it to get a closer look but couldn't find anything else unusual about it other than the fact that it was there. It was just a black glassy button inserted into the rock of the wall, no bigger than my fist. I waved a hand in front of it. Nothing happened. I lined up directly in front of it and placed one eye dangerously close to the wall, peering into the blackness. Again nothing.

I suddenly knew what I should do with it and I walked back over to Plink, hoisted her onto my shoulder, and dragged her limp body over to the wall. With all the courage I could muster, I took a deep breath, and pressed my hand flat onto the black circle as firmly as I could. The moment my skin touched the smooth surface, complete darkness engulfed us both.

I woke up in a black room. Pitch black walls, a shiny black floor, and a high black ceiling gave me the odd sensation of being in outer space; in reality, I was in some sort of theater. A few black chairs were scattered around me on one half of the room and on the other half, a small stage. There were two doors on either side of the stage and a door behind all the chairs. Plink lay next to me in the same disheveled state she had been in the alleyway.

The truly frightening thing was what was on stage. Brew's limp body was tied to a stake in the middle of the platform. She was held upright by a few taut ropes encircling her. Two Umbili stood on either side. Worst of all, her light was completely out and her body was turning a pasty gray. I didn't see anyone else in the room.

I looked around. The Umbili were completely still. If it weren't for the fact that they were breathing I would have thought they were statues. I decided to test the limits of my freedom and stood up. Neither of the Umbili in the room acted. I started to walk around Plink to put her body in a more comfortable position. Again, they did nothing. As I walked I felt a throbbing in my

head and realized that I had been knocked unconscious by something when I had touched the black circle.

After I situated Plink, I checked the stage again and then headed toward the door at the back of the theater to see if I could open it. Just as I reached for the handle something hard hit me in the face, and I realized my mistake. There were Umbili in the room who had not unlocked my view of them.

As I sat up, my head reeling from the blow, I looked at the door and tried to focus on the wall around where I thought one of them was standing. The outline of a dude who looked a lot like Chak came into view. I glanced around the room and saw the faint outlines of a few others, one standing next to Plink where I had left her, and another on each door in the room, bringing the grand total up to six opposing Umbili in the room with me, three dudes and three dades.

I thought longingly of my armor and sword that I had left in the backpack with Chak. I reached down to my belt and found that my pistol had been removed at some point while I was unconscious, but to my amazement, the time seed was still draped around my neck, nestled inside the leather pouch just like always. I thought for a moment about the situation. What should I do? What *could* I do? There were six Umbili, immensely stronger than me, keeping me with two disabled allies. I had no idea where or when we were. The only asset I had was the seed hanging around my neck.

I decided the best course of action was to talk.

I pulled the seed out of its pouch and held it in front of me.

“So why didn’t you take this from me?” I yelled as confidently as I could to the room at large. No response.

“What? Were you scared to touch it?”

Again, no response.

“Big strong Mendrax can’t even give you enough courage to touch a little seed. Sounds like quite a leader.” I was trying to evoke some sort of reaction, anything that I could try and capitalize on.

“I guess your morning star isn’t really reigning supreme is he?” Finally I hit pay dirt. All six of the Umbili in the room hissed loudly like snakes, and the four whom I couldn’t see suddenly unlocked my full view of them. The dade guarding Brew on the stage began chanting just as the four legged animal had done in the clearing.

“Mendrax will reign supreme. The morning star has risen and its light will blot out the sun.” She did this so monotonously and quietly that it just filled the room with a slight murmur more than anything else.

“So why did you leave me alive?” I shouted. “Why not just kill me? Kill us all like you killed Brew! It would end the threat right here, right now! What do you need me alive for?”

The Umbili at the doors took a few steps closer to me and the one guarding Plink reached down and grabbed her. I flinched slightly but tried not to show my fear.

“Why not me?!?” I wailed. “Speak up! What do you need me for? If you don’t tell me I’ll... I’ll—” I raised the seed high above my head and as I did the Umbili by the back door froze. In fact, everything in the room froze. The chanting stopped. There was absolute silence. It was as if time itself had momentarily halted and I was the only one who could see it happening.

Then I heard a voice. It was a calm voice speaking just as loudly as one might when having a conversation in a quiet living room. I can’t explain why but I knew without a doubt that the voice belonged to the extremely confident man from the alleyway.

“Nicholas, you will have only a short time to complete the following. Go and drag Plink to the door behind you and sit her just next to it in a chair. Once you have done that, go onto the stage and retrieve the Agnosian Orb, which the dade is keeping concealed behind Brew, and retrieve your pistol from the dude. Untie the ropes keeping Brew tied to the pole. She is about to undergo a transformation. Once these tasks are complete, return to where you are now and blink your eyes three times.” The voice stopped.

“Who are you? What kind of transformation?” I asked. The voice didn’t respond.

“Why should I trust you?”

“Why shouldn’t you?” the voice said, and I could tell by the way he asked the question that it was the last time he would speak.

I paused for just a moment. Who or whatever this voice was, his reasoning was correct. I had nothing to lose by doing what he said and the possibility of gaining something if I did. If he was on the opposing side, then I would be no worse off than I already was, but if he was on my side, I might have the chance to get out of this situation.

I was convinced quickly and set to work. I put the seed back in its pouch around my neck, placed Plink by the back door, grabbed the Agnosian Orb and my pistol, and untied the ropes holding Brew in place. She slid down the post slightly but the frozen Umbili grasping her on either side prevented her from falling to the floor. When that was done I returned to my position, orb and pistol in hand, and blinked slowly and intentionally three times.

The moment I opened my eyes after the third blink, the room exploded with light. It was sudden and blinding and a loud thunderclap accompanied it followed by a loud ringing sound, which knocked all the Umbili in the room to the floor. Strangely enough, I was in complete control of my footing. The light was coming from Brew. She no longer needed to be held in

place; she rose slightly up the post and her body began to stretch in every direction. The light was so bright that I had to shade my eyes so I couldn't see exactly what was happening.

The ringing continued and a few seconds into the transformation I felt something lift me off my feet. Before I knew what was happening I had been hoisted over the familiar shoulder of Thrump. The back door had been opened and Thrump, Chak, Flye, Fwik, Fwish, Shishu, Dr. Lee, and Pathena had rushed in, grabbed Plink and me and started making their way out. I barely got a glimpse of Shishu cradling Plink in his arms, and Chak looking back at Brew's shining body before passing out for the second time that day.

The last thought on my mind as I faded into blackness was the simple and comforting phrase, "My friends!"

## CHAPTER 17– Dramatic Changes

I came to and we were running. Thrump's body was jostling and there were yelling humans all over. I realized that we were running straight through The Settlement, and currently were making our way through the busy marketplace. There were some humans running away frightened and others running toward us with weapons and yelling battle cries. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Shishu launch up and out of the city. He had taken Plink with him. We continued to run. Fwik was waving Plink's hip weapon around, deflecting attacks from the humans as we ran. Every few seconds Shishu would return and then another member of our group would disappear into the blue clouds with him.

It was down to just me, Thrump, Chak, and Fwish when the bullets started flying. The people of The Settlement had finally gotten out their rifles and were taking deadly aim. The bullets would glance off of Thrump's back and make sparks as they contacted his tough Umbili skin. I could hear him wince every time a bullet hit him, and he pulled me off of his shoulder and held me in front of his body to shield me from the danger.

As we continued to run I could tell that we were getting closer to the front gates. The barrage of bullets thinned as we made it through the gates outside of The Settlement, but we didn't slow down. Thrump continued to sprint toward the rocks where our group had split up hours before, and we found the rest of the group sitting there, panting.

There was silence for a moment, before Fwik spoke awkwardly.

“Hey guys.”

Everyone glared at him.

We didn't get much time to ourselves because two things suddenly landed in our circle with a huge thud. The two things were struggling with each other. I couldn't tell what they were

because they were moving so fast. One would weave downward and the other would follow, then one would jump into the air and glide swiftly back down to earth, while the other synchronized its movements to try and overtake it. There were flashes of light coming from the pair of them as well, and a cloud of dust rose and engulfed them as they continued to fight. After a few moments they broke apart and the dust settled; it was then that I saw them both clearly.

One was an Umbili dude. He was average sized, shorter than Chak, but taller than Fwik, scrawny, and had a red light emanating from his jagged skin. He wore the classic white Umbili tunic just like Chak's, but around his waist was a ruby red cord. It looked metallic and flashy just like the gold that the Umbili I knew wore, but it was the deepest fiery red that I had ever seen.

The other was a female Umbra. She was petite and covered in a light powdery grey color. She wore a hooded robe, like Shishu's, but the hood wasn't up as his always was. She had spunky pixie-like spiked hair, that was the same powdery grey as the rest of her body, and her fingers and feet were the same sort of straw-like strands as Shishu's, and the same silver rope was wrapped around her waist. She looked different than her Umbili self, but there was no mistaking who this Umbra was.

"Brew!" I shouted.

"Yes. It's good ta see you too Nicholas, but please don't distract me for the next few seconds," she said quickly, with a hint of her old twang, but it was veiled now and less enthusiastic than before.

She jumped suddenly, and it was just suddenly enough to catch the dude off guard. He looked into the sky, and in the moment that he had been blinded by the sun, Brew landed softly and silently behind him. She reached up, put a spindly arm around his neck, and made a

squeezing and twisting motion. There was a little popping sound, and the dude stopped struggling against Brew's grasp. She laid him down gently on the ground. We all stood staring.

"Did you just kill him?" I asked.

"No he's just unconscious. He'll be asleep for a few hours and have quite a headache when he comes around," she said. "Somebody wanna get me the restraints from the backpack?" Thrump nodded and started rummaging around. I looked down at the orb still clutched in my hand.

"Here Thrump. You can put this in there too." I handed it to him gently, along with the pistol. He took them, tossed Brew some sort of harness, and handed me my armor.

"You'll want to put this back on I suppose," he said.

"Thanks," I said.

We were the only three in the group moving and talking and it was a little awkward. Most of the group members were still looking at Brew. Chak hadn't stopped staring at her or closed his mouth since she entered the rocky clearing. It was in this silence that I noticed Pathena, standing up tall like part of the team, and all the questions I had about the entire day flooded into my mind.

"Ok, can we take a break here and figure out what just happened?" I asked the group at large.

"I think that's a marvelous notion, and I believe it is a respite I should begin as I have a rather large confession to make to the assembly at this time. I cannot hide my past any longer."

I looked around. Doctor Lee was sitting on the tip of a large rock that jutted up and into the clearing so that he was sitting at eyelevel.

"You? What could you have to confess?" I asked.

"Well," said Doctor Lee, "For starters it's my fault that all of this happened. It's rather a long story. I think it might be best if we take a moment, set up camp here and perhaps have something to eat as I'm sure you are all quite hungry. I promise you will hear the story then."

I looked around. Everyone was coming out of their states of shock. Chak spoke first, gruffly. "Fine. Let's get to work. I want to hear this," he said.

We all mulled about doing various chores and pitching the remaining tents. Thrump tied the unconscious dude to a rock and made sure that he could not escape. Flye took charge of preparing the meal, and I sat with her in silence. Everyone was quiet as we ate and finally, we all gathered around Fwik and Fwish's fire to listen to Doctor Lee. The sun was barely over the horizon as he began and it gave a dramatic backdrop to the tale.

"My confession is this: I have not always been on your side. Back when the Umbili split and Mendrax took some of you with him, I enlisted myself into his services."

At this news there was movement in the group and I realized that Chak was starting to stand up to square off to the beetle and squash him like the bug that he was.

"Chak please! Allow me to finish. Allow me to explain myself, I beg of you, please!  
Grant me this one favor before you kill me."

"I will not let you talk your way out of this bug. Your only ally on this journey was Brew and look what you've done to her! You don't deserve to live." He started to glide forward and others began to stand and watch in horror.

"I want to hear him out!" I shouted.

Chak stopped. He turned and looked at me.

"You can't continue to manipulate me like this Nicholas," said Chak. He was speaking tersely and intensely. It was scary. "This bug deserves to die and you will not stand in my way."

“We have to hear his story at least. I have to know what all this was about. Too much has happened in the last day to go on oblivious. We have to hear him out,” I said as calmly as I could.

Chak stared for a moment. His face was hard and emotionless. There was a tense moment, then I saw him glance at Brew, and he relinquished.

“You have five minutes to live bug. Make them count,” he said, and sat back down by the fire.

“Well, as I said, I was enlisted in the services of Mendrax for quite some time. The reason was twofold. Firstly, Mendrax promised to open my mind to new discoveries. He told me that he could teach me what the foundations of the world were built on. He even hinted that I might learn how to create life. I wanted to learn this. It was selfish, I know, but I wanted to learn about the deepest most basic stones on which life is built, and Mendrax seemed to have the answers. Secondly, I was bitter and logic driven. This is a terrible combination. After the death of my family, I bought into the grand lie that love was an illusion and that death was the ultimate destination. With my entire philosophy built on these two axioms, I could come to no other conclusion but to follow the one who claimed to overcome death and who disbelieved in love. Surely you can understand my feelings. I don’t defend my actions, but I ask you to at least understand them.”

I could understand them. I had been in similar despair when I thought that Pathena was dead. I was close to following the same path as Dr. Lee when the Trojan war happened, and my descent into deep despair had been put on hold. I thought about this for a moment, and silence filled the group as others did the same.

“Go on,” I whispered.

Doctor Lee took a deep breath. "In the services of Mendrax, I was placed on the team to defend his garden. He knew that the Higher-ups were assembling a team to infiltrate, and somehow he knew that Brew would be on that team and that I knew her from long ago. I was instructed to rekindle my friendship with her and keep her under surveillance for the human who would carry the seed. So, as you know, that's what I did.

"I spent my days outside of Brew's house, waiting for a human to appear whom I would befriend and report to Mendrax on his strengths and weaknesses. I was instructed to gain his trust." Doctor Lee nearly whispered when he said this, and kept his small black eyes firmly on the rock in front of his feet.

"Mendrax would send Umbra in to meet me in secret and I would report on the whereabouts of the group and the information I had recovered. I was the one who instructed him to send the Felavis that first night in the woods. That was the last action that I took specifically in line with Mendrax's bidding. It was during that fight, when I saw Thrump and Shishu fighting so valiantly for what they believed in, that I began to question my axiom of the illusion of love. I began to question whether love was a real thing or not.

"That battle, along with my conversations with Nicholas and my realization that I had kindled a true friendship instead of a farce made me reconsider my conclusions about love. When I saw the pain and death Mendrax was willing to inflict for his own gain, and the love that this group had for each other, and then the real love that I had redeveloped for Brew, my entire perception of the world shattered. I had to come to the conclusion that Mendrax was truly wrong and that the Higher-ups were truly right.

"It was the night that we reached The City of Falling Water that I sent word to Mendrax that I would no longer be in his service. I had defected. He didn't like that at all, and he sent the

Umbra the next day to try and crush the resistance while he still knew where we were. It was that night that he decided to punish me for my defection. It was the power of love that caused me to leave his service, so he tried to use that love against me to get me to reenlist in his service. He tried to manipulate me by kidnapping Brew, knowing that I loved her like a sister and a mother. He tried to force me back into his conscription. He under-estimated the power of love yet again: both Chak's love for his partner and this whole group's love for their friends.

“Of course, I must take responsibility for my actions. I bear no ill will toward you for what you must do to me, now that you know what I have done. I am filled with utter regret and sorrow over the outcome of my decisions.

“I realize now that love is not affectionate feeling, but a constant aspiration for the ultimate good of the loved.” He looked at Brew. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forgive myself for the harm that I have caused you, my dear.”

“I can,” she said. Then she glided up to the little beetle, picked him up in both hands, and gave him the smallest sweetest kiss that’s ever been given.

Chak looked stunned. He didn’t know what to do. It was for Brew’s vengeance that he intended to kill the beetle, and now it seemed that action would be contrary to her honor. He simply sat there with the strangest of looks on his face. The others in the group stood up and rallied around Brew giving Dr. Lee their forgiveness as well. You could hear the joy in everyone’s voices as a member of the team, both old in a sense and new in another, was added to the fold.

I walked over and sat next to Chak who was still sitting in stunned silence.

“Are you ok?” I asked.

He coughed slightly as he found his voice. “I suppose. I just don’t understand. I don’t understand how she can,” he hesitated, “how she can wipe that all away. Look at what he did to her. He made her an Umbra. He made her one of those punished with death. She forgave him for punishing her forever.”

I thought a moment for the right words.

“Chak, I don’t want to make you angry but maybe you need to reconsider something. Just like Doctor Lee realized that love is not an illusion, and that changed the way he lived, maybe you need to realize something too. Maybe,” I stopped, for a moment, making sure to think through what I was about to say.

“Maybe what?” he whispered.

“Maybe being an Umbra isn’t a punishment. Maybe it’s an honor beyond all others.”

## CHAPTER 18- Teleon

We celebrated a bit that night. This detour had been quite taxing, and by all rights and purposes we shouldn't have had the energy to celebrate, but we did anyway. We ate food and sang into the night at the return of a friend. Chak was quiet for most of the night, but just before he went to bed he quietly said to Doctor Lee, "I forgive you too." He didn't wait for a response, but turned, gave Brew a huge hug, and then walked into his tent. I glanced around.

No one else noticed these little interactions, but I could tell that Chak was dealing with the idea that he might have been wrong about Umbra this entire time. He needed time to work it all out in his head, and I was happy that he was taking the time to do it. If we were lucky we might get back the jovial Chak I had met on my first day in the Syllogy. It was strange to me to think that it had been only five days ago that this whole adventure began.

I leaned against a rock and thought on this for a while. These Umbili had probably had a bigger influence on my life than anyone else, and it had all happened in the space of five days. It was while pondering this thought that I suddenly realized Pathena was there with us in this campsite and I had no idea how she had gotten there. I quickly stood up and walked over to her, blurting out the tactless and ill-formed sentence, "What are you here for how?"

She smiled at me sweetly and said, "Would you like another try at that?"

I swallowed and nodded. "Sorry," I said, taking a breath. "How did you get here?"

"I think Shishu should answer that question," she said.

With that we walked over to Shishu, who was talking with Thrump, Dr. Lee, Brew, and the slowly recovering Plink.

"Shishu, Nicholas wants to know how I got here. Do you want to fill him in?" said Pathena with a strangely confident swagger.

“I will do my best,” said Shishu. “I don’t know exactly where I lost you in our plan to save Pathena. I remember following you intently when you simply faded from sight. I then realized that I had not been following you for some time, and that Pathena was standing in front of me. I knew it was she because she did not treat me like a human who had been raised in The Settlement, but like one who had been placed there. She looked directly at me and asked me a question.”

“I’ve never been one to dislike Umbili, or Umbra,” she said. “You see, I was standing outside my master’s house taking inventory of the carpets we still hadn’t sold when Shishu approached me, and, strangely enough, I had been waiting for him. I think for you to understand this, I have to tell you something else.

“There’s a man who comes to The Settlement very often. His name is Teleon. He leads a small group of citizens there and teaches them philosophy. He also tells the citizens of The Settlement strange things and performs miracles. No one really knows where he comes from, or where he goes. Some say he was born in The Settlement and grew up there. Others say he’s a traveler of worlds. Some just say he’s crazy and wonders the wilderness. Not many really trust him or like him. He’s always visiting and speaking and eating with the poor people, and the slaves. He’s always kind to me. He has a way of grabbing your attention with just a look. It’s piercing and frightening and exciting and attractive all at the same time. Whatever you think of him, everyone agrees that when he shows up, things happen.

“Two months ago he came and told me that you would be coming for me. He said that an Umbra would come to my door, take me away, and bring me to you. He also told me that I had to remain faithful to my master until that time.

"That is why I was so worried when I saw you in the marketplace this morning. I knew that you had come in the wrong way, at the wrong time, and this man Teleon, he... he's always right about these things," she said abruptly.

Shishu interjected, "We've heard different stories of Teleon back in the City of the Syllogy, though all we really knew for sure was his name. He sounds like a boogie man in most of our stories, though I've wondered how much is accurate. They say he can kill with a glance and heal with a touch. There's as much debate in the Umbili world about him as there is in The Settlement."

"Right. Well, when Shishu showed up, I asked him if Teleon had sent him." Pathena said, returning to the story.

"When she spoke to me, I told her that I didn't know Teleon, but that I was your friend. She didn't hesitate to go with me. The problem became that I did not know where you were. You had vanished and I did not know how long I had been following some shadow of you. So, I took Pathena out to the place where we had left Chak, Thrump, and the twins only to find that they were gone."

"But Teleon was there," said Pathena.

"What does Teleon look like?" I asked.

"He's pretty ordinary looking actually. He has black hair and the deepest blue eyes ever," she said.

I couldn't believe it. It was the same man. The same man who had guided me to himself moments before Plink appeared, and, from the sound of it, he had showed up here in this rocky clearing just moments later. This was the man who was supposedly just a crazy person living in the wilderness. Who was this man? What was this man?

“He told us that we needed to go back into The Settlement and he gave us specific directions to where we could find Chak, Fwik, Fwish, and Thrump, who had been captured by Umbili. He told us how to rescue them and then gave us specific instructions to find you. He didn’t tell us about Brew though.”

Another poignant silence punctuated the conversation.

“He told me about Brew. He told me she would have a transformation. I guess I should have understood what that meant,” I said.

“When did he tell you this?” asked Shishu.

“Later,” I said. “Tell me this, where were we when you guys came to the rescue? What part of The Settlement? I was unconscious for so long during our escape that I don’t really know what happened.”

“You were only unconscious for a few moments. We were at the base of the canyon wall, in an ancient theater. It’s one of the less populated places in The Settlement. You passed out. We ran. The rest of the Umbili of Mendrax were caught in the rock slide.”

“There was a rock slide?” I asked.

Trump walked up and joined in the conversation. “Yeah, a pretty big one. I think it was from Brew’s makeover. It knocked out the other Umbili, except for this one apparently, and when the rocks started falling we started running.”

“You haven’t got a chance.” We all looked around. No one recognized the voice that had just spoken. We glanced back and forth at each other as if to ask ‘*Was that you?*’ but no one claimed it.

“Down here,” said the voice again.

It was the rival Umbili that had been knocked out by Brew. Apparently, he was awake. We looked down at him, and Thrump looked at the group and asked, "What do you say we get to know our new friend?" No one objected. He reached down and grabbed the dude by the back of the tunic and yanked him to his feet.

The dude looked pretty beat up. He looked almost as bad as Plink did when I first found her. She was healing remarkably quickly, and had even begun walking around on her own, if a bit shakily. This dude, however, looked like his face had been placed in a meat grinder. He was a slender Umbili and seemed like he would have been weak even if he hadn't been beaten to a pulp earlier that day. His red rope belt shone in the darkness in a way that I hadn't seen the gold ropes do, and he had a most unimpressed look plastered across his face.

"You don't scare me," he said. "I work for Mendrax voluntarily. Do you really think a few muscles will throw me into a state of panic?"

With that, Thrump swung the dude downward and slammed his face into the rocky ground. There was a loud bang when he did. He held the Umbili up again as before, but he was slightly limper.

"On second thought, how about you don't hit me anymore and I cooperate with you in return?"

"Why don't we just kill you?" asked Thrump.

"You can't! You're the good guys. You wouldn't ever kill an Umbili without permission from the Higher-ups! I may be a Mendrax follower, but I'm still an Umbili."

"Who's to say we don't have Higher-up permission to kill you?" said Plink, smoothly. Her voice dripped with confidence, and the darkness shielded her weakened body from sight, giving an ominous feeling to the statement.

"I don't believe you," said the dude, obviously scared now.

"And how confident are you in that disbelief?" said Fwik.

"Now, now, no need to fret. Don't give us a reason to kill you and we won't have to," said Thrump calmly.

I honestly couldn't tell if this was all an act for the dude's benefit or if they were serious.

From what I knew of these Umbili, I didn't believe they would kill this dude out of cold blood.

Then again, I had seen them in action, and I didn't know how confident I was in that belief.

"Let's get to know each other a bit, and forget about all of this killing talk. I'm," at this point Thrump made a huge thudding sound that resembled a herd of elephants and a rolling snare drum. "Since we have some non-Umbili members in our party I go by my human name, Thrump, around here. Who might you be?" His speech was so silky smooth that it was hard to say no to him. The effect was both soothing and terrifying.

"His name is," the sound of twisting metal and old car brakes squealing greeted our ears and it was awful. Flye was the one who spoke. "He's my brother."

"What?" said everyone in the group at the same time.

"Oh hey sis, I didn't see you there! I didn't know you'd been picked to try and stop us. Long time no see!"

"You can just call him Skreech. It's a lot more pleasant on the ears. What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Well, isn't this fun? Little Flye and her friends are off to save the world. Isn't it obvious what I'm doing here? We had to punish the beetle for his treachery. He didn't deserve a quick and painless death; we had to make him suffer." A truly disgusting smile crept onto Skreech's face, helped by the swelling, drool, and red blood that leaked out of his wounds.

“What else is coming our way Skreech? What else does Mendrax have to try and stop us?” asked Flye. She sounded forceful and almost mean. I had never imagined this sort of tone could come out of the innocent timid form of Flye.

“Ah, now that would be telling wouldn’t it?” said Skreech.

