

ARTIFUL

by

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PART ONE ... The Great MasPiola

CHAPTER 1

Ulysses looked at the arrangement of rocks that sat in the shed. Before he had hauled them there, they had been sitting in a river, the current carving them over the last three hundred years. His grandfather had lovingly placed them in the water, anticipating a need for them as a natural statue. These stones would serve as a central element in a final masterpiece, shaped by intelligent hands.

He looked at them for several minutes before choosing the second from the left. It was half his height, narrow and beautifully misshapen, with a fascinating web of grooves, channels and pores. Yes, this would be the seed of his master work. Of course, the previous sixty sculptures of his one hundred and twenty years of existence started out to be a masterpiece. The spark of imagination ignited the thrill of creativity. The thrill of creativity fueled the hands and

mind to work as one. Sadly, there was always a shortage of it to keep the mind, body and soul working in harmony. All his previous artworks fell short of his inspiration. This time he was sure it would end differently. Creativity, like love, is blind.

He wrapped his arms around the mass and squatted. He knew it would be too heavy to carry, but he wanted to judge its weight. "Huey" he called. He shouted his nephew's name again, but there was no answer. He thought Huey probably heard him. After a minute passed, he became resigned to the fact that the hauling would need to be done at another time. His inspiration would just need to be kept alive until the world caught up with it.

Two days later, the stone was in Ulysses's studio, and he was energized to new heights.

"Faster, Huey" he shouted. "You have to hold that speed until I get all the shells in."

"I know that!" snapped his nephew. The sanctity of master and apprentice relationship had long been overturned by the familiarity of family. "If I pedal faster, this damn machine will fall apart!"

Ulysses said nothing. He was concentrating on pouring in the right combination of shell and earth. He knew his apprentice was right. The contraption he was operating was built by his grandfather, the Great MasPiola. With its wooden gears, sewn bladders, levers and pulleys, it was the pinnacle of the burrow's technology. It had allowed their family to make just the right molding material to create the finest sculptures in all the villages. Ulysses had always lived in the shadow of the Great MasPiola. His grandfather's religious zeal was part of his legend, and gloomily, a part of Ulysses' legacy. He knew his work would never be judged on its own but compared it to the generations before.

Huey webbed feet ached. His body did not meld well with the machine's rhythms. He was, after all, an Oslík. Oslíks are creatures that prefer to paddle on the water than pedal. As far as Oslíks go, both uncle and nephew were physically typical. They had muscular lower legs, and webbed feet like a goose. Soft, downy feathers covered the lower half of their pear-shaped bodies. The upper torso held gently sloping shoulders, long lean arms and amazingly intricate and articulated hands. Their heads, which stood on a pedestal-like neck, were naked except for tufts of feathers. The eyes, which resembled those of a primate, were extremely expressive. Two individual Oslíks could make eye contact with each other across a vast field of a hundred other Oslíks.

Ulysses put a small wooden trowel into the doughy material that was being turned by the machine. He eyed the glob, sniffed it, plied it with his fingers and signaled his nephew to stop. Taking a handful, he expertly applied it to a part of the stone. He manipulated it for some introspective moments and then stepped back to appraise his progress.

"What are you going to call it?" asked Huey.

"Not sure yet" came the quick reply. Both knew that the title would reveal the emotion and feeling the piece was supposed to evoke. They also realized that if you had to tell the viewer what they were supposed to feel, the sculpture was flawed, not the viewer. After a moment of thought, the artist answered. "When I first took it out of the river, it reminded me of a time when I was very young. I had been out paddling and playing in the cold. I had just come indoors when my mother, your grandmother, wrapped me in a blanket and sat me down by the warming box. As I sat there with a steaming mug of *chiolot* in my hands, I felt very happy. I was exhausted from playing all day and all was right with my little world. When I am done with this sculpture, I

want anyone who sees it to instantly have that feeling. That is what I want. Do you have any idea what to call it?"

"That's a tough one. I will have to think about it." He knew it was an ambitious goal, but all Osliks, by nature, have an uncanny ability to communicate visually.

The two worked together in silence for quite a while. Finally, Huey broke the silence by saying "The missionaries want to talk to me." He tried to say it in a matter-of-fact manner, but he knew it was a sore spot with his uncle. Ulysses abruptly stopped working. "The missionaries!" he spat with an exaggerated sarcasm. "The missionaries!" he continued. "They say it is every Oslik's duty to share their gift with the less gifted creatures. What they mean is it is our duty to prove we are superior to all beings, forcing them to see things as we see them. Show me a missionary that can watch and listen, instead of talking and preaching, and I'll show you an ex-missionary. Those pompous fools asked me to join, they asked my father to join and now they are asking you!" He stopped short of saying "They probably hope you are like your grandfather." Ulysses said all of this in one big breath. He opened his mouth and filled his lungs so that he could continue with his outburst. But then, he stopped. In a tiny moment of fore thought, he realized he was reciting his father's time-worn speech, almost word for word.

Silence lingered for a bit before his nephew said "Mom said you would say that. She even mimicked the same speech you just made. She said she had heard it over and over again, a thousand times."

Ulysses sat down, pretending to nonchalantly pick at his tail feathers. "What else did she say?"

Huey walked over to the box of shells and started talking. "Mom says grandfather really believed he was making the world a better place. That's why he was such a large figure in the

Church of Divine Insight. The other creatures couldn't learn from us unless they could see what we created. Our work would enlighten them, maybe even inspire."

"Now it sounds like your mom is reciting the Church's sermons. Go on." said his uncle smirking.

"Maybe she's right. Maybe you're right. I don't know. Hell, I've never talked to another creature that lives on the other side of the world. Maybe they do need our insight, my insight. Who knows, maybe they can teach us something. I'd just like to meet some of them." After a short pause, he continued. "I'm bored here. Olivia started talking about the two of us hatching an egg together. I just want to see the world, have some adventure, before my life is over. The missionaries are the only ones who know about the other side. They use those machines that the College of Madness gives them." He stopped speaking, realizing he had been talking a little too fast, a little too excitedly.

Ulysses massaged his chin with his thumb and forefinger. He waited for a few seconds before addressing his nephew. "You know, I had the same thought when I was your age. But I couldn't listen to that Divine Insight dribble anymore, so I dropped out of the missionary school. Brainwashing was too big a price to pay for a trip to the other side of the world. Huey, this is your decision to make. If it really is your calling, you will succeed. If not, you'll be miserable. Only you can make that call."

The letter that Ulysses would receive a few days later would turn Huey's dream into Ulysses' journey. That letter was from the College of Madness.

CHAPTER 2

The letter was over a month old, but that was not unusual. That it sat by his door for a week, now that was different. Ever since Helena died, Ulysses had hidden in his work. Normally, she would have checked the mail barge daily. He never had to worry about everyday things like that before his wife's death. He did not open the letter at first, although he was dying to read it. His superstitions got the best of him, believing it would contain bad news if he got too excited about its contents. Eventually he opened it. It was from the Studies of Systematic; known as the College of Madness by all except for the institute's members themselves.

It read as follows ...

Dear Ulysses,

It has been a long time since I wrote. I know it has been hard since the passing of your beloved Helena. I had only heard of her passing recently. You have my deepest sympathy for your loss. Your father and I would write regularly throughout the decades, up until the time of his death. We all miss him. You and I can catch up when (if) you come to visit. I hope my news will prompt you to come as soon as possible.

A ceramic tube was found a year ago at the edge of the Great Tar Sea. It has some inscription etched on it, dated about two hundred and fifty years ago. The name on this tube is that of your grandfather, the Great MasPiola! If the Church of Divine Insight finds out, they will put a lot of pressure on me to give it to them. They won't even open it. They will try to make a holy shrine out of it. You are his direct descendant. You can give me permission to see what is inside. Come see for yourself.

Sincerely

Professor Motz

Professor 4 of SofS

And so, Ulysses found himself reclining on his narrow traveling raft, making the three-day journey to the College of Madness. His butt rested at the back edge of the raft, his big, webbed feet gently paddling him through the canal. His belongings were nice and dry, wrapped in the bundle at the front of the little craft. Lying there on his back, he had forgotten how incredibly beautiful and mysterious his world was. It really was an amazing bubble they lived in. High above him was the vast pastel dome, the interior wall of nature's bubble. In the distance, shafts of light streamed through the holes in the shroud above. There were thousands of beams of light, a forest of them. At some places, the soft shroud above twisted to form threads that swayed as they dangled down to the ground. Ulysses marveled at the sheer magnitude of their lengths. They never broke even when the winds were violent. Where these strings touched the ground, there was a luminous glow of liquid. At the edges of the glowing pools grew fantastic colored tentacles of enormous varieties. Some of these had translucent funnels on their tops. Some opened, trying to capture tiny flying creatures that sought the warmth of the pools. Others had spouts that would shoot drops of liquid light, drops that would either pollinate or poison.

Ulysses' world was naturally cut into thousands of canals. The Osliks used this waterway to travel from borough to borough. The College of Madness had been the driving force to look at

this waterway and dig their own canals to make a seamless infrastructure for travel. They even made road signs so you would know where you were going, or if you were lost. His stomach was growling again. He was hungry, but not hungry enough to eat anymore of the fruit that grew at the edge of the canal. He was sick of it. Then, he saw it, a slow steady stream of bubbles rising out of the water. Carefully, he gently let out a net, right above the spot where the bubbles had surfaced. He waited, knowing patience was a skill. Suddenly, a big black sphere shot up out of the water, landed softly and skidded away on top of the water. It headed for the vegetation along the bank. A few seconds later, another squirted up and glided away. For a moment, he thought of moving the net a little to the left. Just as he decided to move it, the net jumped up three feet into the air, a black bubble the size of his head trapped below it. He jerked the strings and had captured it. It fought him as he dragged it onto his raft. The question was, what was inside? If he was lucky, it would be some sweet nectar or gummy *flackal*. Of course, there was always the possibility that it contained a *barrack*. The Great MasPiola himself had caught a *barrack* when he was very young. It had bitten off the top of his little finger. Legend has it that was the first time the Great MasPiola had a divine intervention, an inspiration to show the other creatures of the world the beauty of his creations. Ulysses held the black bubble down, grabbed a sharp stick and slowly tried to deflate it. Nothing jumped out. He drank the juice inside and tossed the empty bag back into the water. He had a sudden urge to gently bite the tip of his pinky finger. Loud laughter came from him as he did so.

The rest of his journey was leisurely, navigating the canal and looking for signs. Occasionally, he would rummage through his travel bundle and pull out the letter. It helped him daydream about the ceramic tube that held something mysterious. He was practical enough not to

dream too outrageously, too fantastically. Yet imagination is liquid, not solid. You cannot mold it in your head, it will flow where it wants, sometimes to the heart.

CHAPTER 3

As Ulysses drifted upstream, he could see a huge mechanical sign. The sheer number of moving parts grabbed his attention. That was its only purpose, to let you know that you were entering the realm of the Studies of Systematic. The closer he got to it, the more the canals were organized, forming a gentle flowing grid. On the main island, at the center of the grid, stood a structure that towered over the landscape. This was the famed observation tower of the College of Madness.

The closer he got to it, the more magnificent it became. It looked like a huge icicle standing upright on its base. An elaborate water wheel turned slowly, pulling ropes and pulleys. These lines led from the base of the tower to a platform at its pinnacle. A few evenly spaced chairs, like that of a ski lift, dangled as they climbed to the top and came back down again. "Ulysses!" came a shout. "Ulysses, I'm up here!" Way up high, at the tower's top was a small figure with a very long megaphone. "Use the lift. Take the chair lift! It's me, Professor Motz."

Oslik's, by the pear-shaped nature of their bodies, have great balance, especially when sitting on their bottoms. Ulysses had no problem standing in front of the next chair that was inching its way upward. When the lift touched his tail feathers, he lifted his legs, settled in and was on his way up to the top. The panoramic view below took his breath away. For a moment, he closed his eyes and shut out all thoughts. If only he could share this feeling in his next sculpture that would truly be a gift worth sharing. Maybe there was something of the Great MasPiola in him, but just a tiny piece. He was bounced out of his meditation when the professor grabbed his arm, jostling him out of the chair before it made its descent down.

"Ulysses, I am so glad to see you. I have been waiting for you since it got light. I can see the canals for miles up here. How do you like our observation tower? How was your trip? Did you come alone? Are you hungry?" The barrage of questions kept coming at Ulysses. Yes, this was the same man he had remembered. He waited for Professor Motz to take a breath, which took a while, before he was able to get a word in. "Professor, it is beautiful up here" he finally said.

"Yes. Yes, it is." answered the professor. "They said we couldn't build a tower to the sky. Well, we did. We did! They said it would fall. It didn't. I didn't! They said the dome itself would wrap us in a shroud and we'd disappear. Well, here I am! Here is the college! The more they say, the more we prove them wrong!" Once again, Ulysses knew he would have to interject quickly or be the student of a wild, never-ending lecture about everything and anything.

"Why did you build this observation tower, professor?" he asked in a desperate attempt to steer the conversation in a singular direction.

"The dome of course! Those holes in the shroud, they don't change. We've watched, took notes and made measurements. But the light coming through, that changes. Sometimes, there are thousands of beams, sometimes none. Our world is just a bubble. We live in it. But where does the bubble live? It's floating on something, in something. Outside our bubble it is glowing at times; cold at times, hot at other times. When the dome's shroud touches the ground, then jumps back up, we are bouncing. Bouncing on what is the next question. I think we need to dig a tunnel to the middle of our bubble. I don't know what that'll do, but it's a good idea, don't you think so?"

Ulysses saw his opportunity to try to reign in the conversation again. "Professor, we can talk about that later and catch up on old times. But the tube you found. You say it was from my grandfather. Tell me about it"

"The tube. Of course. The tube! It's long. It is a tube. It floats. It's old. It has MasPiola's inscription on it. From the Great Tar Sea. Pretty heavy. Makes a funny sound if you strike it. We should open it! Yes, yes, that's what we should do. But first I must get it. You must open the outside before you can see what is inside. If it were the other way around, we'd be done by now or at least halfway there. First things first, that's the best way to tackle a problem at this. You can only open it when you have it, so I'll get it. Now is the time. I'll go get it. Be back in a moment with my tube, your tube!"

With surprising agility, Professor Motz sped down a hallway. Ulysses bounced on the tips of his webbed feet, excitement reenergizing him. A hidden mystery, the kind that could thaw the frozen inner child, was brewing in his mind. He dove into that feeling unconditionally. Sadly, as seconds turned to minutes, the thawing stopped as time started to freeze. Ten minutes turned into thirty. Should he just stay there? Maybe he should search for the professor down the hallway. Going down the chair lift was another option, but being confronted with decisions made him tired. Procrastination was the obvious choice. Eventually he fell asleep.

Ulysses would have continued sleeping if it were not for the tiny hammering noises that entered his dreams. When he was fully awake, he went down the hallway, following the sounds of the hammer. He could see the professor trying to open the tube with precise, gentle blows. The ceramic, however, proved to be very resilient. Professor Motz looked up from his task and said "I don't want to destroy the tube, just to get the contents. It might have historical value about its journey. Ulysses, get that chisel and hold it right here. I'll try using two hands on the hammer."

It took several good whacks, before it finally cracked into six pieces. The treasure inside was beautifully dry and preserved, wrapped in some type of animal hide. When they unwrapped

it, they found a small black journal, an assortment of written papers and a few drawings. The professor instantly recognized the top drawing.

"Flegos!" he shouted. "This is a Flego! You might be too young, but do you remember stories about the Amazing Flegos?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I heard old stories from dad about them. They could jump so high. And juggle while dancing. They also could talk to us or sing it I should say. They were our first, and only contact, with other life across the Great Tar Sea."

"Remind me to tell you the real story behind the Amazing Flegos. I even have an old poster of theirs. I'd like to show it to you. I have it somewhere; somewhere. But first, help me catalog all of this." He spread his hands, gesturing to the contents strewn before him.

It did not take long to go over the few items. There was a small diary, half filled with some torn out pages. Doodles, pictures and symbols filled the margins. The writing itself was scribbled, but still legible. On four separate pieces of thick paper were four drawings. The first was of a creature known as a Fledgick. This was the drawing that caused the professor to say "Flegos!" It was a picture of a large hairy creature, like a mouse in structure. The hind legs, however, were designed for hopping long distances. These strong legs were bent backwards, like grasshopper. It was a liile larger than an average Oslík. The face was like an Oslík, but its neck was short, as if the head and body were one. It had short arms, like a kangaroo. The picture was clearly labeled 'Fledgick'.

The second drawing had the words 'Extuf' printed on it. It showed a stout animal, sitting upright, balanced by a long thick tail. Its skin looked rough and leathery. The legs were short and looked enormously powerful. Its head looked like an elephant, but no trunk or tusks. The Extuf looked strong, but not fast, but that could have been only a first impression. Somehow, the

picture seemed to convey that its subject was capable of inner thought and intelligent communication. Again, it was impossible to tell if the creature possessed those gifts or if it was only the residue an artist leaves of himself in his work.

Picture three was an unfinished sketch of a tall, upright, angular animal. It had long legs, like an ostrich, but with hooves. A beaklike mouth attached to a head that sat on a swan like neck. It had a long, tufted tail. Enormous ears hung from the sides of its head. The upper body, arms and hands, were very similar to an Oslik. The word 'Evil Lokil' was written on the back.

Ulysses grabbed the fourth and final sketch. "Is that my grandfather!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes." replied Professor Motz. "That's him alright. I can see how much you look like him.

He must have done this self-portrait before he left with the first missionaries."

The bold artist signature at the bottom read 'MasPiola'. "I'm surprised he did not sign it as the Great MasPiola!" said Ulysses. He had forgotten how good of a draftsman his grandfather had been, much better than himself.

"Now, now" signed the professor. "Let's focus on the rest of these items".

There was a small apparatus with a crystal in it. It could be used as a telescope or microscope, depending on how it was assembled. A very sharp knife was also among the items. It was elaborately decorated and probably ceremonial in nature. Three tiny, smooth stones, small enough to fit in one's hand were also laying amongst the tube's contents. Other items were a loose combination of twine, beads, feathers and a foul smelling, hard red substance that was in a box. This box was decorated with some primitive carvings. Ulysses made one last glance at the things before him. "So, what do you make of all this?" he asked.

The professor did not answer. He was too busy reading the small diary. "This might give us a clue." he finally replied. "It seems to start when your grandfather was already on the other side of the Great Tar Sea, already making contact with other intelligent life. I guess one or two of the sketches might be some of those aliens"

"When did he first leave? On his mission, I mean."

"Back in those days, about two hundred fifty years ago, we were not so skilled in building tar skimmers. I'm sure I can find the exact date in the college's archives. But for now, I am getting hungry. Let's get something to eat and talk about old times." The professor was talking, but not listening. Ulysses was getting used to this. "I hear you have a nephew that is your apprentice. How about your sister? Can she still talk your ear off? I have some papers from your father. I have been meaning to send them to you. We can talk about all kinds of things. And Helena, how could I forget. I only met her once. Do you remember? So sad! So sad!"

Ulysses did not interrupt him. He was glad of his company. The professor kept talking as they took the lift down to the ground. They walked to the dining hall in the College of Madness.

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A thousand miles away, on the other side of the world, on the sloshing banks of the Great Tar Sea sat a Fledgick. She looked out across the black ocean, her eyes closed in meditation. Her lips moved slightly, repeating phrases in her mind, not realizing her lips read her thoughts. Her two hands were pressed together, rolling three small, smooth stones. The rhythms of her hands were the same as those on her lips. These three stones came from a massive stone that her ancestors had placed in a swift river current many, many generations ago. She had chiseled three

pieces off the sacred relic herself when she had come of age, just as her mother had done before her. Her hands were very expressive, very beautiful. The only flaw in them was the missing fingertip on her left little finger, a flaw that she believed made them look even more beautiful.

CHAPTER 4

Many, many years earlier, a young Oslik watched a fantastic machine skim slowly over the black ooze of the ocean. He knew it must have been invented by the crazy ones, only they would have such knowledge. Where he stood, in the far distance, it was hard to make out the figures that stepped onto the shore. Two of them looked nothing at all like him, like any other Oslik. The great shroud of the dome was slowly descending. It was getting too dark to see, but he could not take his eyes away. He decided to watch for a couple more minutes before he had to leave. He was on 'bong' duty tonight at the Temple. Even though he knew it was a chore that was to be done with selflessness and honor, he hated it. After all, the others were already recognizing his talent, his genius. He should except from all that tedium. Finally, he could not see anymore, so he reluctantly returned to the Temple.

All was quiet at the Temple grounds. He started the long climb, up the slowly inclining ramp to the tower top. When he reached the stone archway, he pulled out the box that stood at the side and placed it under the arch. Standing on the box, he touched the keystone with the fingertips of both hands. The elegantly carved stone was heavily worn, having been kissed in such a way over centuries. He dragged the box back to its original resting place.

A fat Oslik waddled up to him and said "MasPiola, hurry up! My shift is almost over. It's your turn to roll the stone. I'm starving!"

"All right! Quit nagging me!" snapped MasPiola. The two touched fingertips and simultaneously chanted a mantra. The fat one then sped off to the dinner hall. MasPiola looked at the hourglass and knew he still had time to get to the first stone. The three sacred stones were already up in the tower. They were all the same size, about the size of an Oslik's head. All were

perfectly round, having been lovingly and spiritually rubbed by their keepers for centuries.

MasPiola looked at the three other rocks, not yet rounded. Part of his duties today was to polish them, but he decided not to because no one would know the difference.

It was time. He picked up the first blessed sphere, kissed it, half-heartedly murmured its prayer and lifted it to the chute. He gently pushed it and watched as it gradually followed the well-worn path of the ramp. It rolled down the complex series of ramps, chutes and gutters. It made soothing, natural noises as it hit a row of hollow tube chimes which dangled from above. It echoed a rhythm of thumping sounds as it rolled down a row of steps. Whistling music came from flutes that were set singing by paddles that whirled as it passed. It passed through shallow water, making a swooshing sound that mixed with the remnants of the previous tunes that lingered in the wind. After a few minutes, it finished its symphony with a huge splash, its journey ending at the bottom of a small pond. From the Temple, a hundred Osliks could be heard stamping their feet three times and chanting in harmony. Some stomping could also be heard faintly, down in the rest of the borough.

As soon as the splash finished echoing, MasPiola knew he must launch the second stone. He pushed it gently down its course. The concert continued as it followed its path, ending with a splash. On cue, he launched the final one. He always hated the last part. When the final note splashed, he had to fill his lungs and chant as loud as he could. He sang "Time teaches us how important it is to all of us."

The ritual was not yet over. The entire sacrament needed to be done two more times. MasPiola needed to walk down the long winding ramp and retrieve the stones, one at a time, and carry them back up to the top. Before he started his descent, he tied a sturdy rope to the handle of a very strong basket. The other end was securely fastened to the inside of the tower. He dropped

it down to the ground. MasPiola whistled as he strolled down the ramp. He had about an hour to get all three balls back up the tower.

"What a waste of time. My time!" he mumbled to himself. He thought about the days of training, sitting in that small temple room, learning the centuries old ritual. It had not taught him humility. He did not want to waste his time suffering just to prove how much he revered the past. MasPiola had better things to do with his time, important things, big things. These thoughts eased his conscience as he came to the base of the tower. He sighed when he came to the pond. Of course, the water would be cold, what self-respecting rite would want nice warm water. He dove in.

It was not too hard to fish out these three stones. The tedium was taking them back up the ramp. Well, he was not going to do that again. What better way to honor time than to use it wisely. He rolled all three up to the basket and placed them in it, tugging on the rope to make sure the knot would not undo itself. Then, he had a small moment of panic. What if someone had seen him? His devotion could be questioned. Craning his neck, left and right, he saw he was alone. Besides, he had learned long ago, the monks were more that content with staying inside and being warm and comfortable. The thrill of being irreverent was enough to start him whistling again as he started his slow walk to the top. Once there, he pulled up the basket and placed the three balls next to the chute. He had a little less than an hour before he needed to send them to their destination.

Now he had time to think about tomorrow's big presentation for the Temple's elders. He pulled out his sketches. He would start with his 'Great Bubble of Time' painting, the one that first brought him recognition. That would remind the board why he was in the running for this commission in the first place. He had agreed to spend a year as a novice before he would move

on to the second round. Yes, he had reluctantly learned what they thought, knew and valued. But, if they were so smart, so evolved, they wouldn't need him. But they did need him and were too arrogant to admit it. These self-appointed leaders of wisdom needed someone, him, to communicate their inner thoughts. Osliks communicated best through visual means and power was held by those who could do it best.

Suddenly, he remembered the hourglass. Was he late? No, it was still half full. He decided he should concentrate on the rest of tonight's symphony. No use wasting a year because of time slipping away from him. The music he made for the Temple that night went as planned, just as it had done centuries before.

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On the beach of the tar sea, one of the two Osliks held the chain that linked the arms of the two other creatures together. The other Oslik finished hiding the tar skimmer in a nearby cave. Confident it was well camouflaged; he went back to his colleague. Both Osliks had their tail feathers died red.

"Can't we unchain them?" asked Professor Franken. "They know there is no place to go. Besides, you can see they are gentle. They aren't dumb animals, they're intelligent"

Both creatures, furry with long, jumping legs, listened intently. The words they were hearing were just sounds to them, but both could understand the mood. The other Oslik said "Alright. Let's unchain them and keep them calm. We can take the long way back to the college, talk to them. Show them their new home, their new world."

"Yes, that's a good idea" answered Professor Franken. "They seem to like it when we talk to them". He walked next to one creature, while the other two paired up. At first, it was difficult for them to stay astride. The Osliks were waddling, while the creatures tried to walk, but their natural stride was to hop. Certain movements were tried to get them all to synchronize. Finally, the combination of Osliks aggressively picking up their knees high and the creatures shuffling along seemed to work best.