Thrump raised him high as if to send him careening back to the ground again, but Skreech shrieked at the upward movement.

“Ok, ok. I’ll tell you. He has another two teams of Umbili, just like the team that stole the orb, another group of Umbra that he created himself, a pack of Felavis for scout missions, and some guard dogs at the front gate. Two pairs of Ostrogles circle his house at all times and one large tree frog is at the draw bridge. Then there’s his entire court and realm full of Umbili and other animals, not that you’ll make it that far anyway- please don’t hit me again.” He said all of this quickly and the pitch of his voice rose higher and higher as he made his way through the list.

“Is that all?” asked Thrump.

“Yes. I think so. I don’t know. Is it?” Skreech was becoming incoherent.

“This is a waste of time,” said Flye, and with that, she moved forward, and grabbed Skreech’s head with one hand. He suddenly became motionless and Flye was closing her eyes tightly as she held on to the top of her brother’s head. After a moment, she relinquished and Skreech was back to his disjointed self.

“They’re coming. We need to move. Now,” she said. It was still so strange to see Flye in this authoritative mode that we didn’t argue.

Thrump secured Skreech tightly to a nearby rock and went to wake Chak. The camp was taken down in minutes and we were suddenly racing through the darkness, back on the road toward the river. Plink was limping as she ran, but she, Shishu, and Brew surrounded me,

Pathena, and Dr. Lee nonetheless. Thrump kept tight hold of Skreech, who had been gagged, and Chak and Flye led the group while the twins brought up the rear.

The team was incredibly tense, and the only sounds I could hear were the grunting of Umbili and the crunching of gravel as we moved swiftly down the road. The night was well and truly upon us as we rushed through the darkness. I had no idea how Flye or Chak could see where we were going.

Eventually – I can't remember how long it took – we reached the river. I didn't realize it until we were right in front of the large metal spike. We regrouped and talked over the plan.

"They're right on our tail. We could hear them using one of Mendrax's maculators the whole way down here. They'll be here any minute. We have to keep going," said Fwik fervently.

"Actually, you don't need to go anywhere. Just hand over the human boy, the seed, and the orb and you may all leave in peace." It was a deep voice. We looked around and saw that the shore of the river was lined with Umbili, each holding a rope tied to a felavis. There was one Umbili standing just in front of the spire, alone in the center of the conference.

"Do you really think that's an option?" said Chak.

"We tried," said the dude in the center. "Kill them all, but spare the human."

Immediately, there was light, coming from glowing orbs like the ones Chak would put up at night in the camp. Each of the enemy Umbili had tossed one into the air at their leader's words. It would have been blinding if our group hadn't been prepared for battle. There was fighting all around me. Snarling felavis were flying all over.

Chak had engaged the leader who had spoken and they were exchanging earth-shattering blows. They both had met their perfect match, and within moments they were a whirling mass of

colored light moving this way and that. Huge sounds were coming from their tussle, joining the cacophony that was the battle.

I drew my sword and grabbed Pathena's hand, holding her behind me, but she had drawn a dagger of her own and was prepared to fight. We were back to back in the center of the fight, but few blows ever made their way through the wall that was Thrump, Plink, Brew and Shishu. They surrounded us with their backs facing inward creating a shield from the fight.

Thrumpt was taking on two Umbili and three Felavis all at once, swinging his huge arms through multiple foes in a single punch. At one point I saw him pick up one of the four-legged creatures by the hind legs and start using it as a bat and Skreech as a shield in his fight with his remaining opponents.

Brew and Shishu worked into a groove with each other. They were becoming tangible and intangible as they each fought an Umbili. They would go through each other to switch places in the wall around me and Pathena to confuse their respective foes. Once they had their opponents disarmed, dizzy and on the ground, Shishu immediately went to the aid of Plink who was doing her best in her wounded state to ward off a snarling Felavis as it snapped at her on the command of its Umbili trainer.

Plink had her hip weapon drawn and now that I had learned what a gun was I could tell that it was a type of gun with two large blades lining the outside of the barrel, making it an effective dagger as well. Periodically, in between slicing at the Felavis, she would expertly let off a shot, but the Umbili would usually dodge the fiery glowing bullets just in time. Once Shishu joined her it was a different story. He descended upon the Umbili controlling the Felavis, and within moments the dude was no more. The rope tied to his animal went slack and it leapt onto Plink, who flung herself backward to avoid a direct hit.

The Felavis careened over her and into our protective circle. Without a moment's hesitation, before the Felavis could regain its footing, I stabbed with all my might at its eye. Pathena went for the body of the beast, and we swiftly ended the animal's life.

On the back end of the shore I could make out Fwik and Fwish wielding their whips with skill and, surprisingly, Flye was helping them to contain the two Umbili they were fighting.

The battle raged on for a few minutes, but I soon realized that we were outnumbered. Whenever a small victory appeared in one part of the fight, another enemy Umbili would take its fallen companion's place. I could tell that the group was tiring. Plink was on her knees, being fiercely protected by Shishu, Thrump was favoring one arm and was limping as he continued to battle through an absurd ratio of opponents. Fwik was also on the ground, his feet lying in the water of the river and looked to be unconscious while his sister's whip flew less aggressively at her attackers.

I was about to call the battle off and go with this enemy group of Umbili when a bright white light flashed from overhead. It halted the fighting for a moment and everyone on the dam looked up. Again a light flashed in the sky, and for a reason unknown to me, the enemy retreated. The fighting stopped and I could see the remaining rival Umbili quickly find their feet, a look of utter terror in their eyes as they ran away from the metal spire. After they retreated a few yards from the battleground I began hearing little *pops* all around the river, and realized that they were disappearing left and right, using the maculators to teleport away.

More pulses of bright light came from the top of the spire, but I saw the source of the light descending closer and closer to me. As it came into view I made out the form of Brew coming down from the top of the spire holding a little round ball. Doctor Lee flew in front of her, a look of triumph on his face.

The ball in Brew's hand flashed again, and I knew it was the source of the light. She smiled as she landed gently on the ground.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," she said, and winked, then she threw the ball up in the air and it travelled to the top of the metal spire and stayed lit there, steadily, instead of pulsing as it had.

"No, really. What was that?" I asked again.

"That's a defense mechanism, to keep the followers of Mendrax from destroying the Higher-ups towers," said Dr. Lee "I remembered Mendrax warning us about those little balls when we were being briefed on our counter mission, so when they showed up here I told Brew to accompany me to the top of the spire to retrieve it. It will keep them away from this place for a day at least, and probably keep them from attempting another attack while we are near one of the communication spires. Unfortunately since it's been activated for defense that means we won't be able to communicate to the Higher-ups on our whereabouts from this tower until it switches back in a day or two."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said a confident voice. I turned toward it. The man with untidy black hair was standing near the base of the spire. He looked just as sure of himself as he had in the alleyway when our paths had first crossed. His eyes were captivating pools that glistened in the light of the spire. There was such sweetness and power behind those eyes.

"The Higher-up always know what you're up to," he said, smiling.

"Who are you?" I asked quickly, though I already knew the answer.

"My name is Teleon. You will get to know me better later Nicholas, but right now I need you to listen. I don't have much time. I have messages for each of you."

Most of the Umbili in the group were shocked to see the famed Teleon in person. Chak, however, looked angry.

"We don't want any part with you Teleon. Leave us in peace and we won't harm you," he said slowly.

"Chak, Chak. Why have you strayed so far from me?" said Teleon calmly.

Chak was slightly taken aback.

"Look we don't want to have to hurt you, but we will," he said, taking a battle stance.

Flye, Pathena, and Shishu took steps forward in-between Chak and Teleon. Most of the rest of the group just watched confused and slightly dumbfounded. Teleon's presence was not what any of them expected. From the stories, most of them had anticipated Teleon being completely out of his mind, or totally wild. The astonishment of seeing a man completely in control of his mental faculties, and saliva, left them silent and speechless.

That aside, we all wondered why Chak was so angry right now, and why he wanted to pick another fight when the battle had just ended. What had Teleon done?

"Chak, you're forgiven. Stop hating yourself for your past hatred. Look forward," said Teleon. That's when we understood. Here was the man who embodied the truth that Chak had so long denied, the man who taught that Umbili and Umbra were equals.

Chak had changed his mind about Umbra, but he hadn't forgiven himself for taking so long to do it. Teleon's presence only cut deeper into his memories of disdain toward the race to which his partner now belonged. He still couldn't let go of his hatred, but now that hatred was directed inward instead of out.

He started to run at Teleon. Shishu and Pathena stepped forward to interfere, but Teleon didn't need their help. Teleon waved a hand at Chak and he was knocked backward onto his

back. His body was rigid as Teleon approached. A tear was rolling down Chak's face, which was contorted in pain and contrition.

"Chak, you know the truth now and you can't change the past. I've brought you low now, but you will be lifted up before this is over. I've forgiven you, Shishu has forgiven you, now you must forgive yourself. Do you understand?"

The tension left Chak's body and he began to weep quietly on the ground.

There was a long silence as Chak slowly regained his breath and an awkward tension in the group as we watched our leader brought low in his sorrows. He looked up at Teleon's face. "I'm sorry," he said resolutely, still gasping for breath. "There were so many thoughts. So many times when I..." he trailed off, then looked right in Teleon's eyes, calmly, respectfully, reverently. "Thank you sir." The words surprised everyone. To Chak, Teleon had been a common loon, not someone who gave orders or had authority and certainly not someone to call sir.

"You're welcome. You may continue to lead. But do not forget why you lead: not that you may be remembered for your leadership, but that you may be forgotten for it."

"I will," said Chak, looking down again, still kneeling on the ground in front of him.  
"Thank you."

Teleon turned away from Chak toward the rest of the group. He didn't address their mixed expressions or even straighten out their misconceptions about him, he went straight to the messages.

"Doctor Cornelius Spencer Lee. You had betrayed us, you now no longer have. The past is not of consequence; your future is new. Do not fear what you cannot change. Love what is good, and hate what is evil."

"I will sir. Thank you," said Dr. Lee.

"Fwik and Fwish."

The twins staggered forward, Fwik looking particularly shambolic and leaning on his sister to keep him upright.

"Your weakness is not in your gift for humor, but in your use of it. Stay true to who you are, but be sure that your duty precedes your personality."

Fwik gave a weak laugh that was accompanied by a slight cough. "He said *duty*." Fwish chuckled and held her brother more tightly.

"You should probably take that as a 'yes sir,'" she said.

Teleon smiled.

"Pathena, you are now a member of a new family. Nicholas has a mission to fulfill. These Umbili are here to help him fulfill that mission. You are to assist them in any way that you can."

"Yes sir," said Pathena.

"Flye, Brew, Plink, Shishu, and Thrump, your messages are all the same: well-done noble Umbili. Remain as you are and endure." Brew and Thrump looked sheepish at this news. They had never given Teleon much consideration, but still they were being commended. Now, seeing his power first hand, they were almost ashamed to accept the praise from him. Flye and Plink merely beamed, and Shishu stood resolute as ever.

"Nicholas and Pathena, I must speak with you each privately before I depart," said Teleon.

I walked over to him and he turned alongside me.

“The measure of a man is not in what he has done in the past, but what he does in the present: in who he is, not who he was. Compare yourself only to perfection, realize the distance you have yet to travel, and the journey will be easy.”

“But I—”

“I cannot yet answer your questions Nicholas; my time is too short. But I promise that one day, soon, I will.” He made eye contact with Pathena and beckoned her forward with one hand. “Please leave us Nicholas.” He said curtly.

I walked back over to Fwik and assisted Fwish in lowering him onto a rock. No sooner had I finished and turned around than Teleon had addressed the entire group again. “Rest now and regain your strength. The journey is still ahead of you.”

With that Teleon gave us all the salute I had seen Flye perform once before. With his right hand he smoothly and briefly covered his eye, then his right ear, then tapped his chest twice with his middle finger. He then turned and walked up stream. He seemed to enjoy making me watch him walk away with questions swarming in my head.

I looked back at the group. Chak was straightening up now and had a rather regal look on his face, the face of one forgiven. The rest had various looks of awe, confusion, wonder, and hope. They were beaten down, but the messages from Teleon revitalized them. Everyone stood momentarily pondering the man who had just walked into oppressive wilderness as casually as one walks down a city street. I decided to ask the question that was on everyone’s mind.

“Is he a Higher-up?”

Everyone looked around at each other with the most meaningful of glances that can be mustered then set to work assembling the campsite without another word.

## CHAPTER 19- R & R

We stayed at the campsite on the river for two days. It was a wonderful time of recuperation. Plink, Fwik, and Thrump had received the most debilitating wounds from The Battle at Settlement Dam, as it would later come to be known, but due to their Umbili regenerative powers they were almost at full strength at the end of our respite.

Plink had a few deep pink bruises on her face and arms that had yet to be healed, but they just added to her beauty instead of distracting from it. She refused to let anyone help her, with the exception of Shishu, and she trained hard to regain her strength. She kept saying over and over again, “pain is a choice.” I half believed her by the end of the two days because she was walking without a limp and throwing punches without a problem. At one point in a sparring session with Chak she knocked him to the ground with an impressive shoulder dip and left hook that I thought would have brought her to her knees with agony, but she simply smiled after her take down and helped Chak back up to his feet.

Thrump also trained hard to regain his strength, but not quite as diligently as Plink. I think his natural strength and presence gave him a bit of an edge. He didn’t have as much to prove in the I-can-beat-anyone-in-a-fight arena as Plink did.

Fwik on the other hand took a different approach to working on recovery in that he didn’t. He simply played practical jokes on everyone for two days and kept track of how many small injuries, inconveniences, and embarrassing moments he caused for the group as a whole and had Fwish keep a tally of them in the sand announcing his total every hour. Needless to say, we were all ready to tie him up and leave him there when we packed up camp at the end of two days.

Chak was back to how I remembered meeting him just outside the Syllogy; he was the dude who had given me my first tour of this new world. He was fun-loving and easy to get along with and he was having actual conversations with Shishu, asking his advice on the journey and becoming more and more curious about what it was like to be an Umbra.

“What’s it feel like to run? I mean compared to what it was like as an Umbili?” I overheard him ask.

“It’s much the same only smoother. All actions feel as though they have a buffer zone, or cushion of air around them,” explained Shishu.

“What about your partnership? How did that change when you became an Umbra?” asked Chak.

Shishu hesitated. “Well I think it would be better for you to hear the Umbili side of that story before hearing the Umbra side,” he said. “Plink, come here. Chak has some questions for you.”

My mouth dropped. “What?” I shouted.

Chak and Shishu looked at me; they didn’t realize I had been listening in on the conversation.

“What’s wrong Nicholas?” asked Chak.

My mouth was still hanging open.

“You two are partners?” I asked loudly at Shishu and Plink.

“Yes. I thought you had already realized this fact. You saw me rescue Plink as we escaped The Settlement. You saw me go to her aid in our battle. Did you not understand it then? By the Higher-ups, Nicholas I thought you were a reasoner.” Shishu sounded like he was about to burst into laughter.

"I just, I thought you said that Plink's partner was on a mission for the Higher-ups," I said.

"I am," said Shishu.

I thought back to the conversation about partnerships that Shishu, Thrump and I had shared. He didn't trust me with the news that he and Plink were partners back then. My mind raced as I processed the information.

"So you two are partners?" I asked again, making sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Yes, we are," said Shishu again, and this time he did laugh. It was the first time I had ever heard him laugh.

There was a certain lightness to the group of fresh Teleon converts who inhabited the camp. Chak's humility before Teleon had been impactful for us. We saw a dude who knew what it was to be brought low before others, but it made us respect him more in the end.

Pathena and I also reconnected. I asked her what Teleon had told her in private and she said it didn't matter. After pestering her a few times about it I realized she wouldn't be spilling the beans, so I left it alone.

She explained to me how she had arrived in the Syllogy, and to be honest, it didn't make any sense to me. She told me how her relationship with the man in flowing black cloth had changed. She admitted that she had been blinded to the truth of his trade by infatuation for a time. That was the time I remembered best. But quickly the infatuation with a man who seemed to set her free became fear of a man who truly had her captive.

He had locked her up the night I was in Athens for training. She had no recollection of ever joining him. She didn't remember ever becoming one of the slaver's accomplices, or fighting with me and the farmer in Megara. She said she was his prisoner for a few days, but then

woke up one day in The Settlement, and some woman was her master. She assumed that she had been sedated and sold, but as she lived in The Settlement for a while she realized that she was no longer on earth. The talk of things like Umbili, Umbra, and the fact that it was nothing like fifteenth century BC Athens clued her in to the fact that something strange had happened to her which she wouldn't be able to explain. She had gone through confusion, and depression, and relentless doubt about reality, but eventually came to a point of acceptance with the world around her. She told me that she had been living in The Settlement for four years when Shishu finally showed up at her door. I was baffled and confused.

As for Flye, she seemed to have a regression during the two-day break. Having her brother around had caused Flye to retreat into herself. Skreech had been chained to the spire for the entire two days, and something was definitely wrong with him. He was in a state of constant pain and moaning. It was probably a combination of the multiple beatings and the fact that he had been physically restrained from fleeing from the Higher-up's white light. When he did speak it was jumbled and slightly incoherent.

I could tell that a few Umbili in the group truly hated having Skreech around and were ready to be rid of him.

“We can’t kill him.” Plink was whispering, but fairly loudly, with Chak, Thrump, and Brew. “You don’t realize how worried she is. It’s not just a matter of one more Umbili enemy dead or not. This is Flye’s brother, kith and kin. He might have betrayed the true Umbili way of life but that doesn’t stop him from being her brother.”

“As far as I’m concerned it does. We can’t afford to run the risk of having him here,” said Brew, a lightly veiled contempt for Skreech apparent in her tone.

“I have to agree with Brew. Enlisting with Mendrax is grounds for execution. Besides, look at the dude. He’ll be dead soon anyway, or at least his life won’t be worth living. And how do we know it’s not all just an act, and he’s biding his time for us to get complacent with him?” said Thrump.

“I’m sorry, but I have to agree with Plink. Maybe it’s just from my most recent experience, but I don’t want to put Flye through that if I don’t have to. We can’t kill him, at least not until she wants to do it,” said Chak.

“But he’s an unnecessary risk,” said Thrump. “He’s not even sorry for what he’s done or the trouble he’s caused. He’s ready to do whatever he can to get back to Mendrax and continue in his service!” said Thrump.

“I don’t care. It’s not an unnecessary risk. It is completely necessary for the sake of our friend,” said Chak.

“Thank you Chak. I won’t forget this,” said Plink. “I know it will be tough Thrump, but just remember, you’re doing this for Flye. Take a look at her next mealtime. You can tell she’s worried and it’s because she thinks we’re going to kill her brother. How can we expect her to trust us if we go around offing her family?” asked Plink.

“What are we supposed to do with him in the long term?” said Thrump.

“I don’t know, but we can’t kill him,” said Chak.

Thrumpt sighed. “Fine,” he said, obviously trying to calm his nerves. “But you’re going to have to keep track of him. I’ll trade you. Backpack for Skreech.”

“Fair enough. He’ll stay chained to me in tow, and we’ll sedate him too so he doesn’t get any ideas of escaping.”

“I guess I’m satisfied with that,” said Thrump.

“Oh good. I can’t wait to tell Flye. She’ll be happy to hear this,” said Plink.

There were other memorable conversations in those two days, but one in particular is worth sharing. It was between Pathena and me. She had conveniently skipped confronting the issue for a while, but I was getting annoyed by her avoidance, so during lunch one day I asked her straight out.

“Do you love me?”

She was a bit taken aback. “What do you mean?” She asked slowly.

“It’s a simple question. Do you love me?”

“Of course I do! You’re my oldest friend, you’re basically my whole family, and now that I have you back I don’t ever want you to leave again,” she said.

“But do you love me as more than a friend and sort-of-like-a-family member. Do you *love* me?” I asked, stressing the word love.

She looked deeply in my eyes for a moment. “Of course I do,” she said quietly and more slowly.

My insides began dancing with joy and excitement. I almost felt my heart beating out of my chest at the exhilaration of hearing those words. I kept a cool exterior though. I wanted to mess with her a little, and flirting in the process wouldn’t hurt.

“When exactly did you decide that you love me?” I said in a matter-of-fact, instructor sort of tone.

She just kept staring at me seriously, but smiled to let me know she would play along.

“I suppose it was the day you went off to combat training when we were fifteen,” she said.

“Ah,” I said. “So,” I paused, waiting for her to fill in the rest of the question.

"So, why didn't I tell you?" she asked.

"That's a very good question," I said, still matter-of-factly. "Why didn't you tell me?" I tapped my finger on my chin like I was thinking hard.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she said.

She caught me off guard. "What?"

"I know you've loved me since we were young. You thought I didn't realize, but I could tell at moments. I saw the way you looked at me out of the corner of your eye. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

I thought a moment. We weren't playing games anymore. Now it was serious.

"I guess I was afraid. The only ones I had ever loved, I had lost. I didn't want to lose you too. I thought it would be better to hide it and keep you than to tell you and lose everything." I paused. "And I didn't think you felt the same way." I said sheepishly.

"You let your fear rob us both Nicholas. We were both orphans. We both needed each other. Of course I felt the same way."

"Well, why did you go off with that slaver if you loved me?" I said hotly. I was trying to start a fight to divert the blame.

"You went off to be trained and I was left alone! I was confused and afraid, like you. At the time he seemed like the solution. I thought he had a future for me. I was wrong. I see that now. I'm sorry Nicholas. I'm so very sorry I ever went with him. It truly is one of my deepest regrets. Will you forgive me?"

I was silent. I didn't know what to think. I expected her to return fire, but instead of arguing back she just apologized. It's hard to have a fight under those circumstances.

“Of course I will. I should be asking you to forgive me. I should have told you. I shouldn’t have kept my feelings a secret. I should have protected you. Will you forgive me?” I said.

“Of course I will,” she said, matching my intonation.

“You realize you still haven’t told me,” I said grinning.

“Told you what?” she said, grinning back.

“That you love me,” I said.

“Yes I did!” she said incredulously.

“No you didn’t. I checked the manuscript. You said, ‘Of course I do.’ You didn’t say, ‘I love you.’ There’s a big difference.”

She smiled much wider at me this time, and rolled her eyes just a little.

“I love you Nicholas,” she said slowly. “There. Are you happy?”

“Very much so,” I said. I kissed her quickly then pulled back and said, “I love you too, I guess.” She laughed and kissed me back.

The second night on the beach was a good one. We played music, sang songs and Brew and Flye made the best meal we had eaten to date. Pathena and I were given the most succulent and juicy grapes I’d ever seen, and we fed them to each other throughout the meal.

I took Plink’s advice and looked at Flye that night at dinner. She did seem distraught. It was as if she had become scared of something. The fearlessness that I had seen for that brief period of time outside The Settlement was gone. She was closed off from the world, and it didn’t make sense to me. I knew Plink must have told her that Skreech would be kept alive, so she shouldn’t seem so troubled. Of course, putting myself in her shoes, having him around at all would be taxing.

That night we sat around the fire once more and talked about what we had left to accomplish.

“We’ve got two more days of travel on the river and then we’ve about three quarters of a sight-length of jungle to walk through before we make it to Mendrax’s realm. After that it’s just a matter of getting in, Nicholas planting the seed, and getting out. It should be smooth sailing to get back to the Syllogy after that. Any questions?” said Chak.

No one responded. We were all in good spirits as we went to bed that night. Since we had two new parties in our crew, and one fewer tent, all the males decided to sleep in one and let the females have two. Thrump and Shishu elected to sleep outside, and since they had the first watch, no one argued with them.

The next morning we packed up the camp. The air was fresh and cool and it was marvelous to have Pathena at my side. We could talk to each other about anything, it didn’t matter what we had to say because it was us. However, I have to admit that having Pathena back at my side caused a problem as well. I was captivated. We were becoming exceptionally annoying to the others with our constant affection, giggling, and flirting. It had gone on for two days and the rest of the group was officially sick of it.

While breaking down the camp, Pathena and I were cuddling on a rock and watching everyone else go about their tasks. Our feet were propped up on the backpack. We were making loud and obnoxious comments about my hands.

“They’re so dainty. I think my hands are actually bigger than yours,” said Pathena.

“Big hands aren’t everything. Good things come in small packages,” I retorted.

“No, look,” she said, holding up her palm toward me and indicating that I should compare my hand to hers. She was wrong; my fingers were slightly longer, but definitely more slender.

“Okay, fine. You may be right,” she said after seeing the size difference.

“Ha. Oh but wait, do you see that?” I said, and looked closely at our touching palms. She leaned in to see what I was talking about, and when she was fully off guard, I half-tickled half pinched her side so she jumped inside her skin and squealed. She hit me playfully and I pretended to take cover, and that’s when I knocked the backpack over.

The Agnoscian Orb tumbled out across the campground and we didn’t even notice. Chak picked it up and put it back in the backpack rather forcefully and gave me a look that said *You really need to cut this out.*

That particular look was enough for me to realize the effect that our being together again was having on the rest of the group. Our constant flirtation was causing problems. I grabbed Pathena’s hand and pulled her off to the side to talk to her.

“Listen, I love you, and I love that we’re together again, but we need to act more like friends, at least until this journey is over. You have to admit, we’re being a little bit...” I trailed off.

“I know what you mean, I had the same thought just now. Fair enough. We have the rest of our lives to be together, so I guess we can be *apart* for the next week or so.”

“Thanks,” I whispered and gave her a kiss.

By mid-morning we were on the river again, cutting through the glassy blue water. It was so still and peaceful. While on the river that day I had a chance to inspect the Agnoscian Orb up

close. Plink was telling me about the rich history behind the creation of the orbs, but I wasn't really listening.

From a distance the orb looked like a solid metal green ball, but up close it was a work of art. Ornate words in languages I didn't understand were scrawled all over the face of the orb. Five slender circles were faintly etched on either side of the orb, to the point that you wouldn't know they were there unless you were looking for them. There were finely engraved drawings of what looked like a great battle, but they were fluid and organic in their construction so that no real subject could be determined, only an overall appearance and feel of victory in the mural.

I wondered for only a second what would happen if I placed my fingers in line with the faint circles, as Flye had done when we catapulted over the edge of the waterfall. I wondered what it would be like to control another person's reality. Chak was watching my face intently and he could see the look of temptation come across it.

"Nicholas, that's a bad idea. I've only ever heard of one human operating an Agnoscian Orb, and it didn't go well," said Chak.

I looked up abruptly. "What do you mean it didn't go well?"

"There is power in that orb. Power corrupts. Only someone with no intention to hurt can operate the orb properly. The moment someone uses an Agnoscian Orb specifically to accomplish evil, the orb reacts. It fights back. Its nature is for good."

"You're talking about it like it's a living thing. It can't fight, can it?"

"What do you think?" asked Chak seriously.

"I don't know. I guess I was just curious about what it would feel like to have that kind of... control," I said.

“That’s exactly my point. That is the utterly wrong reason to use an Agnoscian Orb and thus you will have utterly wrong results. But don’t trouble yourself with that. Let Flye and me worry about using the Agnoscian Orb. You worry about getting that seed into Mendrax’s garden.” He paused and added, “Don’t worry about it,” with a smile and a sly wink.

So he did know I was getting tired of that phrase.

## CHAPTER 20 - What's That Smell?

The next two days were rather uneventful. We talked, ate, and floated down the river quite peacefully. An unnatural calmness came over the group. We all knew exactly what the plan was, and no one was worried about it. I suppose we all wanted to take advantage of the relaxing time as much as we could. The only real agent of mischief was Skreech. He was tied in the middle of the boat, forced to wear the complicated restraints at all hours. He was beginning to regain self-awareness and, while he never said anything to get himself truly pummeled, he found it necessary to slip snide sarcastic comments into conversations at every available opportunity.

One good example of his annoying interactions took place just before lunch one day when we had stopped on a secluded little shore to eat. Chak and Plink were discussing Umbra and what sort of adjustments Plink had to make when Shishu had become one.

“They’re really the same as their former selves, just veiled. Shishu put it well the other day. It’s as if a cushion of air, a buffer zone, has been placed all around them. That means everything that they are: around their minds, which is why Flye has such trouble reading Umbra future, around their bodies, which is why they sort of glide instead of walk, and even their personalities, which is why Brew seems like her old self, but not as much as she used to be. Her twang isn’t as twangy, her wit isn’t as witty, and her spunk isn’t as spunky. She’s still the same being deep down, but it isn’t as visible as before,” Plink explained.

“So what should I do to counteract that?” asked Chak.

“How about you run a vacuum over her at night?” interjected Skreech.

“Well, it will take time for you to develop the same connection you used to have with her. Her light still complements yours but it too has a veil over it,” said Plink.

“Looks more like a *smoke* screen to me,” said Skreech with a disgusting chuckle. They continued to ignore him.

“Do you and Shishu ever talk like you used to?” asked Chak.

“All the time! You don’t need to worry about this so much Chak. I know Brew well. She’s still your dade. Not even her death could change that,” Plink said, smiling.

“I know I need to not be so in my head about this. I need to just relax and let it happen,” said Chak nervously.

“Don’t worry. It will happen,” said Plink.

“Yeah, she’ll definitely be sending you *signals* to let you know! Ha! Get it, ‘cause of smoke signals,” said Skreech. That was all Chak could take and he whipped his elbow sharply into Skreech’s nose, which kept him quiet for the rest of the meal.

We were back on the river again that afternoon, and it was that evening that the plan began to change again.

Everything had been moving along smoothly. We were floating downstream at a nice brisk pace when a loud bang alerted us to something unusual in the trees ahead of us to our right. A thick orange smoke was rising out of the colorful jungle canopy and with it a strange smell.

The best way I can describe this smell is to say that it was the worst thing imaginable. As a soldier in the Athenian army at the Trojan War I had experienced my fair share of repulsive smells. To put it in perspective, the smell of bodies rotting on a beach mixed with dead fish, burning incense, and open holes for relieving ourselves ranks as the second most horrible thing to ever hit my nostrils, coming in just after this orange smoke.

I slowly started to realize that the smell was repulsive to the Umbili in the boat, and when I say repulsive, I mean literally. As we neared the source of the smoke, the boat naturally floated

away from it. It was a little like when you put two magnets together and they circle around each other but never touch. The same thing was happening to the Umbili in the boat. I could see an invisible force act on all of them as we approached the smell. They all leaned left slightly, and the boat compensated for this force by floating away.

I asked Chak what was going on.

"I don't know for sure," he said shortly, "Flye, the Orb."

Flye rummaged around in the backpack at Thrump's feet for a moment and then extracted the Agnosian Orb. She sank her fingers into the sides of the green ball and suddenly the force stopped. I could see all the Umbili in the boat relax and Shishu picked up one of the oars. I also noticed that the smell had become much less pungent. It was still terrible, but it wasn't as pugnacious about its nature anymore.

Shishu rowed us over to the right bank of the river; everyone exited the boat, and I followed suit. Thrump slipped the boat easily into the backpack and slung it over his shoulder. Chak marched off into the woods, a look of wonder and excitement on his face. We all fell in behind him.

As we walked, Pathena quietly asked me, "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" I replied.

She shook her head slowly, "Nothing I guess."

The jungle was dense, much denser than the forests we had begun our journey in. Everyone was quiet except Skreech who was moaning in pain and complaining loudly as we made our way closer and closer to the source of the orange smoke.

The trees got thicker in some places, to the point that we would have to squeeze between closely growing plants single file, and then they would thin in places so that we could walk two

or three in a row. We walked for about twenty minutes, before I could see the smoke hanging lightly in the trees.

As we drew near, I could tell that the repulsive force was beginning to gain strength on the Umbili again. They struggled more and more as we walked. Movement was difficult for them.

After a few more minutes we arrived at the source of the smoke. A little red box sat on the jungle floor. The Umbili all gathered around and Chak spoke to me. He talked as if it was hard to speak, and he was concentrating on not being thrown backwards.

“Nicholas. Pathena. Find. Stop. Button!”

I nodded and darted toward the box; Pathena followed me. We grabbed the little red box and lifted it off the jungle floor. The smoke continued to pour upward in a pillar and it was difficult to see what we were doing with so much smoke around us that smelled so terrible. Eventually we found a circular button on the bottom of the box and pressed it.

Instantly, the smoke stopped flowing from the box, and a few of the Umbili collapsed on the floor, their fight to remain standing where they were had ceased and they were all breathing heavily, clearly exhausted.

Chak was the first to regain his composure.

“Thank you Nicholas. I don’t know how long we would have been able to resist that. Umbili are notoriously weak-willed, as you know.”

“What is this thing?” I asked.

“This? This is a box,” said Chak, nonchalantly, as he took the little red box from my hands and tossed it to Thrump who placed it in the backpack.

“Oh really? I couldn’t tell. But what kind of a box?” I asked sarcastically.

“A little red box. You’re not as observant as I thought you were Nicholas,” said Chak with a small smirk on his face, and he turned to walk back in the direction we had just come from.

“Hold it!” shouted a female voice. It was Pathena. She was suddenly quite fierce.

Chak stopped walking and turned around. “Yes?” he asked.

“You have to tell him. Do you understand me? He’s going to Mendrax’s realm. You have to tell him what’s coming,” she said with enough intensity in her voice to scare even Thrump into obeying. Her fists were clenched and turning white with pressure.

“Tell me what?” I asked.

“You could... hear it?” asked Chak incredulously.

“You’d better believe it buster. Now tell him.”

“Tell me what?” I said.

“But we need time sort it out,” said Chak.

“Tell him now!” She was legitimately frightening.

“Will somebody please tell me what you’re talking about?” I shouted.

“Alright,” said Chak. “You want the truth? I don’t know what that box is, or what it does, but it was whispering in an Umbili language just now and I guess your darling little woman there speaks the language. It’s no big deal. Mendrax is just trying to scare us since we’re getting close.”

“Tell him what it said, or I will,” said Pathena, still furious.

“You will what?” asked Chak, a little bit scared a little bit sarcastic, taunting her to try something with him.

There was a pause.

"I will tell him," said Pathena with the words *you idiot* plastered across her face.

"Oh right," said Chak, understanding his mistake. "Right, well fine. I'll tell him. You have to remember Nicholas, this doesn't mean anything, we're here to combat this very thing and you shouldn't be upset by it because it really isn't –"

"You lost your chance!" shouted Pathena. "I'm telling him. This is what the box was saying:

'With blood the time was took by me

And blood must be repaid

The blood of man will grow the tree

And all his blood be weighed

For in my garden there must be

A line of time arrayed

And there, just one man's sacrifice

Will see my reign unmade."

"What was that? A poem?" I asked.

"An instruction. That's what this box was whispering while it let out the smoke. It's been chanting that since the bang we heard earlier on the river," said Chak.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"Well," he said. A long pause followed this word. "It means..."

"It means you're gonna die before the end of this," said Skreech with a gleam in his eye.

I had known this from the moment Pathena told me the poem. The line *and all his blood be weighed* left little room for error. I couldn't feel my stomach. It had lodged itself in my throat.

I sank to my knees and stayed there for what felt like an eternity. I wanted tears to fill my eyes, but my whole body felt dry. There was an odd ringing in my ears and I looked up at Chak. He was talking, but I couldn't hear him. After a few seconds the sound came back and I stood up. I was angry.

"How dare you," I said staring straight at Chak.

"I didn't lie to you Nicholas, let me explain."

"You lied before and you're lying now! How dare you drag me into this, promising me life! You said I would change my purpose! You said my purpose was death and if I wanted to change it I should come here with you. You said right from the beginning that death is where I was headed if I *didn't* come with you. You said you brought me here to keep me from dying, but it turns out you just wanted to keep me from dying until it was convenient for you!"

Plink tried to interject, "Nicholas—"

"Don't you dare get into this Plink. You knew too didn't you? You all knew all along I was just a piece of meat. You all knew I was going to be the payment. Didn't you? Didn't you?" I was practically screaming.

The looks on their faces told me that I was right. None of the Umbili tried to change the subject or convince me otherwise. They all frowned knowingly, doing their best not to make eye contact, all except Skreech who was grinning from ear to ear, obviously giddy with this deceit.

I couldn't bear there to be silence in the air when I was so angry, so I continued to yell to fill the void.

"I don't need this. You're the ones who need me... need me to die. To give up on living. I'm not going to! You hear? I'm not going to do it! I refuse! I won't. I refuse!"

I wrenched off the pouch that dangled from my neck and threw it hard into the ground. The Umbili all flinched when I did, but the soft jungle dirt protected it from harm. None of them moved an inch.

“See how you get along without me,” I said and walked resolutely back the way we had come.

I didn’t know exactly what my plan was. I thought momentarily of going back to The Settlement. I thought of maybe trying to find the trader who had brought Pathena here to see if he could get me back to earth. I thought of searching for Teleon and giving him a piece of my mind. I even considered just sitting on the beach and waiting for someone or something to come along.

So many thoughts were racing through my mind. I thought back to the little makeshift boat I had found in Troy and the whirlwind that Chak had first appeared in, when he looked so frightening. Who’d have thought that days later I would be in a screaming match with him and he’d be scared of me. I thought of the questions he had asked and whether or not he had actually killed all the people he said he did. I thought of the solemn faces of the other Umbili I had just walked away from. I thought of my little boat back in Athens and how this whole mess could have been avoided if I had never gone to Troy in the first place. That’s when I thought of Pathena. I never would have found her again either.

It was just when this thought entered my head that I heard her voice.

“Nicholas! Nicholas, wait for me!”

I turned around to see her making her way through the thick jungle toward me. She looked distressed but also happy at the same time. It was an odd expression.

“Nicholas,” she said as she finally closed the ground between us. “Nicholas listen. I know this is frightening, but Chak does have a bit of an explanation, and I’m sorry but you really do need to go back. At least hear them out. They do have a plan.”

“Pathena, you don’t get it. They lied to me. I’ve trusted them this entire time, and they were lying through their teeth this entire time.”

“I understand that Nicholas, but listen. You have to go back. The fact that they lied to you aside, the fact that you want to leave right now aside, what are you going to do without them? Right here, right now, in the middle of this jungle, what are your plans now that you’ve stormed away? Did you think you would hitchhike back to Athens?”

She was right. None of my ideas were particularly viable.

“I figured I’d start by heading back to The Settlement and finding someone who could get me back to earth,” I said sheepishly.

“Nicholas, you literally just tore that place apart four days ago. Do you really think they won’t remember you, or even that they won’t kill you if they get the chance? What was your back-up plan?” She was grinning.

“Looking for Teleon,” I said, even more sheepishly.

“Teleon? The probably Higher-up guy who wants you to continue on this mission? The one who told you to measure yourself only against perfection? The guy who told you that you would face many perils ahead? You were going to go to this man to get help deserting the mission he urged you to finish? Smart plan. Did you have any other thoughts?” she said almost laughing now.

“Well, I had also considered just sitting around and waiting for someone to...” I didn’t even finish this one. A full-blown beam was slung across her face now and it wiped my mind clean momentarily. “What?” I asked. “What’s so funny?”

“You are,” she said. “You didn’t think this through at all did you? And I thought you got this job because of your reasoning capabilities.”

“Sort of,” I said. “I still don’t want to go back there. I don’t want to be around the people who were going to throw me to the wolves.”

“Just hear them out. They actually had a plan. They were going to try to keep you from dying, but really, can you blame them for keeping that information from you? What good would it have done to tell you from the beginning? At least this way you would be happy for a little bit.”

“That’s a weak argument and you know it. They should have told me,” I retorted.

“Look, there’s one more reason you need to go back. I don’t know if this will change your mind, or just make you angrier, but Teleon told me this would happen,” she said.

“What? You mean you knew I was going to have to die too?” I yelled.

“No, no. I didn’t know that. He didn’t tell me that. But he did tell me that soon you would want to quit, and he told me I had to stop you. He said I’d be the only one you would listen to.”

“Well he was wrong.”

“Was he really wrong?” She smiled again, and again I had a momentary memory wipe. “You still don’t have any real plan of action if you do leave. At least hear Chak out. He’s your friend now after all. If you still want to give up after you’ve heard their explanation and their plan I will follow you. But maybe you should make your decision after you’ve heard all the facts.”

There was a brief silence and she took a step closer to me, and pulled my hand toward her. She grasped it tightly.

“Please, Nicholas? Hear them out. For me?” I then felt her slip something into the palm of my hand. I looked down and saw the pouch with the seed that I had thrown into the dirt before storming away.

“Fine. I’ll hear them out. But I’m not happy about it,” I said with a little smirk but an overall defeated tone.

We trudged back to the little clearing where we had found the little red box and saw the entire group huddled up talking, all except for Skreech who was fastened to the trunk of a tree on the edge of the clearing.

Plink was the first to notice that we were back.

“Nicholas! Thank goodness,” she said with a genuine smile, obviously happy to see us.

“Thank goodness that what? That I decided to die for you?” I shot at her. I thought a moment. “I’m sorry Plink. I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s alright,” she said still smiling.

“Okay Chak, I’m here. You’ve got one chance to convince me. You’d better have an unbelievable, but believable, explanation for this,” I said.

“We sort of do Nicholas. There are two things that need to be addressed. First of all, why we didn’t tell you about this sooner, and second, what we plan to do to keep you alive.”

“I’d say those are the two most important factors, yes.”

“First of all, we didn’t tell you about this sooner because we literally couldn’t. We had all been told that exact poem before joining this mission. The Higher-ups had told it to us saying that it was a message or a treaty they had received from Mendrax, or something like that, but

they specifically instructed us not to share it with the human who would be chosen. They said he wouldn't understand because it was an incomplete instruction. I don't really understand what they mean by that, but there it is.

"There have been times throughout this trip when I really did try to tell you everything, but I couldn't. Whenever I would start, I would find myself tongue-tied. I couldn't even tell you just now! I was trying to find ways around it when Pathena told you what the poem was. Like I've told you before, we have no choice when a Higher-up gives us a direct order. That's part of why we need a human, someone who can disobey Higher-ups if he needs to. We don't know what sort of instruction power Mendrax has. If he can order us like the Higher-ups do, he can undo our entire plan with a simple instruction. He could tell us to turn around and go home when we got there, and we'd have to do it! But I'm getting off track. That's why we haven't told you sooner, we simply didn't have the ability."

"And what about you *Doctor Lee*?" I stressed the word sarcastically. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I knew nothing of it Nicholas. While in Mendrax's service I knew only that a human would be found and I was to keep records of his whereabouts, reporting them back to Mendrax. I truly had no idea you would be required to..." Dr. Lee trailed off.

"To kill myself?" I said bluntly.

No one spoke. I turned back to Chak.

"Why would the Higher-ups instruct you not to tell me?"

"I don't know why. I asked, but they wouldn't tell me. I didn't think it was right! Like I said, I've been trying to come clean this whole trip. Really though, would it have done any good to know that from the beginning? I mean it would have just made you more upset and more

unwilling to do the job. At least this way you were a little bit happy in your final days. Maybe that's why they didn't want you to know," said Chak.

"That's what Pathena said. It's a weak argument and you both know it," I said.

"You're right," said Chak. "But I know that the Higher-ups always have reasons for what they do, we just don't always see or understand them until much later, or not at all."

"Okay. Let's say I accept that explanation for the first point. What's your plan for keeping me alive? How am I going to have *all my blood be weighed* in planting this seed without dying?" I asked.

"Well, now let me say first that this was an idea that Brew, Flye and I came up with. It's not something the Higher-ups told us to do; it's something we cooked up ourselves to try and prevent, well, your death," said Chak awkwardly.

"Wait a second. You can do that?"

"Sure. They didn't tell us we can't try to keep you from dying!"

"They sure seem to want me to die though," I said.

"*Seem* being the important word. Maybe we can work around that," said Chak hastily. "The bottom line is we think you shouldn't have to die in order to save us and we're going to try and stop it from happening. Flye, grab the IV. Let's show him."

Flye reached into the backpack and extracted the bags of liquid and tubes I had seen go into it on my first day in the Syllogy.

"Basically this is a setup to do a blood transfusion. See we brought all this human blood," he said gesturing toward the bags of liquid, "and we'll find your blood type with a simple blood test. Then, when you water the seed with your blood from your veins, we'll hook up the IV and be replacing it with other blood. Flye developed an additive that virtually eliminates transfusion

reactions and helps to accelerate the assimilation process. If we go slowly enough, the transfused blood will replace and become your own. See you'll be using *all* of your blood in the garden, but you'll be keeping someone else's blood, and your life. What do you think?" He finished this quick little explanation with his voice very high, obviously trying to paint this mediocre plan in the best light that he could.

"That's one of the lamest things I think I've ever heard. You think you can trick the Higher-ups and Mendrax by pumping extra blood into my veins? Forget the fact that I have no idea how a blood transfusion works or if I want you doing one on me, how do you think the Higher-ups feel about this little plan of yours?"

"I imagine they don't like it, but I also imagine they know about it and haven't stopped us yet. But most importantly, the way I see it, it's this or death," said Chak desperately.

"What chance do you think this has of working?" I asked.

"I'll be honest. It probably has about a fifty percent chance. But that's fifty percent more than if you just go to die, right? What do you say? Can you forgive us? Can you keep going? Can you trust us to do everything we can to save your life, in your attempt to save ours?" Chak said, desperation still flooding his voice.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice. At least you're trying to save my skin. That's more than the Higher-ups or Mendrax are offering me." I paused at this point thinking the explanation over in my head. I looked around at the pleading group then at Chak's pitiful face. Finally I glanced at Pathena who seemed to be thinking it over as well. Saving the Syllogy meant saving her too. How could I refuse such a task?

"Yes I can forgive you Chak. I can forgive you all. What do I need to do to make this transfusion thing work?" I said.

"That's great Nicholas. We promised to protect you and that's what we're gonna do." For a moment Chak sounded like the old spunky Brew. "All we need is a prick of your finger to match your blood type. We can take care of the rest in the garden."

"Whatever you say captain," I said, trying to give the impression that I trusted him more than I actually did.

In the back of my mind I thought it was insane, but at this point there was no turning back. If not for these Umbili, who were becoming like family to me, then for myself, I had to finish this job. The Syllogy, the Higher-ups, and the entire Umbili race were counting on me, and if I was going to die, then I was going to die. As I had already concluded a week early in the bay of Troy, that was my fate anyway. There was no use in fighting it. At least I could go out with my head held high.

I looked at Pathena, who was intently watching Chak and Flye run the blood test. Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were worried. I knew she thought that this plan was weak also. She knew I was heading to my death, just like I did. But Pathena was part of this now too. She was in the Syllogy and in just as much peril as the rest of it. She was worth dying for. If nothing else, I would do it to save her life alone.

I was going to die for life. If there was one thing I was sure of it was that there is no greater act of love than to die for the sake of others, and that's just what I intended to do.

## CHAPTER 21- Beaches and Barriers

We were all quiet as we packed up the backpack, having correctly matched blood types, and we headed back toward the river in relative silence. A question popped in my mind as we walked.

“Chak, what was that little red box anyway? You never really said?”

He laughed. “That’s cause I don’t really know. The Higher-ups told us that when we met real resistance we’d know we were coming close to Mendrax’s realm. It’s funny, I was thinking the *real resistance* was the fight with the Umbra, then I thought it was the kidnapping, but now I realize it was that smoke with its repelling effect. The Higher-ups have that sort of sense of humor with their instructions. It was so literal the whole time, but I was thinking figuratively for most of it. Just another little example of how they know better than me, huh?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said quietly. It sort of made sense, but part of me just thought they were being unnecessarily confusing. Why leave that ambiguity there? If they were going to be literal, then why not actually be literal? Why not just tell Chak that when he smelled the worst thing imaginable and came across a red box spewing orange smoke then he’d be getting close to Mendrax’s realm?

We walked on and approached the river at the same spot we had left it. It was smooth and glassy, just the way I like it. We loaded up the boat and began floating downstream once more. I could definitely sense a stillness among the group that hadn’t been there before. I couldn’t tell if this stillness was a result of our little fight or the fact that we were nearing our journey’s end.

I tried to start conversations inside the boat, but no one was in a talking mood. After an hour or so I gave up, and we floated downstream silently. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I heard a choir singing quietly in the distant wood. Every time I tried to focus on the music it faded into

silence, and just when my focus was turned away from it, the melody would creep back into my ears. The end of the song approached, and a sweet high soprano held out the last note of the tune; it hesitated before disappearing.

I glanced around at the group and none of them seemed to hear it, but I did notice Pathena close her eyes and let out a soft sigh as the note sailed away. As soon as it did, we struck sand. The river had come to an abrupt end. It didn't let out anywhere. It just stopped and lapped onto a wide beach. I wondered for a moment where all the water went but didn't have time to consider the thought as I was hustled out of the boat. It was slipped into the backpack and we grouped up on the beach.

It was a long beach that sloped upward as you went away from the water. Light, loose sand covered the slope and our feet sank a few inches into it every time we took a step. There was a sparse tree line about three hundred yards away from the beach, flecked with rather young pine saplings. It was an odd sight to see the white sandy beach dotted with green pine needles. There were also little black holes in the sand that would normally belong to sand crabs. I peered down at one of the holes near me and as I kicked a little sand into it a small animal did come out, but it wasn't a crab.

It was a squirrel. Much smaller than a normal squirrel, this one was about the size of a walnut and was monstrously fast. It darted out of its hole and looked up at me. The sight of it startled me and I jumped back. It started yelling and shaking its fists in my direction. I don't know if it was the translator in my ear or the squirrel was speaking a human language, but I could understand its tiny squeaks and screeches.

"What's the big idea, huh? I don't go kicking bricks into your house! This is a grave injustice. I'll take you to court. I will! I'll do it!"

All of these words were delivered in the cutest little high-pitched voice you could imagine, and though you could tell he was yelling at the top of his lungs it was actually quite soft. In spite of myself, I let out a little laugh. He let out a little, “Hmph!” and darted back into his hole.

I turned back to the group, which was staring at me with a look of *are you done now?* on their faces. I apologized and rejoined the conversation. Chak began speaking.

“Dudes and dades, Umbra and beetles, men and women, it’s been a pleasure travelling with you. Whatever happens now, know that I hold you all in the highest respect. Except for you Skreech, I find you detestable.