Professor Franken, by nature was a talker, so that is what he did as they made their way. He knew it wasn't what he said but how he said it.

"We are called Osliks." he said as he pointed both to himself and his colleague. "There are different tribes of us. Take me, for example. I'm from the 'Pro' tribe. By nature, we are more objectively curious than the other tribes. You are hatched into your tribe, but you can go to a different if you have other aptitudes. I was born into an art tribe, but I couldn't create anything that would ever inspire anyone. I liked to invent things, so I applied to the Studies of Systematic. My family, especially my father, said it was a waste of time. He was embarrassed to have a son in the College of Madness."

The creature that walked next to him gently took his hand. Professor Franken was startled for a moment, not because of the physical touch, but because it happened so naturally. He continued to talk as the two walked hand in hand, as if they had done so since birth.

"But, enough about me. Where are my manners? Since Professor Avil and I discovered you, we have got to name your species. You and your kind shall be known as Fledgick. The college uses ancient Osliketic for new words. It confuses the other tribes, and we enjoy that. Fledgick means 'hairy hopper' and that is what you are. Squeezing his new friend's hand gently, he continued "So my new friends, I bet you are wondering why we brought you here, all the way

from the other side of the world. We want to understand you, study you. Sorry we had to bring you were, but we have been kind, haven't we? As for those chains, well, we thought you would capsize us all on the voyage. We took the both of you so you wouldn't be lonely. Maybe one of you is male, the other female? That'll help you through the nights. We'll take you back when the Blue Mist comes back. You have my word on that."

As they neared the college, they were spotted by some members who waved and shouted. Soon many of them came running out of the buildings. Past expeditions had brought back only some bones. The dream of actual touching aliens from across the Great Tar Sea overwhelmed many of them. This would be a day they would all remember.

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MasPiola did not sleep well after his ritualistic shift was over. Dreams of success kept colliding with nightmares of failures. He knew this anxiety brewed from tomorrow's presentation to the Temple Elders. If he could convince them, then he would finally be the image he had created in his mind. If they just looked at him blankly and shouted 'next', he would be empty, his courage to dream extinguished. He stood up straight, his conscience rising. He would not, could not live without something magical inside him. He walked with confidence to the Great Dome of the Temple. It was not quite yet finished, but inside, it was still awe inspiring. A great, white blank ceiling towered above him. He, MasPiola, would be the one chosen to fill it with paintings the world had never seen before! His own force of would make it so. It was his destiny to unveil his talent, to live forever as part of this magnificent dome. He would be famous, rich, adored and respected. Well, why shouldn't he. Wasn't it obvious that he was the Great Maspiola!"

CHAPTER 5

After a few hours of reminiscing, Ulysses and professor Professor Motz, grew silent. They knew the artifact held historical significance. The Great MasPiola was a renaissance champion, master painter and sculptor, powerful philosopher, unsurpassed inventor and founder of a religion. These were the titles that came to mind when his name was mentioned. This alone would have propelled him into legend. But his disappearance, at age one hundred and twenty, which was middle age for an Oslík, allowed imagination to lift him even higher. Yet for these two, MasPiola had the roots of a real living Oslík. The professor had worked with him quite a few times, back in the day when he was painting the interior of the Great Temple Dome, so long ago. Ulysses had never met his grandfather, but his perception of the mighty one had been forged by his parents, especially his father.

The professor laid the huge archive book down on the table. "Let me see now" he said. "He would have left about one hundred and fifty years ago. We keep excellent records. When the tar skimmers left, when they returned, who were on them and what cargo they carried. Yes, we keep excellent records! Excellent! The Blue Mist, that's the secret. Only when the Blue Mist drifts down from the dome is it safe to cross. The dome tells you exactly when the mist comes. All you must do is observe the dome. It's like a huge clock you know. The Blue Mist comes every three years. We know that for certain."

Ulysses wanted to talk about his grandfather, not nature, but things had to run its course with Professor Motz. "So, what do you think happened to him?" Ulysses asked quickly when he found a chance.

"Dead, of course." was the short, abrupt answer. "He was supposed to go over there for three years. Then he was supposed to rendezvous with the skimmer, right here" He pointed to a small island on a map, an incomplete map that showed the shores of the other side of the world. "We sent a skimmer every three years for fifteen years, just in case he showed up. As you know, the Church of Divine Insight still does a pilgrimage to that island every three years, following the Blue Mist. I don't think he could have been lost, if he could always find the shores of the Great Tar Sea. He was resourceful, a survivor, but his arrogance might have caught up with him. Maybe he's living there right now. Maybe he didn't want to come back. Most likely, though, he's dead. Speculation has always run rampant, especially among the story tellers; food for myth!"

"Want about his visions? Do you think they were real? Dad says he was a con artist. Do you believe he could see your soul?"

"Well, he was a great artist, so why wouldn't he be a great con artist?" The professor laughed at his own joke, but the pun was lost on Ulysses. "He was a very good judge of character, but you'd need that to reach the heights he had reached. Claiming he had visions did not hurt him when it came to persuasion. If he really had the visions of Divine Insight, I don't know. I do know there are so who will destroy you if you say otherwise. Your father probably could have told you more about that, but you know that."

"Yes, yes he could." sighed Ulysses. When he was younger, he thought his father was weak. He now understood the strength it took to carry a burden that you can't escape from.

For a while, both Osliks were into their own thoughts. The silence was broken when

Ulysses asked "Why do you think he went over there? I know the historians claim it was to bring the Divine Insight to simpler creatures. They say he was a missionary, unselfish and all giving. That sure doesn't sound like the Osluk that my father described!"

"I have a lot of papers from your father, a lot of letters to me. We corresponded quite a bit. He was in awe of your grandfather. The Great MasPiola was self-serving. He had that rare ability to be the author of his own story. Success at an early age allowed him to do that. He needed to do big things to inspire himself. Doing things that were bigger than life grabbed the attention of those around him. He loved the attention, he needed it! Good or bad, crazy or not, that was him. As for being a missionary, I don't know. But I do know there was not a dry eye when he left, except for those he crossed. Besides, it was probably a good way to avoid his debts, at least for a while."

"Well, he succeeded in being bigger than life. How many can claim to be a legend? He's become a character in mythology."

" You must be dead to make that claim." said Professor Motz. He picked up the small black diary, which was released, just hours before, from the ceramic tube. "I looked through this, but it's not a diary. It has some hand drawn maps, with landmarks and notes. Probably just to refresh his memory, in case he got lost. There are some sketches of eyes, beaks, hooves and such, with some notes. These seem to be made so he could distinguish individuals. They probably all looked the same to him at first. It might have taken some time to distinguish the subtleties. There are some ripped out pages and sketches of plants, the dome and a page full of numbers and symbols."

Ulysses interjected "Any final words on the last couple of pages?"

"No. He obviously did not think of this as his end. He fully believed he would return.

Return with all of this.” he said as he pointed to the objects before him. "The stories, that's what he wanted; stories about him, told by him. He was smart enough to figure out how to cross the Great Tar Sea and arrogant enough to try. His body is probably sitting at the bottom of all that tar, rotting away."

"Or he might have been eaten by some savages. That is what he was, a great big, MasPiola main course for something that didn't mind eating tail feathers."

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Ulysses did not sleep well that night. He got up and paced. Without thinking, he found himself at the top of the observation tower. It was beautiful, way up there. Far in the distance, he could see the huge black blanket that covered the ground as far as he could see. It was the Great Tar Sea. It looked very still, usually it bubbled and popped. He knew it was calming because this was the season of the Blue Mist. He made a mental note to ask the professor why it was called 'blue'. In actuality, it was colorless and translucent. He, and all other Osliks, was reminded that this was a special season, by the strange music that came from the distance. Those harmonious notes were made by the three sacred balls that rolled down from the top of the Temple. After he heard the first splash he was transfixed until the third and final watery note. Three splashes, each signifying one year before the sea would be calm again. This was always a magical time that made him appreciate life and all the little things it held, a time to be joyous and think of the future. Maybe it was nature itself controlling some primitive instinct. Or maybe he was just remembering this time as a child.

All children loved the coming of Blue Mist. It was full of holidays, festivals, food and presents. Families would gather at the shore to see what bounty floated to the top, delicacies that could be boiled, fried or mashed into soup. Sometimes there were beautifully colored gems. The adults forged for things to help them survive the next three years, but the children played and explored. For the young, it was not so much what they found, but the excitement of finding itself.

Yes, this was the perfect time for him to be up in the tower. All this talk about his grandfather, the trip to the College of Madness, opening the tube, all these things put him in a state of mind fertile for growing ideas. These ideas blossomed longer because they sprang from imagination.

"The other side of the world!" shouted Ulysses out loud. "Why not! Why not me!" These sounds made his inner thoughts real. Why couldn't he see what was there? Why did life have to be mundane? Why couldn't he throw himself into an adventure? Wasn't he a direct descendant of the Great MasPiola? The whole concept seemed so natural now, it just took the perfect place and time to crystallize. He would get a blanket and sleep up in the observation tower. That little act of rebellion against the norm would be his first step on this marvelous journey. He did not remember his dreams that night. Maybe he did not have any because they couldn't compete with his daydreams.

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A thousand miles away, on the other side of the world, on the sloshing banks of tar, sat an Extuf. It was cold, so he buried his gigantic feet in the sand. He held three smooth stones in one

large hand. He was in harmony with nature. His big nostrils pointed high in the air, waiting for the unmistakable smell of the Blue Mist. He instinctively knew it would come. Its presence brought meaning to his life.

CHAPTER 6

This was the biggest day in MasPiola's life, of his career. He was one of three finalists for the mighty honor of painting the newly constructed Dome of the Temple. He knew it wasn't just about his ideas, his sketches or the box of tiny sculptures. Charisma, his charisma, would grab the Temple Elders and mold them to be a part of a greater vision, the vision of the Great MasPiola. At least, that was the plan last night, but it was hard to stay at those enthusiastic heights for long. The glow of daily light brought some apprehension with it. He had one advantage the other two competitors did not. He had the foresight to become a novice monk the previous year. His vision would come from the heart, not the head. At least, this is what he would tell the Elders, with the tiny drop of a tear in his eyes, if he could figure out how to do that.

He was confident, but still nervous. There were still a few hours before he had to make his way to the Dome and he did not want to spend them in his room. Then, a spark shot from his memory. Last night, at the banks of the sea, he had seen a machine skidding over the tar. He could swear he had seen two unworldly, silhouetted creatures. He had plenty of time to head out there and look around. It would help him take his mind off the presentation.

As he strolled down to the shore, he thought about his competitors. They weren't supposed to see each other's work, but MasPiola had snuck a peek at their proposals. He did not feel guilty about it, he was sure they had both done the same to him. First, there was Brandt, that pompous, arrogant, talentless artist that must have bribed somebody to get this far. He had probably stolen his ideas from someone else. If they were his own, then he had just gotten lucky, a flash in the pan. Any Oslik who looked at that garbage would sit there blankly, scratching their

heads. No, lower than that, scratching their tail feathers. Brandt was no competition to him at all. He just hoped those idiot Elder were smart enough to know that.

The other contender was his old nemesis, Honore. Even MasPiola had to recognize Honore's talent. Two years before, they had both competed for the hand of the beautiful Suzanne. She was smart, pretty and talented, a perfect match for MasPiola. He had mentioned to her, more than once, that if anyone deserved him, it was her. That she chose Honore over him was unimaginable. Honore had probably spread lies about him to her. What other explanation could there be? Well, those two could just be happy raising their own egg together. The last laugh would be on them. Soon they would have another mouth to feed. Besides, not being burdened with Suzanne had allowed him to join the Temple as a novice monk. He'll get that commission. That will teach those two a lesson!

MasPiola whistled as he walked down to the shore. He stopped in his tracks when he saw the unusual footprints in the sand. The two sets of prints were definitely Oslík, but the other two sets were much bigger and deeper. He could not imagine what type of animal made them, but he had seen a faded glimpse of them yesterday in the dusk, so he knew they were real. One of the Oslík tracks led to a cave. He followed them. Hidden there was that machine, that beautiful and wonderful machine! He could see it in all its glory, skimming over the tar, sails flying, big balloon bladders helping it walk across the tar at times. It was magnificent with all its ropes, cranks and pulleys. It was not so majestic just lying there, but he had seen what it could do last night. And then inspiration hit him. The crazy ones from the college had found some new species on the other side of the world. They must have thought it intelligent, or they would not have bothered to bring them back. They would try to keep this a secret, at least for a while, studying them without outside interference. Of course, the Temple and the Studies of Systematic were

always at odds with each other and stealing tribe members. The two institutions were always competing. It was amazing that the college had helped the Temple build the Dome. Right at that moment, he decided to alter his presentation to the Elders. In it, he would include a vision, a vision that predicated life on the other side of the world.

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The three Elders, sitting at a table, looked small in the vast building. The elaborate table was right under the Temple Dome's center. Off to one side were a few other Osliks. You wouldn't have even noticed those others at first because the tall, ornate headdresses of the Elders demanded center stage. The Elders knew this, and for one of them, it was her main reason for wanting to be an Elder in the first place. Her name was Nadia the Iconic. The other Elder, Paulo the Pragmatic, the serious one, sat to her right. Victor the Pious was to her left. The three were conversing, comparing notes and adjusting their headdresses. Nadia the Iconic called her assistant for a few more feathers.

Honore had just finished his presentation. He walked out of the Dome, head high and shoulders back, forcing himself to move exaggeratingly slower and straighter. Gentle stomping of feet serenaded him as he left. Two assistants followed him, carrying boxes, easels and boards. Another pulled a wagon full of tiny models and sculptures. All eyes followed the procession's withdrawal.

Outside the Dome, MasPiola waited. His would be the third and final presentation. He knew Honore would be coming out of the door any second. The applause and feet stomping from inside had died down, so he had a clue his turn would be coming up soon. How should he greet

Honore? Perhaps a hearty handshake and a ‘best of luck.’ If no one was looking, maybe he would bend over and tell him to kiss his tail feathers. The door opened and Honore came out, a look of exhaustion on his face. Before MasPiola had time to react, Suzanne came running up to Honore and threw her arms around him. For that moment, they were the only two Osliks in the entire world. The couple walked hand in hand, not even noticing MasPiola. MasPiola had made sure of that.

His ego was deflated for a second, but it soon filled with anger. He strode into the Dome, hollering at the assistant behind him to hurry up. He stood a measured few steps in front of the judge’s desk, his hands assertively on his hips. He would wait and say nothing, just stare at them. He would wait, trying to anticipate when one of them would start to say something. At that precise moment, he would go into his newly prepared speech. Nadia the Iconic was getting a little uncomfortable with the silence. She folded her hands and leaned forward. MasPiola knew she was about to speak, so he cleared his throat and loudly started his speech.

“It is a great honor to be here. It is humbling enough to be grouped with such fellow artists as Brandt and Honore. Being under this mighty dome makes me realize how small and insignificant I am, just a moment in time, but my moment. Having been a novice monk at the Temple this past year has taught me so much. I did not know or understand the joy of sacrifice or its transformational powers until I became one with your great tribe!” He took a quick look at the three judges. So far, Nadia the Iconic and Victor the Pious were beaming. Only Paulo the Pragmatic, the serious one, was not. His expression revealed nothing.

Taking a deep breath, for effect, MasPiola continued. “Just last night, I had the honor of rolling the three sacred stones. I cannot describe the feeling. Life changing, that’s all I can say.” From the corner of his eye, he could see Victor the Pious, lean forward enthusiastically.

MasPiola gained confidence, continuing. “Maybe last night’s sacrament has given me the courage to abandon my original presentation. “This” he said, raising his hand in the air, looking up at the dome’s ceiling “is all too important. It shouldn’t, no it must not be trivialized with a common sales pitch!” His voice started to boom and echo off the dome. He was becoming more animated. He was on a roll, and he knew it. “Last night, I had a vision. No, no, it was not a dream. I am certain of that! I saw a small glowing sphere at first, a bubble really. In it, I could see myself, looking up at the magnificent dome above me. I felt at one with the bubble. Suddenly, there stood next to me a creature, holding my hand. I could feel all my talent, all my love flowing from me into its hand. It seemed so happy that it made me happier than I ever could have imagined. I knew at that precise moment there were other intelligent creatures on the other side of the world. If my art was strong enough, good enough, they would understand us. Through me, we could communicate with them. Teach them what we know. We could inspire them to be like us. We are the center of the bubble. Shouldn’t we ourselves be a shining beacon for lesser life?”

Victor the Pious was so captivated that he accidentally passed gas and thought he was having an out of body experience. Paulo the Pragmatic, however, saw it differently and decided to speak. He abruptly said “Well, the Temple needs to inspire other Osliks. We need art for Osliks. MasPiola, your visions are irrelevant to our Dome. Please show us what you have brought us today. “And so, it was time for MasPiola’s sales pitch for the commission.

At its inception, the purpose of the Great Temple Dome was to unify all Osliks with the same thought. Time was the common river that connected all of them; they were all in one harmonious bubble, floating through time. All who entered the Temple’s Dome were to be instantly flooded with that feeling, that emotion, that belief. That was a lofty ambition, but Osliks have an uncanny ability to visually portray the abstract. MasPiola knew he did not have to

accomplish this; just convince others he could do so. He pulled out sculptures and sketches. He talked about his work and how it would all come together. But deep down inside, his heart was aching. He had made a mistake, a miscalculation. He should have stuck with his original opening speech. Changing it at the last minute for this vision nonsense was a big mistake. Now he looked like an idiot, a madman ranting about glowing bubbles and creatures from the other side of the world.

He did not even remember finishing his speech or the question-and-answer session afterward. He was still confident in his work, but not in winning this once in a lifetime competition. After it was all over, he thanked the panel, stood up straight and walked out of the Dome fully composed. Once outside he gave his assistant a little kick, just because. He decided to go down by the river and chew on some ‘slevick’ stalks. That would give him a high, helping forget today’s events.

The panel of Elders took off their ceremonial headdresses when the Dome was empty. No one was there to see them, so they could let their guard down and be themselves. It was time to get down to business. “I really liked MasPiola vision!” exclaimed Victor the Pious very energetically. “The Dome should be sanctified with the work of one of us, a monk, even if only a humble, modest novice monk. He must be special to have had that vision!”

“That vision!” shouted Paulo the Pragmatic. “You believe that dribble. I like his work, I’ll give you that, but I don’t trust him. Who does he think we are, some ignorant peasants that he can trick? He made all of that up. I’ll bet he even became a novice just to get a leg up on the competition. He’s trouble. That’s what he is!”

“Sacrilege!” Victor the Pious shouted, pointing a finger at his colleague. “How dare you even question a brother of the faith, especially here in the Dome! This shall be the most sacred of places.”

“Perhaps” came the reply “But it isn’t sacred yet. Time, generations and tradition will do that, not MasPiola” The two arguing Elders turned to Nadia the Iconic. She hadn’t been paying much attention to their argument. She was too busy rearranging her headdress as it stood on a stand before her. “Well?” They both asked here simultaneously.

“If you really hate MasPiola, I won’t vote for him. The two of you can decide between Brandt and Honore. If you still can’t decide, I will cast my vote for Honore. I really don’t care who you give it to. The important part was the ceremony and that’s over. I’m tired.”

With Nadia the Iconoc’s final decision, Paulo the Pragmatic cast his vote for Honore. Reluctantly, so did the pious one. That is how they came to a consensus. That is how the decision was made.

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That same night, at the College of Madness, space was being prepared for the two new guests from the other side of the world. Both Fledgicks were sleeping comfortably, exhausted by all the new sights and sounds that bombarded them. The college wanted to keep them a secret. They all knew this was an amazing new discovery, but they were also aware that gossip and premature analysis could distort facts. The facts were of the utmost importance. Besides, they had a duty to make sure no harm came to the Feldgicks, even unintentional danger that could come from flocking curiosity seekers, or that meddlesome Temple. Every precaution was made

to hide them safely inside the college. There was, however, one small crack in their security. There was a young, disgruntled Oslik among them. He was born into the tribe, but had little aptitude for science, invention or mechanics. His name was Benedict. Just last week, Benedict had ridden down the canal down to the Temple. He had an appointment to meet with the three Elders. His goal was to convince them that he was talented enough to become an artist. He had little talent or even desire to create from his imagination, but he did not fit in with the Studies of Systematic. He had nothing to lose.

When the Elders met with him, they dismissed him quite early. Before they got up to leave, the serious one asked for an aid and whispered something in his ear. As Benedict turned to leave, the aid ran up to him and said “Benedict, the Temple really wants to thank you for coming by to share your gifts with us. Although we cannot accept you into our tribe at this time, our colleagues from the Studies of Systematic are always valued and welcome. Talent does not have to be something you are born with. Sometimes it can be nurtured with time. Come back and see me, Benedict, if you think you have something that we, at the Temple, can nurture.”

Benedict thanked the aid, not having any idea what he was talking about.

The Fledgicks lay fast asleep. Benedict was very tired. He had been assigned the title of ‘Fledgick Digestive’ assistant. This meant he followed them around all day, picking up their droppings. He was not happy about this, but no one ever bothered to ask him if he was. And then, it hit him. He understood what the Temple had meant. Information about the goings on at the College was valuable to the Temple. Perhaps, if it were valuable enough, it might get him an

internship as an artist. It couldn't be worse from what he was being forced to do now. That same night, he floated down to the Temple and sought out Paulo the Pragmatic's aid.

He told the aid about the two Feldgicks and the assistant realized this was a very strategic piece of data. He quickly dismissed Benedict because the aid was rising in the ranks among Paulo the Pragmatic's assistants and was quickly learning the psychology of bureaucracies. Good news should always be delivered in person, but bad news should be passed on by your minions. This was very important news.

Paulo the Pragmatic was enthusiastically told that the College of Madness had sent an expedition, three years ago, across the Great Tar Sea. They had returned, just yesterday with a pair of creatures. It was not known if they were intelligent, but they most likely were. The College will spend the next few months seeing if they can communicate with them. It was uncertain if the pair was male and female. A detailed description of their physical appearance was given. Paulo the Pragmatic quickly told the assistant to have the other two Elders meet him at his chambers. They were to be told it was urgent and to tell no one.

It took about an hour before the other two Elders finally came. Neither of them was happy, they were used to summoning others, not the other way around. Nadia the Iconic was wearing her headdress. Victor the Pious was munching on a basket of food he held in one hand. He did not offer any to the others.

Paulo the Pragmatic could care less about what they thought. He started to speak. "Certain valuable information has come my way." He then repeated the news to them, with a little embellishment thrown in. The moment he finished, Victor the Pious exclaimed "The vision! The vision MasPiola had yesterday. He foretold this; I knew it. Life on the other side! We are all

part of a bigger plan. This was destiny, my destiny ...um, I mean all our destinies. We must help this young Oslík expand our bubble with our knowledge. There is no other explanation!”

“I’m sure he had a vision, just like the one I had an hour ago” said Paulo the Pragmatic sarcastically.

“Who cares?” said Nadia the Iconic, yawning”

“We care. The Temple cares. Don’t you see? If we declare MasPiola the winner, he can make the same speech he made to us, about the vision. We, the Temple, can say our nurturing of talent, our bold intuition to build the Dome, was instrumental in MasPiola’s vision. We can say his vision is just a piece of a bigger prophecy. Eventually, word will leak out the College actually has two creatures. I’ll make sure that knowledge is leaked at an opportune time. We will declare MasPiola the winner at tomorrow’s ceremony. He will describe his vision, and with a little help from me, he can go into a greater description of what they look like. Eventually, the prophecy will fulfill itself. We will have more power. The Studies of Systematic will delegate to a secondary position, behind our divine insight.”

Victor the Pious, the pious one, wasn’t even listening. In his mind MasPiola’s vision had already come true. This was not lost on Paulo the Pragmatic. He knew Victor the Pious should make a speech at the opening ceremony, there was nothing like a true believer to stir up a crowd. “Victor the Pious” he said “tomorrow at the acceptance ceremony, you must make a speech on MasPiola’s vision, how it affected you, what it means to us and future generations. Only you can deliver such a speech!”

Victor the Pious’s head was swimming. His whole life had been destined for this moment. Suddenly Nadia the Iconic stood up. She was not happy; this should be her time. Couldn’t they see she had the largest, grandest headdress of all? Paulo the Pragmatic recognized the situation.

He said “Of course, only our own Nadia the Iconic can give the opening speech. Only her talent can become a spotlight for this marvelous and stupendous occasion! This vision is too grand for the common Oslik. The arrangement of its thoughts, its concepts can only be handled by Nadia the Iconic!” He turned to her, grasped her hand and said “Please do it! Please! We’ll fail if you don’t!”

“Of course, I’ll do it.” she answered. “It is my humble duty to the Temple.” Her mind was already racing. Where would she find extra-large feathers by tomorrow morning?

CHAPTER 7

Ulysses woke up the next morning and found he had not been dreaming. He had slept there all night, up in the observation tower. Last night, he had convinced himself he was going on a great adventure, across the sea. Normally, this enthusiasm would slowly erode by breakfast and completely fade away after lunch. But this time, it was different. It grew during breakfast and demanded action before lunch. He ran about the college, asking where he could find Professor Motz.

The professor was in his workshop, trying some new designs for the tar skimmer. He was hoping to develop a new prototype, one which could carry more cargo. Deep down, he dreamed of flying, up to the outer reaches of the dome, maybe even to dimensions outside of the bubble. In his mind he thought “Perhaps we really are the College of Madness. That should be our official name.” This made him very happy.

Ulysses’ excitement was contagious when blurted out to the professor “Help me get to the other side. I want to cross the sea. Come with me. We’ll both go!”

For a brief second, Professor Motz almost agreed to go, but instead, he said “I have been on a few adventures in my life. Surviving them isn’t fun, only talking about them years later; and exaggerating them, of course.”