“Here on out we have no real instructions from the Higher-ups except to get in and plant that seed by any means necessary. Nicholas, all we know is that the garden is in the center of the realm. Whatever happens to us, get it there. Flye and Plink, you’re with Nicholas. Everyone else is on diversion patrol. If it comes to fighting, keep the fighting away from Nicholas. I don’t know what we may face ahead of us, but face it we must. Let’s do it with our heads held high and the pride of the Syllogy in our hearts. For the Higher-ups!” He shouted the last sentence and with his right hand briefly covered his eyes then his right ear then tapped his chest twice.

“For the Higher-ups!” the whole group yelled, and copied the hand motion.

“Right. Get ready to go. Flye, I need to talk with you a moment,” said Chak. He handed Skreech to Plink, motioned Flye away from the group and began talking with her quietly. I tried to listen in on what they were saying, but it was no use. They were speaking too quietly. Moments later they rejoined the group.

“Right. Let’s be off!” Chak said at last.

With that, we marched up the sloped beach and into the pine trees. The sand didn't stop. It made the walk taxing to have your foot sink down at every step. The trees became steadily larger and denser as we walked, and before long we were in a real pine forest. The small squirrels could be seen darting between trees every now and then, and they disappeared into small holes in the sand at the base of the trees. We trudged along through the sand, the sun still high in the sky.

Eventually we came to a stone wall, beautifully laid with river rounded stones, and an ornate decorative railing along the top. It was about five feet high and just sat in the middle of the wood stretching out of sight in either direction.

The Umbili in the group all exchanged meaningful looks.

"We're here," said Chak seriously.

"This is it?" I asked. "This is the edge of Mendrax's realm?"

"Yes. I believe so," said Chak.

"So, what do we do? Just hop the wall?" I said.

"No. Mendrax will have made it much more difficult than that," said Plink, walking toward the wall to examine it.

"So what are we gonna do?"

"We could throw Skreech over the wall and see what happens," laughed Thrump.

Flye frowned at him.

"Sorry," he said. "But actually, that's an idea. How about we do a little interrogation?"

Thrumpt walked over to Skreech and grabbed him by the neck, raising him off of his feet.

Chak let go of the little leash they had fashioned for him.

"Here's the deal Skreech, every lie you tell means another finger you no longer get to call your own. Understand? Here's your first question. Is it safe to hop over this wall?"

Skreech looked left and right to see if anyone would be on his side. He glanced over at his sister for support, but she was staring at her feet. His face fell when he realized that he was alone. He then composed himself and smiled. "Of course it is!" he said in as light-hearted a tone as he could muster.

Thrumpt frowned and tossed a pine cone over the wall. The moment it passed the plane of the wall it lit in a blue flame. There was a bright flash and the pine cone was no more. "Wrong answer," he said. He grabbed ahold of Skreech's right pinky and bent it straight backward. There was a loud *crack* and Skreech was obviously in great pain because he was howling loudly. As he did, Thrumpt lifted Skreech up to the wall, forced his hurt hand into a fist except for his limp pinky, and thrust the pinky into the invisible barrier. Another bright flash of blue flame, some more screeches of pain, and he was back on the ground cradling a singed pinky stump. He sat there sobbing.

"Let's try this again. Is it safe to hop over this wall?" said Thrumpt calmly.

"No," sobbed Skreech. "No it's not."

"Very good. Question two: How do we get into Mendrax's realm?"

"You can't," cried Skreech. "You won't be able to do it."

"You are a slow learner," said Thrumpt. He repeated the process for Skreech's left pinky.

Moments later he was sitting on the ground again, sobbing uncontrollably now.

"I wasn't lying!" yelled Skreech. "There's only one way past this barrier. It's through a gate in the wall about two miles down. It's heavily guarded. You won't be able get in," he shouted through the pain. It was the only way he was able to get the words out.

Thrump punched him hard in the face and he fell backward.

“While you might have been telling the truth about the way in, I didn’t ask for your opinion. Try to stick to the facts from now on, eh? Last question: What’s guarding the gate and how do we get past it?”

“Why don’t you go find out for yourself?” Skreech screamed.

“Answering questions with other questions is ill advised at this point in the game. Are you sure you don’t want to change your answer?” said Thrump.

“I really don’t know. I don’t. I don’t know I don’t.” Thrump grabbed Skreech’s right hand preparing to rip off his fourth finger. Skreech began yelling, high and fast.

“No I really don’t. I don’t. I don’t! Mendrax always sent someone to accompany us to the gate and say something to the guard dogs. He never let us hear. The gate would open and we would walk through just fine. He didn’t tell us how to get through by ourselves. I promise. I promise. I promise. Please don’t! Please don’t break my other fingers! Please don’t! I need them! Please! Stop!”

“STOP!” there was a pause in the action as we all looked for the source of the new voice. It was Flye.

“Stop it Thrump. He’s telling the truth. I just saw it. I just looked forward and he’s telling the truth. There is a gate and we need to go and talk to the guard dogs.”

“I can also vouch for his story,” said Doctor Lee confidently. “The wall wasn’t fully built when I first came to this place, but there was a gate that we entered through. I can lead us to it.”

“Why didn’t you speak up earlier Doc?” asked Thrump.

"I wasn't sure if Mendrax had changed things since I left," he said. "These trees weren't here when last I came and the wall was under construction. I needed to hear what Skreech had to say to see how much I still knew about the realm."

"Fair enough," said Thrump releasing Skreech who fell to the ground whimpering.

This was a side of Thrump I always knew he was capable of but had never seen. He was truly scary for those few moments, and the thought crossed my mind that he must not have always been so even keeled. He must have worked hard to control his temper and emotions. He was also obviously tired of the half measures and ready to be done with this whole journey.

We made our way down the wall with Dr. Lee leading the way. Trekking through the sand did not help the already hot tempers. All of a sudden, Dr. Lee stopped. He hovered in the air a moment before zipping around to face Chak.

"I'm having a thought Chak. The gate as I remember is right around the bend up there, but I was considering the possible advantages of setting up a camp site back toward the beach a bit and embarking on the infiltration early tomorrow morning. Mendrax, as you know, is a bit of a night owl. He's not a morning dude. I believe the best time of day to truly take his realm by surprise would be at first light. Might we have a nice meal and cool our tempers before charging into possible death and destruction?"

Chak considered it for a moment.

"You might be right Doc. But how can we be sure we'll be safe setting up camp so close to his realm. Wouldn't we be in great danger if we waited?"

"I had the same thought sir. But I believe we will be safe to do so, because Mendrax is ill equipped to attack us. His maneuver crew is likely still in disarray from the battle we had with them, and all of the other obstacles Skreech mentioned are inside this stone wall barrier, not

outside of it, so we have a bottle neck advantage. Anything that comes our way will have to come out of the gate just down this wall. We can't be outflanked when theirs is no flank to begin with!" said Dr. Lee.

"That makes a lot of sense Chak," I said. "We could all probably use the rest considering what's ahead. Maybe we could celebrate a little bit too!"

Chak looked at me for a moment and then a huge grin spread steadily across his face.

"Why not?" he said. "Let's head back toward the beach a bit."

"Excellent," said Doctor Lee happily and he buzzed into the trees to scout out a good place to camp.

## CHAPTER 22- Gobin and the Courageous Danes

The next morning we woke and packed the camp quickly. It was an hour hike back up to the brick wall and we found the gate right away. Just before approaching it, Thrump stopped us.

“Let me take the lead on this one,” he said.

No one put up much of a fight. Recent events had taught us not to disagree with Thrump.

He strode over to Skreech and whispered in his ear, “If you so much as breathe too loudly for the next two days, your life will come to a painful end. Do you understand?”

Skreech nodded, terror on his face.

Thrumpt approached the gate slowly, knees bent, ready to fight if necessary. The gate was a beautiful black wrought iron piece of art. It rose into a high arch in the center and split down the middle into two doors. All over its body were the shapes of Umbili. There was one in the center wearing a crown, a few bowing in the front, and a strange bird-like creature stretching its wings over the background of the mural with an ominous presence.

Thrumpt grabbed the intricate handle and twisted it down, giving the gate a strong tug. It swung open easily and silently. He looked back at us as if to say, “Well that was easy.” He crept forward, slowly, just into the threshold of the gate. There was lush green grass on the other side of the wall, and the divide between sand and grass was striking. Just as his foot touched down on the grass a loud bark clanged in the air like a gong.

It stung the ears and all of us instinctively covered our own. As we did, the other side of the gate swung open to match its partner and seven majestic and huge Great Danes strode in front of the gate taking a position much like a flock of geese would with one in the front and the other six just behind him on either side forming the head of an arrow. The dog in the center barked again, and again the sound was too painful to bear without covering our ears.

The lead dog then did something no one expected. It stood up on its hind legs so that it was a good seven feet in the air. It even rolled its shoulders backwards making it look normal to stand this way. After this, he spoke, which was less startling considering all the other talking animals I had met and the fact that he had just stood up like a man.

“Umbili of the Syllogy, prepare to die.” He took a fighting stance and his cohorts, still on four legs, leaned close to the ground and raised their hackles, snarling.

“Wait!” shouted Fwik.

“Yes we have an idea that might avoid bloodshed!” yelled Fwish after her brother.

This move was unplanned and took the entire group off guard, particularly considering who was speaking. Fwik and Fwish were always ready with a sarcastic joke or their whips but never a diplomatic discussion.

“What makes you think we would waste time talking to you when we can simply kill you as we have been instructed?” The lead dog’s low voice was unctuous and serene.

“Let me ask you one question, and then if you want to kill us after I’ve asked you, go right ahead,” said Fwik.

The dog cocked his head to the side the way dogs do when they are intrigued or confused. He stood quietly for a moment, considering the proposition.

“Alright. Ask your question,” he said slowly. “We can kill you afterward.”

“Are you happy?” asked Fwik.

The dog started laughing a deep booming laugh, clutched his belly, and rolled over. The other dogs behind him cackled maniacally.

“Happy?” he shouted through fits of laughter. “Happy?”

“What?” asked Fwish, “Do you have something against being happy?”

“If happy existed, maybe I would.”

“You’re saying there isn’t any such thing?” asked Fwik.

“Of course not! It’s against nature.”

“How did we get into that state?” said Fwish.

“We were born that way. Happiness is an illusion. Suffering is all that truly exists in this world. The world is broken and always has been and so we serve the only leader who recognizes this fact,” the dog retorted.

“We’re not talking about suffering or brokenness we’re talking about being happy. Are you happy?”

“You can’t be happy if you’re in pain, in a broken world,” said the dog.

“Why not?” asked Fwik shortly.

“You’d better start making sense pretty quickly, because I’m hungry.”<sup>2</sup>

“How do you know the world is broken?” asked Fwik.

“What?” asked the dog.

“You can not call a line crooked unless you have some idea of a straight line. If you never had any pain in your life, how would you know when you were happy? To what are you comparing the broken world, if you do not know of a better world? If a cup has always had leaks in it, how would you know to stop them up? Wouldn’t you assume that cups are supposed to leak?” It was Dr. Lee who had spoken. The dog was no longer laughing, just listening silently.<sup>3</sup>

“Your reasons for following Mendrax don’t make sense, my good dog. I had to come to this realization as well. If Mendrax is right and the world has always been this way, we wouldn’t

<sup>2</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited* (NY: Dramatist Play Services, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

know what pain and happiness were, even as abstract ideas. Those ideas would not have entered into our mind. But if the Higher-ups are right and Mendrax actually broke this world, then our understanding of happiness and pain are justified.” Dr. Lee was speaking precisely so as not to strike a nerve with the dog.

“So, are you happy?” asked Fwik again.

The dog sat down onto his hindquarters. He was actually considering the question this time. Finally he answered.

“No, I’m not,” he said bluntly. “But what do you think you’re going to do about it?”

“We can’t do anything about it if you don’t really want to make a change. As the saying goes, insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Do you want to be happy, or at least, happier?”

“Yes,” said the dog sincerely. “Of course I do.”

“Then help us,” said Fwik.

“Or at least, don’t hinder us,” said Fwsh.

“Wait just a minute,” said the dog, “What makes you think you hold the keys to happiness? I may not like what Mendrax does, but at least I know what to expect. How can you guarantee it won’t go from bad to worse when the Higher-ups get back in power?”

“I don’t know that we can,” said Fwik. “It’s a matter of trust.”

“Ha! Sorry, but that’s not good enough. I’ve heard the trust line before. You’ve got to come up with something better, or we’re back to where we started,” said the dog.

Everyone looked at each other for a moment. Fwik was particularly intense with his stares, not wanting his effort to communicate instead of to fight to go to waste. No one spoke.

“Right. That’s what I thought. Pack, assume attack positions!” shouted the lead dog, his sincere demeanor had gone and the stature of a general commanding his troops returned.

The other dogs in the group crouched back down and began snarling again.

“Guys quick, we need something,” said Fwish. Plink drew her crossbow and loaded a bolt on the string.

“File one hold position, file two strike with me,” the dog barked at his pack.

“Anything?” asked Dr. Lee to the group at large. “Chak think of something!” Thrumpt was cracking his knuckles to prepare for a fight.

“Battle cry on three!” shouted the dog. “One!”

“Please, let’s talk.”

“Two!”

“Flye, think of something!”

“Three!”

“Anyone?”

“Courageous Danes! We fight!” The sound of all the dogs yelling this phrase echoed for a moment. And then it hit me.

“WAIT!” I shouted. “Courageous Danes, wait!”

The lead dog looked at me. “What?” he snapped.

“Courage. That’s how you can tell whether we’re worth the trouble,” I said.

“What?” he asked again, more slowly.

“You value courage, don’t you? Majestic, powerful creatures like yourselves must. If we can prove to you that we are courageous, courageous enough to be Courageous Danes, then would you consider us a worthy regime to replace Mendrax?”

“And how do you suggest your courage can be proven?”

“How do you prove anything? Test it. So, test us! Test our courage, test our character!

Surely only the Courageous Danes could truly asses one’s courage. You must have a way of doing so,” I said in my most flattering tone.

One of the other dogs finally spoke. H drooled and slobbered as he did so.

“Gobin, swe could puht them through initheiathion.”

“Initiation. There’s an idea,” said the lead dog, Gobin, slowly nodding his head and standing back up like a man again. “I like this idea. You Umbili surprise me. I thought you’d be all bite and no bark. It does get tedious out here constantly proceeding straight to the fight. It always makes me wonder if there’s not a better way.” He paused, considering the proposition. “I accept your proposal. We will test you; test your courage that is. If you can pass our tests we will let you by without a fight and without warning Mendrax of your arrival, if not your futures will not be so bright. Are we agreed?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” I said quickly.

“Right, then follow us, we will escort you to our training facility,” said Gobin.

He turned and marched along the wall and the group walked calmly through the gate to follow him. On the other side of the wall was an open field as far as the eye could see. Lush green grass and the wonderful smell of summer filled my head as we walked behind the pack of dogs.

I didn’t notice at first, but Chak, Thrump, and Plink were all walking in a tight group and whispering. I edged my way over so that I could hear what they were saying.

“I don’t care what deal we have, if it looks to be going sour, we need to attack,” whispered Chak.

“Obviously I agree. How do we know these mutts will keep their word?” asked Plink.

“I trust Nicholas. If he thinks the dogs will keep their word, that’s good enough for me,” whispered Thrump.

I was just about to interject when Gobin spoke loudly over his shoulder.

“Well said large dude. We are dogs of our word. The human has judged us rightly. We will not deal in underhanded tricks, and if you plan on doing so I suggest you concoct your plan much farther away as I have impeccable hearing. I am a Great Dane remember.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle a little bit as the three Umbili tried to mask their surprise at having been overheard. I liked this dog. He reminded me of myself in many ways. Quick to act when need be, but willing to think if the opportunity presented itself.

We walked for a few more minutes before coming upon a huge dog park. There were tunnels, jungle gyms, and lots of hills and mounds. Some of the hills were squared off, some were steep, some were shallow, some went up and down like waves. Some were muddy, some were grassy, some were sandy, and some were just piles of dirt. On the edge of this field, full of hills and obstacles, stood a rickety old set of wooden stands with bright blue paint that was peeling off. They creaked loudly when we stepped on them.

“This is our training ground,” said Gobin, as we filed in and took seats in the stands. The other Courageous Danes did as well, and Gobin stood before us on the ground, clearly ready to deliver a speech.

“There is a strenuous procedure by which a dog becomes a Courageous Dane. It consists of many tests of courage, agility, and strength. It is through these tests that you will prove yourselves worthy of trust. As these are special circumstances we will alter the tests slightly. You must pick different members of your group to undergo each of these tests, and we will do

the same to match you. No single member may compete in more than one challenge. Without further ado, let's look at the first test."

Gobin turned around and barked something in Great Dane language and when he did the field changed. A defined course, or track, rose from the ground and most of the mounds receded back down into it. There were sections of the track that had spikes poking up from the floor, one section with large hammers swinging across the trail, and a few sections that randomly burst into flame, along with other oddly shaped obstacles scattered over it.

"This first test is what you might call a classic test of speed, agility, and courage. The goal is simple. The first contestant to make it through this course unharmed wins. You will be running side by side, and any means necessary are allowed to inhibit your opponent's progress. Teams, please make your selections now."

We looked at each other. The Courageous Danes had obviously already decided who their contestant would be because one of them stood up like Gobin and strolled down to stand next to his leader. He was muscular and toned. He had a scar running the length of his snout up to the corner of his eye, and the eye it touched was red while the other was a normal black. Tufts of fur were missing from his coat which was anything but sleek. He looked menacing. Chak spoke.

"I believe our best contestants in these challenges will be Thrump, Brew, Shishu, and myself."

"Agreed," said Thrump. "This particular challenge seems pretty straightforward. Pointy things, fiery things, crushing things. Nothing too serious. What do you think Shish ole buddy? You up for it?" Thrump smiled knowingly and looked at Shishu, who kept a straight face,

nodded, and stood up slowly. He then jumped down to stand next to Gobin, achieving quite a bit of height in the process.

“Just to be clear. You can’t do that during the race. Both contestants must pass through all of the obstacles, not fly over them,” said Gobin looking at Shishu and his dog in turn.

“Of course,” said Shishu.

The dog just growled.

“Very well then, as long as we’re clear. Take your marks.”

The other dog and Shishu stood at the starting line that had risen from the ground with the rest of the track.

“Get set.”

I felt something cold envelop my hand. It was as if I had plunged it into a bucket of ice water. I looked down and saw the Agnoscian Orb attached to the end of my arm, held there by Chak, concealed from view in the mouth of the backpack. To the casual observer it would look as if I had my hand in the backpack, not the Agnoscian Orb.

The two contestants crouched at the line, but did so extremely slowly. The dog went back onto all fours and Shishu merely locked his elbows to his side ready to begin running. It became apparent that they were moving in slow motion.

“Go!” shouted Gobin. The word took a full ten seconds to exit his mouth and I suddenly understood what was happening and why. The Agnoscian Orb was slowing down my perception of the succession of events so that I could see them all and watch the race while still knowing what was happening.

The necessity of this became apparent when there was a loud bang and I realized that it was both of the contestants breaking the sound barrier. They were moving so quickly in real time

that I would hardly be able to see them if it weren't being slowed down for me by the Agnoscian Orb.

Another thing that became apparent was that these dogs weren't anything like the hounds I had known in Athens. These Courageous Danes had abilities far beyond those of any dog on earth. Shishu and the dog were moving so quickly that even in my slowed down perception of the race they were moving fast.

They both started off fairly even. The dog made one attempt to bite at Shishu's hand, but he had gone incorporeal just in time to avoid being snatched. They were huffing and puffing against the strain of the race and approached the first obstacle completely neck and neck. It was the swinging hammers. Neither one was thrown off balance by this obstacle and they both timed the swings so perfectly that it hardly took any time at all before they were on the other side of them, though it looked like Shishu came out with a slight lead.

They then ran to the second obstacle, the fire plane. This was when the first mistake was made. Unfortunately, Shishu timed it wrong and singed one foot. The dog was in the middle of the plane when the fire burst went off and leapt up into the air just a split second before Shishu did. They both exited the plane and Shishu was obviously favoring one leg over the other. The Dog landed off balance from his amazing leap and took a few steps to regain his composure, but the injury Shishu had sustained gave the dog a slight edge. He was four or five paces ahead of Shishu as they darted toward the next obstacle.

The loop-the-loop they had to race through was clearly no match for either of them as they stayed an identical distance apart the entire time that they ran vertically up the track, upside down, and down the other side. It wasn't until they reached the hurdles that Shishu began to retake his opponent. The dog's four legs repeatedly tripped him up and he couldn't get the

distance of his paces right in-between hurdles, which caused him to constantly slow down before each jump. Shishu on the other hand took the hurdles three at a time. It was quite impressive to see him soar over the barriers as if it were nothing to be held. He came out at the hairpin turn at the end of the hurdles a good two or three seconds in front of the dog, at least in my perception of time.

He took the turn expertly and smiled at the dog as they passed each other. The dog tried to make another snap at him as he passed, but Shishu was ready for it and dodged the attack well. The return track to the finish line was a straight shot with one obstacle in the middle of it. It was a spider jump alley. A large tank of water appeared where the track was and two walls were suspended over the water. The contestants had to jump in-between the suspended walls and push against the walls with their arms and legs to jump along down the alley, repeatedly catching themselves between the walls. It's a difficult obstacle that we had trained with in the Athenian army.

This particularly difficult obstacle was even more so for both contestants as Shishu had wispy hands and feet that gave him little traction with which to stabilize himself, and the dog had padded paws instead of hands to push with. Given the grace with which both contestants had maneuvered all of the other obstacles, both looked quite inept as they jumped their way down the alley, and the dog gained a bit of his distance back, having practiced this obstacle before. However, it was to no avail as Shishu emerged on the other end of the spider jump three paces ahead of his opponent, and crossed the finish line victorious.

As soon as he finished the race, the cold feeling left my hand and I saw Chak packing the Agnoscian Orb back into the backpack. Time resumed at its regular rate and our group crowded around Shishu, patting him on the back and cheering raucously.

Gobin was genuinely surprised that Shishu had bested his dog, and he barked some sobering words in the Great Dane language at his defeated companion.

The aftermath of the race finally settled and we returned to our seats in the stands. Gobin resumed his place in the front.

“The intruders have passed the first test, surprisingly,” he said with a growl. “The first test was to assess your speed and agility. This next test is one of pure strength, and a classic game as well. It’s time for Tug-of-War.” When Gobin said Tug-of-War all the Courageous Danes let out howls and whoops of approval. Chak and Thrump looked at each other, confused. Did they really mean Tug-of-War or was it some sort of inside joke or metaphor?

Gobin barked some orders out into the field and the track disappeared, being replaced by a long chain laid from end to end in-between two white lines painted on the grass underneath it and a heavy metal ball in the center.

“One on one. Classic rules. Whoever gets the ball over their own starting line wins.”

So he did mean Tug-of-War. Chak and Thrump shrugged.

“Do you want to take it, or should I?” asked Thrump.

“Why don’t you go ahead? I think you could out pull any of these dogs,” replied Chak.

Thrump walked down the stands toward the chain. He stopped to talk to Gobin before proceeding to his starting position.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I mean… it’s Tug-of-War. Isn’t that a bit, childish?”

“There is nothing puppyish about the art of Tug-of-War. It is a time-honored tradition among the Courageous Danes and you will respect it thusly. Are we clear?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I – uh – didn’t realize,” said Thrump.

With that, he took his place on one end. One of the Courageous Danes stood on his hind legs and strolled casually to the other end. His demeanor was completely the opposite of his predecessor. His face was unblemished and perfectly proportioned and he walked with an air of easygoing confidence. He smiled serenely at Thrump when he reached his starting line and went back down to all fours.

“Ready,” said Gobin in a booming announcer voice.

Thrump looked like he thought this whole thing was a little ridiculous, but reached down and grasped the chain in both hands. The dog grabbed the end of the chain in his mouth.

“Set,” shouted Gobin.

Thrump planted his feet firmly, as did the dog on the other end.

“Go!” yelled Gobin.

Nothing could have prepared Thrump for the initial vicious pull that the dog gave. It was so forceful that Thrump fell forward onto his stomach, his shoulders nearly being pulled out of their sockets. He was careering through the grass toward the dog’s starting line, rather like a water-skier who has lost his footing. But Thrump acted quickly. He twirled his feet back underneath him, and just like a water skier standing up on his skis, he planted his heels in the ground and came to a screeching halt keeping the metal ball about five feet in front of the dog’s starting line.

This sudden stop meant that it was the dog’s turn to lose his balance. He fell forward, headfirst into the ground when the chain stopped giving way to his mighty pulls. As soon as he did, Thrump wrapped the chain around his arm and whipped it upward. The dog hardly knew what was happening and his cool confidence turned to terror when his feet left the ground and he was sent upward in an arch over Thrump as the chain fully extended into the air. There was a

horrible crunch when the dog hit the ground on the far end, his legs slightly mangled as he lay in a heap, twitching on the other side of Thrump's starting line.

The cheers from the Courageous Danes had stopped at this point. Thrump smiled at them all, dropped the chain and walked calmly back to his seat. Gobin was obviously lost for words. When he found his voice again, he announced to the crowd, "Well, that was quick. Although he didn't tug as much as fling, the Umbili did achieve the goal of getting the marker across his line. So – uh – I guess they passed that test as well." There was an awkward silence following this statement and then Gobin added on, "Could someone go check on Verro and make sure he's all right?"

## CHAPTER 23- The Final Test

No one had expected the Tug-of-War to end as quickly as it did. Verro was revived and helped back onto the stands, and the palpable feeling among the group of Courageous Danes was something along the lines of *What have we gotten ourselves into?*

The dogs all sat around looking at each other then back at Gobin. Gobin stared around at our rag-tag group of misfits with an impressed frown on his face and a slight nod of his head.

“You have done well. You have come close to proving that you are worthy to be Courageous Danes and so worthy of our allegiance and trust, but there is one final challenge to complete. You spoke earlier of trust. You said that it was a matter of trust that things won’t go from bad to worse if the Higher-ups were back in charge. I want to test this theory. I want to test how much trust you really have. You are going to have to trust me with your lives, and once you do, I will trust you with ours and let you continue on your way.”

We all looked at each other, somewhat confused. What did he mean when he said we would have to trust him with our lives?

“Will you tell us what the challenge is first?” asked Chak.

“I have given you all the information I am going to give. You must select your participant.”

“I’m not doing it,” said Plink. “I don’t trust him.”

“I tend to agree with Plink,” whispered Chak. “I don’t really trust this Gobin character. How do we know he’ll keep his word or that he’ll even trust us back once we trust him. You know he’s thinking the same thing we are right now.”

“We’ve got no choice. We have to trust him, that’s the challenge. It’s a leap of faith!” said Thrump. “I would do it, I trust Nicholas, and Nicholas trusts the dog, but I’ve already competed.”

Shishu spoke. “There you are. Thrump has just said it. Nicholas trusts the dog. He should be the one to compete.”

“I disagree. The dog might harm him. He’s our only hope. He is too valuable to lose at this stage,” said Brew.

“But who else can we send forward? None of us trusts him, so how can we possibly compete in this challenge?”

“Pardon me, but I believe we are forgetting a few members of this group,” interjected Dr. Lee.

“Who? You?” asked Chak.

“Well, no, but I am flattered. I was thinking more along the lines of the brave young dade who just walked forward to accept this challenge.”

We all looked down at Gobin and saw Flye standing next to him. She was white as an Umbra, and something was dangling from her left hand: the pouch containing the seed of linear time. I instinctively reached toward my neck and discovered it missing.

“What’s she doing?” I asked.

“She’s accepting the challenge Nicholas. She’s proving that she has the ability to trust where trust is asked,” said Dr. Lee.

“She’s going to get herself killed!” I said.

“Thank you so much for volunteering ma’am,” said Gobin in a booming voice. He turned back toward the stands. “The reason I couldn’t tell you what the challenge was was that I didn’t

know yet what the challenge would be. You see, the challenge is for you to prove that you trust me with your life in some way that shows that it really is trust, and not fear. If I had, say, taken one of you hostage and let you continue on your way, it would not have been trust that motivated you, but fear of losing your friend. The task is for you to come up with a way that proves that you truly do trust me, and I will do the same by allowing you all to pass through to Mendrax's house unhindered and undetected. So my young dade, how will you prove that you truly do trust me?" Gobin finished his speech with a serene smile.

"Why don't you prove your trust first by letting us go?" yelled Chak from the stands.

"Because I am not the one being tested, my friend. You agreed to let us test you, not the other way around. You must show your trust first, and then we will have a reason to trust you back."

"But what reason do we have to trust you in the first place?" yelled Plink.

"You're still alive aren't you? I've given you a chance to live, haven't I? It is merely my word, my honor as a Courageous Dane, and my actions up to this point by which you have to base your trust. The rest is up to you! Or I should say, up to her." Gobin gestured toward Flye with his paw.

There was a tense silence. Flye's face was shock white and she was obviously frightened and in a bit of pain being so close to the seed for so long, but her eyes were determined. She spoke as calmly as she could, "I need to tell you, I knew what the test would be, but I promise unequivocally that I don't know what the results will be. Here is how we show that we trust you. We put our fate completely in your hands. Within this pouch is the last seed of linear time. It is the object of our quest to plant this seed in Mendrax's garden. We trust you with it, and we trust you to return it to us intact to finish our quest. Without it, the future of the Syllogy is lost."

She extended her arm and the pouch dangled in front of Gobin.

"I don't like this. I don't like this at all. I say we fight. We can take these dogs," whispered Chak.

"We need to get through here undetected if we intend to plant that seed. Have a little faith Chak. Trust him," I whispered.

Gobin stared at the dangling pouch for a few moments. Everything was silent. He reached out, grabbed the string, drew it towards himself, opened the mouth of the pouch, and peered inside, being careful not to touch the seed within. Flye took a deep breath when he did and visibly relaxed.

Everyone on the stand was holding their collective breath, including the Courageous Danes. No one could believe what Flye had just done, but no one could disagree that she had indeed found a way to prove her trust to Gobin.

Gobin breathed heavily, obviously pondering the power of the moment.

Slowly, he pulled the drawstring of the pouch closed and handed the bag back toward Flye. She clenched one fist, gritted her teeth and accepted it. Her eyes were wide and afraid as they had been that night on the beach and in the cabin at The City of Falling Water. She thanked Gobin and walked back to the stands. When she arrived, she handed me the pouch, which I immediately put back around my neck.

"Well, I must say you have passed the tests with flying colors. You are indeed Courageous Danes at heart. I am bound by my word and my honor to let you continue on your journey," said Gobin with a bow.

"Thank you Gobin. You won't regret this," said Chak.

"I think you might just be right. You Umbili might be the answer for a better world."

"How do we get to Mendrax's mansion?" asked Chak as we filed out of the stands to bid farewell to Gobin.

"It's about a day's journey that way," said Gobin, pointing out across the open field. "This whole realm is his to rule, but there are areas he doesn't watch as closely. There's a patch of trees that way that should provide cover for you. It's half the distance to the mansion, just far enough away from it that you won't be detected. I suggest you camp there tonight and take the mansion in the morning. You will have quite a day ahead of you if you plan on coming out alive. I'll send Jiben and Salies with you to make sure you get there safely."

"Thank you Gobin. You truly are a Great Dane," said Plink and she kissed him on the top of the head the way an owner kisses their dog. The other Courageous Danes all howled and whooped.

"Not at all madam, but I feel I need to ask you all, why are you so confident in the Higher-ups? Why do you want to change this world so badly? How do you know that world will be any better than this one?"

There was a moment of silence following this question.

"Because it has to be," said Flye simply.<sup>4</sup>

"Very well," replied Gobin with a smile. "Well, you best be off. Jiben, Salies, take them to their campsite. Good luck Umbili. May the Higher-ups be with you!" With that, Gobin turned and barked orders at the rest of the Courageous Danes and they began sprinting back out into the training ground and running drills. Two of the dogs stayed behind, looked at us meaningfully, and turned out toward the field. We took our cue and followed.

<sup>4</sup> *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "The Wish," Directed by David Greenwalt. Written by Josh Whedon and Marti Noxon (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox: December 8, 1998).

The feeling as we walked was an odd one. We had just emerged from what seemed like an inevitable situation with a new ally instead of bloodshed. The fighters in the group were obviously confused by what had just happened as they thought through the events of the last hour. I merely walked on happily. Dr. Lee and I chatted as we walked, but everyone else remained silent. Even Skreech was quietly thinking. I assume this was partly because of Thrump's warning earlier but partly out of outrage at the Courageous Danes' actions.

"Well done Nicholas. An excellent display of diplomacy and foresight. Expertly crafted arguments, I must say."

"Thanks Doc. I don't think that could have turned out any better than it just did."

"Indeed it could not have. I was surprised at the actions of Gobin. There may be hope for the world yet."

"There's always hope doc. There's always hope." The words surprised me as they exited my lips. *There's always hope.* Was that really true? There didn't seem to be hope for me. I was still going to die. That was my purpose. Where was my hope? Why did I still feel the drive to complete this mission, even though it was hopeless from my perspective? Being honest, the blood transfusion did feel like a pipe dream.

I pondered the thoughts until we arrived at the patch of trees. The group set up camp as we always did but decided to forego the fire so as not to alert Mendrax of our presence with smoke. Jiben and Salies hung around for a little while before saying their terse farewells and returning to the Courageous Dane training ground.

We relaxed around the campground for the rest of the evening. Plink had us all do a workout to prepare for the inevitable fights tomorrow. I tried to show her that working out now was sort of pointless; that was something that needed to be done for the last few months and one

night of exercise wouldn't change the outcome of a fight. She ignored my protests and made me do twenty extra pushups.

As we ate dinner Chak outlined the plan of attack on the mansion. Of course, "plan" is a loose term because we had no idea what to expect of the mansion or how to go about getting in and planting the seed in Mendrax's garden.

"We're going to sneak in somehow, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, and we're going to be quiet and not get caught once inside the mansion. It should be deserted. Then somehow we'll find the garden inside the mansion, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, and Nicholas will plant the seed."

I looked at him flabbergasted.

"That's the plan? You've had how long to come up with this?" asked Pathena.

"A couple of years," said Chak sheepishly.

"And this is the best you could do in a couple years of planning?"

"We had no intel on Mendrax's mansion. We had no idea how it would work once we got here, we just knew how to get here," said Chak defensively.

"So the fate of the Syllogy rests on us *somewhat* getting into Mendrax's mansion and then *somewhat* sneaking around without getting caught, and then *somewhat* making it to the garden? You've actually got three *somewhows* written into your plan?" said Pathena; she was practically yelling. "Who thought this was a good idea?"

"No one thought it was a good idea, but it's still the best one we've got. If you have a better idea then be our guest," said Thrump.

Pathena was silent for a moment.

"Well we at least have a source now," she said gesturing to Skreech who was bound and gagged by a tree. "And we could send out a recon team tonight to get a little better idea of how to get into the house. It's better than going in blind!"

"We're not pumping my brother for any more information," said Flye sternly. Everyone was surprised at her sudden decisiveness and for her slang use.

"I'm not saying we should *pump* him, but he at least could tell us how to get in," said Pathena.

"And, of course, the intensity of the persuasion necessary to acquire the information is entirely up to him. No *pumping* need take place, to borrow the colloquialism," said Dr. Lee matter-of-factly.

I still don't like it, and I won't let you use him. He's still my brother, no matter what he's done or what he believes."

"But Flye, he's not. Not really," said Fwish. "He's a traitor. The day he abandoned the Higher-ups and their laws he gave up his rights to their blessings as well. Family included. He may be your brother by birth, but he's not your brother in the ways that count. He's not your brother in arms, or in service, or in allegiance, or in belief. In a way, he's less your brother than Chak or Thrump are."

Flye's face contorted in pain at Fwish's words. She was fighting back tears as the rest of the group ganged up on her.

"Please, let's not rob the word 'brother' of its meaning. The word does equally mean both a male sibling and a fellow comrade in arms. At the very least, Skreech is just as equally Flye's brother as Chak is," said Dr. Lee.

"I agree with Flye," came a deep confident voice. It was Shishu.

“But Shishu, you can’t possible—”

“I can and do,” said Shishu, cutting Plink’s protest short.

“So do I,” said Brew. When she said this, both Shishu and Brew glided over next to Flye.

Brew gave her a hug and Shishu stared down the rest of the group.

“I’m tired of having this same conversation over and over again. He is the enemy. We are supposed to take down the enemy at any cost! This family business is just getting in the way,” said Chak. Brew whipped around and gave him a tense glare.

“You’re gonna stop that sorta talk right now. Understand?” she said. She sounded remarkably close to her old self, but with a much more menacing and determined tone. Chak fell silent.

“I kind of agree with Shishu and Brew,” I said.

“So do I,” said Thrump. This shocked everyone. Thrump had been the least happy of the entire group to take on Skreech as a travelling companion.

“We decided earlier that Flye would make the decision regarding Skreech’s fate. We should stand by that decision. Besides, he’s already told us everything he knows about the mansion. There’s the tree frog guarding a moat around the mansion, four ostrogles circling overhead, and a team of Umbra and more Umbili we haven’t met yet.”

Everyone in the group had forgotten these facts from earlier. There were murmurs going around the group with no real cohesion until Pathena spoke.

“Fine. I give up. You do what you want. I’m only a side show here anyway.” She threw up her hands and walked toward her tent.

“I think Pathena has a point. We could send a recon group out tonight to get a feel of the place,” said Chak. Pathena stopped walking and returned to the group.

There was a murmur of agreement.

“So, who will go?” he asked.

“Oooo! Ooooo! Send us! We’ll go!” said Fwik jumping up and down and waiving his hands in the air.

“We’ll be as swift and as silent as a... a really swift and silent thing!” said Fwish, joining her brother. As the two of them jumped, Fwik landed on a stick on the ground, which was wedged under a rock. It acted like a lever and propelled the rock over the group and smashed hard and loud into a pot that had been left out from dinner. The clang resounded through the trees and everyone reached toward their weapons, ready to fight off any enemies alerted by the sound. After a few moments, the tension receded and everyone looked at Fwish and Fwik who were no longer jumping in the air.

Fwik sighed. “We’ll stay here,” he said in a dejected tone.

“I should stay here too,” said Thrump. “I can protect Nicholas and Pathena, and keep an eye on Skreech.”

“I think Shishu and Brew are the lightest on their feet, and won’t have to deal with their light giving them away.”

“I have no argument with that,” said Shishu.

“Me neither,” chimed Brew.

“Plink and I should accompany them. We can do a two-by-two pattern that way,” said Chak.

“That sounds like a good plan,” said Thrump. “At what point should we come looking for you?”

"Send the twins out if we're not back by first light. If they come back empty handed you forget about us and get Nicholas in by any means necessary," said Chak seriously.

"Right," said Thrump straightening up. The four going on the reconnaissance mission split off and made some minor preparations. Chak and Plink each extracted a length of long black cloth from the backpack and wrapped it around the brightest parts of their bodies. They also put on black hats to cover their hair from shimmering in the darkness. Once the four of them were adequately prepared, Chak turned toward Thrump and swiftly covered his eyes, then his right ear, and tapped his chest twice. Chak returned the salute they had picked up from Teleon and the two Umbili and two Umbra disappeared in the night.

Thrump returned to the remaining group. Skreech was still tied to the tree with a gag in his mouth and Flye was sitting at the front of her tent on a tree stump staring at him intensely in the dim light provided by the floating orbs. Fwik and Fwish were sitting in the dirt across from each other playing a game with a rock on the ground. Thrump and Dr. Lee began a discussion on the day ahead of them and eventually started arguing about which recon team would come back with better information. Pathena walked off toward her tent. I started to follow her but she waved me off saying she wanted to be alone for a little while.

I walked over to Fwik and Fwish and sat down next to them and watched their game.

"It's a simple game," said Fwish. "See, it's my turn, so I toss this rock in the air. It has to go past both of our heads. If Fwik catches it while it's travelling upward then he gets to slap the back of my hand. But if he misses it and I catch it on the fall then I get to slap his hand. Then if I miss it and he catches it underneath where I tried to catch it, he gets his slap back. That all happens on one toss. Three chances to catch. If nobody catches it then nobody gets slapped and it's his toss. The possession of the toss switches regardless of the outcome."

I nodded understandingly and privately thought it was one of the stupidest games I had ever heard of.

“How do you know who wins?” I asked.

“Who ever says ‘Ow’ first loses,” said Fwik intently staring at the stone in Fwish’s hand, he kept both hands planted firmly on the ground.

Fwish tossed the stone into the air and Fwik pulled his hands off the ground and quickly followed the stone upward snatching it out of the air just as it slowed its ascent.

“Aha!” he said.

Fwish extended her hand and Fwik placed the stone onto the back of her hand, then brought his own down hard onto the stone driving it into the back of Fwish’s hand. Fwish flinched momentarily, her eyes screwed up in pain, but she didn’t make a sound.

“That’s a rather stupid game,” came a smooth serene voice from behind me. I turned around and Teleon was standing there, looking lazily up at a tree. He reached toward the leaves in front of his face, pulled one off, and started tearing it slowly along the veins. He never looked back in my direction, but he smiled a warm and calm smile as he played with the leaf.

“Teleon!” I said loudly. “What... what are you doing here?”

“Don’t worry Nicholas, I’m just checking in. I had some errands to run earlier, that’s why I didn’t stick around long when you last saw me. How are things going so far?”

Fwik and Fwish had gotten up and were fighting to stand in front of each other to present themselves to Teleon.

“Well there’s been an interesting turn of events since you left us.” I had taken on a bit more formal tone, suddenly remembering all that I had learned since my last encounter with Teleon and the fact that he expected, and even planned, for me to die.

“Yes I suppose there has been,” he said in his relaxed tone. This made me angrier.

“And you thought it would be better if I learned that I am supposed to kill myself from some stupid little red box in the woods?”

“No. I didn’t think it would be better,”

“Then why—”

“I knew it would be better,” he said, smiling at me.

Well maybe you thought... or you knew... wrong.” The words sounded strange after I had said them.

“You can’t *know* wrong,” he said, still smiling. “Knowledge is always right, always true. If it’s not true then it’s not knowledge. It’s falsehood and lies. Opinions can be true or false. Opinions can be right or wrong. But think a moment, knowledge can’t be false, knowledge can’t be wrong. If something is knowledge it’s impossible for it to be false knowledge or wrong knowledge.<sup>5</sup> And yes, I knew it would be better this way.”

“How could you possibly know that?” I asked.

“I could try to explain it to you, but your head would explode,” said Teleon.

Fwik laughed at this statement, and I glared at him.

“How do you know that my head would explode? Do you know the future?”

“Of course,” said Teleon simply. It was strange. If anyone else had claimed to know the future, I would have called him arrogant or a liar. Teleon merely said it as a humble point of fact and I knew not to disagree with him or he’d make me look like a fool.

“So... what are you doing here?” I asked again, trying to stay angry with the man, but his presence was such that you couldn’t stay mad at him long.

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<sup>5</sup> Mortimer Adler, and Max Weismann, *How to think about Great Ideas* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000).

“I told you, I’m just checking in. Thought I’d hang out with you all until the reconnaissance team gets back.”

“Well, when we last talked, you said you would answer my questions one day soon. Is that day today? Is it right now? Will you answer my questions right now?”

“Some, but not all. The rest of the answers are still to come on another day very soon.”

“But... but I really only have one day left,” I said.

“Well then I suppose that very soon day will be tomorrow, won’t it?” said Teleon with a comforting smile, knowing what I was thinking about.

“Okay, well can I ask you a few now?”

“Ask away Nicholas,” he said.

“How did Pathena die on earth and end up here?”

“Well, Nicholas, that’s quite a long story, that I think we should save for another time. The short version is that she left earth long before your encounter. The person you saw die on earth was an imposter, not really her.”

I decided to accept this half answer, because it was obvious that he wasn’t going to tell me anymore than that.

“Is this IV plan that Chak has going to work, or am I really going to die?”

Teleon laughed a little bit at this, “Oh yes. The IV. We had quite a little chuckle over that. No Nicholas, Chak’s IV isn’t going to work. There’s only one thing that will work. There’s only one way that seed can be planted in Mendrax’s garden. Trust me.”

He was so casual as he referred to my death and laughed at Chak’s plan like a father laughs at his child’s attempt to fly. Part of me was angered at his flippancy, but part of me was comforted knowing that I had made the right decision to give up my life. This was the only way.

‘*All his blood be weighed*’ rang in my ears. I sat silently pondering this thought for a long time.

“Well, if that’s all, I say we play this game that Fwik and Fwish just taught us,” said Teleon.

“But wait, I have more questions!”

“Another time Nicholas. Sometimes it’s good to just have a mental distraction and play a fun little game without worrying about the fate of the world.”

“I thought you said this was a stupid game?” said Fwish.

“And indeed it is, but where’s the harm in playing a stupid game every once in a while? Good, clean, stupid, fun I think is just what the doctor ordered this evening. Nicholas, are you game?”

I snapped out of my thoughts and looked at him intently.

“You bet I’m game,” I said, trying to match his free and inspiring smile with one of my own. With that I picked up a rock from the ground and sent it soaring into the air.

## CHAPTER 24 - Startling Words

I came to discover that there was more skill to Fwik and Fwish's game than I thought.

There were different strategies to employ on the throw. You could try to throw it upward only a little bit so that your opponent wouldn't have much time to try and catch it, or you could launch it out of reach into the air and fight it out on the ground to try and get a better chance at catching it on the way down.

Teleon was not good at the game, but I had the feeling he was letting us beat him because he would always toss the rock to the same height in the air and close enough for his opponent to reach it quickly. I tried to call him on this fact but he merely shrugged off my accusation, smirking as he did.

We played seven or eight games of "Ouch" –which Fwik instructed me must be said "in a certain way that conveys real pain when speaking the name of the game"— before the recon parties returned. Chak and Plink were the first back followed closely by Shishu and Brew. They were all breathing heavily, and it was the first time I had seen real fear on Brew's face since she became an Umbra.

"What's wrong? What did you guys find? Why are you back so soon?" I asked.

Chak started to talk in between gasps for air.

"We have practically no chance of making it into that mansion," he said finally.

"What? Why?" I asked loudly as he and the rest of the group caught their breath. Thrump and Pathena reemerged and joined the group in waiting for an explanation.

"There's no way in but the front gate, and it's guarded by a huge tree frog. This thing is the size of an oak tree!" said Chak.

"I've heard the legends about this frog," said Pathena. "He doesn't eat, he doesn't sleep, and he always finishes the job. He is downright deadly in a frontal assault. He could rip Thrump in two with the flick of his tongue. If we could get behind him, we might have a shot at taking him down, but there's really no hope of that since he'll have a closed door to his back."

There was a palpable tension in the group. I was watching Pathena. When she finished talking she had an intense look of thought. Finally, she spoke again.

"Dr. Lee," she said hesitantly, "How did you get in and out of the mansion when you were in the service of Mendrax?"

"My dear, I had considered this angle myself, but I will be of little use in this mission. I have only been here once. I spent a year inside, but once we were through the gate in the brick wall I was brought the rest of the way by an Umbili inside a cardboard container along with other prospective helpers to Mendrax. I didn't see how to get here or how to get in, and I spent most of my time inside the mansion confined to a single room with other trainees where the voice of Mendrax would emit from a small black box in the wall. I've never even seen the dude's face! The only thing I do know is that the Umbili servants of Mendrax sometimes spoke of a password. I assume that it was how they gained entrance. I'll bet that the frog requires a password."

"But that doesn't really matter does it? Even if we have the right password, surely the Umbili we fought at the river would have told Mendrax exactly who was coming and the frog won't let us through even with the right password!" said Plink.

"She's right," I said defeated.

"Actually," said Dr. Lee hesitantly, "that is likely incorrect."

"What do you mean?" asked Plink.

“He means that the frog doesn’t work for Mendrax,” interjected Pathena. “I mean, he does, but he’s not loyal to Mendrax’s cause, he’s loyal to his system.”

“You’re going to have to explain,” said Chak.

“Well, there are a lot of legends that surround this frog in The Settlement. He’s very old. He’s older than The Settlement, older than the City of the Syllogy. He was among the first created by the Higher-ups to live in the Wilderness of the Syllogy. He works for himself and gives his services to the highest bidder. He’s in it only for the money and the glory to himself.”

“Go on,” said Chak.

“The legends say that he gives travellers three guesses at his password. If the travellers guess it correctly, then he lets them pass free and clear. If we were to get the password correct, he would let us go into the mansion quietly. If they don’t get it right in three tries, then he... well... he...”

“Rips you apart,” finished Flye.

“But the difficulty with all of this is that we are without the password, and no one has ever guessed it correctly,” said Dr. Lee.

“No one?” I asked.

“No one,” said Pathena.

“Never?” said Chak.

“Never,” said Dr. Lee.

“I’m sorry, but why would Mendrax even use a frog like this where there is a possibility that he would just let us walk right in to his mansion unannounced? Why wouldn’t he just get a guard who always attacks without question?” I asked.

"I asked Mendrax that same question when in his service. He said that the frog's success rate was too attractive. Remember Nicholas, Mendrax is a proud Umbili and he wants to beat the Higher-ups after giving them every seemingly possible advantage. He knows assuredly that the frog won't fail, but he would love to have the ability to say that the frog *might* have failed, if only the Higher-ups were cleverer."

I glanced back at Teleon to see what he thought of this new revelation from Dr. Lee, but Teleon was gone. I spun around looking for him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"So where does that leave us?" said Chak bleakly.

Pathena's mind was buzzing again. Everyone except Shishu looked either thoughtful or despondent. Shishu merely stood there with a stony look on his face.

"I hate to bring up more bad news, but the Ostrgles are pretty tough stuff too," said Brew. "I don't see how we'll get by them during the day."

"They have poor vision at night and sleep two hours when the sky is darkest," said Shishu in a monotone.

"But Mendrax is more active during the night than the day. He'll have other defenses during that time."

"It's sort of a moot point. This whole mission is a failure. We can't get in. It's hopeless!" said Plink.