“I don’t care. I want to go! Sometimes, I don’t know why I was put in the bubble. Making up my own reason is better than not having any reason at all. I’m going! You said you have some of my father’s old papers. I want to see them!”

“The map.” said the professor. “Is that what you are looking for?”

Ulysses looked surprised “How did you know about that?”

“I was the one that helped your grandfather draw it, fill in the details. He was the one who asked me to make a copy of it and hide it with the other things he left. When your father was older, he asked me to help him decipher it. Your father was going to make the same journey, to follow the Great MasPiola.”

“Why didn’t he go?”

“A few days later, he found out your mother was going to have an egg. He did not want to abandon you the way he was abandoned. Your father gave the map, and other things back to me, the College really. The map’s legacy was part of the college’s expedition. It really was not your grandfathers to take, to use.”

“How did he get it?”

“I was just starting out at the college, assigned to machines; specifically, a way to cross the Great Tar Sea. We had many failures. Finally, after some successful landings, the college funded a full expedition. We did not know what we would find on the other side. Three of the expeditions came back with only some rocks, bones and scrawny plants. All said there was nothing but a vast wasteland. They had trouble surviving the three years they had to wait; wait for the Blue Mist to come and calm the sea. But one expedition came back with life, intelligent life. But I guess all Osliks know this.

“The Amazing Flegos!” shouted Ulysses.

Yes, Ulysses, they returned with two Fledgicks. I had become friends with Professor Franken, one of the two explorers that found them. He became very sad that year, depressed really. Trouble handling fame I suppose, but mostly because of what he had done to those two creatures. They became an oddity, eventually living in a zoo. Professor Franken felt responsible;

felt he should have done more to protect them. We had no way of knowing their life span was only a tenth of ours.”

Both stood silent for a minute. The professor continued “Professor Franken used to talk to me in confidence about these things; eased his soul I suppose. He told me that he and his colleague had found a route to get through the vast desert on the other side. It was at the end of this route they found the two Fledgicks. Both creatures were very weak. One of them was badly hurt. They tried to nurse them back to health the best they could. Eventually, they built sleds and dragged them back across the desert and to the shore. The Fledgicks were still sick and the season for the sea calming was at hand. Professor Franken made the decision to bring them back instead of leaving them there. He did not know how things would turn out. He kept the secret of the passage through the desert. He thought it was safer that way. It was his way of protecting the Fledgick race from our side of the world; from us.”

“So why did you tell my grandfather; help him draw a map?”

“I was naïve enough, when I was young, to desperately want to believe in something mystical. I was there, in the audience, when MasPiola received the commission to paint the Temple of the Dome. I heard him talk about his vision; that he could communicate with creatures from the other side. He described how they looked. He described the Fledgicks that had just landed the day before. Until then, no one even knew such creatures existed. As I said before, I was young. I wanted an escape from the coldness of science, so I let myself believe MasPiola had supernatural power. The Temple itself was endorsing him, saying he had extraordinary talent, an insight. Even though the Temple was our nemesis, many of us believed that talent must come from some outside source, something beyond science. Ulysses, I have work to finish today. Come back when it gets dark, and the dome is low. Come to the library. I will explain

more and get the map. Take the rest of the day to think this over. If this journey still feels right, then go. Let that be your guide.”

Ulysses said goodbye, realizing this was pretty much the same advice he had given his nephew just a few days earlier. He also conceded it was easier to give advice than to take it.

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Ulysses had just enough time to float on the main canal and see the Temple of the Dome. He had never been inside without his father by his side. Would it provide some insight, some direction? He hoped, by looking up at it, without his father’s negative words, it would lead him to the right decision. If that could happen, then the Great MasPiola could truly work miracles. The Dome was not crowded. It will be closing soon. He, and a small group of pilgrims, were the only ones in it. This made it seem even more cavernous; the Oslik made Dome inside the great bubble of life. Ulysses forgot what an amazing impression it had on him; on anyone with the ability of self-reflection. The base of the Dome was filled with paintings of Osliks in everyday life. One fourth of the way up, the negative spaces of the figures started to form geometric patterns. These patterns became more and more intricate, turning to organic-like, abstract shapes as they inched closer and closer to the top of the Dome’s interior. From that point on, it seamlessly started to become a three-dimensional relief and finally an abstract sculpture.

Different types of light glowed through ingeniously placed holes and slots in the Dome’s top. These glowing beams hit the abstract sculpture in its center. Shadows danced as light was blocked; at other places, shafts of light were reflected off to other parts of the Dome. The interior of the Dome was MasPiola’s attempt to create nature, his own nature, by having the outside

world meld with the world inside his mind. This truly was genius, thought Ulysses. Realizing this got him his answer. The Dome had provided the miracle he wanted. He would go to the other side of the world.

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Ulysses knocked on the library door. Professor Motz was already inside with lots of paper spread out on a table. “Come in. Come in” he said to Ulysses. He tried to enter, but the door was locked. “Sorry” said the professor as he unlatched it. “You can’t be too careful you know.”

The map itself was pictorial in nature. A compass symbol, showing north, south, east and west was right next to Pilgrim Island. A dotted red line crossed the narrow channel to the mainland’s shore. The dotted line ended at a big red ‘X’, which seemed to indicate a landing place. Other symbols seemed to represent some type of landmarks. One could follow these as they had west. On the far-left hand side of the map, were a lot of cross-hatched marks. In the middle of these cross-hatchings were two symbols. They were both obviously symbols for the two Fledgicks. Next to all the other landmark symbols were notations of time. For example, two days, less than one half day, etc. It was easy to tell these were travel times for walking.

“Do you recognize some of the symbols?” asked the professor.

“Not really.”

He handed Ulysses the black diary they had freed yesterday.

Professor Motz said “A lot of these symbols are found in MasPiola diary. The more you look at it, you can see the pages going forward are a map itself, extending the original map westward.

I'd say your grandfather crossed the wastelands and kept going. He found three separate species of life; intelligent life, I believe.

They both looked at the sketches that had originally accompanied the diary."Fledgicks, Lokils and Extufs" said Ulysses as he examined the drawings which were made so many years ago by the Great MasPiola.

They tried, for several hours, to piece the rest of the puzzle together, but there were too many blank spots. Both agreed that MasPiola had been trying to return home, but then a thought came into the professor's head. He said "What if MasPiola did not find anything on the other side? I would not have put it past him to use his imagination and make all of this up!"

"Only one way to find out." said Ulysses.

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A thousand miles away, on the other side of the world, on the sloshing banks of the Great Tar Sea, knelt a Lokil. It had been hard for it to walk, carrying one of the three large rocks, one at a time, through the sand. Its hooves were not made for the beach, but it had made the pilgrimage, as all the faithful had done over the many generations. He scratched a prayer on one of the stones by using his hard, sharp beak. He carried it to the sea and dropped it in. This was done for the second stone and then the third. The Blue Mist would be happy with the sacrifice he had made. He would stay until the mist disappeared and the sea bubbled again. At that time, he would dive in, retrieve the sacred stones and restore them back to their rightful place.

CHAPTER 8

MasPiola had a terrible taste in his mouth. Partly, it was from chewing too much ‘slevick’ stalk the other night, which always gave him a headache, but most of it came from his damn presentation. What was he thinking of? How stupid could he be, trying to con the Elders with his fabricated tales of a vision? Oh well, that was the end of it. He was sure. He had best head on back to the Temple and cleanup a little bit before the ceremony that would announce the winner. He did not want to show up, letting some other artist get all the glory, especially if it was Honore. That thought made him feel even sicker, but he felt a little better while he walked. How should he react, up on the stage, when the winner was announced? He decided to act aloof, bored even. Yes, that was it, a sleepy yawn, just to show this whole thing was just another day in the life of MasPiola. He could almost convince himself it was so, if only Honore wasn’t going to be there, probably getting all the accolades.

When he arrived at the Temple, he was told by more than one, Paulo the Pragmatic was looking for him. He felt a pit in his stomach. He was sure he was going to be defrocked as a novice monk, most likely for lack of humility. Sometimes, so many things can go wrong all at once, you become free of the worries of everyday life. The burden of trying to salvage anything from the last year was off his shoulders. He determined he would march into the office of Paulo the Pragmatic and give him a piece of his mind. He never really liked him anyway, that smug Elder!

Paulo the Pragmatic paced in his office. How was he going to handle this? His instinct told him MasPiola could not be trusted, but this was an unusual circumstance. He hurried up and sat down behind his desk when he heard his assistant ushering MasPiola into the outside chamber. He had prepared to wait a long moment, once he heard MasPiola knock on the door, before allowing him to enter. But MasPiola did not knock; he just barged right past the aid and into the office of Elder..

Paulo the Pragmatic was taken aback as MasPiola said “What’s all this then? I am very busy. I was in the process of an intense creative meditation. I was on the verge of a magnificent break through and now it’s gone!” He was full of confidence, ready for a fight. He thought there was nothing to lose.

“Ah” said Paulo the Pragmatic, getting his composure back. “Was it your vision? Did creatures from the other side get in touch with you? How did they do that again? Oh, yes, now I remember. A glowing bubble, wasn’t it?”

“What is it to you?” was the stinging reply. “Do your worst your big bag of wind!”

“That’s more like it” said Paulo the Pragmatic. “It will be easier to deal with the matter at hand if we are honest with each other, honest with ourselves.”

“What are you getting at?”

“MasPiola, I do not know how you did it, but you knew the College’s expedition came back yesterday, after a long three years, with two creatures.”

“That was my vision, my insight into the beyond. It was my ...”

Paulo the Pragmatic shot up and interrupted him with a shout. “Shut up! You used that piece of information to help sell yourself. Although I personally dislike you, I do admire your

guts. Now, I have more information that could make your vision even clearer, clear enough to astound Osliks throughout the bubble.”

“And what is that?”

“I can give you some small details on what they look like. You can tweak your vision theatrics to include these tiny details. The Temple would be eternally grateful if you would repeat your vision, repeat it today when the winner of the Dome commission is named.”

“Why would I do that for you? You’re going to give the award to someone else, so you aren’t getting any cooperation from me.”

MasPiola started to leave, but stopped in his tracks when he heard the Elder say coldly “It is a shame you feel that way. We had decided to give you the commission, you are the winner. Well, let me change that, you will be the winner, if you can have another insight of your vision in front of the crowd.”

The Great MasPiola could feel his confidence feeding his ego. He turned, using all his control to remain calm and not shout for joy. He stared right into Paulo the Pragmatic’s eyes and said coolly “That can be arranged.” But then, his suspicious nature came through and he blurted out “Hey, what are you getting out of this! I’m sure you’re not helping because it is your nature to be nice.

You want something. What is it?”

Paulo the Pragmatic’s reply had been well rehearsed, letting the puppet know the puppeteer still controlled the strings. “Your visions will only enhance your art work’s appeal to the average Oslík. You will become a legend. Many want to be that legend, be you, to feel what you felt while making a masterpiece. The Dome, my Dome, the Temple’s Dome will be the crucible to hold that. It will become a mystical place, a sacred place. It will give me great

satisfaction to use that crucible, however I wish, whenever I wish. You get something, I get something. What could be better?”

“It works for me,” said MasPiola. “The world gets to see me as the talented genius I am, and you get to be the creepy old Oslík that you are.”

Paulo the Pragmatic did not say anything, just nodded his head in compliance, but his inner thoughts had MasPiola being slowly dipped in hot oil, headfirst. With the smile of a predator, he said “Now, at the ceremony, all you really need to do is give an abbreviated speech based on your previous day’s presentation. As you did yesterday, start with that vision nonsense ... I mean prophecy. Describe the glowing bubble. Do not put yourself in that bubble. Instead, there is only a creature, a hairy, intelligent animal that hops on giant legs. It hunches forward when it is resting on those legs but remains somewhat upright. It has short arms and a large head with very expressive eyes. In your speech, you will mention those eyes, almost childlike, asking no, begging for guidance. And let me make this perfectly clear, the creature in your vision is not, I repeat not, asking for your guidance. You are only the messenger. It is asking this love from the totality of all Oslík kind. The reciprocation for this request will be channeled through the Temple. I can make life very difficult for you if you make this vision all about you. Once you are done with this part of the speech, you can talk about your artistic plans for the Temple’s Dome. That part, I do not care about. You can make it all about yourself. There should be enough there to even satisfy your gluttonous ego.”

After a pause, he waved his hand and said “That will be all. You can go now.” He instantly realized he had made a mistake by using that dismissive gesture. MasPiola pulled out a ‘slevick’ stalk and chewed a little piece. He knew it was absolutely forbidden by Temple

members, let alone in the Temple itself. He picked at one of his tail feathers and said, “I want a headdress.”

“What?” shouted Paulo the Pragmatic, losing his composure? “Impossible! That is a symbol for all we stand for. You are not an Elder.”

“Yes. That is what I want, a nice big one. If I am going to be your prophet, I may as well look like one. Oh, and make it red. I like red. It will make me stick out on stage.”

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A sea of Osliks flooded the grounds adjacent to the Dome. It was a huge festival, paid for by the Temple, to announce the winner of the competition. Most of the crowd did not care. To them, it was only a momentous occasion because it allowed them to escape the day-to-day monotony of everyday life. But far up ahead, on a platform that stood in the shadow of the Dome, it was quite different for the six figures sitting there. Gongs and noise makers started to go off, trying to get the crowd’s attention.

A female Oslik, with an enormous headdress stood up and began to shout. “The Temple, your Temple, our Temple is the center of the life force which unites all of us as Osliks. The mighty Bubble is the egg that nurtures us all. The Temple was founded on the site of the holy nest, where the Bubble created the first two eggs. We all share these as our ancestors. Now, we have built the Dome of the Egg, a sacred place that let’s all Osliks feel the unity and grace of being all one in a nest, in an egg, warm and safe and loved in the Bubble.”

As Nadia the Iconic spoke, lesser officials of the Temple, standing on pedestal which were dispersed throughout the crowd, shouted her words. She made sure to make calculated

pauses, reaching up to touch her headdress at those times. Nadia the Iconic kept talking and talking. Finally, Paulo the Pragmatic sent for his aid to deliver a message. The assistant crouched up to the podium where she was giving her long winded sermon and quietly placed it discretely in front of her. It read

“Announce the winner or I will do it!” Nadia the Iconic glanced at it and said “The interior of the Dome is what has brought here today. We, the Elders, have sacrificed much to find just the right artist to inspire us all.”

At this, all three contestants stood up straight. Two of them tried to remain calm, but both knew their lives could dramatically change in the next few seconds. The third casually groomed his fingertips with the serenity of knowing the outcome.

“It has been a unanimous decision. MasPiola will be commissioned to bring his vision to us all!” shouted Nadia with great fanfare and theatrics. Her moment, which is all she really cared about, was over. With her head and posture perfectly erect, she sat down. Her ornamental hat never wavered. She believed all eyes were still on her and would never leave. She was oblivious to all the rest.

A thunderous thumping of webbed feet came from the crowd. The face of Honore fell. MasPiola had made sure he was looking at it when the announcement came. With that little revenge played out, he strode up to the podium, placed his hands on his hips and stared down at the crowd. He did not speak, but just stood there. The Elders started to get uncomfortable. The crowd was getting uneasy. Suddenly, he threw up his head and hands and shouted.

“A vision! A vision! The vision, that is why I am here today!” declared MasPiola as he turned around and looked up. “That is why the Dome is here. This is why it was built. This is how we shall pay tribute and thanks for the great gift of life, the gift that unites us as one inside

the mighty Bubble!” He paused for a moment, trying to gauge his audience. He continued. “I want to share a story with all of you. I have never told a single soul, but today, I have the inner strength of a thousand souls, your souls my friends. When I was very young, I would fish for bubbles on the canals, just as many of you have, I am sure. It was a tiny black bubble I held in my hand so many years ago. Suddenly, it began to glow a beautiful orange color! In my youth, I tried to break it open, too eager to see inside instead of gaining insight from this miracle.

Suddenly, it turned into a ‘barrack’, which bit off the tip of my finger.” He held up his hand so all could see the missing digit. “My pinky glowed orange, but there was no blood. It healed almost instantly. I have never mentioned this before, thinking others would think I was insane. But last night, that same glowing bubble floated before my eyes. This time, I held it gently. I could feel its warmth in my hands. Slowly, very slowly, as I stared at it, I could see an image inside. At first, it was only a pair of eyes. Such childlike eyes, it almost made me cry.” MasPiola made the motion of clearing away a tear drop from his eye. “And then, in a quick burst of light, I could see a creature inside. No, my friends, this was not a being like you or me. It was from the other side of the world. We are not alone in this great Bubble!”

A collective gasp came over the crowd. Paulo the Pragmatic rubbed his hands together in delight. MasPiola had them in the palm of his hand and continued “The creature was furry. It hopped on giant legs. Its arms were small, with hands like ours. Its face was somewhat like ours, capable of the same facial expressions. At that moment, it reached out to me, touching the inside of this glowing orb. I instinctively touched the outside of that bubble, right where it touched the inside. Somehow, we were united then. I knew it was trying to communicate with me, trying to learn from Osliks. This instinctive vision pulsed through my veins. It took hold of all my creative powers. A lesser Oslik might have fainted, even died, but not I! I knew, right then, what I would

bring to the Temple's Dome of the Egg. That feeling, that duty, that sense of existence is what I shall instill in the Dome's interior. Every Oslik who opens their mind and heart, who looks up at my creation, will feel that same sense which came from my vision. This is a new day, a great day! We are not alone!" MasPiola, slumped, as if exhaustion had over run him.

A great cheer arose from the crowd. Most did not even understand why they were cheering, but they were caught up in the moment. Victor the Pious cheered and stamped the loudest. His eyes were closed. His head was lifted high, trying to see the vision of a glowing orange orb. He kept concentrating, believing he might be able to see the being inside it. He would give it a gift, the greatest gift he could give, to teach this creature how to be just like him.

After another fifteen minutes of talking, MasPiola received a note. It read "Hurry up! Others must make speeches. You did well. There is more than enough for the both of us."

When MasPiola finished his speech, a full ten minutes later, he snapped his fingers. A minion scampered towards him with a red headdress. He slowly placed it on MasPiola's head. MasPiola raised his arms in triumph and went to sit down. This act was not lost on the crowd. They understood he was now a powerful Oslik. He thought this final gesture would infuriate Paulo the Pragmatic. It did. He believed it would solidify the vision in Victor the Pious's mind. It succeeded. He calculated it would make him a colleague and confidant of Nadia the Iconic. It did not! In her mind, three headdresses were too many. Four was positively barbaric. She assumed he would try to take hers away someday. After all, hers was the finest and grandest of them all.

Victor the Pious was the next speaker to make a speech. His web feet never seemed to touch the ground; he was so elevated by divine inspiration. The words 'vision', 'destiny' and 'inspiration' peppered his speech. After a while, many of the Osliks started to tune out his

sentences. But for a few, these mental seeds started to take root; roots, that one day, would grow to action. Those influenced few started to drift to the front of the crowd. They stomped and cheered the loudest when Victor the Pious left the podium. He was feeling more alive than ever before. At that moment he had been blessed with the ‘Divine Insight.’

Paulo the Pragmatic was the final Elder to stand before the crowd. He had wanted to go last, saving the best part for himself. After a few short sentences of thanks and praise, he announced that this was the first ‘Carnival of the Dome’ and it would repeat every three years. With a wave of his arms, costumed Oslisks ran through the crowd, throwing pastries and candy. Dancers were secretly hired to look like impromptu celebrators. From the Temple Tower, sacred stones were sent down their chutes, making music for the masses. Huge puppets, handled by four or five Oslisks, floated above the swarm. Fireworks could be heard in the distance. All in all, Paulo the Pragmatic was pleased. He knew that most of the populous would remember the celebration, the festival, more than anything else. He wanted them to think of him as the Elder of the Carnival.

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All through the night MasPiola celebrated with youthful recklessness and abandon. He was high on victory, power, the future and ‘slevick’. He drank in all the praises from all admirers, well wishes and hangers on. He boasted, mocked, laughed, sang and shook his tail feathers. In his mind, every female wanted him. If it was only for his newfound fame, well, that was a part of who he was. That night, the Carnival of the Dome, was the first time he openly talked of himself in the third person, referring himself to the Great MasPiola to others.

CHAPTER 9

Ulysses watched, from atop the College observation tower, some students helping to assemble a small fleet of twenty tar skimmers. He could also see some pilgrims deciding which skimmer they would hire. These pilgrims, from the Church of Divine Insight, were easy to pick out. Each had a small orange hood. He knew a small blue circle was on the top of those hoods. He could also spot a few missionaries. They wore the same type of orange hood, but an orange orb hung around their necks. Missionaries did not mingle with pilgrims. They thought pilgrims lacked the devotion to evolve to a higher state. Pilgrims did not mix with missionaries. They believed missionaries were arrogant enough to believe in their own transcendence. Three generations of this reasoning had solidified into a permanent situation. The Studies of Systematic gladly used this to their advantage, especially during the coming of the Blue Mist. Ferrying groups to Pilgrim Island, on the other side of the Great Tar Sea, had become a very profitable industry for them.

Ulysses knew he would cross with them, but once they landed, he would go his own way. His mind wandered back and forth, between thinking of the things he needed to do for his future adventure and thinking about how best to leave the past. He was not one for long goodbyes. He would be gone for at least three years, maybe longer; perhaps forever. He decided on a few long letters to those he was closest to. The professor could send them down the mail canal after he departed. He even wrote a letter to his dead wife and took it with him. This way, they could both live this adventure of lifetime.

He still had a few weeks to prepare, but the biggest thing he needed to do was determine what to do when he reached the other side. Most of the pilgrims would set out when the Blue

Mist came and returned before it left a few weeks later. Others would stay on Pilgrim Island. It had become a tourist attraction. A few others would wander about the wasteland for a few weeks, energizing their souls. Perhaps they'd have a vision or two while they were fasting in the dry heat. They too would return before the Tar Sea was too turbulent.

As for the true missionaries, that was a different story. They were there for the long haul, at least three years. Sometimes they were gone for six or nine years. A few made it their life's work and never came back. They were committed to finding intelligent life. They knew it existed, the Amazing Flegos had proven that. Yet, for nearly three generations, they could not find any. The first few decades, they had wandered aimlessly in the wasteland. Then one day, a great missionary, Tulg, came to the desert's edge. At that boundary rose an enormous natural wall, like a mountain range, but it was much more vertical. The College scientists said it was made from the same material as the Great Tar Sea, but it had hardened to a solid. It had become known as Tulg's Wall and it was sacred to the missionaries. They decided to carve a stairway into this overwhelming barrier and reach the top. Many had dedicated their life to building these stairs and many had died. Reaching the top was synonymous with reaching a higher state of being. Their teachings had told them that once they reached the summit, a vision would tell them what to do next. Unfortunately, the stairway was nowhere close to the top. At the current rate of carving, it might take five or six more generations to achieve that lofty goal. Still, letting future generations stand on their shoulders was a noble goal; a goal they zealously undertook. Besides, many believed Fledgicks were waiting on the other side, desperate to be saved by the Osliks with Divine Insight.

That was the dilemma that faced Ulysses, either the desert or the wall. He believed his grandfather had gotten over Tulg's Wall; or under it. Again, that was assuming MasPiola did not

make up the sketches of the different creatures out of his imagination. The twinges of doubts were always with him.

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Later that day, Professor Motz was looking through some of MasPiola's papers. He was hoping for some insight, some clue to help Ulysses on his voyage. There was no mention of Tulg's Wall. The Great MasPiola had left some forty years before it was discovered. He pulled out the map which he had copied with MasPiola's help so many years ago. He noticed a small symbol. He had seen it before. It took him a minute to remember it was in one of those sketches, the one of the Fledgick. It was on the back in the lower corner. Next to it was a smaller symbol, one that was in the black diary. In that little book, next to that symbol were the following words.

‘UNDERGROUND STREAM. Many days. No glow’.

On the next page of the diary were some descriptions and pictures. Sketches of Extufs faces started to show up. Had MasPiola contacted these Extufs? Perhaps an underground stream surfaced where they lived. He hoped these clues held some encrypted logic that extended the original map. If that were true, he could use all the archived knowledge from the pilgrim's maps. These maps had been growing in detail over the last two generations. He grew more and more excited. Eagerly, he started his investigation. Ulysses would be there in a few hours. He wanted to crack the code, if there was one, before they were to meet.

Ulysses could not find the professor. They had agreed to meet at the arranged time, but the library was empty. There, on the floor was a large map, with three dimensional contours. He could pick out Pilgrim's Island, Tulg's Wall, the seashore, the major oasis of the desert and some other landmarks. He was startled by the voice of Professor Motz saying "I have it! I believe I know it!" Try as he might, Ulysses could not see where the voice was coming from. Eventually, he looked up and the professor was hanging in a network of ropes which suspended him high above the map on the floor. "Give me a pole." shouted the voice from above, pointing in the direction of a long stick that lay beneath him. As Ulysses handed it to him, the professor pointed to a place on the map and said "Put a small mark right there and then help me down. I'll explain in a minute."

The highly detailed map, which was maintained by the College, ended at Tulg's Wall. Professor Motz had extended beyond it with bits and pieces. These new parts came from the knowledge extracted from MasPiola's black book. At least, it was the professor's best attempt to do so. The spot, where Ulysses had freshly made a mark, was nearly in the middle of the wasteland, known to the missionaries as the Terrible Tremors. From that awful place, had come documented sightings of massive creatures with two antennae, gigantic mouths, thick tails and sweet addictive odor. Few traveled that way; it was very dangerous. Those who ventured out there, and had successfully returned, were quite mad. They had the unquenchable cravings of an addict. Far to the west of that retched spot, lay Tulg's Wall. This is where the College's map ended. To left of the Wall, the professor had laid down large sheets of paper. He had drawn symbols on those sheets. Numbers were written in between a direct line from one symbol to another. These represented days of travel, presumably by walking, and came directly from MasPiola's black book.