"I tend to agree," said Chak.

Brew was just as unsure as her partner. Shishu was the only one showing no emotion. There was a heavy moment in which the gravity of the situation weighed on us all.

"It is by no means hopeless," Shishu said sternly. "The Higher-ups are on our side. We need not fear Mendrax when the Higher-ups are on our side. They would not have instructed us to go into the mansion if they did not intend for us to get in. They will protect us."

Shishu said this last bit as a matter of fact. He was not trying to give us false hope; he simply stated the truth. There was a long and edgy silence as Brew, Chak, and Plink stared at Shishu.

"I agree with Shishu," came a voice to finally break the silence. It was Dr. Lee. "I know not of Higher-ups, nor their promises of protection for I am new to their ranks. However, I feel kindling within me something I have not felt in ages... something I have not felt since my family died. Hope. I know the legends and the stories. I know of how Higher-ups led the great Umbili Jing against the rebellion of old. I've heard tell of the victories they gave to the first two Umbra in the wilderness. I know of how they brought the first humans here and gave them The Settlement as their own. I've heard of their legendary protection of The City of Falling Water against the Felvais forces of Fennegal. Their history of victory needs no introduction.

"When I served Mendrax, we were not even permitted to speak the name of Teleon, or mention the Higher-ups, because he feared them so. I have never seen more powerful works from any Umbili but Mendrax, but I will never forget the tremble in his voice when he spoke of the Higher-ups.

"If they are truly with you, you need not fear. You will succeed. You need only now ask, are they truly with you?"

Dr. Lee's words were spoken into the darkness of the night and dangled in the air. It wasn't like before on the beach when we were all laughing at his speech. His words had weight

this time. These were the words of a truly humble creature speaking humble truth, and it couldn't have been more powerful.

There was still an awkward hesitation among the group, but then Thrump stepped forward and said, "I agree with Shishu. We can take the mansion. The Higher-ups are on our side." This was the tip in the scales that we needed. As Thrump moved toward Shishu to stand next to him, I joined him. Brew looked pensive, teetering on the brink of decision.

"They're right!" she cried at last. "We can do anything if the Higher-ups are for us."

After that it was mere moments before the rest of the group had joined us and we began our plan of attack. Chak leaned in, finally, with a smile on his face.

"I am reminded of a time on earth when the great Empire of Babylon thought they had an impenetrable fortress. We may be able to learn something from good king Cyrus."

## CHAPTER 25- Breaking and Entering

The plan was set and we set to work. We packed up camp quickly and quietly. Skreech was given a sleeping pill that Brew had produced from the backpack and all of the Umbili in the group covered their shining skin with black cloths to keep from giving them away.

We headed toward the mansion at a brisk pace. Because of how far we were from the camp, and because we needed to be there when the ostrogles would be asleep, Shishu and Brew were carrying me and Pathena. The twins were glad to finally have a chance to move as quickly as possible and I was surprised at how fast we moved as a group. When we could just barely see the mansion peaking over the black horizon, we halted.

We scampered around so that we were at the opposite side of the building from the main entrance keeping the distance about the same so that it would be clearly visible but out of earshot. Chak turned around and spoke to everyone in an intense whisper.

“Shovels out.”

We started digging. In order to execute this plan we would have to dig fast. Luckily, Thrump, Shishu, Fwik, and Chak were expert diggers. Thrump and Shishu set to work building a pond. They started by digging 10 feet straight down, so that Chak and Fwik could get started on the tunnel. It was quite impressive, as they were moving practically at the speed of sound. They were already halfway done with the pond and the tunnel twenty minutes after starting. The rest of us, helped where we could, but for the most part we just stayed out of their way. Fwik kept cracking jokes under his breath about men being at work, and Fwish clotheslined him with her shovel when he tried to head back into the tunnel where he and Chak were working.

To pass the time, I whispered with Dr. Lee going through the plan again so as to fully understand it.

“So, when this tunnel and this pond are finished we’ll connect the tunnel with the moat encircling the mansion.”

“Correct.”

“So all the water will drain out of the moat and into this pond.”

“Not all the water, just enough that the drainage systems from the mansion into the moat are revealed. We don’t want the Frog to notice that the water has suddenly disappeared from the moat.”

“Right, so about a third of the water drains into this pond.”

“Right.”

“Then Chak, Fwik, Plink, Shishu and I will wade into the moat and get in the mansion through the drainage system and come back out through the front door.”

“Exactly.”

“Meanwhile, Brew, Thrump, Flye, Skreech, Pathena, and you will approach him from the front and make sure he is distracted as you guess at the password.”

“Yes.”

“And how do you intend to spend more than a minute guessing at a password when you only have three guesses?”

“Improvisation my dear boy.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, privately thinking that he hadn’t thought this through. “Then while the frog is distracted by your... improvisation... my group can attack him from the back, and dispose of him quietly.”

“Yes, and since he has no defense for a rear assault, the advantage is ours.”

“Okay. I think I understand. I just have one last question.”

“And that is?”

“Are we crazy or something? How convoluted and confusing can we make this plan?

We’re literally building a tunnel that goes almost five hundred yards to drain out a moat!”

“To that, I merely reply with a simple, ‘you got a better idea?’” said Dr. Lee.

This was enough to keep me quiet and watch as the team worked away in the dark. The pond was about twenty by twenty feet and almost thirty feet deep. Dr. Lee had explained to me the calculations he had done to determine that this was the correct size, but I don’t remember how it worked exactly.

After about an hour of work, Fwik and Chak emerged from the dark entrance of the tunnel, which was just barely big enough around to fit Chak’s shoulders, and whispered that they were about to break through. This could not have come at a better time because the Ostrogles were due to wake up within the next hour. We ran through the plan again to make sure everyone was on the same page and the group split up.

I went with Shishu, Chak, Plink, and Fwik and we followed the path of the tunnel from above all the way to the moat. The other team made a large loop around to the front of the mansion, and we had lost sight of them through the darkness in a matter of seconds.

Once at the moat Chak gave a meaningful look at Shishu, who took his shovel in one straw-like hand, nodded, and dropped silently into the stream. He went under water instantly with only a little plop and for a second I thought that someone had said Plink’s name.

We waited on the shore of the moat and shared a tense silence.

Then, almost imperceptibly, the water level in the moat began to lower. Shishu’s head was gradually revealed as the surface of the water sank. Before long, the water was only about halfway up Shishu’s torso, making it about four feet deep. I could barely see the one-foot hole

that was the entrance to the tunnel on this side, and the water level reached barely to the bottom edge of the hole. It lapped into the tunnel as Shishu waded forward to the middle of the moat and motioned for us to join him.

The four of us on the bank silently slid down the side and into the moat. The water almost went over Fwik's head and he had to stand on tiptoe in the water in order to breath. It came up to my neck, and I grabbed tightly to Chak's iron-like arm as we waded through, searching for the drainage outlet that would get us into the mansion.

We had waded down almost to the end of the wall when Shishu whispered in his monotone, "There."

I looked at where he was pointing. There, on the stone wall of the mansion just above the current water level, was the top of an arched grate. The water mark on the side of the wall showed that it normally was completely covered, but now about six inches could be seen. Iron bars were welded to the top edge of the arch and descended into the water. We made our way over and Shishu's head disappeared again.

He emerged on the other side of the grate, looking as if he were in jail.

"The bars only go halfway. You can walk under them. The stone on this side is slippery. Be careful."

One by one, we made our way under the iron grate and into the pitch-black tunnel on the other side. It was obvious that this tunnel was usually full to the top with water and it was impossible to see. Fwik stepped in front and unwrapped the cloth covering his face so that a little bit of his shining blue skin could light our path. In the walls of this tunnel were smaller holes, about a foot in diameter, out of which trickled water constantly. We were in the main outlet shaft of the plumbing.

It was about five minutes of walking up and down shallow slopes and making left and right turns when eventually we came to the foot of a flight of stairs. The stairs descended into the water, and the line on the wall showed us that they were usually covered about halfway. A door sat menacingly at the top. We crept up the stairs and Fwik reached for the handle. Chak stopped him.

“Before we go in, we need to be sure of our plan. Priority one is to find the front door. If we are unable, priority two is to find the garden. The others do not matter if Nicholas does not plant that seed. Anyone we encounter along the way gets taken out as quickly and quietly as possible. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” we all whispered.

Fwik opened the door quietly and discovered a dark and empty hallway. We each slithered through the doorway and closed it behind us before heading left. Plink said confidently that she had kept track of the turns we made and knew about where we were inside the mansion. According to her, at the end of the hallway would be a right turn and the main doorway would then be on the left-hand wall.

We glided down the corridor following Plink’s lead and approached the right turn. In unison we flattened ourselves to the wall with Plink in front. She slowly peered around the corner and then whispered quizzically, “Flye?”

“Plink?” we heard whispered from around the corner. Plink ushered us forward and, to our surprise, we saw the entire group huddled in the middle of the hallway, and Flye was beckoning us forward.

“You made it!” she whispered spiritedly.

My entire group was a little bit dumb-founded. We stood there dripping water in the middle of the hallway with flabbergasted looks on our faces.

Chak was the first one to find his voice. “So... How?”

“Flye guessed the password!” said Brew.

“But, how?”

“I don’t know, it just sort of came to me. Dr. Lee was doing his improvisations to try and get the frog to talk. He was asking him a whole bunch of questions, and buzzing around, and then I had a flash and I blurted out the word that I heard in the flash.”

“What was the password?” I asked.

“froggiesrock2000,” said Flye.

We all stared at her, but she simply looked at us with that wide-eyed innocent expression and nodded.

“So we came in here, closed the door behind us and that’s when you all showed up!” she finished cheerfully. It was clear that Skreech’s unconsciousness left Flye feeling more comfortable.

We congratulated her on a job well done and laughed about the fact that our complicated plan ended up being completely unnecessary. After a joyful but noiseless reunion, we began to reapply ourselves to the task at hand, deciding to stay together for the time being. We headed around the corner from the way my group had just come. It continued for thirty feet after the turn and dead-ended in a large oak door.

Just before it, Flye whispered for us to halt.

“Chak, get me the orb,” she said. She wasn’t messing around with small talk and no one cared.

Chak took the backpack from Thrump, who was glad to only carry the unconscious Skreech, and extracted the Agnoscian Orb. He handed it to Flye, who sunk her hands into the sides and closed her eyes. Moments later she opened them and whispered, “Through the door, and down the hall. There will be lots of doors. Take the third one on the right. It will open to a large room. That’s the center of the complex, we can get anywhere else in the building from there.”

Chak nodded and led the way. The mansion was frighteningly quiet. We encountered no opposition as we made our way down the hall. When the door to the center of the complex opened, we held our breath, but it too was empty.

It was a huge room. The ceiling was sixty feet in the air, and everything was a dark steel blue. It was nicely decorated. There were doors, tables, couches and rugs, and knick-knacks that you might find in anyone’s décor. In the center of the room, a dark blue spiral staircase disappeared into the ceiling and descended through the floor. The room was dimly lit and the details were hard to make out.

Even with all of this, it felt oddly empty. It looked like a lounge where Umbili might gather to socialize, but there was not a single Umbili in sight.

I thought that maybe I simply couldn’t see them, so I whispered to Chak, “Are we alone in here?” He nodded his head.

Our shuffling feet made the only sounds in the room as we turned to look back at Flye who was immersed again in the Agnoscian Orb. There was a sense of urgency and optimism in the group that hadn’t been there before.

But the optimism was short-lived, because that’s when Skreech woke up.

## CHAPTER 26- Where It All Went Wrong

“Intruders! Intruders! To arms! To arms! Opponents of the morning star are here!”

Skreech was screaming. He shouted his name in its original tongue, and we had to cover our ears because of the sound.

Suddenly, there were more Umbili in the room, and I could see them all clearly. Felavis were snarling in every direction, and the battle began.

In the confusion, Thrump had loosened his grip on Skreech, and a well-placed kick made him drop the dude altogether. Skreech scrambled over to Flye under the cover of fire and jumped on his sister. He was strangling her with all his might, and because of her size she had little chance of getting free.

Shishu and Chak had taken defensive stances around me, but I could see through their wall that Flye had dropped the Agnoscian Orb. It rolled out into the middle of the room, but no one was paying it any attention. I felt for the pouch around my neck to check that the seed was still secure. It was.

I looked back at the fight between Skreech and Flye. They were struggling on the ground, and I could see Flye’s eyes beginning to roll back and cloud up. Suddenly, something from the fight in the rest of the room struck Skreech in the back of the head and threw him off balance enough for Flye to catch a breath. Plink had thrown the object. It was her special gun. Flye, still restricted to the ground by Skreech’s weight, reached frantically for the weapon to fight back against her brother. I could see him saying something to her, sneering in her face, but the noise in the room drowned out his words.

Chak moved around me for a moment to throw off a Felavis that was leaping for his head. His dodge was perfectly timed and the creature careened face first into the railing of the spiral staircase.

There were Umbili coming in from every door and opening, and a few seemed to fall straight from the ceiling to get into the room. There were at least thirty there with us.

I maneuvered inside my protective shield enough to see Flye and Skreech again. I saw them just as a bright flash from Plink's weapon caused Skreech's body to go limp. Flye wriggled out from beneath her brother and a group of fighting Umbili moved in between us, blocking my view.

I glanced around the room trying to get a glimpse of the battle. Brew and Plink were fighting back to back around Pathena just as Chak and Shishu were fighting around me. Brew was tangled between a black Umbra and a dade and she looked immobilized. Suddenly, the ground beneath her shook as she attempted to shoot into the air. The opposing Umbra stopped her attempt with his own abilities, but the tremor was enough for Brew to wriggle free. She expertly grabbed the dade on her other side by the rope around her waist and yanked her off her feet, into the Umbra. The rope slipped off in the process.

The two enemies lay in a tangled mess on the floor nearby, and Brew swung the red rope around in the air, wielding it as a new weapon. She glanced over her shoulder at Plink engaged in close combat with a dude almost as big as Thrump. Brew used the rope like a lasso, and tangled up the dude's feet by pulling it tight. It stopped him from moving temporarily. Pathena drew a small dagger out of Brew's milky white robes and brought its point down into the dude's foot. It did almost nothing to him. Since the dagger was already lined up, Brew saw what Pathena was going for and delivered a swift kick into the hilt of the dagger. With Brew's added strength it

sank into the dude's foot and he cried out in pain. His foot was skewered to the ground. Plink fell on her enemy and ended the struggle quickly. Moments later, Plink and Brew straightened up and almost instantly were engaged with new adversaries.

I glanced around and saw Fwik just as he launched into a spectacular move with his whip. He slung it into the air, over Chak's head, and fastened it to a rail on the spiral staircase. He took a running leap and hurled himself around the room, giving flying kicks to several opponents' faces as he did. Just as he was about to come full circle, an enemy Umbra reached up, clearly trying to snag him from the air. Fwik gave a flick of his wrist, the whip released, and he did an impressive backwards flip to land on his feet and barely dodge the Umbra's grasp. He crouched low on the landing and let his arm fly again. His whip extended across the room and connected with the tip of Fwish's whip, which had just been unfurled. The two pulled the line taught and ran in the same direction, sweeping the feet out from under three Umbili and the Umbra who had just tried to grab Fwik.

I saw Thrump covered head to toe in enemies. Every so often, his arms would appear from amidst the massive dog pile and swing around to deliver a series of earth-shattering punches. Fwish and Fwik saw it and rushed over to Thrump's aid. They wove their way in among the opponents and disappeared from sight in the middle of the ball. They were small enough not to be noticed. Then, something was spinning in the middle of the pile.

It took a second to realize what was happening. Fwik and Fwish had attached themselves to the ends of their whips and curled up in perfect little balls, and Thrump had grabbed both whips and was twirling the two siblings around like a bola. Their armored bodies were gaining speed and knocking away the huge crowd of foes. At the last second Thrump let go and the twins

cataapulted across the room. Both of them unwound from their curled up positions in mid air and used their whips to swing themselves into another enemy and engage in another fight.

All of this was happening so quickly that it was hard to keep up and I was amazed at how well our group fought as a team. It appeared as if nothing these enemy Umbili could throw at us was having an effect. Nevertheless, opponents were still coming, and I knew we couldn't hold them off forever.

I took a step backward and tripped over something round. It was the Agnoscian Orb. I dropped to the floor and tried to grab it, but it slipped through my fingers and rolled away toward the spiral staircase. I barely caught sight of it as it teetered on the top of the staircase. If it fell, it would go straight down the stairs and be lost to who knows where.

I reached up and tried to get Chak's attention, but it was no use. He was preoccupied with two Umbili of his own. I made up my mind then to just do it.

I unsheathed my sword, crouched low and left the protective bubble Chak and Shishu were creating for me. A tall and thin dude saw me exit and headed toward me, trying to grab at the pouch containing the seed. He quickly reached toward me, but I was ready for him and dodged to the left, bringing my sword down on his outstretched hand. Surprisingly, it cut clean through his arm, leaving it a bright red stump. I used the momentum of my dodge to dive toward the staircase and onto the Agnoscian Orb. As I fell, I heard someone say my name. It was Chak. He had seen me and followed my dive into the staircase with one of his own.

Oddly, I only touched the stairs once as I plummeted into the stairwell. After that, I was simply falling, but somehow falling upwards. Chak was a little bit below me. And I noticed Pathena a little below Chak. Both of them had dived after me when I went for the orb. They were

following me upward, and the stairs we had just fallen into were below him, but getting smaller by the second.

As I rose, I saw the pouch slip out in front of me, and I flashed back to my bungee jumping at the City of Falling Water. This time, I expertly grabbed the pouch without a second's hesitation. Just as I did, my back slammed in to something hard. Chak slammed up, or down, next to me seconds later, and Pathena a moment after that. I groaned.

"Remind me to thank Glizz for making me bungee jump if I ever see him again," I coughed.

Chak rolled over and moaned back, "Glizz made you go bungee jumping?"

"Yeah. Never mind. Where are we?"

Dazed, I stood up, and gravity suddenly made sense again. We were standing on a sheet of something hard, and it had a thin layer of sand over it. There was a circle of clear blue light on the ground around us. It emanated from a small speck far above us, the hole from which we had fallen.

Chak stood up next to me and dusted himself off. Pathena did the same.

"I don't know, but give me the Agnosian Orb. Maybe I can figure out how to get us where we need to be."

I looked over where the Orb had landed, near the edge of the circle of light. A small trail in the sand indicated that it had rolled a bit upon landing. I walked over and picked it up, then noticed something strange in the sand where it had rolled.

In the imprint that the orb made, I could see ten circles where each finger hole had touched the sand, and I could vaguely make out the battle mural that was etched in its sides, but in particular what stood out was a word.

My name was printed there in the sand.

It was unmistakable. My name, written in beautiful slanted writing, was etched in the sand. It was so surprising that I let out a little gasp.

“What is it?” Pathena asked.

I didn’t know what to say. My mouth was dry. I merely pointed.

She and Chak stood next to me, looking down at the sand. Pathena was the first to notice my name, and she let out a little gasp too.

“Chak, why is my name on this orb?”

“I... I don’t know,” he said genuinely shocked.

“I picked up the orb and searched for my name. There, written backwards in beautiful flowing script, was my name. The writing I had previously mistaken for an ancient Umbili language was in fact my native Greek. It seems strange to say so, but your own language, when written backwards, is almost unrecognizable if you don’t know what you’re looking at.

I then realized that the words spiraled around the ball and I caught bits and pieces of other words I recognized.

“Hold on Chak. Let me try something.”

I dropped to my knees and placed the ball back in the sand with my name pressed into the grain. I rolled it around trying to keep it in line with the text that I could see. Amazingly, a message appeared in the sand. The trail that the orb left also left the perfect indentation of a message, written in Greek, addressed to me. Pathena read it out loud.

“Nicholas,

This poem you’ve heard in part, but now  
you’ll hear it be complete

The first half you have heard just how  
Some blood will soon deplete  
'With blood the time was took by me,  
and blood must be repaid.

The blood of man will grow the tree  
And all his blood be weighed.

For in my garden there must be  
A line of time arrayed  
And there, just one man's sacrifice  
Will see my reign unmade.'

To finish you must understand

Your life is yours to give  
And given freely by one man  
The option not to live  
But also for the seed to grow

It must be stolen too  
So you must pay back what you owe  
A debt is sorely due  
You've reached the point of no return  
But still one thing you lack  
So use this orb, and you'll discern  
How death will bring you back."

“What do you think it means?” I asked them.

“I think it means you’re ready to use that orb,” said Chak, seriously.

“What do you mean? I thought it was dangerous for a human to use an Agnoscian Orb,” I said.

“It’s a powerful thing, but none of us realized that this is *your* orb. Legends and myths float around the Syllogy about Agnoscian Orbs being linked with specific people, but I always thought it was a fairy tale. But here’s the proof, this is your orb! You have to use it! Use it to figure out where the garden is. Maybe something will happen!” Chak was getting more excited as he talked.

“But what if something bad happens?”

“It won’t! Trust me,” he said.

I glanced unconvinced at the sand again and reread the message. Then something struck me. It was written in Greek just for me. I looked at the Agnoscian Orb, then at Chak, then at Pathena, and knelt back down to write in the sand.

“Chak, What was it that the Higher-ups told you would be my greatest strength?”

“Your ignorance,” said Chak quickly, obviously perturbed that I hadn’t yet used the orb.

I reached forward and wrote the word ignorance in the sand, but I wrote it in the language I knew, the language I had grown up with, Greek.

*Agnoia.* One can’t help but see the similarities. Agnoscian Orb, or an orb of ignorance. *My ignorance. My orb.* The Higher-ups had told me from the beginning, but I simply couldn’t see it. This orb would be my greatest strength. It was the key to finding the garden and to planting this seed.

I nodded slowly, picked up the orb, lined my fingers up with the almost imperceptible circles along the edges and took a deep breath.

“My ignorance will light the way,” I whispered the words Chak had told me on my first day in the Syllogy, and then plunged my fingers into the sides of the Orb.

Suddenly the room was full of light. The cold feeling I had experienced at the contest of the Courageous Danes returned to my hands. It was exhilarating. I felt completely aware and in control of my surroundings. I could see in every direction, the floor was lit up, and everything was bright. Slowly it dawned on me that we were inside a crystal jungle.

There were beautiful jewels everywhere. Stunning gems were arranged around us in intricate and delicate plant-like patterns. The plants in this garden were made of crystals.

We had found Mendrax’s garden; we had been standing in the middle of it. We just needed the orb to light the way.

Pathena reached forward and tried to pull a little red crystal leaf off one of the plants. Just as she touched it, the actions all reversed themselves and she was suddenly two steps away just about to reach forward and touch the leaf again. Again she stepped forward and touched the leaf. Again she was back where she had started. Chak reached forward and grabbed her during the third cycle to break the chain.

“It’s best to keep your hands to yourself in a place like this,” he said seriously. Nothing more needed to be said on the subject.

I led the way through the jungle, dodging low-hanging crystal leaves and being careful to step over large jeweled roots that protruded from the ground.

Ahead and on the left there was what looked like a big yellow-gold crystalline willow tree. Long delicate vines hung to the ground. It had the most beautiful looking fruit on its branches, and I felt the urge to investigate.

I walked over to the golden tree; Chak and Pathena followed. I wanted with everything in me to taste the fruit hanging before me. My mouth watered, but as I extracted my hand from the Orb, the room went dark and the tree disappeared. Quickly I re-immersed my hand and the light returned.

“What do you think you’re doing Nick?” said Chak sternly.

“I want to taste this fruit,” I said seriously, almost in a trance.

“Well don’t. Who knows what will happen?” he said.

“Do you know?” I asked.

“No, I don’t. I don’t know why you’re so fixated either.”

“I can’t explain it. I just want to taste it.” I glanced at Pathena. She had the same longing look on her face as I did. She reached out her hand to grab the fruit. Suddenly, against my will, I pulled my own hand out of the orb, plunging us into darkness once again.

“Hey! Why’d you do that?” Pathena yelled into the black.

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to. I had to.”

I had experienced this in The Settlement. The same unconscious movements were controlling me, and I knew we would not be able to taste the fruit on that golden tree. It wouldn’t matter what we did, we would never be able to reach out and touch that beautiful fruit.

With that realization, I turned around and instructed Pathena to do the same. Once done, I put my hand back in the orb and the light returned. We left the tree there, but the longing to taste that golden fruit has never left me.

As we made our way through the garden we encountered other odd little plants, but none so distinct as that golden yellow tree. Then we found what we were looking for.

After fifteen minutes of wandering through the maze of gemstones we were finally standing in front of the object of our quest. Planted before us was a single, sickly, purple tree. It shimmered in the light, and its crystal leaves drooped. I didn't know purple gemstones could look soft and wilted until I saw this tree. I was so mesmerized by it that I extracted my hands from the orb. The room went dark again, except for a single beam of light that illuminated the purple tree. This was it. This was where I needed to plant the seed. I looked at Chak in the light of the tree and in the soft glow that was coming from his body. He started to take off the backpack nodding at me knowingly.

Then, out of nowhere, a loud voice yelled, "Freeze!"

Chak stopped moving.

I looked around, but didn't see anything. The voice spoke again.

"Nicholas Alexander. It's nice to finally meet you. Welcome to my garden."

## CHAPTER 27 – Where It All Went Right

Looking back, I can't believe I had thought it would be so easy. I should have realized that it was planting this seed that Mendrax wanted to stop at all costs, and so he wouldn't allow us to simply walk up and do what we had to do. Not without a fight.

I sank my hands back into the orb and the lights in the garden came back on. Pathena attended to Chak. He was completely frozen. Not moving. Not breathing. Even the light emanating from his body wasn't flickering with life anymore; it was a solid glow.

"He can't see you," said the voice.

"Mendrax?" I said.

"Yes my friend?" he replied.

"Let him go!"

"I'm afraid I can't. You see, Chak here has a bad impression of me and if I let him go, he might do some permanent damage to my beautiful garden," said Mendrax.

Pathena and I looked all around trying to find the source of Mendrax's voice, but it was nowhere to be seen.

"There's no point looking for me," he said. His voice was smooth and calm. It reminded me distinctly of Teleon. It was a warm and comforting voice. There was something about it that made you want to listen to whatever he was saying. It also came from different places around the room. First you would think it was coming from the left, and the next sentence would come from the right.

"I have to say, you've done an excellent job of bringing this seed to me. I couldn't have picked a better person for the task."

"Bringing you the seed? What do you mean?"

“I mean you brought the seed to me, just as I hoped you would.”

“I didn’t bring this seed here for you and you didn’t want me to bring it here!” I shouted.

“I didn’t? How did you make it into my mansion so easily then? Did you notice that no real security was present when you arrived? Why did my Umbili attack only your friends, and never you? I told them not to! I wanted you and that seed here safely, my friend. What did they tell you your mission was? Were you bringing it here to end me? Would planting that seed in my garden finally wipe me off the face of the Syllogy?” he said.

“Yes,” I said firmly, though I wasn’t as confident as I sounded. I had never stopped to think how that would work, or why Mendrax would be killed when the seed was planted. I had simply taken Chak’s word for it when he told me the story. Actually, he had simply taken the Higher-ups’ word for it. I mulled this over.

“I can see the wheels turning. It doesn’t make sense, does it Nicholas?” said the voice.

“Don’t listen to him Nicholas,” said Pathena. “He’s lying, you know that. He’s lying to you!”

“Am I?” it said.

“Pathena, he’s right, it doesn’t make sense. How will planting this seed get rid of him?”

“It will restore the balance of time! You know this! Linear time is dying in the Syllogy, here’s the proof!” She gestured at the purple tree. “But when you plant the seed, it will restore the balance. Linear time will be restored,” I could hear Pathena pleading with me in her voice.

“And what does any of that have to do with me? I didn’t hear you mention my name at all,” said the voice. “How will restoring the balance affect me?”

“You’re the one who poisoned the time, so restoring it necessarily works against your plans!” she shouted.

“But perhaps my plans have changed,” said the voice.

I thought quickly, trying to attack the problem from every angle.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few more questions while you ponder that one Nicholas?”

He didn’t wait for a response, but his voice was so inviting I would have said yes if I wasn’t deep in thought. “Why do you trust the Higher-ups so unflinchingly? What have they done that makes them worth trusting more than me? What makes them right and me wrong? How do you now they are good and I’m bad? Mightn’t you have been working for the wrong side this whole time?” he said.

I thought a moment. He continued.

“Remember what Chak told you. I have powers that Umbili don’t even know about. Perhaps we could work out an arrangement. Perhaps once you plant the seed, you could join my ranks?”

“Try again,” I hissed. “I’m not on your side, and I’ll never be on your side.”

“You’ll die for the Higher-ups? You don’t even know why they brought you here, why they chose you. Plain little Nicholas. But if you were to pledge allegiance to me, we could help each other afterward.”

“I’ll be dead afterward,” I said tersely.

“You don’t have to be,” he whispered.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean that I can bring you back after you’ve set me free. I can save you. All you have to do is follow me!” he said.

“I’ll never follow you,” I said.

There was a beat. Mendrax was losing his cool collected tone. “But why? You said it yourself, it doesn’t make sense! Why will you follow them but not me?”

Again, I thought a moment. Mendrax let me. Slowly I responded.

“All of the reasons piled in my head can possibly be refuted except one. I’ve seen the love of their followers. The Umbili who brought me here are reason enough for me to follow the one that they follow. If the Higher-ups have people like that on their side, I want to be on the Higher-ups’s side too.”

I could almost hear Mendrax’s disembodied voice squirm when I talked about love.

“You realize that you’re in quite a quandary here Nicholas. You see, both the Higher-ups and myself want the same thing. We want you to plant the seed, following them, then, is also following me. We’re on the same side in this equation.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“While it will indeed restore the balance of time to the Syllogy,” the voice continued, cooling once again, “it will also free me from this prison. You see my friend in order for the higher-ups to trap me here, they took my body away from me. Without a body, an Umbili soul is trapped in the last place that it had a body, which for me would be here in this garden. But I liked having a body, you see. All of the pleasures of flesh were denied me when I was robbed of a body! Whatever could I do? That’s when I realized how I could get it back. Poison time! Time is only necessary for Umbili who have bodies to inhabit it. By poisoning time, I struck a deal with the Higher-ups. The prophecy was made, and as soon as some lucky human came to restore the balance, I would be restored my body as well. I would be free to roam again! You see, I held the Syllogy at ransom in order to make the Higher-ups work against themselves. Glorious isn’t it?”

“Why are you telling me all this? What’s to stop me from leaving now? Won’t it spoil your plans?” I said.

“I don’t have to worry about that,” said the voice, he seemed to be abandoning his attempt to gain my favor. “The Higher-ups want you to do this as well. They know there’s no other way to save the Syllogy. It’s the lesser of two evils in their minds. Release me, or lose the Syllogy, which would you choose?”

I don’t want to choose either. “What if I choose not to choose?” I said defiantly. Pathena looked worried at this.

We’re past that point Nicholas. Remember the prophecy? *To finish you must understand your life is yours to give, and given freely by one man, the option not to live. But also for the seed to grow it must be stolen too. So you must pay back what you owe, a debt is sorely due.* You’ve already done the given freely part by showing up here. Now it’s time to do the stealing part.”

There was a loud bang and Chak was suddenly sprinting toward me with a sword in his hand. Mendrax was trying to force him to kill me. Instinctively I turned my back and braced for pierce of his sword. The pierce never came. I felt my fingers slip from the agnoscian orb, but the lights didn’t go out. I opened my eyes and saw Teleon, standing in front of me, his clear and calming eyes fixed on Chak, who had once again frozen. In fact, the whole room had frozen, just as it had done in the theater in The Settlement. Pathena’s mouth was open in a scream, but no sound was coming out. Chak’s eyes were filled with rage and he was mid-stride toward me. Teleon and I were the only ones alive at the moment.

“Nicholas, if you’re going to plant that seed, now is the time to do it,” he said smoothly.

“What?” I asked, the sudden stillness in the room catching me off guard.

"I know you, Nicholas. I know that you have resolved time and time again on this journey to do whatever was necessary to save the Syllogy. You must do so once more." Tears began to fill my eyes.

"But Teleon. I don't want to," I glanced over at Pathena. "What about her? I can't leave her like she left me. And once Mendrax has his body back, who will protect her from him?"

"That's not your concern Nicholas. You have a job to do. It's the job you were chosen for. It's the job you must do. You need to plant the seed to save the Syllogy and Pathena with it."

I started to move toward the tree. But stopped again and looked at Teleon.

"There must be another way. There must be a way to save everyone."

"Someone's got to pay the price Nicholas. That's always been the case. If it's going to be you, now's the time."

I knelt down and buried the seed in the shallow sand available to me, then drew my sword from its sheath. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then took another. Tears were streaming down my face now. I had to do this. I had to make the sacrifice. I had to do what was right! I knew Teleon was right. I trusted him. I trusted him to take care of Pathena. I trusted that this is what needed to be done.

The blade was still held high above my head. I wanted to do what was right.

For only a moment, I held my breath and I joined the absolutely silent and still tableau that Teleon had created around us. Silence.

"I can't!" I yelled. "I can't do it. I know I need to. I'm sorry, I just can't." I lost all control at this point. The tears obscured my vision entirely, and I dropped my sword on the ground. I leaned forward sobbing, my arms wrapped around my waist, and wept bitterly into the

ground. The sand rubbed on my cheek as I writhed. My insides were coming apart. My head throbbed. My heart pounded.

"I just can't do it! There's got to be another way!" I screamed into the sand.

I felt a firm set of hands grab my shoulders and pull me onto my feet. Teleon spun me around and faced me toward him. He still had his eyes on Chak, but he was talking to me.

"There is. Don't you remember what I told you? *There's only one thing that will work. There's only one way that seed can be planted in Mendrax's garden.* I knew you couldn't do it. I just had to make sure you knew it too," he said, and a melancholy smile spread across his face; He was still looking at Chak though. "Do you trust me?"

With these words his eyes locked onto mine. My vision was still blurred, but I could see the pain and the joy mingled in his piercing eyes.

Then I heard Pathena screaming.

I felt a hard shove away from Teleon. He had pushed me out of the path of Chak's charging frame. I rolled over just in time to see Chak drive his sword into Teleon's belly.

Teleon dropped to the ground and clutched his stomach. The blood poured out of his wound and began to pool on the ground where I had planted the seed. I could hear him breathing heavily, and a ringing filled my ears. I could hear Mendrax screaming in protest, almost agony, but it was muffled and quiet. I heard Chak drop the sword and saw him fall to his knees, but it was blurry from the tears. Chak was clutching Teleon trying to stop the bleeding, obviously in control of himself again.

I heard Teleon whisper something to Chak, but I couldn't make it out because of the ringing in my ears and the shrieks of Mendrax. One thing I did hear clearly was a last long breath from Teleon's mouth.

I remember that breath, because as he exhaled everything went silent and dark for exactly one moment. I don't know how long a moment actually is, but I know that this moment – when silence came and darkness fell – was the most painful moment of my life, and it felt like it would last for all eternity.

Then something exploded. Two things were happening at the same time.

One was a huge purple tree rocketing out of the ground. It shot into the air, twenty, thirty, forty feet high; it just kept climbing until its canopy was out of sight. The ground was rumbling, and there was a blaze of purple light in every direction. It scattered through the other plants in the room reflecting off of their gems. It knocked Pathena off balance and she fell to the ground next to me.

The other thing happening was something growing out of the sand just next to the new tree. The form of a man emerged and materialized. It was a large man, with proportions like Thrump, but taller and more muscular. First his feet, then his legs, then his torso built themselves together with a purple light. I realized it was not a man, but an Umbili. His skin was the exact same quality as the purple tree growing next to him; it was almost crystalline, more like glass than lightning like the other Umbili I had seen.

His face came into view just as the tree slowed its growth. He was astonishingly beautiful. He gleamed in the light, and he radiated confidence. His very presence was attractive.

There was one thing about him that didn't fit: his eyes. At first glance they were kind and helpful, mesmerizing. But when you looked at them closely, they were unsettlingly empty. It was as if a beautiful shawl had been pulled over an endless abyss, a bottomless pit. His eyes were a bottomless pit.

His eyes made it perfectly clear to me who this was. This was Mendrax in bodily form. This was the Umbili who had sneaked into the forbidden realms of time and gained knowledge beyond his grasp. This was the dude who had tried to take control of the Syllogy but went mad with the power he gained. Teleon's death had worked. It had given back a body to Mendrax.

Mendrax drew in a long breath, and the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees. He smiled at me sinisterly. I was still lying on my back, too afraid to move.

"Now then, Nicholas. What are we going to do with you?"

He held up a glassy arm and formed his hand as if he were choking someone. Nothing else happened.

Mendrax was distracted momentarily, and he looked at his hand. He reached forward again as if to strangle an imaginary someone in front of him. Chak stood up, glaring at Mendrax. Teleon's body lay limp at his feet.

"What's wrong Mendrax? Feeling a little powerless?" Chak said half taunting and half enraged by what he had just been forced to do.

Mendrax raised a finger to his temple and narrowed his eyes on Chak.

"You can't read my mind anymore. You also can't speak to me with yours if that's what you were trying to do. You see Teleon's death did something you hadn't counted on. He was both a man and a Higher-up. Sure it gave you back your body, but it took away all those Higher-up powers you once had. No more special treatment Mendrax. You're just like the rest of us now."

Mendrax looked frightened for only a second. He clearly had not anticipated the loss of his Higher-up-like powers, though he knew that Teleon's death instead of Nicholas's would have to have some effect. He quickly regained his composure and strolled forward.

"Then I'll just have to kill you all the old-fashioned way then regain them just as I did before," he said smoothly.

There wasn't a moment's hesitation after these words, then Mendrax lunged forward at Chak. They were instantly engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand battle. No weapons, no tricks, only skill in the fight.

Chak was ready for Mendrax's advance. He deflected the first three of Mendrax's blows and delivered two of his own. Not a single punch was landed for the first thirty seconds of the fight. In that time I had grabbed Pathena's hand and the Agnoscian Orb and pulled them both behind a nearby shrub of gems. I didn't know all of what the orb was capable of, but I thought of something to try. We were partially hidden from the fight, but could still see everything clearly, so I sunk my hands into the orb again, I was getting comfortable with the cold sensation now, and focused on Mendrax. I willed with all my might that he would freeze. It worked pretty well. He was in mid back swing with a closed fist when he obviously met with unseen resistance. It was just for a second, but it was long enough for Chak to land a punch to Mendrax's gut. I heard a crunching sound at the impact. Chak had cracked the glass-like body of his foe. There was a small spider web of flaws in Mendrax's once perfect skin.

He staggered backward, but wasn't knocked off his feet. He used the backward momentum to his advantage and did an impressive handspring to get away from Chak's next kick. They squared back up to each other. Chak was obviously invigorated by landing the first blow.

Mendrax feinted to his left and Chak took the bait. Quickly pulling out of the fade, Mendrax dug his right shoulder into Chak's path and caught the side of his cheek. Just as Chak was reaching up in reaction to the hit, Mendrax grabbed his wrist and wrenched it behind his

back. Chak let out a gasp of pain, clearly caught off guard by this move. I tried again to interfere but it was no use. Mendrax was determined this time. He lifted Chak up off his feet and slammed him, back first, into the ground. Chak let out a loud cough and moan. The moan was just enough punctuation to make Mendrax laugh with superiority.

Chak took that opportunity to spin his legs into Mendrax's bringing him to the ground as well. This time it was Chak's turn to twist around Mendrax's arm, and a flurry of spindly cracks raced their way into Mendrax's shoulder. Chak glanced around and saw what he was looking for. He pushed Mendrax hard into a red bush. The effect was exactly what Chak wanted. Instantly, Mendrax's fall reversed itself and he fell quickly upward into Chak's outstretched fist. Chak used this impressive blow to knock Mendrax into a blue plant just next to the red. His body slowed down quickly, and I could see the look of pain and concentration mingled on Mendrax's face as he fought the effects of the time plants. He was on his hands and knees now, about to stand up, when Chak brought both arms down onto his back. Mendrax collapsed and I saw fine glass dust exit his mouth.

Chak looked around for Pathena and me, and as he did Mendrax staggered back to his feet. Chak saw it out of the corner of his eye and let loose a roundhouse kick, but Mendrax was ready and caught Chak's foot. He threw it back the direction it had come from, and Chak was off balance and backwards. Mendrax rushed forward in that moment and tackled Chak from behind.

They were now a tangled ball and neither ever had a chance to get back on their feet. They were falling all over each other, landing punches and kicks, when they rolled into a blue tree. The slowing effect was enough for Mendrax to get the upper hand, having experienced it moments earlier. He escaped from the plant just quickly enough to put Chak in a chokehold. I tried desperately to get him loose with the orb, but Mendrax's mind was set. I switched tactics. I

focused on Chak and tried to force him into pressing on a small cluster of cracks nestled at the base of Mendrax's neck. Amazingly, it worked. Chak managed to get one finger pressed firmly into the cluster, and the crunch of fracturing glass boomed in the air. Mendrax howled in pain and let him loose. I relaxed my focus and Chak regained control.

They both scrambled to their feet and squared off again. They each had injuries and sides they were favoring, but looked tough all the same.

Abruptly, Chak started forward and Mendrax extended a strong left hook into his jaw. Chak spun around and landed face down on the ground. He wasn't moving, and his light wasn't flickering. The fight was over. I couldn't believe what had just happened.

Mendrax let out a little laugh of contempt and spit on Chak's back. He turned toward me. He was walking slowly, and dancing as he did. He obviously got a rush of pleasure from defeating Chak. He shook his head from side to side, and it tilted as he did. The effect was quite unnerving.

I glanced to my side and saw that Pathena had gone. I wanted to look for her, but I was focusing on Mendrax, trying to slow his motion toward me.

It then occurred to me to try and use the orb on the objects in the room. What if this orb gave me the power to control things the way Plink had suggested all humans could?

I looked at the blue tree that Chak and Mendrax had just been caught in. I tried with all my might to rip the crystal leaves off of the tree and cover Mendrax's body with them.

I couldn't believe it. It worked.

I couldn't believe it so much that I stopped focusing on them and they fell from Mendrax, freeing him from their slowing effects. He lurched toward me, but I regained my focus quickly enough to freeze him in mid reach. He was strong, and was fighting against the power of the time

leaves, so I imagined a strong wind kicking up just in front of him. The sand on the ground blew around him and created a tight cloud. It gave me enough time to relocate out of his nearing grasp.

He was gaining speed now, so I quickly mind-grabbed a red shrub and ripped it from the ground, roots and all. I imagined it flying onto Mendrax's head, and it obeyed my thoughts effortlessly. Mendrax instantly reversed his course, all the way to where he had finished off Chak. That was when I realized where Pathena had gone. She was waiting for Mendrax by Chak's body, and she had my sword in her hand. Just as Mendrax finished his reversal, she plunged the sword with all her might into the cluster of cracks Chak had agitated earlier.

It was the only place on Mendrax's body weak enough to yield to the blade. Pathena drove the sword downward into Mendrax's chest, and a symphony of shatters met our ears. Mendrax was screaming, howling in pain, and the same bright purple light as the tree was pouring out of him.

When that light hit me, its brightness, combined I think with the effects of the orb, my grief over Teleon and Chak, my relief at the sureness of Mendrax's defeat, and the general exhaustion from the whole adventure hit me all at once, and my mind faded out of focus. I went limp and collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

## CHAPTER 28 – The Higher-up

Though I was not conscious of the mansion, and the garden, and Mendrax's untimely death, I was not without consciousness completely.

I found myself, inexplicably, standing in a white room. I was dressed in the white tunic of an Umbili and a white rope was tied around my waist.

Opposite me, there were only three other things in the room. One was Teleon, next to him a ball of light that looked like the sun, and next to it was what looked like an Umbra, but transparent. This Umbra was not opaque like Brew and Shishu, and it didn't have hands or feet. It simply floated in the air next to the ball of light.

Instinctively I sank to my knees. The thought had passed through my head that these were the Higher-ups, and an intense fear and excitement coursed through my veins. In that moment, I was aware of nothing other than my insignificance and imperfection when compared to them.

Teleon was suddenly above me, pulling me up by the arm. He stood resolutely between me and the other Higher-ups.

“It’s alright Nicholas, don’t be afraid. It’s time to talk like you wanted to!”

I hesitantly rose to my feet, still keeping my eyes down.

“Really Nicholas, you are safe in this place.”

I looked at Teleon’s face. He was smiling at me. It was amazing how differently Teleon and Mendrax smiled.

“You died,” I said after a short pause.

“Yes. Yes I did,” he said matter-of-factly. There wasn’t any more to say on the subject.

“So now is when I get to ask all of my questions?”

“Indeed it is,” he responded kindly.

“I can ask you anything?”

“You can ask me anything,” he said.

I thought a moment, and then one obvious question came to mind.

“Where are we?”

“We are in a parallel dimension to the Syllogy. One in which we, the Higher-up, reside.”

“Don’t you mean Higher-ups?” I said.

“No I don’t.” Again, no more questions on the subject were necessary.

“Am I dead?” I asked.

“Far from it. You are having what some people on earth like to call an ‘out of body experience.’ You’re not really here right now, even though you are. You’re back in the forbidden time realm in Mendrax’s basement, lying on your back a little bit unconscious at the moment,” said Teleon.

“But how can we be both here and there and not here all at the same time?”

“The answer to that lies in the fact that time is different here than in the Syllogy, just as it is different in the Syllogy than it is on earth. This is another of the forbidden time realms, one that no one can access except through our power,” said Teleon gesturing behind him toward the other two beings in the room. Yet again there was no need to question him further. I was oddly satisfied with the answer, even though I didn’t understand any of it.

“What’s going to happen to Mendrax?”

“He will be stripped of his physical form and quarantined on earth. We have more to do with him before his final fate,” said Teleon.

“Won’t he hurt people on earth?” I said.

“No more than they’ll hurt themselves, and he’ll help in other ways on earth, though he won’t realize it.”

“What ways?”

“He’ll make people realize what you realized on the beach of Troy.”

“Oh,” I said, befuddled, but not wanting to look like I misunderstood. “So there’s still more to do on earth.”

“Definitely,” said Teleon. “But you shouldn’t worry yourself with that yet.”

I was overcome by grief again, and I could feel tears knotting up in my throat, about to burst forward. “Teleon, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t plant the seed.”

He gave me a hug that warmed me from the inside outward.

“All is forgiven Nicholas. You did your job of carrying the seed well... of course, since we’re here and not there you’re also doing your job well and will do your job well.” He smiled at me with a silly little smile.

“Is that cause time is different here?” I asked sarcastically, sniffing.

“You’re catching on!” he said.

“So what happened down there?” I asked.

“You mean what is happening down there, you also mean what will happen down there because it was, will, and is happening right now.”

“For the rest of these questions how about we stick with my perspective of time, the linear kind?” His joke had worked and I was no longer about to cry.

“Fair enough,” said Teleon, smiling even wider. “Well, what happened down there was you planted the seed and it restored the balance of time to the Syllogy. It also released Mendrax from his prison.”

“No, I didn’t plant the seed. You did,” I said, though I knew after I finished it was silly to correct him.

“All the works I have done have been credited to you. No, you weren’t able to plant the seed. But I Am,” he said.

“Okay. So Mendrax was imprisoned down there?” I asked.

“Yes. He wasn’t lying about that part. In fact, he wasn’t lying a whole lot at all down there. Usually the best deceptions consist largely of truth.”

“And the seed set him free.”

“Yes it did, and then my blood stripped him of both his human powers and his Higher-up powers.”

“He had human powers?” I asked.

“Yes he did,” said Teleon.

“What kind of human powers were worth taking?” I asked.

“To put it succinctly, he had to have the human powers in order to gain the Higher-up power. Umbili and Higher-up natures are naturally incompatible. The Umbili nature wasn’t designed with the Higher-up nature in mind, at least, not in the same way that human natures were. He needed to take some humanness in order to take the Higher-upness.”

I nodded, pretending I understood what he was saying.

“So you are dead right now?” I asked. A sudden and great sadness overtook me as I thought back to the image of Chak plunging my sword into Teleon’s belly.

“Yes, I am,” sad Teleon softly. “But I’m also alive right now. My sacrifice was, is, and will be necessary.”

There was a somber moment as a few tears trailed down my face. I didn't know why I was crying. I was standing there with Teleon, alive and in person! But at the same time, I was distinctly aware of Teleon's death, and my own failures. Teleon waited patiently for me to regain my composure. A thought then occurred to me, and that was when my tears turned to anger.

"Why did you bring me here to carry this seed if it wasn't my blood you needed to begin with? Why did you put me through all this? Why didn't you do this all yourself? You're powerful enough to do it aren't you?" I spat at him.

"Of course I Am," he said. He wasn't phased by my anger. "But let me ask you a question: would you rather be back in Athens right now instead of the Syllogy?"

I was taken aback, and thought a moment. "No, I wouldn't."

"Now that it's over, do you wish you had never been involved?" he asked.

"No I don't."

"Looking back, would you have become the better person that you are without having carried that seed in the Syllogy?" he said.

I wanted to contradict him, but I couldn't. He was right. I had been changed for the better because of my experience carrying the seed. "No, I wouldn't have. So my involvement in this escapade was actually about me changing for the better, and not about saving the Syllogy?"

"It was about both! One is a description of the other. Each was the means to the other's end."

I nodded as I considered his statement.

"A third and more important reason could be given as well: it was by these two means and ends that the Higher-up might be fulfilled," he said.

I didn't completely understand his last statement, but again, there seemed no point in arguing. I knew he had to be right.

"So, if you're dead right now, but you're not, where are you?"

"Well, I'm currently making a quick jot into another parallel dimension. I have to chat with the Granju, conquer the Hashcoil and reunite myself with the Duesthongott."

"I don't know what any of that means."

"I know you don't. But you asked, so I told you. Why do you think I answer so few questions directly? It's because you'll never understand the direct answer," he said grinning.

"Are there any other questions?"

"There are always more questions," I said seriously, but also trying to match him with a sly smile.

"How true, but I prefer more answers to more questions. What say we limit it to one more?"

"Alright. I guess the others will keep. How about this for a last question: How do I get out of here?"