“I have a lot of questions,” said Ulysses. “It might just be easier if you explain all of this to me.”

Professor Motz raised himself on the tips of his webs, he was so delighted. This is what he lived for, giving a lecture to a captivated audience; one that would hang on his every word. “Very well” he started. “Let us start at the beginning” Your grandfather said he had gained the confidence of the Amazing Flegos. Let’s assume, at least for now, that is true. That is why the map he made, which is the one copy we have here, would be invaluable. By showing landmarks the Flegos described, it can tell us where the expedition originally found them. Look at this line here” he pointed to a thin line to the far left of Tulg’s Wall. “It was far west of them in the distance, so the Flegos only knew it as some type of mountain range. The map they described to him is on both sides of that line. The Flegos had crossed over, I suspect under the Great Wall, without even realizing it. I do not think they ever came close enough to it to really know how immense it was. I mean to say they never saw it close, above ground. MasPiola’s log helps fill in the gaps of the original map which the Flegos described. Your grandfather describes both east and west of the Wall. He was on the other side of it.

This elevated Ulysses’ heart. He had a tangible direction and how to get there. Both knew that there was probably a passage which went under the Wall, not over it or through it. That is why MasPiola’s old map never displayed Tulg’s Wall as anything more than just a thin line.

The professor continued. “There must be some type of underground canal in the Terrible Tremors. See those three circles on the map. They must be the Three Oasis of Larft. Once you are there, you will have to start looking for the landmarks described in his notes and sketches. There should be a cave. MasPiola would have made some drawings on its inside. When you are in it, listen for water, use your Oslik instincts. Find the current underground. Float down it. In a few

days, you should begin to see some light filtering through the cracks above. When you do, you will know you are on the other side of Tulg's Wall. Hopefully, the rest of the map I made today will make some sense and you will see some of these other landmarks. Maybe, these intelligent beings will find you."

"Do you really think he had the confidence of the Flegos? I mean, there is a tiny concern to me that this is all an elaborate hoax."

"I think MasPiola intended to return home with that tube. He and I were the only ones that knew about the Flego's map. And without that, the rest of the log and sketches are meaningless. No, I fully believe he went to the other side and made contact. He was returning home, with the tube, but never made it across the Great Tar Sea. Only the tube washed up on our shore's generations later. He left the map in disjointed logical pieces so only he could put the puzzle back together again. I am sure his plan was to return in triumph and make great paintings about life on the other side."

"Well, professor, you have convinced me this is real. I'd better start packing and planning."

"Having second thoughts?"

"A little, but just making the trip over will prove something, a least to me."

"One piece of advice, Ulysses, but you probably already knew it. I wouldn't let those pilgrims know you are a direct descendant of the Great MasPiola. You know how it ruined your own father's life, drove him into seclusion."

"I have no desire to mention that fact on my little adventure. As far as anyone else is concerned, I am just another pilgrim, wandering and fasting in the desert. Once I am in the wastelands, no one will bother me."

“Except for the Terrible Tremors monster.”

“Oh yes, I forgot about them. I don’t think they’ll care much.” Ulysses said laughing, a strain of comprehension in his voice.

CHAPTER 10

It had been nearly six weeks since the Festival of the Dome. MasPiola had become a celebrity overnight. At first, it was very hectic and very little work was actually done to the Dome's interior. He had to meet regularly with the town criers from the boroughs, answering the same questions repeatedly. But now, the daily crowds were thinning out. He and the Dome had become part of the normal landscape. A little disconcerting was the small band of Osliks that made a tiny camp right next to the Dome. They were regulars and it looked like they would become permanent. Victor the Pious seemed to have them under control and MasPiola was grateful for that.

MasPiola had requested an engineer from the Studies of Systematic. He needed scaffolding built. This would be crucial when the base of the interior was finished with its figures of Osliks. The scaffold needed to be circular and rise over time as the artist worked his way up to the top. A young Oslik, with his tail feathers recently stained red walked up to him.

"It is a pleasure and honor to meet the Great MasPiola" he said, trying to be bolder than he was. "My name is Professor Motz, the associate engineer you requested from the College."

MasPiola looked up from his work. "Associate engineer! Get out of here! I need a full professor of engineering!" He was about to kick him in the tail feathers when he noticed they were red. "Did you dye them yourself? I'll make sure your superiors cut them off and tie them around your scrawny neck!"

Professor Motz gathered the courage to speak. "I just got them yesterday. I know it is unusual to be read and not be a full professor, but I've come up with some new ideas, new inventions. That is why they sent me down to you. I heard your speech, your vision at the award

ceremony. Since then, I have been designing and building a model for the Dome's interior. It is exactly what you'll need; I am sure of it. Please, allow me the opportunity to show you."

MasPiola could see a wagon with a model in it. Pointing to it, he asked "Is that it?"

"Why, yes."

The artist scrutinized it for a while, asking a few questions. Professor Motz answered all with precision and started to explain how it worked. MasPiola was very impressed but refused to show it. Finally, he said "Yes, that is exactly how I would have designed it. You will do. Just stay out of my way when I am working. Oh, and one more thing, I like a nice hot mug of 'chiolte' in the morning. Make sure you bring one each day. I expect it to be hot, but not too hot.

I have very sensitive taste buds, extraordinary taste buds.

Paulo the Pragmatic had come regularly to see the Dome's progress. He was concerned because his spies told him the common Osliks called it MasPiola's Dome, not the Temple's Dome. He had made sure the town cries never mentioned the name MasPiola. Instead, they referred to him as only the Temple's artist in residence. Still, MasPiola had become the face of the Dome. Paulo the Pragmatic had planned the whole project to be done in three years, in time for the anniversary of the first Festival of the Dome. It was well into the second year and the scaffolding was only one fourth of the way up. The longer it took, the more entrenched MasPiola became. Paulo the Pragmatic's original plan was to use him, then quickly get rid of him, but he was painfully realizing this was not to be. Two things needed to happen. First, the Dome must be finished. He could not figure out a way to hurry it up. Secondly, a plan needed to be made that would secretly make MasPiola disappear. The timing of the second depended upon the

completion of the first. In the meantime, he and Nadia the Iconic had developed a relationship which could only be forged with conspiracy. Both he and his sister Elder had a common bond, they both hated MasPiola. Paulo the Pragmatic detested him personally. Nadia the Iconic despised the head that dared to wear a headdress.

“When are you going to finish?” shouted Paulo the Pragmatic, his words echoing inside the Dome, his eyes straining to find MasPiola.

“You can’t rush genius, but I guess you would have no way of knowing that.” came the reply from high up in the scaffold.

“What if I sent some assistant artists to help you?”

Paulo the Pragmatic ducked as a glob of paint came hurdling past him and splattered on the floor. Professor Motz came running, seemingly out of nowhere, cleaning it up. MasPiola was very pleased as he watched the scene unfold below. Too bad he had missed, but Motz was turning into a proper little toady. Paulo the Pragmatic left, shouting that he would return in a day or two. It would be the price he was willing to pay for a masterpiece. In the end, Paulo the Pragmatic knew he would get all he wanted. Time and patience were on his side, they always were.

One day, MasPiola was watching Professor Motz lift the scaffolding. He was very impressed with the young engineer, but never let on. He decided to have some with him.

“Professor Motz, come here. Last night, I was quite bored, so I figured I’d try my hand at ideas for some inventions. Of course, you know, this type of thing is child’s play to me, but it amuses me. Anyway, I’d like you to build a model for me. It is a raft that can cross the Great Tar Sea, when it is calm of course.

Professor Motz had no way of knowing MasPiola had seen the College's Tar skimmer a year earlier. The College had kept it, and the Fledgicks, a secret. He described certain design details that astounded Professor Motz. It had taken nearly a generation of trial and error to build the prototype, yet here was MasPiola, cutting through all that using only his thought processes. In his mind, this made MasPiola not only an artistic visionary, but an engineering and design genius. He really was the Great MasPiola, the most gifted and rare Oslik in all the bubble.

He could read the astonishment in the young engineer's eyes. "Well," said MasPiola "that's one vision I don't have time for. You can use it, say it is your own idea, I don't care. You are a good worker. I'd be glad to share any little tidbits of visions I can't use. Anyway, get back to work. My time is valuable."

Professor Motz went back to work. That night at the College, he told his fellow associates of the fantastic engineering mind of the Great MasPiola. Sadly, he never received any new ideas from MasPiola and he never drew any conclusions about why.

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The two Fledgicks had been at the College for some time now. It was getting harder to keep them a secret from the outside world. Professor Franken, who oversaw their well-being, was worried about this. He knew, as did most of the college, the Temple had already known. MasPiola's vision was a little too precise in its description. It could not have been a coincidence. Rumors, probably started by the Temple, were spreading. These rumors suggested the College was keeping a dark secret; a secret that would eventually destroy Oslik life as they knew it.

Distrust of science was looming. Professor Franken despaired about what would happen to his Fledicks in such a toxic atmosphere. His worst thoughts were of a zoo, the public demanding they be put on display. His conscience knew they were already captives of the College, but his mind was calmed about thoughts of the Blue Mist. In a few more years, the Tar Sea will be calm again. Then, he could return his beloved friends back to their home on the other side of the world. Until then, he would try to protect and make them as comfortable as possible.

Try as he might, he could not find a way to communicate with them. A team of others got the same negative results. Both he and the team knew the Fledicks were trying to talk to them, but there was no meaningful dialogue. There were only the animal basics, like ‘time to eat’ or ‘scratch my ear’. Professor Franken desperately wanted to tell them they would be safe; comfort them with the knowledge of returning home. He could see that both Fledicks could communicate with each other, but the ‘verb’ and ‘noun’ concept of speech did not seem to work with them. It was obvious they were aware of their own conscience.

Paulo the Pragmatic had gotten word the College was going to announce the existence of the two creatures. That left him with a dilemma. First, he could play up the Vision, which would enhance the Temple, but also make MasPiola a prophet. That would work, but only if he could get rid of MasPiola. Perhaps a half finished Dome could be more intriguing, more everlasting than a finished one. The second option was to spread more propaganda, saying both the creatures and college were evil. He could play on the fears of the Oslis. At the same time, he could make MasPiola look like a conspirator who had tricked the Temple. Paulo the Pragmatic would then

step in and save the day, getting rid of MasPiola and the College all in one bold move. This required some more thought.

In the end, he had decided to let it play itself out, seeing which way the wind blew. It was always easier to ride the tide of public sentiment than to mold it. All he needed was a little influence with the town criers, just to put a tiny spin on any announcements.

A few days later, many in the boroughs woke in the morning glow to hear the shouting from their town squares. “We are not alone! Intelligent life found on the other side of the world. Temple Elders will convene with the Studies of Systematic!” Osliks poured into their squares. All kinds of rumors started to fly. Vision believers fell to their knees and looked upward. The fearful spoke of the end of the world. The curious wanted descriptions and details. The entrepreneur decided to make little statues, whenever they could get a glimpse of these fantastic creatures. They could sell them as souvenirs, with the words ‘We are not alone’ at the base. Mothers told little children to be good or the newly found monster would eat them. Yes, they would all remember where they were on that momentous day.

For the most part, most of the Osliks took this news with optimistic excitement. The source of their individual excitement, though, was varied. Paulo the Pragmatic had called a meeting of borough elders. They would each meet individually with him, allowing him to gauge the populous. He had learned a lesson, a few years earlier, when the Temple had held a conference. Osliks, by nature are not hostile, at least not in the collective sense. The crowd mentality did not bring out violent instincts. No, Osliks will throw dung at each other when angered. That situation needed to be avoided.

Some of the borough elders said the Temple should act as a moral ambassador, injecting their advice into the College. Others felt the creatures should become guests of the Temple, with the College having only visiting rights. Pomp and ceremony topped both proposals. Two of the outlying boroughs feared the aliens. That was their nature to distrust what they did not know. It was easier than going through the effort to gain knowledge. There was even talk, by them, of commissioning the College to build a huge dung throwing catapult. Paulo the Pragmatic dismissed the idea, but later decided he liked the concept. He would have such a weapon made for himself.

Still, the more intelligent elders questioned how these beings got over from the other side. How had they crossed the Great Tar Sea? Had they come by themselves or had the College brought them? To them, traveling over brought more intrigue than anything else. Three of the borough elders did not meet with Paulo the Pragmatic. Instead, they were represented by Victor the Pious, the pious. He entered the room wearing his headdress. Paulo the Pragmatic quickly reached for his and placed it crookedly on his head. Victor the Pious began to speak. "I represent the followers of the Vision. What the prophet MasPiola has foreseen has come true. We know what is best for these poor creatures. It is our duty, our destiny."

Paulo the Pragmatic was taken aback. It took a minute to register the fact that a cult was being formed. He had not really thought about it. The gears of his mind started to turn, calculating how best to use them.

CHAPTER 11

And so, Ulysses found himself sitting in a tar skimmer alongside three other pilgrims and a skimmer captain. Altogether, the small flotilla had nine crafts. The more maneuverable lead skimmer was out in front. The other eight were tethered together to form a single line. It was not just the marvelous mechanics which drew Ulysses' attention. He was fascinated by the skill of the captain; constantly turning wheels, pulling levers and paddling a wheel with her feet. The other three pilgrims paid no attention to this. It was not their first time on a pilgrimage.

The older and fatter pilgrim to his right said "Fascinating, isn't it. My name is Robert. I am a merchant. I come every three years. There is no reason I cannot be a pilgrim and do a little business on the side." The second voyager identified herself as Anita. She spoke to all of them. "I'm thinking of joining the Church, but that would disappoint my father. My mother said I should go over and fast. Hopefully, my true calling will appear. I'm not sure how I'd tell if I were having a vision or if I was being delusional. "

Robert gave a hearty laugh. "What you need is a little inspiration from the Great MasPiola!" He reached into a box with several small statues. He pulled out one of the carvings of MasPiola, holding an orange orb in his palm. At the base of this sculpture were the words 'You are not alone'. He said "I sell these on Pilgrim Island. Here, you can have this one. I've got plenty of them."

You could feel the tension when the last pilgrim stated coldly "You should not take light, that which you cannot understand/" He looked younger than the others, but he seemed to have a depth about him; a deepness which comes from embracing the heaviness of life and abandoning the lighter side as trivial. Ulysses resisted the urge to tell this stranger he knew nothing about his

grandfather. This was the type of Oslik he wanted to avoid. Yet he found himself asking “What does this pilgrimage mean to you?”

“There is value in my life. The pilgrimage helped me know that. MasPiola’s calling brought me over the first time. The second time, I fasted in the wasteland. I had a vision, but I was tempted by the fruit of the Trembling monster. I was addicted to that terrible temptation. Others took care of me and returned me home. I joined the Church of Divine Insight to help me understand my vision. I will now go to Tulg’s Wall and be a laborer for the stairway. I will serve the missionaries, if they will have me. I must live out the rest of my days redeeming myself for eating the forbidden fruit.”

Anita looked sympathetically at him. “You poor, tortured soul” she said.

Robert jumped in “A very noble, young Oslik you are. The journey to the Wall is quite an undertaking. It will take a long time to get there. How are you fixed for supplies? When we land at Pilgrim Island, I have just the things you’ll need for such a journey.” He quickly adds “And at the cheapest prices.”

Ulysses remembered his missionary training, so many years ago. He knew the ‘Forbidden Fruit’ was the addictive secretions of the monstrous animals that lived in the area known as the Terrible Tremors. He asked the pilgrim “Did you see those monsters? Can you tell me about them?” “There was no answer. He rephrased his question. “Did you encounter the evil which tempted you with its fruit in that unholy place?”

“I saw them only from a distance. The ground trembled when they were near, so I hid. I hid like a coward instead of confronting them. I was not strong enough, only weak enough to eat their temptation. I did not have the courage of MasPiola.”

“What about water? Did you smell any water when you were in the wasteland?”

“No. The only water is in the three heavenly oases that lay before you enter the desert.”

“Can you tell me about the forbidden Fruit? How did you find it?”

“You do not find it. It finds you! You are drawn to it. You live for its taste, for its smell.

It keeps drawing you back to that unholy place. I do not want to think about it. Leave me alone!”

He then pulled out three small stones and rolled them in the palm of his hand. His lips moved slightly, repeating phrases in his mind, not realizing his lips read his thoughts.

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Pilgrim Island was a comfortable retreat for some. For others, it was the point where your quest was launched. Ulysses fell into the latter category, so the line he had to stand was less dense. Those travelers, heading to the wasteland, formed small packs. Once they reached the desert, they would each go their own separate way. They would seek insight by themselves just like the Great MasPiola had done before them. Ulysses found himself in the company of Anita again. He helped her with some supplies.

As they walked, she asked “Did you get everything you need? I hear it can get cold when the glow dims.”

“I think so. When I bought all of this, I was feeling confident in my barter skills.’ He pointed to the bundle of goods slung over his shoulder. “But now, I think Robert got the better of me.”

“I find that hard to believe.” She giggled.

For a moment, Ulysses thought she was flirting with him. He did not want to be an old fool, but she might be his last contact with any other Oslik. “Well,” he said, “I have lived a rich and full life.” The rest of the day he sucked in his stomach and preened his feathers a lot.

The two of them talked a great deal over the three-day trek. Ulysses spoke of his dead wife, his sculpture and his dreams. He never mentioned his grandfather. Anita talked of her family, her male friend back home and her indecision on which path to take in life. At one point she asked “What are you going into the Terrible Tremors? I can tell you are not a fanatic. It’s dangerous there. If you aren’t killed, you’ll lose your mind; go insane.”

“A quest.” he answered, “I cannot speak of it.” He put his hands on his hips, stood statuesquely erect and lifted his chin high. Right then and there, he felt bigger than life. He also hoped he looked that way to Anita. Through the corner of his eye, he tried to get a quick glimpse of her facial expression.

“A quest? What is it?” she grabbed his arm enthusiastically. “Tell me.”

“I cannot. I must not.” He said, trying to sound mysterious.

She kept tickling him as they walked, whispering in his ear and smoothing his neck feathers. Little by little, she coaxed out bits and pieces of information. It was a happy, flirtatious game which made the time fly. In the distance, both could see the three Heavenly Oases, the entrance to his voyage and the boundary to hers. It was getting dark, and they huddled together for warm. Together, they made a nest. The cool, dry desert air made it even more exotic.

The glow of day woke Ulysses, and he found Anita was gone. At first, he thought about following her footprints, but he did not. As he paddled about in the oasis, he felt alive, even energized. He was strong again, age being only a state of mind. He took a big breath of fresh air

and started to march, straight into the land known as Terrible Tremors. When he was far enough from the oasis, far enough so no one could hear, he shouted “I am the Great Ulysses!”

Ulysses looked at his map. The first landmark was easy enough to spot. In the distance, five shafts of light glowed from the top of the bubble, down to the ground. It was obvious that he should walk towards them. So far, the Terrible Tremors looked no different than the rest of the wasteland. The landmark was a lot further away than it seemed, but most destinations are like that. When he finally reached it, the dimness of day was starting to set in. From there, the map pointed to something long and vertical, coming out of the ground. Sadly, he could not see anything that resembled it. He looked in MasPiola’s little black log book. There was a notation in it which read ‘It only comes out at dark’. That did not make sense to him. If he could not see it now, how would it be more visible at night? He decided to camp there and rest.

Suddenly, he was shaken out of his sleep by a huge cracking sound. The ground trembled violently. “The monsters!” he thought. He began to panic. He was surrounded by nothing but wide-open spaces. There was no place to run and nowhere to hide. Another loud cracking sound came, and he fell to his knees, face down. He covered his head with his hands.

”Crack!” ”Crack!” ”Crack!”

Again and again, the thunderous noise came, the ground shaking in harmony. He lay there for what seemed like a lifetime. The cracking thunder grew less and less harsh until it stopped. Spreading the fingers that shielded his eyes, he could see a huge glow. A gigantic green, luminous shaft had sprung up out of the ground. It sprang right out of the center of a large crater. It reached up high to nature’s dome. Strings of mist from the dome seemed to drift down to the

top of the shaft. Ulysses knew it was gathering nutrients. He also knew he should go to the base of this plant, because it held his next clue. On the map, near the symbol of the shaft was a drawn circle. Next to the circle was the word 'down'. There were also added notes in the log saying 'Run to the center, look around, past the top of the crater. There should be one peak which tower above the rest. Walk to that peak. Do not stay on the crater. Danger!'

The word 'Danger' naturally caught his eye. He looked down at the bottom of the crater. Did he really need to run down to the bottom? He did not think he needed to follow the instructions too literally. It was probably just MasPiola's way of having some fun at someone else's expense. In a tiny act of defiance, he slowly strolled down to the bottom. It was a little steep, but not too hard to walk down. He felt pretty good, happy in fact. This was turning out to be a marvelous adventure. Once he reached the bottom, he looked up. It was easy enough to spot the highest peak. He would just aim for it as he climbed up out of this hole. He decided it would be best to just stand there for a while, before he would start his ascent. It was beautiful own there: the air so cool, the smells so sweet and soothing. It was intoxicating. He found himself sitting, grabbing a handful of sand and sniffing it. He grabbed two big handfuls and inhaled. He wanted more. He dug deeper and breathed heavier. Suddenly, his hands found a smooth globe, hidden in the earth below. It was some type of treasure. He dug with unbridled enthusiasm. As he brought it out of its grave, he screamed, dropped it and ran straight up out of the crater. He looked down at the Oslik skull he had just dropped. He tried to catch his breath as he rested with his hands on his knees. After a moment, he realized he could not spot the tallest peak. At least he could not see it from this vantage point. He realized he would have to go back to the crater's bottom to get the right perspective.

This time he prepared himself. He ran down to the bottom, looked up, spotted the tallest peak and raced back up without any hesitation. From now on, he would pay closer attention to MasPiola's notes.

CHAPTER 12

At first, the Studies of Systematic would only let a few dignitaries from the outside see the two Fledgicks. Later, more and more Osliks camped outside the college, hoping to see a glimpse of these new creatures. At that point, The College decided to take a more long-term plan. This plan meant slowly opening visiting hours. That eventually led to the Amazing Flegos going on tour to some of the larger boroughs.

Professor Franken scratched Jumper's ear. He was very attached to both Fledgicks, but especially Jumper. "I'm sorry I brought you both back here," he said. "Maybe it would have been best to let you die in peace on the other side. I'll do my best to protect you. Would you like to practice now? I know it's been a long tour, but it's over now, I'll make sure you have a comfortable new home. We'll still have to put on two shows a day, but at least you won't have to travel." His heart ached as he saw the poster with the bold letters on it, saying 'The Amazing Flegos'. At least this publicity stunt had stopped the fear and hate mongers.

He held a little whistle in his hand and blew it. Both Fledgicks jumped in unison in a series of very complex movements. They showed power and grace at the same time. Jumper stood on the back of her colleague and sang a high pitch sound. Hopper started to make a humming, clicking sound. After a few seconds, the sounds of both were in harmony, making music that Osliks had never heard. Slowly, the two Fledgicks began to move in perfect rhythm with their song. It lasted quite a while, but they knew just the perfect place to put in a pause or increase the speed or jump as high as they could. They seemed to know they were giving a performance and were caught up in the emotion of the event. After the rehearsal, Professor Franken tried to teach them a few words of Oslik. He tried to get them to pronounce the words

“You are not alone. We are here.” If you stretched your imagination, and knew what they were trying to say, you might be able to convince yourself they had succeeded. This little speech was intended for the new grand finale. It looked like the old finale would have to stay in place. Jumper picked up an Oslik flag and marched across the stage, while Hopper carried a sign for some advertisement. Professor Franken clapped and said “You both did very well. Let’s go get you something to eat.” This they understood and ran to him.

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“They are just children. They need our guidance. The prophecy must be allowed to bear fruit.” Victor the Pious said to Paulo the Pragmatic. “You said our first course was to show the Osliks that there is nothing to fear from these creatures. I can assure you; no one is afraid of them. They are celebrities. Let the true believers try and communicate with them. It is time for MasPiola’s vision; time to reach out to their souls.

Paulo the Pragmatic had planned this happening. He pretended to be contemplating Victor the Pious’s words, but he had already rehearsed the response months earlier. “Of course, you are right, Victor. This is why you are known as the ‘Pious’. Your devotion is the heart and soul of the Temple.”

Victor the Pious beamed and said, “The Temple is the center and the Dome its nest.”

“That is why we must build a new home for our children, the Flegos. It can be built right where those most loyal have been camping. Just their devotion has sanctified that ground. These followers look on you as their leader, do they not?”

“Yes, yes they do.” said Victor the Pious. “It will take some time to find them a new camp. Also, I must engage the College to start constructing a new home for these innocent beings. This will take some time.”

“My dear Victor the Pious, please don’t concern yourself with these trivial matters. The College has already been contacted, designs approved and construction is to start next week. We are all in harmony, all in one in our noble mission. Have you decided how you will try to communicate with these gentle Flegos?”

“It is the Prophet MasPiola who is destined to do this. He will teach us how to talk to them. It will be our role to teach them to see as we see, hear as we hear, think as we think and believe as we believe. They are our children. What greater sacrifice, what greater gift can we give them?”

Paulo the Pragmatic cringed when he heard the mention of MasPiola. He said “MasPiola must finish the Dome. The Dome was his vision. I think you should get to know these Flegicks. You are the great teacher, Victor the Pious.”

“I shall consult MasPiola” replied Victor the Pious. “He will be my beacon.”

“I’m sure he will. He can shed light on a lot of things.”

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After the two Elders parted, Paulo the Pragmatic went over to the Dome. He went when he knew it was empty. The interior was living up to its hype, but he suspected MasPiola would drag out its completion; drag it out way past the original timeline of three years. The longer it took, the more the Dome and MasPiola became one entity, an entity to compete with the Temple.

At least he could get rid of that camp of Victor the Pious's followers, but even that was temporary. He had no doubt Victor would find a permanent home for them, with himself as their leader. Somehow, he must get rid of that cult and that arrogant artist. He decided on the empty Dome, and this particular moment, was the perfect time to think this through.

Martyrdom was the best solution to get rid of both Victor the Pious and MasPiola. The Flegos, trampling them to death would be perfect, but how could he set those events into action. He would have to shelve that idea for another day. A more realistic solution would be to send the two creatures back to the other side when the Blue Mist returned. It should not be too hard to convince Victor the Pious to go with them. MasPiola, now that was a different story. He would never travel across the Great Tar Sea and give up all he had. Things were way too good for him on this side. There would never be enough incentive for him, but blackmail was another thing. The question was how to do it. He had come up with several ideas, but all were flawed and could easily backfire. Part of Paulo the Pragmatic's sinister cleverness was that he had patience. He still had a year until the sea was calm enough. He would have to get Nadia the Iconic involved, without her realizing it of course. He was sure she could be instrumental in getting rid of MasPiola.

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MasPiola came down from the scaffolding to take a break. He stepped outside to see what was going on outside because he heard a lot of noise from there. The little camp of tents, which had grown since he first started to paint the Dome, was slowly packing up. He loved watching others work; it was one of his favorite hobbies. When one of the campers walked close to him, he

shouted “I thought you were staying for the long haul. Getting bored sitting on your tail feathers all day? Where are you going?”

“The Amazing Flegos are coming. Their new home will be right here. Your Vision is becoming clearer each day, oh Great MasPiola. Thank you! Thank you!” said Oslík as he bowed reverently to him. MasPiola reached out his hand so the other could kiss it. It got a little uncomfortable because he was not wearing an Elder’s ring, so the camper did not know what to kiss. Finally, he just straightened up and shook his hand, exclaiming what a great honor it was to do so. “It certainly is, for you.” said MasPiola in aristocratic fashion as he stormed inside.

“Professor Motz! Professor Motz! Where are you?” he asked. He loved hearing his own voice echo inside the Dome. “Tell me know what you know about the Flegos!” He could hear the young professor coming down.

“The Feldgicks, why I thought you knew. I thought you’d be the first to know.” said Professor Motz. The artist did not want to let on that he was left out in the dark by many things. MasPiola took a lazy swipe at the other’s head and shouted “I didn’t ask you about what I know. I asked you to tell me what you know. Are you too dense to see the difference?”

Ducking his head, he replied “Sorry, I don’t see the difference.” The two stood staring at each other for a moment. Finally, MasPiola said ‘Just tell me what you know. I’ll have to explain philosophy to you another time.’

“Well,” Professor Motz began “the College has learned all it can from the two Fledgicks. We know a lot about their biology and physical requirements. The smaller one is female, and the bigger one is male. We haven’t seen them mate, at least not since they have been here.”

“Interesting” said MasPiola. “I’ll have to investigate that. Continue.”

“We know they are intelligent. They can communicate with each other, but for the life of us, we cannot understand how. It is verbal and visual, like us. Anyway, the College has decided to let the Temple have some guidance with them. We did not want to be seen as cold, heartless academics; only interested in cold facts. There are those who believe this is the next step in your Vision being fulfilled. A new habitat for them is going to be built right next to the Dome. Victor the Pious will oversee trying to communicate with them, at least at a more spiritual level.”

“I see.” said MasPiola “The best of luck to them.” He then added hesitantly “Oh, did my name get mentioned.”

“Of course it was, MasPiola. You are the prophet who foresaw all of this. The Flegos were your inspiration, your vision, to create all of this.” Professor Motz looked up at the Dome’s interior.

MasPiola felt a pit in his stomach. He smelled a trap. Just to be sure he asked, “What does Paulo the Pragmatic say about all of this?” Surely, my Dome is the highest priority. I am already behind schedule. I’ve only had one vision since I started my masterpiece. That is my destiny, not being an animal trainer.”

“All the Elders agreed you are the one. In fact, Paulo the Pragmatic insisted on it. By placing the Flegos next to the Dome, you can talk to them, and they can inspire you to finish the Dome. In fact, Paulo the Pragmatic has commissioned the College to come up with a series of tests, tests that will prove you can communicate with them at the highest levels.”

“Does he now? What if the ideas they tell me are too advanced for Osliks? After all, I am a superior Oslik, am I not?”

“Victor the Pious says you are certainly the Prophet, but the Fledgicks are mere children. He and his followers will take the burden of teaching them. Your job will be to find a common

language which will allow Victor the Pious to talk to them directly. Once that is done, you can finish the Dome.”

“Victor the Pious.” said MasPiola. “Yes, I will need to confer with him. Now get back to work! You’ve wasted too much of my time already.”

As Professor Motzscurried up to climb up the scaffolding, MasPiola sat down to think. Victor the Pious would be easy enough to manipulate. All he needed to do was determine the things Victor the Pious wanted to hear. He would be more than willing to believe those ideas came directly from the Flegos. The problem was some type of test the College of Madness would dream up. If he failed that test, Paulo the Pragmatic could say MasPiola was not a real prophet. Once discredited, Paulo the Pragmatic could pay someone else to have a vision, maybe Honore. MasPiola tried to convince himself that he was already way ahead of the game. He was established as a great artist. That could not be taken away from him. But in the back of his mind, this was a contest of wills between himself and Paulo the Pragmatic. What good was fame if he could not wipe that smug smile of that pompous Elder? This battle would become a life-changing obsession.

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As the new home of the Fledgicks started to take shape, MasPiola tried to find more and more ways to run into Victor the Pious. MasPiola began to realize Victor the Pious had steadily become a fanatic with a small army of loyal followers.

“I want these innocent creatures to become novices in the Temple.” Victor the Pious said to MasPiola. “I want them to be able to mediate and repeat the sacred prayers. I want them to take

part in the sacrament if the Blue Mist. Our faith should be theirs. This way, we know they are the best they can possibly be. This will allow them to evolve on the correct path.”

“Yes, I can see you are right. They don’t call you Victor the Pious for nothing. I couldn’t agree with you more.” MasPiola, at that moment, knew what he needed to do. He needed to get some animal training skills. All he had to do was to teach the Flegos to hold their hands a certain way, how to roll a stone up a ramp, when to touch the holy relics, the proper way to kneel in the mist and other such movements. As far as talking, all they needed to do was make some noises and hand gestures, which he could convince Victor the Pious was sign language. If he could do that, he could trick Victor the Pious into believing they were truly enlightened. Victor the Pious was crazy enough to fall for such a plan. There were enough true believers who distrusted the College. They would distrust it enough to protect the Amazing Flegos from any College interference, especially a test. MasPiola was very happy with his new scheme. Maybe, he could sneak into Paulo the Pragmatic’s sleeping nest and dye his tail feathers red. He knew that was just a fantasy, but crazier things could happen. He let his imagination soar.

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Paulo the Pragmatic hated going to the Studies of Systematic. Normally, he would insist on them coming to him. After all, the Temple was paying the College for this, but he wanted to convey a feeling of kinship. This is one of the few times sciences would support his cause; to paint MasPiola as a fake prophet. The spotlight of the public should be on its rightful place, the Dome and the Temple. He tolerated having to wait for the College’s dean, Professor Stan.

“My dear Paulo the Pragmatic, it is great to see you again.” said the dean. “Too often we are on opposite sides of a debate. There is always common ground for us if we both look for it.”

“Yes. Yes, my dear friend.” was the quick reply. “These Fledgicks are the links between our two philosophies. The Temple needs, and respects, the college’s wisdom, just as you do to us. A prophet can be a dangerous thing, without assurance that he is pure and truthful.”

“I agree with you, but I’m sure you came here to learn the type of test we are preparing. In the first test, MasPiola will tell the two Fledgicks that three objects will be given to them. He will first tell them to touch the shiniest object, then the tallest and finally the smallest. MasPiola will then leave the room, and we will bring in the three objects. If they are successful, we will move on to the second part. They will be taken outside. MasPiola will ask them to point to an Oslik made object, then a thing made by nature and then a religious object. We want to see if they talk to each other, trying to differentiate between an Oslik made object and a religious object. If they can accomplish all of this, I’d believe MasPiola is communicating with them on an abstract level. We, the College, have not been able to talk to them at that level. If MasPiola can do all of this, the College would be willing to admit there is some higher power involved; we will give the Temple its due. We will say there is some solid evidence of the Vision.

“That is all the Temple ever wanted, to have our teachings on the same foothold as your scientific teachings.” Paulo the Pragmatic was confident MasPiola would fail. His primary goal was to debunk MasPiola as a prophet, get him to finish the Dome and then get rid of him. A bonus would be to reign in Victor the Pious and his followers. They could be useful to him.

CHAPTER 13

Ulysses had been traveling in the desert for four days now. Sometimes the map and clues were obvious, but too often, they were not. He was not sure if it was just a bizarre coincidence, but he kept finding himself instinctively drawn to a crater. He had no way of knowing it was there until he stumbled into it. The area he found himself in had more and more craters. These holes did not seem to be on the map. Maybe they were new, at least new over the last two hundred years. His map told him he was heading west, away from the Great Tar Sea. He was certain he was going in the right direction, but in three days he should have come to a steep canyon. The notes said he was to follow the length of it. It had already been four days now and he saw no canyon. Despair started to set in. He decided to sit down and try to clear his head. He was not so certain, any longer, that he could retrace his steps, back track to the previous landmark. He was lost.

Then, suddenly, the ground beneath began to vibrate a little. Then it shook again, more violently. In the distance, he could see an enormous creature, its massive legs making the ground jump when its feet stomped. A huge, thick tail dragged behind it. Two massive antennae swayed to its movements as it trudged along. Ulysses froze for a second, but his survival instincts kicked in. He hurled himself down into the nearest crater, hoping the monster of the Terrible Tremors did not see him. He kept perfectly still, his eyes shut, while holding his breath. In a few short seconds, that seemed like hours to him, he could hear the hammering footsteps reverberate away. He relaxed, thinking it must be safe. Slowly he started to crawl up to the top edge of the crater, hoping to peek. While doing so, his hand pushed into some type of soft red substance. It smelled sweet and stuck to his hand. Without a moment's thought, he licked the gooey mass. There was a

huge rush inside all his senses. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with its odors. He placed a small bit of it on his tongue and let it slowly and beautifully dissolve in his mouth. The color of it fascinated him. The red fascinated his eyes. His mind was at peace. Life was just a dream, and dreams can come true.

In a few hours, he woke up, still lying at the bottom of the crater. The small amount of red goo he had found before was now hard. It had lost its radiant color. It was odorless. Ulysses had found the Forbidden Fruit of the wasteland. He knew what it was and did not care; he wanted more. Frantically, he dug about the crate, searching in a panic. After a while, he found himself walking about aimlessly in the desert, willing to keep moving. An instinct to look for water, which is inherent in all Osliks, kept him walking.

After some time, he could not judge how much, the ground beneath him was becoming harder and smoother. It was getting more difficult to keep his balance. With a great thump, he fell on his tail feathers. This act jarred him to his senses. When he stood up, he could see, off in a far distance, a massive black wall rising above the mist. This was Tulg's Wall. He consulted MasPiola's map, finding the thin red line which was surely the wall's symbol. He did not know exactly where he was, but he was in the right area. There were caves, lots of them. He would be searching for one specific cave, but the smell of water might lead him to it. He hoped his senses were keen enough to detect an underground stream. Taking out MasPiola logbook, he entered some of his own notes. There was still a craving to go back and look for more fruit, but the urge was slowly subsiding.

There were many, many caves. All he knew was that the right one would have its interior painted by MasPiola, probably a tribute to his odyssey. But without going into each one of them, there was no way of knowing the right one. After a few days of exploring, he came to a clearing.

In the middle of it sat a large rock. On it was a skillful painting of an Oslik, giving an obscene gesture. Under it were the words ‘Greetings from the Great MasPiola!’ There was no doubt that Ulysses was in the right place. Next to it, on the ground were remnants of painted arrows.

Crudely carved on a stone entrance was the word ‘DOME’. He didn’t know why he did it, but he shouted “Hello!” into the cave. There was no answer. He tried again. Then he picked up a small stone and pitched it in. No one, or nothing, scampered out.

Bending over, to peek inside, he could see that it was not entirely dark inside. Shafts of light filtered in from some cracks above. He dug through his bag and brought out some glowing wax. He made a ball of it and used it to light his way. What he saw next amazed him. The interior was painted like the Dome of the Temple back home. It was a lot cruder and much smaller in scale, but it did mimic his masterpiece. Why had MasPiola bothered to do this? He had probably gone insane eating Forbidden Fruit. The more Ulysses thought of it, the more he was convinced of it. And then it hit him, if MasPiola had gone mad, the log and map could all just be nonsense, the ravings of an addict. It had taken all his courage to go on this quest and now he felt like a fool. That which had seemed noble now looked childish. He felt old and tired. He lay down on the cave floor, looking up at the ceiling. He shut his eyes. It felt wonderfully cool as he stretched out. This calm allowed his senses to become alive. Then, instincts took over. They told him running water was flowing underneath. It had to be the stream that professor Professor Motz had predicted; it was too much of a coincidence not to be.

Crouching down, on his hands and knees, he used his Oslik senses. There, in a dark corner were small painted words saying, ‘this way’. But there was no opening, just the solid cave wall. Ulysses went outside to look at the map and logbook. In the logbook it read ‘this way = look up fool’. And that is what he did. He went back into the cave and looked up. There, next to

the sculpture, which was hanging from the cave's roof, was a small drawing of a map. It was obvious if you were looking for it, but not if you weren't. Following the directions, he went outside. Looked for a large rock with an unmistakable shape and walked towards it. On the ground, rubble was piled high. As he started to clear it away, he could hear, smell and feel the water below. Looking down, he could see a little flowing stream, not deep enough for him to float on, but it would probably get deeper as it heads down stream.

He spent the next day preparing for his trip. He made a helmet, which held some luminous wax on top. He found some large leaves, each larger than himself. Hopefully, they would float, if he needed them to. Lastly, and most importantly, he looked over MasPiola's notes. Before he followed the stream, he needed a plan on how, and when, to get back above ground. He did not want it to be his tomb. He realized, again, any clues he found could be interpreted several different ways. Eventually, he decided he needed to trust his instincts. After all he had gotten this far; hadn't he?

His journey was easy at first. He enjoyed splashing in the stream as he walked. It felt great after the many days of nothing but hot sand under his webs. The coolness of the cavern made him feel alive. This was only natural since Osliks prefer cool and wet over hot and dry. This made him feel a little homesick and his mind began to wander. A series of memory fragments floated in his mind, one drifting to the next. And then, an idea sprang from that pool of thought. He needed to leave some markings along the way. This would be helpful if he were to return this way. If he didn't, it would be proof that the Great Ulysses had been there. It is what his grandfather would have done; that made him feel bigger than life. He became more confident that he would find more clues along the way.

At first, he would just scribble his name on a stone. Sometimes, it was only a handprint or rocks placed in a circle. Later, he stooped and took the time to sketch the face of an Osluk on a vertical, flat section he came across. That face was of his dead wife, drawn from memory. The drawings became more elaborate. He etched his remembrance of the monster from the Terrible Tremors. He inscribed a lewd limerick below it about forbidden fruit. Being alone, way down in that cool cave, had brought out the primitive spirituality in him. He decided, one day, to stop for a while and make a highly detailed drawing on an open stretch of cavern before him. It was to be of a Fledgick. It was a copy of the sketch his grandfather had made. This painting took on a sense of ritual, a way of contacting the creature's spirit. At first, he felt funny talking to it, asking it questions. But later, it became more natural, going beyond the symbolic. It mentally and physically refreshed him. With newfound strength he continued on, following the stream.

CHAPTER 14

MasPiola stopped working on the Dome that day. The Amazing Flegos were moving into their new home. There was fanfare, speeches and ceremony. Much to do about nothing, he thought; nothing more than a fancy zoo. Still, he enjoyed being one of the guests of honor and the banquet he attended was fantastic. The only disconcerting part was when Victor the Pious pulled him aside and whispered, “Now we will show them; show them the true power of the Vision.” Throughout the day, that tiny encounter kept haunting him. “Now what did he mean by that?” he asked in thought. He knew it probably meant trouble down the road, but he decided to worry about it when the time came. He had secretly been avoiding the Fledgicks, only seeing them from a safe distance. What he did know about them came from Professor Motz. He had been hoping the College would eventually find a way to communicate with them. Then, all he needed to do was bluff his way through. He had become an expert on that. What he really needed to do now was to sneak in some night and get a good close look at them; see if his instincts could come up with something. Between Paulo the Pragmatic wanting him to fail and Victor the Pious waiting for the Prophet, he was in a mess. He had to find a way to avoid Paulo the Pragmatic’s test.

That night, MasPiola snuck into the Fledick’s new habitat. It was not hard to do this. It was dark out and no one was around. Besides, MasPiola was often seen wandering about the Dome ground. There was a back entrance, which would connect the Fledgick building with Dome sometime in the future. MasPiola opened the door; he knew it would be unlocked. He poked his head in and whispered “Flego.Flegos.” He did so with a soft, sweet voice. He could not see them. He grew a little braver and stepped all the way in, closing the door behind him. It

was very dim inside and he strained his eyes trying to spot them. He tried a couple of quick whistles, but nothing came out of the shadows. A minute later, a loud thump came from behind him, and he jumped. As he turned, he could see a set of glowing eyes in the corner. He took a stance, hands on hips, thinking it made him look masterful. He shouted “I am the Great MasPiola! Come forth so I can look at you.” Nothing happened. He moved a little closer. “I command you to do my bidding!” Still, there was no movement. His demeanor came with a little less authority as he drew even closer. He held out his hand and forced a smile. The smaller Fledgick slowly came forward, showing herself. It was a little bigger than him, but its hind legs were massive. One kick could send him crashing into the wall. Both stood staring at each other. After the novelty of the moment wore off, he did not know what to do next. He held out his hand, in a gesture to have it kissed. There was no response. He tried shaking her hand, but she backed away. “Sit” he said. He then tried “Jump.” This was followed by “Roll Over”. The Fledgick stared blankly at him. He picked up a small stick and threw it. She did not run after it. MasPiola reached into a bag and pulled out some water fruit. Professor Motz had mentioned once that it was one of their favorite foods. A long tongue quickly sprang from her mouth, grabbing it from his hand.

The tongue snapped back as quickly as it had darted out. She swallowed after two quick bites. The larger Fledgick came out of its hiding place. MasPiola took out another piece. The smaller Fledgick let her counterpart take it.

“This is going pretty well” thought MasPiola. “I can always get their attention with food. They are just like the monks.” He felt talking to them, even if they could not understand, would calm them and him. Nervously, he started “I am called the Great MasPiola, I am the bubble’s

most famous genius, and I have built this mighty Dome. You have inspired me and now I must inspire you to talk to me. I do not have a clue how to do this. Do You?”

Jumper could not understand his words, but knew she was being talked to in a deeper and less superficial way. She looked into his eyes and took his hand. It seemed so natural that he did not even flinch. Suddenly, her eyes became wide, and she dropped his hand. She made some sounds to the other Fledgick and backed away. Both fled back to a dark corner.

“Damn” thought MasPiola. He knew that look. She did not trust him. Many female Oslisks had the uncanny ability to look into his eyes and distrust him. He supposed female Fledgicks had the same instinct; damn them. The eyes were the windows to the soul, too bad he couldn’t keep the curtains shut. He decided to forget about it, at least for the moment. He would seek out the companionship of a pretty Oslisk he had met the other day. She was impressed with the Great MasPiola, she did not care what was in his eyes. He wouldn’t bother to look into hers.

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A few days later, about twenty Oslisks stood by the new Fledgick home. They all wore orange hoods with a blue dot on top. Victor the Pious was amongst them, organizing the group. He was shouting orders. “Stand by the door and let no one in. The Temple is wrong, we have the true insight. We have waited long enough. Now it is our turn!”

They were clearly intent on securing the Flegos for themselves. The time had come for these two creatures to be pawns in the game of salvation. This was great news for MasPiola and he strutted outside to watch. “It’s about time!” he barked at some of them. “I was tired of carrying the burden all by myself.” He walked up to one exceedingly plump believer and said

“Suck in that belly. Stand up straight! Is that the best you can do? Do you want the Temple to walk right into here and steal them away from you? Are you Oslik enough to stand up to the College of Madness? They’re all crazy you know. You’d better be more alert than that!” He was having the time of his life, stirring up mischief and getting the others all riled up. They hung on to his every word and he was talking so fast had had no idea what he was saying. The words just came flying out. This was the kind of day MasPiola lived for.

Even he could not keep this up for long. He decided to pace himself and rest in the shade; save his energy for the show down when Paulo the Pragmatic would come. Then the real fun would begin. MasPiola would then egg them both on, watching as an insult throwing spectator. If it looked like Victor the Pious would cave in, he would run to his side; the righteous prophet defending against evil. He lay down, waiting for Paulo the Pragmatic to come. He waited so long that he fell asleep.

He finally woke up when he heard cheering from the true believers. They had been expecting a confrontation from the Temple, but it was starting to get dark, and there had been no incident. Victor the Pious was making a speech about moral victory and diligence. They seemed to believe that they had won, at least for today. Most were going home, but a few camped out overnight. Victor the Pious would stay inside with the Flegos tonight.

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MasPiola snuck around the back door of the habitat while the campers were asleep. He wanted to see what was going on inside, but he did not wish to be alone with Victor the Pious. He suspected he was unstable. Besides, he did not know how the Fledgicks would react to him

again. Sneaking in, he quietly crouched in a secluded corner. He could hear, and slightly see, Victor the Pious talking to the two creatures.

“No, no. Like this, my children. You must hold your hands like this.” They were not paying any attention to him. In frustration, he slapped the bigger one on the arm saying “Pay attention. How else can I teach you?” A big, hairy Fledgick leg rose and stomped loudly, inches away from him. Victor the Pious jumped back. He had not counted on an unruly child; one that could not be bullied into submission. The teacher-pupil relationship had taken an interesting turn. MasPiola knew what he was trying to do. He had been taught the same thing on his first day as a novice monk. The idiot was trying to teach them as if they were young Osliks. MasPiola had known they were smart enough to mimic gestures. Professor Motz had told him so. In fact, they had been trained to go on tour as the Amazing Flegos. MasPiola kept watching the Elder try to teach them to bow with their hands behind their heads. Both just ignored him, yawning and grooming each other. And then MasPiola realized something. They were playing stupid on purpose. They could understand him, at least at a very base level, but they did not like him.

Lightning is constantly striking in a creative mind. Collisions of some sparks can lead to inspiration. MasPiola was born with thunderstorms in his thoughts. An inspiration just flashed. He knew what Victor the Pious wanted. He wanted the Flegos to perform the rituals of a novice monk. The Flegos had been trained to put on a show, so obviously they could be trained to mimic those rites. The key was the trainer. The key was the scientist who had gone to the other side and brought them back. Professor Motz had mentioned his name. It was Professor Franken. He had to get Professor Franken to help him. His mind was now clear and calm, but this does not produce lightning. He struggled on how to persuade the trainer. He decided to go back to the Dome and sleep on it.

The next day, forty orange hooded believers stood at attention. Victor the Pious walked in the lead of a procession of nine. This line carried a huge sign on their shoulders. It was a very solemn ritual, each movement choreographed. Eventually, the sign was hung above the entrance to the Flegos new home. It read 'Church of Divine Insight'. Victor the Pious, lay at the foot of the entrance and got down on all fours. One by one, the true believers said their name, stood on Victor the Pious's back and touched the new sign with the fingertips of both hands. A small group came out of the Temple to watch. Paulo the Pragmatic was not among them, but all knew he would soon know every detail. Inside, the Amazing Flegos were blissfully unaware their home was now sacred ground. "Paulo! Paulo the Pragmatic!" shouted Nadia the Iconic. "Did you hear?" Victor the Pious left the Temple and formed his own. We are the only Elders now."

Paulo the Pragmatic waited until he stood in front of her. He thought it lacked composure to yell back. "Yes, Nadia the Iconic, I heard. I had received reports this might happen, but I did not think he was foolish enough to do it. I really think he is insane."

"Of course, you know what this means." She replied.

"Oh, I understand the situation, but why don't you tell me what you think it means."

"Don't be such a fool. It means there is an extra headdress now. Victor the Pious cannot keep his, it is Temple property. Can you imagine an extra headdress? This is all too wonderful!"

Paulo the Pragmatic sighed in exasperation, but she did not notice, she was too excited. "Yes, that is exactly what it means, my dear Nadia the Iconic." He knew exactly what she wanted to hear. He would graciously give it to her and help make the alliance stronger. "Only you have

the bearing to wear two headdresses, I don't think I could handle the pressure of it. Nadia, please take Victor headdress. You are the only one who can wear that responsibility."

"Yes, yes, of course" she said, entirely intoxicated at the thought. She quickly added "Of course. I will have it customized for me. Poor Victor, his style was so ordinary."

"Ordinary." repeated Paulo the Pragmatic. The wheel in his mind started to turn. You realize there is a fourth sacred headdress, the one MasPiola has."

"You mean that red thing? He isn't an Elder. He hasn't paid his dues. Who does he think he is? He is just a stupid Oslik, wearing a stupid red hat."

"I couldn't agree more. Rumor has it that he has aligned himself with the Divine Insight; maybe even joined, renouncing the Temple."

"No! After all we did for him! He would be nothing without us; him and his stupid little pictures."

"How true, how true. I believe he wants the Flegos to be prisoners inside that church. If the Temple does not stand up to such evil, who will? I have trouble sleeping at night, thinking about that traitor, that blasphemer is painting our beloved Dome."