"Oh Nicholas, you should know the answer to that already. Don't worry about it!"

I opened my eyes just in time to see Mendrax shatter into a million pieces.

As they fell to the ground, they began to fade from existence, and a soft breeze blew them away.

Slightly overwhelmed by the conversation I had just had, I stood up to assess the situation and wobbled in the process. Pathena was there to stabilize me.

"Nicholas, are you okay?" she asked timidly.

"Yes. Yes I'm fine," I said, though I didn't even convince myself.

“Maybe you should sit down,” she said.

“No, really. I’m fine,” I said, a little more confidently. She backed away and I looked around the room. Chak was still lying on the ground. I glanced at Pathena’s face. I could tell she had recently wiped away tears.

“I thought I had lost all of you,” she said.

I hugged her quickly, and put as much comfort into it as I could.

“Everything’s going to be okay. We just have to—”

Another explosion met our ears. Chak’s body was trembling and rolling around on the floor. His head would whip one way, and his body would whip another. He began to rise into the air, and his light was brighter than I’d ever seen it.

His body stretched in every direction, and then everything shut off and he hit the floor with a thud. He looked very different. His hands were straw-like and spindly. His feet were the same. His white Umbili tunic now had a hood over it, and his pasty white skin contrasted with the glistening crystals all around us.

After a moment, Chak the Umbra sat up and shook his head.

“What just happened?” he asked.

“You died,” I said nonchalantly.

It looked like he was in shock. “I died, and now I’m—” he stopped mid-sentence and looked at his fingers.

“Are you gonna be okay with this?” I said, smiling.

He looked at me tensely for a moment, then a smile peaked through and a faint glimmer touched the corner of his eye. “Yes, I’m going to be fine with this,” he said, flexing his new fingers.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. My tone was the caliber of cool that only Teleon could beat. That's when I remembered. Teleon. I looked over at the base of the tree. His body was still there, as was the pool of his blood.

Chak remembered at the same time I did and was by his side in a flash. Pathena joined him. I walked up slowly.

It's hard to describe the anguish that Chak and Pathena were experiencing. They were both crying. These weren't cries of mere sadness; they were moans of despair. Somewhere inside of Chak and Pathena an integral part of who they are ripped open and there was nothing I could do or say to heal the wound. I knew the truth. I knew that Teleon had planned this from the beginning. I knew that in another world, another realm, another dimension, Teleon was alive and well! But Chak and Pathena couldn't know those things, and they didn't know of my own failings that were all part of that plan. Tears of my own began to flow.

The pain that Chak and Pathena were experiencing brought forth a sort of bittersweet pity. If only they knew! If only they knew just how powerful Teleon really is, they wouldn't cry. I cried. I cried not because of my own pain, but because of the pain of those I loved, and because it hurt to be loved so much by Teleon. I wanted to tell them about the white room, but I knew they wouldn't understand. They would just say I was in shock, or hallucinating. The proof was right here. Teleon's body was on the ground, lifeless. Dead.

I gained composure first. "Come on. We have to find the rest of the group. Chak, can you carry Teleon?" I looked into Chak's eyes. There was the veiled Umbra hint were destitution. He sniffed, then took a vast deep breath and said, "It would be an honor."

He hoisted Teleon's limp body over his shoulder and I led us through the garden. I didn't know how I knew, but my body guided us through the crystal plants. Left, right, two more lefts,

up a little hill, right, through two small trees, and we were standing at the base of the spiral staircase. It was the same one we had fallen down to arrive in the garden. I started climbing, but Pathena grabbed my hand on the second step.

“Nicholas, we can’t climb those stairs. Look up! It could be more than a hundred stories!” she said.

“Trust me.” I started up and counted the steps as I did. It only took twelve to reach the blue room again. None of us knew why, but that’s how it happened.

As we ascended into the blue room, I saw the rest of the group. They were sitting quietly in a few of the couches that made up the décor of the room. Much of the furniture was overturned, there were broken pieces of glass on the floor, and in one corner was a pile of bodies that had obviously been collected from the battle.

I did a quick head-count and realized why everyone was so somber.

“Where are Thrump, Flye, and Fwish?” I asked.

Everyone looked at me and I saw evidence of tears in many of the eyes in the room.

“Nicholas?” said Plink incredulously. “You’re alive?”

I felt around my own body and face comically. “I am?” I said. Then miming realization, “I am!”

Everyone laughed and came to give me a hug in turn. Dr. Lee, whom I hadn’t seen since making it into the mansion, flew in front of me, buzzing excitedly.

“Nicholas, you must relate to us the nature of your excursion!” he said.

“I will Doc, I will, but, where are Thrump, Flye and Fwish?” I repeated. The sickening realization that they hadn’t made it through the fight hit me.

“Oh, they are examining the outer corridors searching for the most effectual course of departure.”

“Translation?” I asked Plink worried.

“They’re looking for the best exit,” she said. A wave of relief hit me. They were alive! She continued, “It turns out that this mansion has a bit of a scrambling mechanism that makes it hard to navigate.”

“Teleon?” I heard the question come from the back of the group, fear and trembling drenching the word. Chak had just emerged through the hole, and Brew had seen whom he was carrying. The rest of the group saw it too, and an even quieter silence than the one I had just broken entered the room.

“What happened?” Shishu asked, finally.

“I have to tell you everything from the beginning. Why don’t we all sit down while we wait for the other three to come back and I’ll tell you what’s happened since we separated,” I said as calmly as I could. There were already tears flowing in the room, but the group had enough composure to agree. They pulled some of the furniture into a circle and I started telling them everything that had happened.

I told them of how I had witnessed Flye’s struggle with her brother, and Skreech’s ultimate demise. They nodded, indicating that Flye had already told them about her fight. They all agreed that she was coping with Screech’s death well, given the circumstances. I explained how I fell into the garden and Chak and Pathena went after me.

Just as I reached the part about the golden tree, Thrump, Flye, and Fwish appeared in the doorway. Flye saw me first and ran forward grabbing me up in a huge hug. I was surprised by the amount of strength she had in her little body.

"I knew you'd find a way," she said.

"Oh really?" I asked.

"I had a flash of myself hugging you when we first entered this room. It was faint, but enough," she said.

Fwish ran up and taught me how to high-five, then proceeded to *teach* me what "down-low-too-slow" was.

Thrump, however, had caught sight of Teleon's body, and he was staring at it silently. Fwik and Flye sensed the tone in the room and soon came to the same realization. I told them that I was in the middle of explaining what happened. They quietly joined the group and listened patiently. Flye was holding on to Teleon's limp hand throughout the whole story.

I came to the part where Teleon had frozen the whole room and didn't know how to continue. How could I tell this whole group that I hadn't been able to water the seed? How could I tell them that it was my failure that caused Teleon's death? In the end, I didn't tell them everything. I told them that I tried to water the seed, but couldn't, and that Teleon had knocked me out of Chak's way and sacrificed himself. It was awkward, but they didn't seem to notice. Then I told them how I had passed out and was about to tell them about my experience in the white room, but something stopped me. I didn't actually hear a voice, but I got the clear impression that my conversation with Teleon was not to be shared. I finished the story by telling them of Chak's transformation into an Umbra and then climbing up the spiral staircase to find them all sitting there, crying.

"That's because we thought you all were dead," said Brew. "We were continuing the battle, when all of the remaining Umbili sort of blew away. It must have been the same time that Mendrax shattered and blew away. We assumed it meant you had successfully planted the seed,

but we also thought that meant the three of you were lost. Thrump took charge and sat us all down to talk about what to do. That's when we decided to send them out to find an exit, and the rest of us waited here."

"I see," I said quietly. Another awkward silence penetrated the group, punctuated only by the sniffs of those still in tears.

Plink broke the silence this time.

"I suppose we should bury the bodies of our fallen comrade, and our fallen enemies," she said. Her voice was stony, but also regal. There was power behind her words.

There wasn't a need for discussion. I helped Flye carry her brother and between the rest of the group we managed to get all of the dead outside, led by Thrump who had found the best exit. The huge tree frog and the ostrogles were nowhere to be seen as we left the mansion. It was apparent that after Mendrax was gone they knew it and had followed suit.

It was well into the morning by that time, and the sunlight was warm and soft on our skin. We decided to dig each of the fallen an individual grave, attempting to show as much respect as possible to our enemies as well as our friends. Dr. Lee recognized a few of the dead Umbili from his time in Mendrax's mansion and I recognized the leader of the group of Umbili who had cornered us at the river. Flye said a few words about her brother, and Brew said some touching words forgiving those who had kidnapped her.

While Flye said her goodbyes to her brother, a thought occurred to me, which I whispered to Plink, "Why don't all Umbili become Umbra when they die? It happened to Chak and Brew, but why not Skreech or these other enemies?"

“An Umbili only becomes an Umbra when he dies a death of honor before the Higher-ups, and the Higher-ups are the ones who transform Umbili into Umbra. It’s a very supernatural procedure,” she whispered back.

We buried Teleon last. No one knew what to say when we had finally covered him with earth. Thrump had placed a simple white stone at the head of his grave, but there was nothing written on it.

We sat in meek silence for what seemed like hours. Again, I was at a loss for how to feel. I knew that everyone in the group was in deep pain over Teleon’s loss, but I was also at peace with it. I knew, from my experience in the white room, that this was Teleon’s plan.

After an eternity, Fwik started singing. This time it wasn’t a chant or a string of rhyming lines, it was a real Umbili song. It started out soft and low. A single note pulsed and filled the air. A whistle joined the pulsing note, and flitted around it, like a songbird looking for a place to land. When it did land, the note and the whistle combined and complimented each other. Fwish joined in and so did Plink. Finally a full choir of creation was dancing in the music. Every Umbili emotion, every human thought, and every created thing had a place in this song.

When the chorus finally faded and Fwik’s low pulsing note was all that remained, my throat was dry and quaking. I had just enough strength in it to utter the words, “Goodbye our true morning star, we hope your light strengthens the sun and guides us home well.”

## Chapter 29 – Fond Farewells

Afterward we went back to the trees we had camped at the night before. There was a clear and present void in the group as we set up camp. It was strange that the void was so tangible, especially considering that Teleon had never spent much time with the group. We had only known him personally for a few days, but his absence was now the defining characteristic of our team.

We all knew there was a chance of death. Our Umbili and Umbra had fully expected some of them to die on this adventure. However, no one thought this about Teleon. He was a Higher-up. He wasn't supposed to die. That wasn't according to plan, or at least, not our plan.

Brew prepared a lunch for us and we tried to relax for the rest of the day. There were scattered conversations about nothing in particular, and Fwik and Fwish tried to start a game of "Ouch," but no one wanted to play. The feel of the entire evening was somber fear. What did it mean for the Syllogy now that Teleon was gone?

I thought for most of the night about ways to explain that he wasn't actually gone! The tension inside me was nearly unbearable. I had such a marvelous secret. I knew the truth, but I simply couldn't express it to anyone. How could I explain to them that they didn't need to be sad? How could I remind the team that we had won? None of our success mattered to anyone. Teleon was dead, and that was all that mattered.

After dinner that night, Chak gathered us together in a close huddle.  
"Tomorrow we need to start making our way back home. We must reach a communication spire as quickly as possible to tell the Higher-ups about Teleon's death," he said. His voice was lifeless, and it wasn't just his Umbra transformation making it so. "Everyone get rest tonight. We'll camp here and start back at first light. Understood?"

There was a murmured agreement. How could I shake these Umbili out of it?

Everyone retired to their hammocks restlessly. I knew none of them would sleep well.

Thrump and Shishu stayed up as lookouts for the night. I didn't understand why, probably out of habit. Wasn't the danger gone now?

As I slept, I dreamed of the all-white room. It was a dream of feelings. I felt warm and safe and complete. It was a warmth that others simply can't experience. It was safety created just for me. It was completeness that you can't get from anywhere else. I loved that dream. I never wanted to leave it, which made me all the angrier when it was rudely interrupted by the rumbling of an earthquake.

I opened my eyes, the tent around me was shaking and Chak was trying to get out of his hammock. I rolled onto the ground and crawled toward the tent flap. As I pulled it open I could see the early morning light, not yet light enough to call it truly morning, but light enough that it was no longer night. Strangely though, the light continued to grow. The light was coming up over the horizon. I watched as the rumbling quieted and the light moved higher and higher over the horizon, and then I realized, it wasn't going higher above the horizon it was coming toward us away from the horizon. The source of the light was walking toward us. It was filling up the morning sky just as if the sun was rising, but it was walking along the ground. Not walking, strolling.

I finally put two and two together. Thrump and Shishu were huddled together by the fire, taking a timid battle stance. I ran up behind them and shouted, "Don't worry! It's him! He's back!"

They looked around at me incredulous then looked back at the shining man strolling toward the camp. The rest of the group crept over to us from their tents. None of them would let

themselves believe it. They were all in shock. I burst through their ranks and ran to meet Teleon. I threw my arms around him in a huge hug, but he whispered to me, "Nicholas you must not cling to me," in a serious but loving tone. I immediately let go and apologized. I was so excited that I didn't know whether to walk with him to the group or run back ahead. I decided on the latter, shouting the whole way, "He's back! He's back!!"

The group was still dumbstruck and most of them were crying yet again. I wondered how they had the moisture left in their bodies. When Teleon finally reached us, he smiled and said casually, "Why the long faces?"

I was the only one who laughed. Everyone else was still unsure of how to handle themselves.

"Don't be afraid. I'm here," said Teleon, calmly. His voice had the effect of a warm drink. It flooded through everyone and relaxed them instantly.

"How did this... I mean of course... how did you..." It was the first time I had seen Dr. Lee at a loss for words.

"The Higher-up has brought me back. But there is no need to fret over those sorts of worries. For now, let's celebrate. Let's spend time together before I have to leave again!"

We did exactly that. For the next few days we simply enjoyed the time we had. I got to introduce Teleon to the Courageous Danes, and when he petted Jobin he looked exactly like a dog for the first time. His leg started pumping and his tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth. He apologized for this later.

As we made our way back to the river and trekked up stream, the going was easy. We shared stories and reminisced about the adventure we had all shared. I remember one conversation in particular I had with Pathena as we were setting up camp back at the spire on the

river. Only a week and a half earlier, Brew and Plink had been captured on this spot, the Agnosian Orb had been stolen, I hadn't known Pathena was even alive, or who Teleon was. It was on this very spot that Teleon had first given us those words of encouragement from the Higher-up. So much had changed in so short a time, but it seemed like a lifetime ago.

"What do you think that tree was for?" I asked out of the blue.

"What tree?" she asked.

"That golden tree back in Mendrax's garden. What do you think it was for?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Well, all those plants were supposed to be time plants right? Cyclical, stagnant, and linear, or whatever they were, those were the three colors of plant. The red was cyclical, the blue was stagnant and the purple was linear. But that tree wasn't any of those colors or any mix of those colors. I really wanted to eat that fruit. I still do. Just thinking about it makes my mouth water."

"I know what you mean. I feel the same way. It was mesmerizing. Everything in me wants to taste that fruit. I'm still a little upset you made us leave. We'll never get that opportunity again, you know. Why did you stop me?" Pathena said.

"I couldn't help it. My body just kind of took over. I think it was Teleon," I said. I was actually quite sure it was Teleon. Now I wished I had asked him about this when we were in the white room.

"Well, it probably doesn't help to dwell on that now. It's too late and we have to put it behind us," she said.

"I guess you're right, but I don't know if I can," I said distantly. I was imagining biting into the skin of that golden fruit.

Teleon broke my thoughts as he called the group together to speak. Evidently the camp was set-up for the night. He spoke in a tone that I now thought was foreign to him. It was more formal and authoritative than our past few conversations had been. It reminded me of the messages he gave to us at the river when we had first met him face to face.

“Dear, dear Umbili and Umbra,” he started. Doctor Lee cleared his throat. “And beetle,” Teleon added. “You have done well. You are much loved. I know that this experience has changed you all, and all for the better I’m sure. I want you to think back on a rousing speech that Dr. Lee once gave you, trying to inspire you to action. He said that you would be remembered. He was right. You have completed the journey and you will be remembered for it. Not as the eight great warriors of the Syllogy, as the good Doctor suggested, but instead as The Host of the Higher-up, the assembly of beings, Umbili, Umbra, Beetle, and Humans, who fought bravely for what was right. The host that was willing to give their lives to restore the balance of time to the Syllogy, and who were unflinchingly devoted to the truth. And Doctor Lee was right about one other thing: your story will be told until the end of time itself.”

Teleon finished his little speech and gave us the salute we had all learned, covering first his eye, then his ear, and then tapping his chest twice. We all reciprocated. Just as we finished, a bright flash came from the top of the spire. It blinded us all for a moment and we were all left blinking the beach back into view. There was a stunned silence as we realized that Teleon was gone. It was hard to believe. He came and left so quickly, but none of us were yet used to it. There was a bittersweet feeling amongst us, but different than when the group was mourning. Now there was hope mixed in with it. We were no longer in despair at having lost our leader, merely sad at having to say goodbye to a good friend, but knowing that we would see each other again.

Fwik was the first one to speak up, “So does anyone else think our group name is kinda lame?” We all laughed and talked about other possible names, but in the end we agreed that the name Teleon had given us should stay. The Host of the Higher-up. It grew on us over time.

I could go on to recount our return journey to the Syllogy, but there is little point. The only remotely exciting thing that occurred as we made our way back to the City of the Syllogy was the encounter we had with a few stray Felavis that had to be put down.

We stopped back off at the City of Falling Water to celebrate the successful completion of our mission and we convinced Flye to go bungee jumping while we were there. We also had a lot of fun educating Pathena on some of the things she hadn’t seen or heard about since she lived inside The Settlement. I got to be on the instructing side about the quirks of the Syllogy for a change.

Eventually, I think it took about two weeks, we made it back to the archway of blue goo. That’s when Chak sprang the last of his surprises on me.

“This is where we part ways,” he said solemnly.

I was a bit taken aback. “What do you mean? We’re all going back to Brew’s house to unpack aren’t we?”

“We are, but you and Pathena aren’t,” he said.

“What? What do you mean?”

“You’re going back to earth,” he said. I could hear him getting choked up as he did. “That’s always been the plan. When you go back through this doorway, you’ll be back on earth. I think you’re going back to your own time period.”

“But... but we can’t! We can’t possibly go back to earth, not after what we’ve done here! That’s where Mendrax is!”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

My mind was buzzing already. “Nothing” I said quickly.

He laughed quietly and looked down at his feet spindly.

“You wanna say your goodbyes?” he asked softly.

“I guess I don’t have a choice about this do I?” I said.

He shook his head.

“Then of course I want to say my goodbyes,” I said.

I looked around and realized that the whole group was lined up just as they had been when I had first met them on this very ledge a month before.

“Shishu,” I started, but he cut me off.

“There is no need for emotional goodbyes Nicholas. We’ll meet again if the Higher-ups so deem it,” he said. He was speaking in the driest monotone I had yet heard from him, and I could tell he was putting the voice on to disguise his real feelings. I smiled at him and nodded, not wanting to make him feel more uncomfortable.

“Plink,” I said, giving her a hug, “thanks for the talks, and for saving my life and all. You take care of Shishu okay? I think he’s a little more emotional than he lets on.” She nodded and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I blushed.

“Hey, cut that mushy gushy stuff out when you get over here!” shouted Fwish.

“Yeah we don’t want a kiss Nicky boy,” said Fwik.

“I suppose you don’t do you. Any last advice for me?” I asked.

“Yeah. When you get back to earth, you gotta try the cling wrap on the door frame bit.

It’s hilarious.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

I moved down the line to Flye.

“Listen,” I started.

“He told me that I was the worthless part of the group. He told me the others didn’t care about me and that I’d be the first one they’d sacrifice if they had to,” she said.

I was slightly stunned.

She continued, “You were going to ask me what Skreech whispered to me before I killed him. Foresight, remember? Anyway, that’s what he said.”

“You know that’s not true, right? You know, I couldn’t have done any of it without you?” I asked.

She smiled at me. “I think you could’ve, it just would have taken a lot longer.”

I gave her a hug and kissed her on the cheek, then stepped down the line to Thrumpt.

“Thanks for grabbing me before we fell off the waterfall, and at The Settlement and for fighting that first Felavis, and—”

“I get the point Nicholas. Of course you’re welcome,” he said in his deep comforting voice.

I leaned in, “keep an eye on the twins. They’re gonna get each other killed if you don’t.”

He laughed and gave me another bone-crushing hug.

“Brew,” I said. She looked at me. I squinted at her. She laughed and bowed her head toward me knowingly.

Dr. Lee was buzzing next to her.

“Doc, I think I learned the most from you on this trip,” I said.

“Was there ever any doubt that you would?” he said.

"I think you had the most dramatic change out of anyone here," I said. "Dark to light's a pretty serious switch."

He did a little loop-the-loop of approval then buzzed in my ear, "You stay safe and take good care of Pathena. Settle down and start a family for goodness sake! Someone needs to carry on the family line."

"I think I'll do that. You know, I bet you could come back with me if you wanted. You'd have to watch how much you talked though. Beetles on earth don't normally do that."

"Alas Nicholas, a world where I can neither read nor speak is world I'd rather not inhabit," he said.

"Well, if you get another opportunity, the offer's always there on my end," I said.

"Noted," he buzzed.

Finally it was Chak's turn.

"You know this was all your fault," I said.

"My fault? You're the one who was all reason driven and picked death. What kind of sick-o are you?" he said with another slight grin.

"Well, if my name comes up on another roster for saving the Syllogy, I'd rather be passed up, all due respect."

"I have to ask you something before you go," said Chak.

"Anything."

"I remember being controlled by Mendrax. I remember wanting to kill you, because of him, and I remember running toward you, and you were suddenly gone, and Teleon was there. Mendrax tried to stop me, but it was all too fast. Do you know how that happened?"

Finally, the moment I had been waiting for. I looked at him seriously and in as slow yet flippant a tone as I could said, “Don’t worry about it.”

He tried not to, but smiled in spite of himself.

“Are you ready to start this new purpose of yours?” he asked seriously.

I stopped and thought of the first conversation we had had in Troy.

“I suppose, though I don’t really see how anything has changed. I’m still going to die one day. How has my purpose changed?”

His eyes got very wide. “You don’t know what Teleon’s resurrection means do you?” he asked seriously.

I looked at him, confused. “I guess not.”

“It means there’s life after death for humans. The only Umbili hope for life after death is to become an Umbra, and until a few weeks ago, it was an experience I hoped never to have. But humans...” he trailed off regaining his thoughts. “Humans don’t come back to life, or at least they haven’t ever since Mendrax changed their purpose. Teleon *was* human. He was a Higher-up too, but he was completely human. His returning to life after death means there’s hope for all of you. He began undoing what Mendrax started! There’s a hope for you post-death now. That should definitely change how you live now! You received two new lives from this little adventure: life eternal and life abundant. Oh, and there’s something else. Teleon told me to give it to you.”

He pulled off the backpack and rummaged around extracting the Agnoscian Orb.

“He said it was your orb to begin with, and you get to keep it. It won’t work the same way on earth, but he said it would still be useful.”

He handed the orb to me and I smiled at him.

“I guess that’s something,” I said.

“You bet it is,” he said.

“I’m going to miss this place.”

“I know. But maybe you’ll come back one day, and even if you don’t, the Higher-ups aren’t done with earth yet. Maybe you’ll get to see its purpose fixed too,” he said.

I looked over and saw Pathena finishing up her goodbyes as well.

“I guess it’s time,” I said.

“Yep,” said Chak.

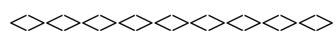
I looked back at everyone and gave them a final farewell salute. They all saluted me back. Then I turned toward the blue archway, grabbed Pathena in my left hand, clutched the Agnoscian Orb in my right, and marched forward into the goo.

The effect of the archway was immediate and I could feel Pathena shiver with joy as she went through it too. The first thing I saw on the other side was my home in Athens. The scene was quite picturesque and I looked at Pathena. She had tears streaming down her face. She said they were sadness and joy, and I understood exactly what she meant.

We settled down that night in Athens and I asked her what she thought would happen if I tried the orb. Curiosity overcame us and I snatched it up and sunk my hands into the sides. Instantly, it split into two perfect halves. The center of the orb was hollow, and contained a handwritten note in a beautiful slanted lettering.

“See you soon and we’ll share a bowl of fruit. Teleon”

Pathena and I looked at each other, mouths watering.



Of course, there is more to this story than what I've told you in these pages, but as I said at the beginning, this is just the account of my first journey outside of this world. There is a really great story involving an old airplane that tells of how I got to your time, and learned your language in the twenty-first century, but that's not important for the moment. What's important is that you understand the point.

The point is that there's more to life than just death if you so choose it. There are people, and beings, and Umbili and Umbra, and creatures that we can't even begin to fathom outside the bounds of this earth, and I've seen some of them. In particular, there's a man named Teleon, who gave me a gift worth sharing. A man I trust more than any other man in any world. A man who came back from the dead, and the hope of doing the same is what keeps me moving throughout the day. A man who promised me that one day we'd share what I imagine is the tastiest piece of fruit anyone will ever eat. I hope one day to introduce you to him.

The End