"It was red I think; MasPiola's ridiculous little hat I mean. If he leaves the Temple, or gets kicked out, what will become of it? Of course, it is inconsequential to me, but it belongs to me ...um, I mean the Temple."

"My dear Nadia the Iconic, align yourself with me, and you can have it. Together, we must fight this injustice, The Temple, as we know it, depends on us. Together, we will preserve tradition and our way of life for future generations. That is our destiny."

‘Yes, we are together on this. Now, let’s do the first things first. We must make sure we recover those two headdresses and that they are securely in my possession. That is our number one priority, don’t you agree?’

“Of course. Of course. I’m glad we had this talk. I feel better knowing I can lean on you during these chaotic times. Between the two of us, I’m sure order will be brought back to its rightful place.”

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MasPiola had asked Professor Motz to speak to Professor Franken on his behalf. MasPiola had convinced the young professor that he could use his vision to speak to the Flegos, but his process would be part intuitive and part scientific in nature. Using the techniques which Professor Franken had already developed would speed things up. Professor Motz had agreed to act as his intermediary. Usually, protocol called for the Temple Elders to contact the College, but he wanted to make sure that did not happen. Professor Motz had even been convinced all of this should be kept a closely guarded secret. He was told it must remain clandestine because powerful forces could be unleashed when science and the divine came together in perfect harmony.

“Professor Franken, can I have a word with you?” asked Professor Motz.

“Yes.” was the nonchalant reply.

“Before I begin, I must ask for your digression. It is an important matter which could have grave consequences.”

“You have my assurance; it will be kept among us.”

“As you know, the Divine Insight has control of your gentle Flegos.” said Professor Motz.

“Holding them captive you mean! At least I can still see them on a regular basis, but for how long. They need me to check up on them. They need me. I’m worried.”

“I know you are and so am I. They might become nothing but pawns between the Church and the Temple. Lines are already being drawn.”

“Where do you think the College stands?”

“Right now, we are in a weak position. You are our only link to them. I know your love for them. We need you to look after their welfare.”

“I try to do what I can, but I have little influence. Often, they won’t let me even be alone with them.”

“This is where I may be able to help. MasPiola has asked me to talk in his behalf.”

“MasPiola! I’ve heard bad things about him.”

“Don’t believe all you hear. Most of it is probably from town criers. They get paid to shout; the more money the louder they are.”

“All right then. What does MasPiola want with me?”

“You know of his Vision. He and the Temple feel it is his destiny to communicate with your Flegos.”

“That is impossible. I know them best. I couldn’t do it.”

“I know, but all your efforts were scientific. What if there was one component missing?”

“You mean some divine intervention?”

“Yes.”

“Have you given up reason to become a fanatic?”

“No, but I must keep an open mind. That, and curiosity unites us as a tribe. Does it not?”

“What does he want from me?”

“MasPiola realizes the importance of what you’ve accomplished. He wants to use your knowledge to help him go even further; to touch their psyche. I know this all sounds strange, but I know him. I think he can do it.”

“I will do it as long as I can be present with them.”

“Of course, MasPiola even insisted on that specific point. He said he wouldn’t even consider trying unless you were present.”

“I’ll help him.”

“Wonderful! Remember, we must keep this amongst ourselves. If the Temple or College finds out, it could complicate things. MasPiola’s success will give the Flegos a voice; a voice to choose their own fate.”

“I owe them that.”

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MasPiola secretly watched Victor the Pious try to teach the two Fledgicks and delighted in watching him fail. Once he received assurance of Professor Franken’s assistance, he felt it was time to intervene. On day, he pretended to accidentally run into Victor the Pious.

“How is the teaching going?” he asked Victor the Pious. “Will the Flegos be able to roll the Sacred Stones soon? That will really show the Temple a thing or two. You will have certainly proved you were right all along.”

Victor the Pious answered humbly. “Not well. I must confess, I do not know how to reach them. You saw it from the beginning. Do you see anything now?”

MasPiola placed his hand on Victor the Pious’s forehead. “Close your mind and open your heart.” he said, looking at the closed eyes of Victor the Pious. “I can sense the purity in your intentions. I will help you.”

Victor the Pious opened his eyes in astonishment saying “You know how to talk to them? Is it your Vision which guides you?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

“I cannot wait to see you make this miracle.”

“No, I must be alone with them. My heart is pure. If the Flegos are merely children, they cannot help but be true also. Love shall open a channel of communication, I can feel it. I go where no other Oslik has ever gone. I welcome the unknown. I scoff at this danger. Humility and virtue will act as my guide in this sacred journey. I just hope my physical body can withstand the demands which my mind must endure.” MasPiola took a quick glance at Victor the Pious. The fool was weeping. He had him right where he wanted him. The thicker he laid it on, the more he wept.

“No, my dear Victor the Pious, do not cry over me. I am but a prophet of a greater cause. I just hope I can continue the Vision after this. Perhaps this was my ultimate destiny; the Vision, the Dome and helping you succeed me. I fear, when I am done, my powers may be diminished. I am truly blessed that you have offered to take the burden off my shoulder and onto yours.”

“Your sacrifice in the noblest of causes!” cried Victor the Pious.

CHAPTER 15

The little stream had turned into a slow flowing river. As Ulysses traveled down it, it got deeper. He made a crude raft from the two huge leaves he had the foresight to scavenge beforehand. Laying on his back, he stares up into the cavern's dark. A few days ago, he would have panicked himself by dreaming up the most disastrous scenarios. But now, he was perfectly calm. He did not have to worry about those tedious daily details that consumed his life back home. Even the word 'home' started to have a foreign sound to it. Living in the moment was easier when that is all you had. The gentle movement of his raft, the soothing sound of the water and the dark coolness of it all was perfect for sleeping; and that is what he did. He dreamed he was floating in an egg. The palms of his hands had paint on them. He pressed them on the interior of the egg, decorating it. Different colors floated into different shapes. Sometimes, the egg was so confining he could barely move. At other times, it was massive; him being only a spec, floating in it. He floated up to the top and pressed his painted palm to it. As he slowly lifted his hand, he noticed something strange about the print it left behind. The tip of the little finger was missing. As he looked at his hand, an orange globe glowed on it. He tried to break it open, but it bounced, and a cold wave splashed over him.

Ulysses woke abruptly from his dream, realizing he was speeding wildly down the river. He held onto his flimsy raft with both hands, grabbing the straps of his traveling bag with his feet. He could not tell how far away he was from the bank, if there were a bank. Suddenly, he could see a glow of light ahead of him. He was expecting to be thrown into this light, but that didn't happen. He slowed down, though he could still hear the gushing water. Mossy vegetation, that glowed, floated on top of the river. He lay in the raft, on his belly, and pulled himself

forward by grabbing onto the plants. He got clear of it and the current rushed him forward. After a minute, his progress was stopped again by more glowing moss. He repeated this several more times, the clearings between patches of vegetation getting smaller and smaller. Finally, he came to a complete standstill. A luminous green carpet of moss stretched before him.

Perhaps, he could stand on it and press his palms down on top of its surface. It was spongy and thick enough to prevent his hands from breaking through. He tried one webbed foot and pushed down as hard as he could. It sank ankle deep, but the moss did not give way. Carefully he tried to stand. It held his weight. Walking was painfully slow because it was not solid beneath him, but after a while, he got used to it. The trick was to make sure one leg was firmly planted before he lifted the other. And so, he began his surreal walk. As the ground became more solid under his feet, he lost his fear of falling through. But that fear was slowly replaced with an uneasy feeling of being watched. The constant glow did not help, especially since it made it difficult to judge distances.

The underground was enormous. He had lost the claustrophobic feeling the cave had given him earlier. Occasionally, some type of liquid drop would fall from above. If it hit some moss, it sparked and became a clear bubble. The bubble would quickly roll, in one direction or another out of sight. At one point, he saw what looked like gigantic roots, dangling from above. He trudged over to inspect it. He froze when it moved as he neared it. He decided the best course of action was to avoid them all together.

It was hard to tell how long he had been walking, but he was always hopeful he would see some light from above, finding its way through cracks from above. There didn't seem to be any mention of glowing sea of green moss in MasPiola's clues. Surely, he would have written something about it; if for no other reason because of its vastness. He decided to take a break, sit

down and carefully consult the map one last time. Sitting on his tail feathers, he stretched his legs before him. Just as he did, a huge drop fell from above. It struck his foot and splashed onto the moss. The spark it made burned the tip of his web. A bubble formed, trapping his foot inside it. The bubble pulled forcibly on his leg, as it tried to roll away. Ulysses' leg was trying to go one way while the sphere was going in an opposite direction. He tried desperately to shake it off, but it held fast. Eventually, the Oslik tired before the sphere did. He was being dragged; it was taking him somewhere, but he could not see where. He watched it drag him by his foot. It was heading for a clearing in the moss. He began to claw at the vegetation under him, trying to stop the momentum, but the closer it got to open water, the stronger its pull. He watched in horror as it got to the water's edge. He closed his eyes and held his breath, expecting to be dragged to the bottom. As soon as the bubble hit the water, it dissolved, freeing his foot. He lay there for some time, waiting for his heart to stop racing. He crawled to the clearing edge and looked at the water. It looked black and thick. He touched it with his finger. It was not water at all, but tar. And then, he could see the bank; a huge black, shiny wall that lifted way up high. The closer he got to the bank, the less the moss and the harder the tar. Eventually, he found himself standing on solid tar, hard as a rock. It was beautifully smooth. It became obvious to him that this was the same tar as that of the Great Tar Sea. His new plan was to follow this black riverbank.

He slipped and sledded, trying to walk along it. Soon, he realized he could lie on his stomach and slide his way, giving a push with his feet or a shove with his hands. This exhilarated him; and then he saw it. It looked like a shaft of light coming from above, in the distance. He was positive this was his way out, the way to get back above ground. Eagerly, he skidded towards it but stopped abruptly. A wide and deep crack in the ground prohibited him from continuing. It was too slippery and steep to go down and too wide to jump across. Building a bridge across

seemed like a good idea, but there was nothing to construct it with. He sat down and tried to think, but no answer would come. He sat there for quite some time. When he looked across the chasm, to the shaft of light, he could see that it moved. It had gotten closer to him. Eventually, it was on his side of the divide. Somewhere above his head was an opening; an opening that could lead him to the outside. The light slowly started to move, columns of it filtering through the cracks above. He followed it, retracing his previous day's journey. Finally, he came to a place where the walls were not very steep or high. Also, they seemed more porous, with enough holes to get a hand hold. Looking up, he could spot an opening in the cave roof. With light streaming down it, he could see well enough to climb out. The warmth and brightness hit him all at once when his head peeked out. He desperately wanted to see what was out there, where he was, but he could not open his eyes; he had been in the dark too long. His eyelids were shut, but they burned a bright orange red to his eyes. After a while, using his hand as a visor, he was able to slowly open his eyes. His sight had come back.

When he was able to survey his surroundings, he was disappointed. He was in a desert, probably the same wasteland as the Terrible Tremors. He tried to get his bearings. His senses could smell and feel the Blue Mist. He knew it came from the direction of the Great Tar Sea. Not too far in the distance, he could spot Tulg's Wall. He was positive he was on the other side of it, having passed underneath the barrier. He hadn't known what to expect when he crossed over, but he should have guessed. The land on one side of the wall looked just like the land on the other side. He started to walk. As he did, he cheered up a little. The missionaries were building a stairway to get to the top of it. It would take them over two hundred years, at least. What did they expect to do when they got to the top; fly down? They would spend all that effort just to wind up in the same desert. Oh well, the joke was on them. He thought of a joke he knew when he was

little.

‘Why did the Oslik cross the road? ‘

‘To get to the other side.’

‘ Ha. Ha. Ha.’

There were some landmarks on the map, but Ulysses did not recognize any of them.

Instinctively, he walked in a certain direction. A sense of déjà vu came over him. It did not take long for him to figure out why.

CHAPTER 16

MasPiola was spending as much time with the Flegos as he was on the Dome. Professor Franken was more than happy to be with them, although it seemed to him that all he was doing was teaching them simple tricks. Still, he did not question it because he was content. Victor the Pious was kept in the dark, but he would brief MasPiola on the types of rituals they need to learn. It was evident that these were modified versions of the Temple's sacraments. A tailor was even hired to make special vestments for the Fledgicks. The Church itself was getting stronger. In fact, their numbers had doubled in a very short time. Osliks from the outer regions had literally been flocking to it. All in all, MasPiola seemed to have everything under control and running smoothly. Of course, he was always looking over his shoulder, waiting for Paulo the Pragmatic to inflict some damage to his plan, but so far, Paulo had not been heard from. Victor the Pious, on the other hand, was always pestering him to show some results. Finally, MasPiola caved in and set a time for a dress rehearsal.

"Now you just sit there and tell them the ritual you wish them to do." said MasPiola to Victor the Pious.

"Clipping the Feathers" Victor the Pious commanded.

Jumper walked over to a bucket of feathers and ceremoniously picked one out. She handed it to Hopper, who carefully placed it onto an elaborate tray. There were hand gestures, bowing and an attempt to mimic Oslik speech. Then, Jumper looked over the items before her and picked up the ritual knife. An intricate pattern was cut from the feather. She handed it to Hopper. He placed it on his palm and gently blew on it. It lifted slowly up into the air, twirling as it gracefully drifted down to the ground. Victor the Pious watched it with complete fascination.

He even found himself stomping his feet, until he realized this was a solemn occasion in a holy place. “Paddle of life” was his next request.

Both Flegos lay on their backs; their long legs pointed upward. A complex dance was done using only their legs, perfectly choreographed with each other. Again, there was an attempt to speak some words.

Then came the other requests; ‘Water of Wisdom’, ‘Fruit of Knowledge’ and ‘Glowing Warmth’. Each was done with enough precision to make Victor the Pious stand up and stretch out his arms, requesting the Flegos to come in for a hug. They hesitated, but Professor Franken prodded them a little. Reluctantly, they let Victor the Pious put his arms around them. MasPiola gestured Professor Franken to retreat into the shadows. He understood he should stay there until needed. That was the price he had to pay.

“Well, what do you think?” asked MasPiola confidently. “I believe I have fulfilled the prophecy.”

“It was all too splendid!” answered Victor the Pious. “When will they be able to talk?”

“Talk!” said MasPiola, taken aback.

“Yes, talk. I wish to speak to them.”

“I don’t think that is possible. Their mouths are different than ours. Have you seen the huge length of their tongues? They can’t form our words.”

“They need to speak Oslik if they are to become us.”

“I see” said MasPiola. He had forgotten how crazy the ex-Elder had become. He decided to create a temporary diversion. “How about they show you the ‘Blessing of the Rolling Stone’?” He knew that meant them all leaving the Church, walking to the Temple and going up to the Tower.

“You know we cannot do that!” said Victor the Pious. “They are only safe in the Church of Divine Insight. The outside world will corrupt them. The Temple will tempt them.”

“Perhaps, you need a new sacrament, one to replace the ‘Blessing of the Rolling Stone’.

“Why yes, that is exactly what I need. I must go now. I have many things to do.”

MasPiola was very pleased with himself. Victor the Pious was so immersed in finding a new ritual, he had forgotten about speaking with the Flegos; at least for now. Still, it was a small victory, and it had been fun manipulating.

Nadia the Iconic had taken it onto herself to declared orange hoods with blue dots a sacrilege. Town criers could be heard shouting “The Temple declares orange hoods with blue dots are to be destroyed! It is the duty of those faithful to the Temple to grab these hats off the heads of the unfaithful. A huge bonfire will be held in two weeks to burn these evil garments. A prize will be given to the Oslik who brings in the most hats.” She even had a large board erected next to the Temple. It was to show the number of hoods confiscated. It would be updated daily.

Osliks are usually gentle because they are generally lazy, but this new declaration from the Temple drove them into action. Some believed their very souls depended on snatching orange hoods off heads. To others, it was a rallying cry to band together and to defend themselves. Most picked a debating side. One side said the existence of Oslik life, as they knew it, depended on obedience to the Temple; to the old ways. The other half said the existence of Oslik life, as they knew it, rested on the right to choose. Families were being torn as members chose opposing factions. Each side declared the other was disloyal and both claimed blood should be thicker than water.

The College tried to find a solution, but compromise was elusive. However, they did finally conclude. The problem, it seemed to them, came from a lack of respect from both parties. So, the College came up with the following new law. It stated a Church member, wearing an orange hood with a blue dot on it, will hold it, with one hand, inches above their head when meeting an Oslik not affiliated with the Church. The other Oslik must then say, 'Thank you'. At that point, the affiliated Church members will place the hood back onto their head.

The College, acting as arbitrator, began to put their plan into action. It was not long, however, before the flaws of this law began to surface. Some Temple followers claimed the Church members were not tipping their hats completely off their heads. Divine Insight argued that many of the 'Thank You' they received were mumbled or disingenuous. Commissions were formed on both sides, each showing statistics proving the other was to blame.

Things reached a fever pitch on the day of the bonfire, with many of the Temple followers turning out in support. To some it was all about justice, to most it was a chance to do something different. The crowd was loud and boisterous. But then, silence began to fall on them.

Coming towards them was a large group of Oslisks, all wearing their orange hoods. The Amazing Flegos were with them. They too, donned orange caps, especially made for them. Both groups stood opposite each other; an uncomfortable quiet hung about them. Then, on cue, both Fledgicks lifted their head gear in unison. A few of the Temple crowd said, 'Thank You.' Those next to them started to say the same and the words slowly cascaded from the crowd, picking up speed and volume as it did. Nadia the Iconic, standing high on a stage in front of the bonfire, was furious. In front of her was a big box of confiscated orange hoods. She grabbed it and was intent on hurling it into the fire. But fate had a different idea that day. The box was too difficult to

handle, so she fell ungracefully on her backside. The box and all its contents fell from the stage and the hats were flung into the air.

Many from the Church of Divine Insight instinctively started cheering. Some were so caught up in the moment they threw their own hoods up into the air, shouting for joy. What happened next would become legendary, deeming that day ‘Day of the Orange’ by the Church and ‘All Hats Day’ by the Temple. A mad scramble took place, both sides intermingling. You could not tell which group was grabbing a hat and why. A powerful wind came, just at that precise moment. The sky was filled with orange. Many scattered, chasing after them, but more simply took the time to get reacquainted with old family and friends. So, both sides had a new holiday to celebrate each year. Each developed their own rationale proving nature had chosen them, proving they were right all along. Even the College was giving itself credit for coming up with the original idea of tipping your hood. They did, however, stop short of saying they had predicted the outcome.

Over time, the Church of Divine Insight was reluctantly recognized by the Temple. Victor the Pious had been persuaded to make some goodwill gestures. Paulo the Pragmatic had come up with one for him; let the Flegos come to the Dome for a visit, leaving the sanctity of the Church. Church members had been forbidden to set foot in the Temple and this act would symbolically declare the Dome as neutral territory. The Dome could then become a solemn place, where all Osliks could go, despite their spiritual differences. Paulo the Pragmatic had heard rumors that MasPiola could talk to the Fledgicks. He did not believe this, but he also knew rumors could be

powerful all by themselves. He would invite some College professors to ask the creatures some questions; give them a well-researched test.

MasPiola sweated a lot that night. He could not think of a way out. He decided that once the creatures failed the test, he would make a speech; tell all his vision had suddenly transcended into artistic talent. He would say some supernatural force was guiding his hand, propelling him to finish the Dome. Even he did not know how to interpret the paintings in it. Of course, this meant Paulo the Pragmatic had won; had bettered him. This really annoyed him, but he took some small consolation in the knowledge he could help the Church of Divine Insight be a thorn in Paulo the Pragmatic's side.

The day the Flegos entered the Dome was the day that really changed MasPiola's life. At first, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Professor Franken walked the two of them across the Church ground to the Dome early in the morning. When they entered, they did not even look up at the interior; to them, it was just another building. They were allowed to wander about freely. Some members of the College came, and Paulo the Pragmatic followed a little later. Victor the Pious stood looking in from the outside. He had forgotten Church members were allowed to enter. An aid of his left to go look it up.

Then, quite suddenly, both Fledgicks started making a beautiful singing noise. They had sung before, but this was very different. Every Oslik in the Dome was quickly hit with the same déjà vu experience. It was the experience of lying outside on your back. In this state, it was dark out, only a faint glow from high above in the shroud. A gentle breeze filled one's senses. It was the feeling of serenity, the heart beating in perfect rhythm with nature. It was hard for them to tell

how long this feeling had lasted, but when it stopped, all the Osliks came out of their trance and looked at each other. They said nothing, but somehow, they all knew they had shared the same sense of being. All this took place just as Victor the Pious had walked into the Dome.

“The Vision! The Vision!” he cried. “It has come. It is here. We are not alone.”

All the Osliks just stood in bewilderment. Finally, one of the College professors noticed the Flegos were staring at a clay model which MasPiola had made. It was to serve as a guide for part of a larger sculpture. This piece would eventually hang from the Dome’s ceiling. It was very abstract in nature. No one was more shocked than MasPiola. The experience he just had, that they all had, was the thought he was having when he molded the clay for that model. He went to look for a different model; one he had started previously but abandoned a few weeks ago.

Abstractly, it was supposed to contain the emotion he felt when the fingertip of his little finger was bitten off so long ago. He brought it over to the Flegos and uncovered it. Both made a low, irritating sound and their fur stood on end. Instinctively, they each grabbed their little fingers. So did the Osliks. They did not understand, but MasPiola was happy to explain.

Another molded abstract was brought it. It represented a specific feeling. MasPiola’s inspiration for it happened a couple of years ago. He had been walking outside, thinking of nothing, when large ‘rustol’ fell from the shroud, missing him by inches. It had happened so quickly that he did not even have the chance to be shocked. The experience was that sudden realization your life could change so quickly, so dramatically; the second it dawns on you that you have avoided your death. It was a time for deep pondering, your life flashing before you.

Again, the Fledgicks sang a song, and all felt what MasPiola had sensed on that lucky day. They did not need to explain it to each other, they just knew. Victor the Pious began to shout

commands to the Flegos; orders to perform his newly created sacrament called “Blessing of the Vision”.

Paulo the Pragmatic found himself pushing Victor the Pious to the floor, saying “Shut up you fool! This is some type of trick!” He felt the other staring at him. He prided himself on keeping his composure, the voice of rationality under pressure. “I’m sorry my dear Victor the Pious” he quickly said, lending a hand to help him up. “I think that lost song had some adverse effect on me. I had no control over my physical body, my hands. We don’t know what after affects this may cause.”

Victor the Pious got up by himself. “Blessed be the Vision!” he exclaimed. “My work, the teachings of the Church of Divine Insight, is at hand. We have only just begun.”

Victor the Pious kept on preaching, but the others soon tuned him out. They were all looking at MasPiola. He seemed dazed. Being con artist was part of being an artist, but this was no trick. It rattled him to his core. His talent really was a divine gift. He had always known he was born with a talent, but until now, he never realized the depths of it. It was one thing to play the part of a prophet; it was another to carry the weight of it.

Professor Motz was the first to speak up. “I think we need to do further testing. MasPiola’s work certainly evokes something in our Fledgicks and their sounds cause us to feel what they feel. These artworks connect with them visually and they, in turn, do the same to us using sound.”

The College professors enthusiastically agreed. They were already talking amongst themselves; theories and ideas flying from their minds and mouths. Paulo the Pragmatic wanted to bring the subject back to the original test, but he knew that door had been closed once and for all. He would have to abandon his master plan and quickly come up with a new one. Both Victor

the Pious and MasPiola had just become more powerful in the last few minutes. His mind instinctively shifted to survival mode. He decided to use the ‘divide and conquer’ approach.

“What a wonderful day for all Osliks.” Paulo the Pragmatic said as he stood up on a box. “Of course, Professor Motz is right, that is evident to us all. We must give the College time to examine this phenomenon. The Dome must be the center of your research. MasPiola, please give them all your attention, at least for a while. You can work in the Dome in your spare time. How fortunate it is that I chose this great artist.” He pointed to MasPiola and started to clap. Soon all the others were applauding.

“You did not choose him.” hissed Victor the Pious. “It was his destiny, our destiny.”

“My dear Victor the Pious, the difference between destiny and circumstance can be debated, by us, at another time. For now, understanding is the most important thing.” said Paulo the Pragmatic.

Victor the Pious was turning red with anger. He shouted “The Vision needs to be fulfilled by the Prophet. My children must be returned to my Church of Divine Insight!”

MasPiola’s ears perked up when he heard the word ‘prophet’. All eyes turned to him. He realized his was the deciding vote. He was afraid of what he would become if he really believed some divine power was bestowed on him. He said “I will stay in the Dome. My destiny is to paint it. That is what I shall do. The Flegos will learn from my work, and we will all learn from them.” He took a quick glance at Paulo the Pragmatic. Both knew an alliance had just been forged between the two of them. MasPiola did not want the yoke of a prophet and Paulo the Pragmatic wanted the power of the Vision to disappear. Both wanted Victor the Pious out of their lives.

Victor the Pious started to protest, but MasPiola said “I know what is best. Communication shall come through me and my inspiration comes from the Dome. The Flegos will stay where I stay. I stay here. That is final.”

Victor the Pious, head downcast, began to leave. As he turned, MasPiola shouted after him. ”I thought you passed an edict forbidding Church members from entering the Dome. Maybe I’m wrong. You’d better check into it. If it is forbidden, you best punish yourself. I recommend public humiliation.”

MasPiola was feeling very pleased with himself again, but then his moment of triumph faded. He noticed Paulo the Pragmatic staring at him. He knew he had made a deal with the devil.

CHAPTER 17

Ulysses knew he was on the other side of Tulg's Wall. This side looked the same as the other, a desert wasteland. He brushed some paint onto his open palm and left a series of handprints on some stones. It was prudent, in his mind, to make a trail back to the underground river. He never knew if he were to return home again.

As he walked, he almost fell into a crater. He walked around it, but a strange, familiar sensation came over him. He wanted to rush back down to its center, but his previous experience helped him avoid that decision. He could not find anything on the map which looked like his surroundings, yet his instincts were pulling him in a certain direction. He kept marching on. Eventually he went tumbling down into a crater. Instantly, he knew forbidden fruit was down there. He could smell it, and it consumed all of him. Digging like a wild animal, he finally found a little red glob of it. Greedily he swallowed it; nothing happened, there was no burst of euphoria. But when he went to stand up, he couldn't. He just sat there, all thoughts draining from his mind. And then it hit him. It was like bright sunshine flooding inside him. Everything was perfect. The ground was perfect. The crater was perfect. Life was perfect. He, above all else, was now finally perfect. Eventually he fell into a beautiful sleep where all his dreams come true.

When he woke up, he realized he had come back down, returning as just Ulysses; nothing more. His bones were stiff, and he had a bad taste in his mouth. The bottom of that crater seemed like a grave to him. This analogy provided this incentive to crawl up and out. He never wanted to have anything to do with forbidden fruit again. But after a few hours, that was all he could think of. He found himself looking for craters and going down into them. Some had bigger scents than

others, but they did not bear fruit. Wearily, he moved on, getting more and more depressed. At some point, he lay down on the ground and curled up.

He was too despondent to move, but when something hit him in the head. The instinct to survive startled him awake. Looking around, all the land was flat and open. Maybe, he thought, something had fallen from the sky. Felling his forehead, he felt a small trickle of blood, so he knew he had not imagined it. Once he was on his feet, it was easier to start walking again. “What a stupid idiot I am,” he started thinking “coming all the way over here. For what? What is wrong with me?” This thought consumed him, so much so it drained all his energy. He sat down, his head in his hands. All his thoughts verged on one point; the hopelessness of it all. He probably would have stayed like this, but a pebble hit him in the back. It could not have come from the sky. He jumped up, thinking to walk towards an area where it might have come from. Sadly, his walk turned into a hypnotic march seeking addiction. When he sat down again, he at least had some energy to keep his wits about him. He could swear he heard some scampering in the distance, off to his right. He pretended to bury his face in his hands, but he kept his fingers spread enough to peek through. Something moved in the distance and a small stone landed by his feet. He jumped to his feet and ran in that direction. Looking around, he could see nothing but desert. After scrutinizing the area, he found some places where the sand had been disturbed. They might be footprints, but it was hard to tell. He tried to follow the prints, if that was what they were, but they seemed to stop in midair. As he kept searching, he had the uncomfortable feeling he was being watched. Then, in the distance he saw something jump straight up. He could not be sure where it landed; it was over the horizon line of sight. Still, this was more than enough to propel him onward. As he trudged forward, he began to ask himself if he was having a hallucination. Perhaps this was only a mirage.

At one point, he sensed the ground start to vibrate beneath his feet. Without even thinking, he ran to find someplace to hide. He knew a Terrible Tremors monster was walking about. It was easy to spot it because it was so large. Laying down in a crack in the desert crust, he covered his head. His only hope was that it did not see him or step on him. The noise was deafening. It was getting closer and closer. He held his breath as if this would make him invisible. Then, it just stopped. When he peeked up, he could see no sight of it. Crawling up out of the ditch, he got to his feet and ran as fast as he could. He stopped only when he could run no further. Yet, some inexplicable thing was telling him to retrace his steps. He headed back to where he previously lay. Logic told him to avoid it, while his senses said otherwise. The closer he got, the stronger the hold on him. There, in the middle of this arid land stood a yellowish, stump-like thing. Without hesitation, he walked up to it. It seemed to be growing out of the ground. It was a little wider in circumference than his waist and half his height. Also, it seemed to be hollow. Leaning against it, it seemed to move slightly, but he could not be sure. He was not sure if it was alive or not. It quivered for a moment and then contracted. Something popped out of it, landing right in front of him. Instantly, he recognized it. It was forbidden fruit! He jumped on it, taking it all in one big gulp. Ecstasy came over him. He could not move; he did not want to. Eventually the intoxication wore off. With wobbly legs, he got up and walked to the stump. He looked down into it, but he did not want to climb down into it. He tried to kick the base of it. When he did, a minute glob popped out of it. He caught it in midair and ate it. The cycle repeated itself; he got high, he woke up, he kicked the stump, and a little piece of forbidden fruit shot up. Each time this happened, the red glob was smaller. Also, he was getting weaker and weaker. The last time he kicked, nothing happened. He kept kicking, trying harder and harder. In frustration, he leaned headfirst into the yellow stump. He hung on tightly with his hands so he would not fall in. And then, it began to

quiver. Its height doubled in an instant, forcing Ulysses' feet up off the ground. The opening began to close around his waist. He could feel it pulling him in, like a boa constrictor. It was alive, trying to trap him inside. He was so weak that his struggle was useless. Everything went black and he calmly accepted his fate.

Something grabbed hold of his ankles, trying to pull him out. Ulysses was caught in the middle of a tug-of-war, with him being the prize. There was a loud popping noise, bright light blinded his eyes, and fresh air filled his lungs. He was alive and free. Whatever had hold of his legs was dragging him away from that evil stump. Being dragged on his belly, he could see the stump start to rise out of the ground. The entire ground trembled. The sand at the stump's base began to cave in, dust filling the sky. A gigantic foot burst out of the ground. The stump had been just a small part of a massive thing; just the tip of an iceberg. As the creature started to sit up, two antennae sprang from its head, bobbling back and forth. Ulysses watched in astonishment as a monster from the Terrible Tremors emerged. The stump had been its puckered mouth, which it was now flexing. As it stood up, it stretched slowly and began to lumber away, its massive tail dragging behind it. It was not following them but going in the opposite direction. A crater was left where it had lain, waiting to capture its prey.

The whole scene had been so surreal he had forgotten about the thing clutching his legs. It let go of him and Ulysses rolled onto his back. When he did, he could see his rescuer for the first time. "You're a Fledgick!" he shouted. More amazingly, it answered him back in perfect missionary-speak. It said "Yes, I am, almighty one. I have been waiting for you."

CHAPTER 18

Even Paulo the Pragmatic treated MasPiola with a little more awe. He was definitely the Oslik of the year. You could no longer say his talent was only subjective taste anymore; no, now it had scientific standing. The Flegos could turn his visual artwork into sounds; the mathematics of music derived from the geometry of space. The dawn of the golden age of the Studies of Systematic was at hand. The question of ‘how’ the domain of the professors, was the world of reason. The question of ‘why’ was murkier. Trying to determine the purpose of all this depended on an individual asking themselves why they existed in the first place. This was a very deep, complex and abstract question for the vast majority of Osliks. Fortunately for them, or perhaps unfortunately, others were certain they knew the answer and they firmly believed one size fits all.

MasPiola’s work in the Dome was rapid. He was creating at a pace that would normally cause him to burn out, but the feedback from the Flegos kept inspiring him. The enthusiasm from the professors was also contagious. They were already constructing a type of sign language and alphabet. The Fledgicks were slowly being taught to mimic Oslik speech. They had trouble making certain sounds, their tongues were too long, but a practiced ear could decipher the words.

Professor Franken grew closer to his Fledgick friends. He was the only one who was interested in their personal lives. When they were alone, he’d ask them all about life on the other side. They would open it to him, but pretended they couldn’t remember much when others asked. Their bond with Professor Franken, grew stronger. Next to Professor Franken, MasPiola knew them best. Sometimes, their music did not have a direct response by Osliks; some things just did not translate. MasPiola could sense they were holding things back at times. At such times, he

would act as interpreter, using this to his own advantage, pretending he understood what others did not. Paulo the Pragmatic suspected this because he discovered a pattern. Whenever the Flegos said something which the others did not register, MasPiola would speak up. He would say the Flego were astonished by the mighty talent of MasPiola or how much they were in awe of his humility. Paulo the Pragmatic was relieved to hear these little speeches of grandeur. He felt much more comfortable dealing with the charlatan rather than the prophet. The first dealt with human nature, the second with human nature gone mad.

The Church of Divine Insight was surprisingly quiet. The Amazing Flegos had made the Dome their home. Although Victor the Pious would enter and observe sometimes, he spent most of his time at the Church. At first, he concentrated on getting information about the hand symbols that were sometimes being used. Later, it was certain words that were unique to Fledgicks. He thought he was getting all his information secretly, through his spies. He did not know Paulo the Pragmatic was letting it leak out in dribbles. The College was writing a manuscript on how to talk to the Fledgicks. It was this information that Paulo the Pragmatic was slowly feeding the Church. He was delighted to find out the Church of Divine Insight was spending all its time copying this text into their own illuminated versions. These copies were now getting extremely elaborate; their visual appeal becoming worth more than the content, at least in Victor the Pious's eyes. One specific copy, known as the 'Divine Tongue' was already becoming a legend. It's huge, stone pages were adorned with intricate reliefs and jewels. It was becoming the centerpiece of the Church and rested in a dome that sat in the middle of the Church. Circular benches were built around it. This did not go unnoticed by Nadia the Iconic. She had artisans working on her own

gilded version called ‘Songs of the Dome’. Paulo the Pragmatic worried about what she would do when it was finished, but still, he was content on seeing both of them busy. It kept their minds off plotting, if they were truly capable of such a thing.

The Flegos were a male and a female. By Fledgick standards, they were old. Both were twenty-five, while most Fledgicks lived to be around twenty. The two had mated ten years earlier and had produced four offspring, which was a normal sized litter. They each had belonged to different herds and would never have met except for in an unusual circumstance.

Hopper, as a young Fledgick had always dreamed of adventure. He would listen to the old story tellers, soaking in all their wonderful tales. Of course, most of these were greatly exaggerated over the generations, but the young Hopper did not know this. The stories which captured his imagination were the ones of the heroic, lone Fledgick going off to seek adventure. One would change his life. It was the story of Olaf.

Olaf had been born many, many generations ago, back in the days when his herd was fighting the mighty Sreas. After the Fledgicks were forced from the riverside, they sought refuge in the barren wastelands. Food was not plentiful, as it had been by the water, but they managed to survive. One day, an enormous creature came from the desert. It was so big the ground trembled. His herd had nowhere to run. All prepared to die for all had lost hope. Olaf decided to fight, it was better than giving up. As the monster approached their village, Olaf went to confront him. He jumped higher than any other Fledgick ever had. He jumped over the beast’s head and grabbed onto its antennae. He found he could ride onto its head, steering it left or right, by

pushing or pulling on the antennae. He drove it straight for the river, crushing the Sreas along its path. That was the legend of Olaf and how he saved the Fledgicks.

A young Hopper, seeking adventure, decided to go to the wasteland and find this monster. A year later, he was found by some wandering Fledgicks of a different herd. He was very sick and weak, seemingly mad, constantly digging for something. He was adopted by these wanders and eventually mated with Jumper. Both led a happy, normal life, but as they grew older, Hopper kept talking about the dream food that was found in the desert; a red glob that turned dreams into reality. Then, one day, quit suddenly, they both decided it was worth the risk and went to look for it. Dreams were important enough to die for, especially when life was nearing its end. They would have perished in the waste land, except for the fact they had stumbled upon an underground river. Their trip down it would bring them to the other side of a great wall of tar. This would lead them to a new reality, one they could never have imagined; the land of the Osliks on the other side of the world.

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It had become mandatory for the Church followers to learn 'The Tongue of the Children of Fledgick'. Later, it became the official language of the Church of Divine Insight. It was an odd, eclectic mixture of Oslík words, clicking sounds, hand and foot gestures and patterns of eye blinking. The problem was, they had no way of knowing if it was a realistic way to communicate with the Flegos. The information they had indirectly been getting from the College was valid, but they had been embellishing simply for the sake of embellishment. Victor the Pious was confident

a divine insight was guiding him. He was positive the ‘tongue’ was superior to anything the Temple or College could ever come up with. One day, he confidently strode to the Dome, leading a tiny procession. They all formed a circle and started to perform some type of ritual, all done in the ‘tongue’. Victor the Pious had expected the Flegos to come jumping out of the Dome, kissing his hand in complete rapture. This did not happen. Instead, MasPiola stuck his head outside of the Dome’s door and said ‘Shut up! Why are you making all that noise? Sounds like you are going to vomit. Go throw up in your own Church you idiots.’”

A bewildered Victor the Pious concluded that they were not loud enough. The group tried again. A reluctant Professor Motz was instructed to throw a bucket of water on them. Somehow, they took encouragement by this and continued even louder. Eventually their throats gave out and so did the theatrics. Reluctantly, they trudged back to the Church. A message was sent to the Temple, requesting a meeting between Paulo the Pragmatic and Victor the Pious.

MasPiola had invited himself to the scheduled confrontation between Paulo the Pragmatic and Victor the Pious. Victor had assumed the prophet would naturally take his side, but Paulo the Pragmatic knew MasPiola could be persuaded with more basic incentives. MasPiola was having a wonderful time, having a ringside seat of a civil exchange which soon dissolved into a shouting match.

“These poor, simple creatures have a right to be enlightened by their superiors. The Church’s entire reason for being is for them and their kind.” sputtered Victor the Pious. Spit was flying from his lips he was talking so fast. You could almost hear Paulo the Pragmatic slowly count to ten, in his mind, before he answered composedly.

“Oh yes, you are the self-appointed superior, aren’t you? Perhaps you could even enlighten all of us in the Temple; let you do all the thinking for us.” Sarcasm rolled eloquently with each syllable. This was much too subtle for Victor the Pious, he thought he had just converted the other.

“Praised be to the shroud above!” shouted Victor the Pious as he raising his head and hands high above. Anger did not have time to grow in Paulo the Pragmatic because the sight of MasPiola mimicking Victor the Pious caused him to break out into a rare laugh.

MasPiola decided to jump in saying “I think this should be settled in true Oslik fashion. I propose a dung fight at twenty paces. I, of course, will make the ammunition for free. It will make me feel like a part of me helped decide this monumental dilemma; a part of me I wish to share with the two of you.”

Victor the Pious was silent, contemplating the thought of a duel. Finally, Paulo the Pragmatic said “Enough of this. The Flegos stay in the Dome. The Temple and College will look after them.” “Impossible!” shouted Victor the Pious. “We cannot let them suffer in ignorance and darkness. Our guidance is essential for their wellbeing. I believe the College is corrupting your mind.”

This was something Paulo the Pragmatic feared. There had always been a rift between the Temple and the College. Many Temple members, out of tradition, opposed the closer ties with the professors. Dissention amongst his own followers was something he strongly needed to avoid. He then decided to play his wild card, the Prophet. Turning to MasPiola, he said “Tell us what you think. It is your vision that is that is the center of all this. Your work on the Dome is near completion. I could probably find someone to finish it up. What was the name of that other artist?

I believe his name was Honore. You knew him, didn't you? I am sure he could finish your work. That would leave you free to set yourself up in the Church of Divine Insight."

MasPiola was no fool. He realized Paulo the Pragmatic was developing a plan to get rid of him. If he got rid of the Flegos, it would also loosen some of the ties with the College. He stood up exaggeratingly straight, spread out his arms. Lifted his head and began to speak. "The Vision is with me. Victor the Pious should go over to the other side, across the Great Tar Sea. His quest is to teach all the Fledgicks, not just the two that are our guests. He then fell limp, as if he was exhausted, but he watched Victor the Pious from the corner of his eye.

"I ..I.." stammered Victor the Pious. "If I were younger, I would embrace that challenge. My followers, here on this side, need my leadership. The Church is still too young."

"Nonsense." said Paulo the Pragmatic with delight. He loved watching others squirm. "Only you, Victor the Pious, can accomplish this noble task. It is a part of the Vision. Why, you should take the Flegos back with you; take them back home. MasPiola shall join you. His natural ways with them will ensure your ultimate success. Yes, my dear Victor the Pious, you are right; the Vision is true. The Temple will gladly work with the College to help you on this sacred mission. Spread the Vision, my two friends. Thus, truly is a glorious day!"

"You can count me out!" shouted MasPiola with no pretense of being a prophet. "You're crazy if you think I'm going to the other side. Tell you what, I'll draw you a map and the both of you can go" he continued, poking his finger at both Victor the Pious and Paulo the Pragmatic. "I believe I'm having another Vision. Yes, yes, I can see it now. There should be a race between Victor the Pious and Paulo the Pragmatic; a contest to see which can cross the fastest."

"Give me the Flegos and let the Temple go get some new Fledgicks. MasPiola will give you a map." said Victor the Pious to Paulo the Pragmatic.

In the end, nothing got resolved, but somehow a seed was planted. All three knew their problems could be solved by sending the other two far away, to the other side of the world.

CHAPTER 19

Ulysses was momentarily in shock. Just a few seconds earlier, he was almost swallowed by a mountain of a monster. Now, he was talking to a Fledgick; a Fledgick who said he had been waiting for him. The creature stood there, its eyes closed, and its hand outstretched as if waiting for a prize. Ulysses took one of the hands and shook it saying “Thank you. You have saved me life.”

The Fledgick did not know what to do or say. Uncomfortable, it stammered “Have I offended you Almighty One? Here, I have the three stones.” It turned around, rummaged through a sack and pulled out three small, smooth stones. He held them out in his open palm and said, “Here are my prayer stones.” Ulysses stood there, totally perplexed. The hairy animal then hopped up and down three times and started to sing a song. It was all very ceremonial in nature, but Ulysses could pick out certain words. From what he could make out, the Fledgick before him was reciting the promise of the return of a great teacher, known as MasPiola. The faithful had been waiting for his return for many generations; eventually he would appear before a chosen one. MasPiola would then bestow a gift to that one. This gift would allow a Fledgick to jump so high it could fly. Ulysses did not know what to do, so he said, “What is your name?”

“Felix.” was its obedient response. Then it quickly lay prone on the ground and began to moan “I am sorry! I am sorry! I am not worthy! I have tasted the Forbidden Fruit. I have thought of things I should not have thought of. Often, I doubted you. I am not worthy!”

Ulysses felt obligated to say something both sympathetic and profound at this point. “I would not be here, right now, if it weren’t for you, Felix. You have believed and survived. That

makes you worthy.” And then he said something, which really surprised him. “Do you have any Forbidden Fruit with you?”

“No. I have tasted that evil, but I try daily to resist its temptations, All I ask is for forgiveness.” Felix reached out to kiss Ulysses’ hand, but retracted back from the sight of it. It stared at Ulysses’s hand, to his face and back to his hand. “You are not he! You are not the Great MasPiola! What are you? Who are you? Are you the Evil LokMila in disguise?”

Again, Ulysses was at a loss for words, but his instincts knew he might be in danger. He wasn’t sure if he should pretend to be MasPiola or not. Finally, he asked “How do you know I am not he?” He tried to make his voice sound commanding and controlled, but it came out cracked with fear.

“Your small finger on your left hand, it has not been removed.” Felix held up his own left hand, showing the missing fingertip. “My finger was sacrificed when I was born. This makes me a believer in the Great MasPiola. Because of this, I was born to believe. It has always been so. You have come to tempt me, but my faith is my guide. Be gone evil! Be gone!”

The Fledgick fled, jumping away in a series of quick hops. Ulysses stood there, all alone. There was nothing for him to do but start walking. He looked into his grandfather’s black logbook, but nothing in it pointed to any clue on which way to go. With no better option, he decided to walk in the direction where Felix had hoped off to. A nagging question kept coming back to him “Why had he come here?” The answer, when there was one, kept changing with the mood and circumstances. Front and center of his mind was the reality of being lost in a hostile and dangerous land. He still knew his way back to the river. Should he retrace his step and head back towards it? He had expected his journey would lead to a purpose. Maybe the exploration along the way was the goal. If it were, he was quickly losing his passion for it. He was tired of

being alone and his meeting with Fledgick did not help. Had Felix been insane; maddened by Forbidden Fruit? Were there more like him? Were they all crazy? Would they all be hostile if they found out he was the not the Great MasPiola?

As he walked and thought, he decided to let fate make the decision for him. He would head towards a rock that stood in the distance. If the trip did not reveal anything to him, he would turn around and go back to the river, starting his long journey back home. Whether he was doing this consciously or unconsciously, it did not matter. The revelation he sought was left open ended, allowing him to interpret it. Deep down to his core, he had become an optimist.

He traveled slowly, taking his time, hoping something would happen. As it too often does, nothing did. Once he reached the rock formation, he decided to rest a little and prepare for the long walk back. He climbed on top of the rock, wanting to make one last, symbolic gesture; one last look at the future that would never be. At that point, standing on the utmost top, Ulysses' life changed. What he saw made him feel life was full of wonder and adventure. The imagination of a young Oslik had replaced the weariness of an old one.

There, not too far way, were three huge circles carved in the ground. More specifically, they were three deep ditches, each forming a perfect circle. These three circles touched each other, forming a triangle at their center. Their perfect geometry could be seen, in all their glory, from Ulysses' viewpoint. Something stood in the center of each circle. From where he was, he could not tell how large in diameter the circles were, but they were very large; large enough to hold many Osliks. Nature definitely did not make these; they were too perfect. With new conviction, confidence and enthusiasm, he marched towards them. Fate had touched him, at least that is what his heart had convinced his mind.

Each circle was about the size of one of the craters made by the Terrible Tremors monsters. This, most likely, was not a coincidence. In the center of each circle lay a smooth, round stone. These were twice the size of Ulysses' head. Weathered hoof prints could be seen all about the interior. He had the déjà vu experience, feeling he belonged there. He found himself drawn to the center, where the circles intersected. Instinctively, he began to dig, being drawn by the whiff of Forbidden Fruit. Something was down there. He cut his finger on something sharp that protruded down deep in the sand. Even though the pain on the little finger of his left hand throbbed, he kept pulling. The object below held fast, it would not budge. He realized this would take some time. Getting a digging stick out of his travel bag, he started to shovel. Soon, he had dug deep enough to dislodge it. It was a skull, but not an Oslik one. There were many of these down there, but just the heads, not the rest of the skeleton. It looked to be some type of ritualistic grave site.

Ulysses recognized the skull. It was one of the creatures his grandfather had sketched. Taking out the four sketches, it was easy to see it was a Lokil. The sharp, pointy beak and sharp teeth made it stick out from the others. Looking at the fresh blood that dripped from one of its teeth, Ulysses remembered his finger. He quickly washed and bandaged it, thinking the entire time he could have easily lost the tip of it. Things were getting stranger. Throwing his bag over his shoulder, he walked as fast as he could, away from that scene.

CHAPTER 20

Professor Franken was the first to notice the changes in the Amazing Flegos. They slept a lot more and seemed disinterested in eating. Eventually, they began to beg him to let them be. The Flegos were well over twenty years old, well into old age for Fledgicks. They told him they would die together when their time came. It was their wish to be returned home to the other side. They murmured more details, but Professor Franken had trouble understanding. All he knew was that he wanted to make them comfortable as possible and fulfill their dying wish. Eventually, this news reached MasPiola, the Temple and the Church.

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“Teaching the less intelligent is the essence of our existence.” cried Victor the Pious to his followers. They all stomped their feet in the pious way they had been taught. “First, we must take the Flegos away from the Temple and bring them back here, where they belong. We want them to be happy while they are dying. Isn’t it obvious they will be in ecstasy just being with us? Do you all agree?”

Again, all stamped their feet in unison. Then, a young Oslik stood up. Sheepishly she said “How do we know they’ll be happy? Shouldn’t we ask them what they want?” The congregation all turned to stare at her.

Victor the Pious rose to the occasion, saying “You, my young Oslik, are like the Flegos. You ask questions because you do not know the answers. If you had learned your lessons, you

would be enlightened; all answers would come to you. Despair comes from the questions.

Happiness arises from the answers. Do we all agree this is correct?"

No one stood up to object. "As you can see, all knew the answer but you. And by looking at your face, I can tell you are not happy. What more proof do you need?" Victor the Pious threw his hands up in triumph as the rhythmic sound of stamping webs slapped the floor.

Victor the Pious stood on a box and said "But our work does not stop with the Flegos. We must find their brothers and sisters. We must teach them to be happy. We must go forth and seek life on the other side. Our Vision can only be seen when we follow the answer. I turn to the future; to all the strong and young Osliks who do not have the responsibility of egg hatching. I need these true believers to cross the Great Tar Sea and continue my work."

A small handful, all very young, stood up and enthusiastically begged to be accepted for the daring challenge. Victor the Pious gestured to one of his aids. The aid left the stage and returned with a large, ornate box. It was brought to Victor the Pious with great ceremony. It was full of tiny red hats, miniature versions of those worn by the Temple Elders. Holding one of the hats up in the air, so all could see, Victor the Pious said "Behold, the Headdress of the Missionary. Each one of you, who is standing, has been touched by fate. You all were chosen, long before you were born, to be here at this glorious moment. Come up here to the stage."

And so, they all went up to the stage. They were instructed to form a single file. One by one, they walked to the platform where Victor the Pious stood. Each stated their name, and a little red hat was placed on their head. Victor the Pious murmured the word of anointment with each crowning. "Each of you shall receive training before you embark on this magnificent and holy quest. He stated when the last hat was placed on the last head. He was a little disappointed to find many red headdresses remained in the box. The new missionaries gleefully went back into the

crowd, receiving admiration, congratulations and well wishes from all. The Church of Divine Insight had been rejuvenated with purpose.

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MasPiola, Professor Motz and Professor Franken all stood by, watching the Flegos sleep. MasPiola was speaking “I’ll be glad to make those idiots a map. The more that leave, the better. It doesn’t surprise me that pompous Victor the Pious isn’t going. He’s all in favor of others doing the sacrificing, but you won’t see him giving up an easy life. Not him! Still, I hope they all go over; and take that Church of theirs with them. Let Victor the Pious fall into the sea and be tar and feathered. That would teach him!”

Professor Franken was trying to get the Flegos to talk. He told them how he was helping to draw a map; a map that could take them home. Professor Motz had made previous maps, but now he was trying to link all the pieces together. The map had been precise on where the Flegos had been found in the wasteland. From that point, landmarks were filled in based on the Flegos descriptions. There was a river, a great wall, desert, a great funnel that touched the ground, etc. The details became vague after a while. Professor Franken did not press them. He knew they were worried about their own kind. In the end there was a map, but it was uncertain how useful it was.

“What’s all this nonsense about magic fruit?” MasPiola asked Professor Franken. “The one called Hopper keeps rattling on, in his sleep about magic red fruit. He says it came make him fly; he can jump so high.”

“Jumper says there is a magic red food that grows in the sand.” answered Professor Franken. “It allows your imagination to run wild. You become your dreams; your dreams are you. It allows you to look and see things you could never see. It is the answer to the question ‘What am I?’ Bliss is knowing the answer.”

“Sounds like a lot of dung to me. Do you think it’s true?”

“It is hard to say. Hopper believes it is; claims he found some when he was young. Jumper hates when he talks about it. She tries to soothe him when he does.”

MasPiola did not reply. His imagination had been captured by the ‘magic red fruit that grew in the sand’. That it only existed in such an exotic place as ‘the other side of the world’ only added to its mystique. He was proud, even vain, about his imagination. It was the fuel for his talent. Could this food increase his power to imagine? Would it allow him to create things no other Oslik could ever dream of? He had tasted fame and fortune when he had won the Dome’s competition. He liked it. The more he tried to stop thinking about it, the more it took root. He was not the type to go chasing after some myth, yet reality was often stranger. He would have been the first to laugh if you were to mention ‘life on the other side’. Yet, sleeping in front of him were two Fledgicks. He could even talk to them. He had never imagined anything like that before.

Over the next few days, MasPiola would stop in and check on the health of the Flegos. He really wasn’t concerned about their welfare. He had an ulterior motive.

“So, let me see if I understand this. There are big craters in the wasteland. If you stand in the middle of one of them, you can smell the fruit, if there is some down there. Is that right?” asked MasPiola.

“Yes.” answered Professor Franken. “Dig a little and you should find it”

“And when I find it, I just pop it into my mouth.”

“Yes.”

“And I’ll see things; things I could never have imagined?”

“That’s what Hopper claims. I have no reason to doubt him.”

“And we definitely know where these craters are?”

“Yes, there’re at the edge of a great wasteland. That’s where you’ll find them. Let me look at your map.”

MasPiola handed him the map he had been drawing.

“Right here.” pointed Professor Franken. “Once you cross over to this island, you’ll see a glowing light in the distance. Just walk towards it.” He erased some of the map’s landmarks and told MasPiola to reposition them. “There, you should be able to find it yourself now.”

Irritably, MasPiola said “I still can’t see why you can’t bring me back some. You’re going anyway. Just name your price.”

“You were told more than once that the College does not think it is wise to bring this unknown substance over. We do not know what effects it will have on Osliks. Living your life, inside of your mind with no escape, is dangerous.”

“The only danger is getting it. Give me some. I’ll keep it to myself. In fact, the College can study me while I eat it. That should satisfy your scientific curiosity and help your feeble mind justify it.”

“No. Besides, this is not my decision to make. You don’t belong to the College anyway. Why should we even take you with us?”

“You’re taking those damned missionaries. Aren’t you? They certainly are not College members. What’s your rationale for that?”

Professor Franken was silent. Finally, he said “I’ll do what I can to make you a member of the expedition when it crosses over. That’s the best I can do.”

“That will do, for now, I guess.” In MasPiola’s mind, he was already thinking of a plan which would get him some Forbidden Fruit, without all the trouble of crossing the Great Tar Sea.

Paulo the Pragmatic was the happiest he had been for some time now. His influence with the College had helped ensure the missionaries would be going over to the other side of the world. He still had hopes of putting Victor the Pious on that expedition. Now, if only this party could be held up, once it crossed over, that would be very advantageous. They only needed to be delayed long enough for the Blue Mist to pass. This would leave them in exile, at least for three years, when the Mist returned. That MasPiola was also thinking of making this voyage was a very pleasant benefit. He was positive he could convince the College to take one more passenger.

CHAPTER 21

Ulysses was feeling light-headed as he walked. Things were becoming surreal. At first, this troubled him. His instincts to look at the past for guidance were being challenged. But now, the strange seemed ordinary. Perhaps he really was the adventurer he had always thought he could never be. This gave him confidence. He shouted at the top of his lungs “I am the Great Ulysses!”

His joyous shout carried a long distance, reaching the huge ears of an Extuf. Its name was Ajax and he was positive he heard the ancient language which had been taught to him when he was quite young. He was not a believer, but the things learned at an early age can take a strong hold. He thought it was probably a Lokil, wailing its prayers. Ajax went looking for a big stick. It was always best to be prepared when dealing with a Lokil. Maybe, if he were lucky, it would fall into one of his traps. He heard they had magical powers and would grant you three wishes, but he knew that was most likely just talk. If they indeed had magical powers, the Rostif Stone would be theirs. There would not be this constant fighting for it between the Extufs, Lokils and Fledgicks. Oh well, that feuding kept Ajax in business. He enjoyed his work, finding holy relics to sell to gullible believers. Making them was always easier than finding them, but it was still thrilling to uncover one just the same.

Ulysses saw something shiny in the distance. He immediately hiked towards it. In his heart, he felt fate guiding him. As he got closer, he could see what it was. There, in the middle of the desert was a pedestal with a carved quartz cup sitting on it. Seeing it, he had a strong desire to

quench his thirst. He ran hurriedly to it. Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath his webbed feet. He found himself sitting at the bottom of a pit; a pit too deep for him to get out. Once the shock wore off, he tried to figure a way back to the top. But after a while, the realization of hopelessness came. All that was left for him to do was to shout for help. That is what he kept doing.

Ajax was checking his traps, lumbering his big feet, dragging his heavy tail behind him. When he heard Ulysses' cries, he moved a lot faster, stopping only to pick up a few stones to throw. As he approached the pit which entrapped Ulysses, he hesitated. From the bottom of the trap, he could hear the ancient language. From afar, he shouted "What are you?"

From the bottom of the pit came "I am Ulysses."

"What is a Ulysses?"

"That is me. My name is Ulysses".

"Are you Extuf, Fledgick or Lokil?"

"I am neither. I am an Oslík."

"Never heard of it." said Ajax as he threw a stone down the pit.

"Ouch!" shouted Ulysses. "Why did you do that?"

"I felt like it, that's why? Now, let's have a look at you."

Ajax peered over the side and down the hole. He was at a loss for words, but finally said "You have returned! Oh, Great MasPiola, I am so sorry. Here, let me help you out of there."

He lowered his huge tail down, allowing Ulysses to crawl out. "Again, please forgive me, Almighty One. Laboring, Ajax knelt to one knee, bowing huge, large head. "I've never believed in you; I mean I do now. Am I the Chosen One? Why me? I mean I am very grateful and humbled you picked me."

Ulysses, for now, decided not to tell him his real name again. He would ask some questions first. He stood erect and tried to speak in an imposing voice. “Sit and tell me your name.”

“Ajax” was the answer.

“Ajax, tell me what you know about me.”

“Why, you are the Great MasPiola. Shouldn’t you know that?” he said with great humility.

“No, I mean how did you learn about my existence?”

“Well, first, your image is carved on the Sacred Rostif Stone. I guess my parents told me about you first. Later, when I was older, the Learning Guild taught us about your first coming. That is where I learned to speak the language of the Great MasPiola. It was the duty of all good Extufs to obey the teachings. One day you would return and show yourself to one of the three Kleks. The Chosen One would then return with you. I always knew you would show yourself to an Extuf, but I could never imagine you’d pick me, but why me?”

“In time, all your questions will be answered. What else did the Learning Guild teach you?”

“The Great MasPiola, that’s you of course, fell from the mighty dome above and landed in the wasteland many, many generations ago. You first showed yourself to a Fledgick hermit. You took pity on Fledgick because it was so lazy and ignorant. Later you realized they were all like that. You just can’t trust them to do anything right.”

Ulysses interrupted him “Please, just tell me what the Guild taught you. I don’t want your personal opinions.”

“That is what I am doing. Where was I, oh yes, the hermit’s name was FlegAnn. You taught her how to speak in your language. It took a long time because Fledgicks are not very smart. If you had chosen an Extuf first, well, things would have been different. Things would be better. Anyway, you eventually met with some other Fledgicks herds and taught them many things. One day, the Evil LokMila crawled out of a dung heap and began to stalk you.”

“Tell me more about this Evil LokMila.”

“The evil, terrible and disgusting LokMila was Lokil of course. It is common knowledge that all Lokils are the worst form of life, but this one was particularly evil. He was an outcast, even amongst his own kind.”

“Why was he evil?”

“Because he was a Lokil. Anyway, the Evil LokMila used to stalk the Fledgicks, stealing from them. At night, one day, he saw some of the Learning Carvings you made.”

“Learning Carvings?”

“The stone carvings you made to help teach the stupid Fledgicks the sacred language. But naturally, you already knew this. You are testing me.”

“That is true. I am testing you. You will understand more in the future. For now, please continue.”

The Evil LokMila taught himself your tongue, although he had to use a lot of sign language and movements. Lokils’ beaks make it hard to pronounce certain sounds. Eventually, he found the courage to talk to you. Those ignorant Fledgicks took him in because you encouraged them to do so.”

“Then what happened?”

“LokMila lived with them for a long time.”

“Did he betray them?”

“No.”

“Did he steal from them?”

“No.”

“I do not understand. Why do you call him the Evil LokMila?”

He was a Lokil. Why wouldn't I call him evil?”

“I see. So, tell me Ajax, how did the Extufs first learn of me? Tell me what your Learning Guild teaches.”

Ajax bowed his head, more from habit of early training than from reverence. “The wise and enlightened ExOnus was the first one you appeared to. He was the Father of the Leaning Guild. He is at the center of our core. You appeared to him; he was the Chosen One.”

“I thought you said I appeared to a Fledgick hermit first. Why wasn't she considered the Chosen One?”

“The Chosen One was always to be an Extuf.”

“How do you know that?”

“The Learning Guild tells us. We are given the answers to questions like that. That way, all know what is true.”

“That sounds familiar. Please continue.”

“The ever-wise ExOnus, Father of the Learning Guild, had a vision before you appeared to him. He saw a glowing orange orb in a dream. In this orb was an unknown creature with the gift of vision; the ability to communicate with other creatures. It did this by using the works it created. The orb spoke to ExOnus, telling him this creature had chosen him to learn to talk to all the other creatures of the world. Until then all Extufs were ignorant. We did not know we were

superior to the Fledgicks or Lokils. Before, we all just existed. But after ExOnus, we could talk with the others. Once we could do so, it was obvious they needed us.”

“Why did they need you?”

“Obviously, Extufs are better than Fledgicks and definitely far superior to Lokils. Any Extuf can tell you so. Besides, the Great MasPiola appeared to the mighty visionary ExOnus. The Vision came only to him, not the brainless Fledgick hermit and certainly not to that Evil LokMila.” Ajax spit after mentioning Lokil’s name.

“Where did I, the Great MasPiola, first show myself to ExOnus?”

“At the sacred site. The Powerful ExOnus was not the type of Extuf who needed material things. He wandered about the desert by himself, often digging as a means of meditation. Sometimes, he would go to a Fledgick site and watch them from a distance.”

“Why would he do that?”

“ExOnus was a very kind Extuf. He would show his kindness by going into their camp at night and borrowing things of theirs. You see, he knew that the Fledgicks he borrowed from would be ecstatic to give him their belongings. This would cause problems because the other Fledgicks would be jealous. In his charity and wisdom, ExOnus would remove these things anomalously in the stealth of the dark.”

“It was very kind of him.”

“Yes, it was. Sadly, those dumb Fledgicks never figured out how lucky they were. They really should have been more grateful. It was the Mighty ExOnus who united all the Kleks by teaching them how to talk to each other.

“The Kleks?”

“The Fledgicks, the Lokils and the Extufs are all Kleks; all living under the dome of life.”

“Let me see if I understand all of this. Many generations ago, ExOnus united all the Kleks. How do you rule each other? How are decisions made which affect all the Kleks?”

“We, the Extufs, try to make the decisions for them, but the Fledgicks are too lazy and the Lokils cannot be trusted.”

“I thought ExOnus united them.”

” He did, but the Fledgicks and Lokils refuse to see that. Only we know the truth. We, the Learning Guild, are still trying to teach them to properly read the Sacred Rostif Stone.”

“The Rostif Stone?”

“Excuse me for saying this, oh great MasPiola, but you carved it. Shouldn’t you be telling me about it?”

“Am I the Great MasPiola or aren’t I!” shouted Ulysses in his best commanding voice.

“Sorry, oh great one.”

“You are forgiven. Continue.”

“You used many drawings and carvings to teach the Kleks a common language. You called it Piolash and it is the ancient language that the Learning Guild taught me, when I was young. One of these stones was ten times higher than me and very narrow compared to its height. On top of it, you carved a statue of yourself. You ordered this monument to be dragged, by a combination of Fledgicks, Lokils and Extufs, to the sacred site. There, the Kleks stood it upright. Gifts were left at the base for you. You were very happy.”

“Then, the Fledgicks, Lokils and Extufs lived in harmony?”

“Yes, until the fighting started.”

“What fighting?”

“The Fledgicks were ignorant. They thought the stone was theirs, to read as they saw fit. Those terrible Lokils tried to capture it for themselves. But we knew it was meant for us because it was on our sacred site.”

“By any chance, was the sacred site where I met the Fledgick hermit?”

“Yes.”

“And that is the place the Evil LokMila met me?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose this is where ExOnus would go to please the Fledgicks by borrowing from them.”

“Of course it was. It was your site, made sacred when you appeared to ExOnus.”

“Take me there.”

Ajax hesitated.

CHAPTER 22

MasPiola hesitated to read the letter. It had arrived three days ago, through the canals. Somehow, he felt delaying its opening would soften the news. He was certain he knew what it was, and it was not good. Taking a deep breath, he ripped open the envelope in one quick motion. It read ...

The family MilOct of the Mila tribe expects the presence of MasPiola for the incubation time of their daughter Basset. This request has been posted with the Oslík Family Society. If no reply has been received within two dome bouncing's, the family MilOct will take actions in regard to Casset's situation. Upon failure of your reply, you must appear before the Oslík Family Society to declare you bear no responsibility for the future egg. You are hereby notified that the Mila tribe has already registered their accusations on this situation.

Renel (Second Son of Mila)

Father of Basset

MasPiola had heard rumors of this. It was, most likely, going to be his egg. The trouble was, he could not remember a female named Basset. He had no intention of marrying her, whoever she was. The best and easiest thing to do was to run; run and hide until all of this blew over. The Blue Mist was coming, a perfect time to cross the Great Tar Sea; a perfect time to get some magic fruit. He could spend a little time there, expanding his mind. In two or three weeks, he would return, making sure he got off at some secluded place. He might have to hide for a while, but he deserved a vacation. He had been working much too hard lately. The peace and quiet would do him good. Besides, he was doing the Church of Divine Insight a huge favor by going

over there. If he played his cards right, he might be able to get them to grant some type of sanctuary for him. Perhaps they could establish some type of religious law that prevented the Oslik Family Society from coming after him. The more he thought about it, the brighter things looked.

.....

Paulo the Pragmatic had just finished making a generous donation to the Oslik Family Society. It was money well spent. Life was getting better and better for him.

“Come in. Come.” he said excitedly when he saw Benedict coming towards his office. “I always enjoy our little visits. Things are going well at the College for you?”

Benedict answered reluctantly “I’m still in charge of Fledgick waste retrieval.”

“That is a shame. Well, things may be looking up for you. The Flegos are not long for this world They are dying and will be sent back home for their final resting place.”

Paulo the Pragmatic was thrilled to hear this but did his best to show sympathy for him. “

“What will become of me?”

“Well, you have been loyal to me, so I want to repay you.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you do me one last favor, perhaps we can take you under our wing, here at the Temple.’

“Leave the College for good and join the Temple?”

“Yes, that would be the plan. I know you are not happy there. I can see the sorrow in your face.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Just cross the Great Tar Sea with the expedition.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There will be one Oslik on it. Do you know MasPiola?”

“Yes, I don’t like him.”

“All the better. He plans to cross over and return in a few weeks. It would be a nice gift to me, from you, if he did not return with the others.”

“You want me to kill him. I can’t do that!”

“No, of course not. We are all civilized here. All you need to do is make sure he is not on the Tar Skimmer when it returns home. We can always pick him up in three years, when the Blue Mist returns. A little vacation will do wonders for MasPiola’s outlook on life. Do you understand?”

“I think so. You want to exile him.”

“Exactly.”

“And what would I get out of this?”

“You get to be one of my special aids, working on my personal projects. It would be a very comfortable life.”

“And you can arrange for the College to let me go?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Glad to have you as a part of the team. We’ll talk later. Please close the door on your way out.”

Paulo the Pragmatic was very pleased with himself. He always won in the end. Time and planning were his allies. He had his Great Dome. Getting rid of MasPiola was more personal, but still very gratifying. All that was left was to destroy the Church of Divine Insight. All it would take was time and planning.

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Professor Franken was the first to know the Amazing Flegos had both died in their sleep, holding each other tightly. The news spread quickly, but only he seemed to genuinely mourn. Victor the Pious preached to his followers, saying these poor innocent creatures died unhappily. Their sadness came from not being taught 'how to see as Osliks see'. The Temple said the Osliks failed them by delaying their final wish to be returned home. They blamed the Church. Both sides pointed the finger at the College for having brought them over in the first place. The College had financial dealings with both, so they said nothing.

The plan to send missionaries to the other side remained in place. In fact, The Church even gained more momentum for it. They could not bring back the dead Flegos, but they could make the world a better place for all Fledgicks. The Temple tried to get more and more Church followers to go, even helping to pay for some of the expedition. Despite the cooperation, there remained one sticking point, which party should pay for the passage and burial of the Flegos. The Church demanded the Temple should pay for it, as a means of penance. The Temple said it was not their fault, besides the Church was going to pay for it when the Flegos were still alive. In the end, the two sides came up with a compromise. An enormous public funeral would be held on this side of the sea. This way, all Osliks could get one last look and pay their respects. After the

funeral, the two bodies would quietly be carted off to some obscure place and dropped into the Great Tar Sea. Paulo the Pragmatic had even volunteered the use of a huge catapult he had commissioned from the College. They all agreed that is what the Amazing Flegos would have wanted.

The funeral was a big success. Half the Oslík population turned out. Street vendors sold tiny statues as mementos. Speeches were made and ceremonies performed. A tiny play was put on by the Church, with two Oslíks dressed in Fledgick costumes. After three days, the funeral ended. Its closing speech was made by Nadia the Iconic. She slowly walked up to the podium, one assistant on each side, helping keep the overly large headdress from falling. All three original Elder headgears had been spliced together.

“My fellow Oslíks” she said “I believe we are all better for having known these simple, humble creatures. I know they were better for having known us.”

With those final words, there was an enormous cheer, and the funeral officially ended. Quietly, the two Fledgick bodies were carted away. Later, both made a beautiful splash of tar as their carcasses were catapulted high into the air. At the same time, a small fleet of nine Tar Skimmers were being prepared on the coast. The Blue Mist was already settling in.

CHAPTER 22

“I said I would like to visit the sacred site.” said Ulysses to Ajax.

“Begging your pardon, oh Great MasPiola, but that request may be difficult for me.”

“Why? Don’t you know where it is?”

“I know, but there were some misunderstandings with a few of my customers back there.”

“How bad can it be? Besides, you will be with me, the Great MasPiola. Surely some trivial problems in your past will be overlooked. Don’t forget, I appeared to you. That makes you the Chose One, at least in the eyes of the Extufs.”

“All will be in awe of seeing you. Your return has been discussed and studied for generations. However, I cannot be the Chosen One, at least technically.”

“What do you mean by technically?”

“Well, you can be absolved of some things by paying penance to the Learning Guild.”

“What penance?”

“You see, I sold some holy relics that the Guild never sanctioned as authentic.”

“Holy relics? Authentic?”

“Maybe I should back up a little. I make a living by the laborious and exhausting search for items which I believe belonged to the holy Extufs of the past. When I find one, I take it to the Guild. I pay a tax on it, and they sanction it as authentic. Once it is declared holy, I can sell it. My customers swear it improves their lives. Once, and I swear it was only, I sold a non-sanctioned relic.”

“What was your punishment?”

“I had to pay an outrageous fine! Plus, I agreed to sign over certain rights to the Learning

Guild.”

“You signed over your right to be the Chosen One?”

Ajax hung his head in shame. “Yes, sadly I really didn’t believe in you back then, but I do now. You can’t understand the extreme and painful shame I feel now.”

Ulysses could sense his act of contrition was not sincere.

Ajax continued “But now that you, the Great and Powerful MasPiola is here, you can lord over that retched Guild; give them some perspective on the real truth, especially their shameful handling of me.” He was grinning from one huge ear to the other.

This made Ulysses think. What were the expectations of the Second Coming of MasPiola? He had the feeling they expected him to have magical powers. They would want to use these powers so that their wishes could be fulfilled. If they were anything like Osliks, the more frivolous the wish, the more they demanded it. Finally, Ulysses said “What do the Extufs expect of me?”

“To simply bring the truth.”

“Tell me what the truth is.”

“That’s easy, all know it. The Extufs should watch over the Fledgicks and terrible Lokils. How else can they be like us if they won’t listen to us? Communication, you see, is the key. The Great MasPiola is the lord of communication.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, of course. I can’t wait to see the looks on all the Kleks faces as we, I mean you, walk up to the Rostif Stone. They will all fall to their knees. Every Extuf will be dancing when you tell the Lokils and Fledgicks to put down their weapons. I’m sure the Learning Guild has

hundreds of ways to humiliate them. They have been dreaming of this for many years; many generations.”

Ulysses could not help but notice the look of pride on Ajax’s face. He asked, “How do you know I won’t choose the Lokils or Fledgicks?”

“If you did, we would know you are not the Great MasPiola; just a pretender to trick us. We have been taught, since we were quite young, that a false MasPiola might come. The Guild taught us how to identify the Evil MasPiola.”

“So, how would you identify my evil counterpart, if he did exist?” Ulysses quickly and nervously added “Naturally he doesn’t exist, you know.”

“He would contradict the Guild. Life is simple when you know the answer.”

“Take me to the Rostif Stone. When I can see it in the distance, you must leave me. Come back to this very spot where we are now standing. Continue doing whatever you were doing before I appeared to you.”

“I do not understand. Aren’t I the Chosen One, at least unofficially?”

“Yes, but I must enter the Sacred Site alone.”

“Can’t I watch, from afar, when you deliver the truth. I would really like to witness that.”

“No, do as I say!”

Ajax nodded his head slowly saying “It is not my place to question you, oh Great MasPiola. Perhaps, in all your wonderful wisdom, you can give me some small possession of yours, just a small memento. This way, years later when I am old, I can look at it and say I did not dream all of this.”

“Of course.” said Ulysses, looking into his bag. He took out a red tail feather and handed it to him.

Ajax was extremely happy. He knelt on one knee and kissed Ulysses' hand. "Thank you! Thank you!" he kept repeating. Ulysses was very touched, but he tried to hide his emotions. Ajax's mind was already swimming with one question 'How much could he charge for that feather?' He was certain it was worth a lot of money.

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The walk was long, but time went quickly for Ulysses. He had learned more about the Kleks, but only from Extuf's view. He knew the three separate families of creatures would each want the Great MasPiola to declare them as Chosen. The other question, which kept clouding his mind, was how to best present himself, either as Ulysses or the Great MasPiola. If he did not say anything, all would assume he was the second coming of MasPiola. He was uncertain if that was advantageous or dangerous. It was, most likely, an equal part of both.

Ajax stopped to point to a monolithic form silhouetted in the descending glow of the dome. "There it is!" he shouted. "That is the Rostif Stone; your sculpture."

Ulysses could see it stood high on a hill in the distance. He really could not make out any of its details. It was just a slender rectangle, sitting straight up and high. He was lost in thought, worrying about his next steps. Ajax broke him out of his trance by saying "Must I really go? I shall miss you greatly."

"I will miss you also, Ajax."

"I shall treasure your gift always. This feather shall never leave my side." He tied it around his neck with some string.

“I was happy to offer it to you as a sign of our friendship.”

“Can I ask one favor, before I go?”

“What is it?”

“I know I can never be the Chosen One, but perhaps you can say you met me in the vast wastelands. Can you write this down and sign your illustrious name? Any future generations that may come from my seed would treasure this with their lives. Here, I have a small scrap of paper you can use.”

Ulysses took the crumpled sheet and began to scribble.

“Could you mention the red feather in it? That would be very helpful.”

CHAPTER 23

MasPiola stayed in the College, with Professor Motz, until the expedition was ready to leave. This way, he could avoid the Oslik Family Society. Also, he did not want to run into any creditors; they may be squeamish about him leaving with so many I.O.U.s soon due. He wanted to slowly disappear, coming back when things cooled off.

He spent the next four days gathering the things he needed for the trip. It would only be for a few weeks, so he packed light. MasPiola took a keen interest in the Tar Skimmer, pretending he knew more about it than he actually did. Just in case, he had Professor Motz show him the basics on running it, although both understood knowledge and expertise should not be confused. At night, he laid in the College Tower, listening to the symphony coming from the Temple. It made him nostalgic; the way he used to roll the Three Stones up the ramp. He thought about the talented way he would roll them, one at a time, making the most beautiful music ever. He remembered how he called the Blue Mist to come to him. He had come a long way since those novice monk days. That was when he was simply known as MasPiola; now, all called him the Great MasPiola! Soon, he would be embarking on a great expedition; far, far away. He would search for magic fruit. MasPiola reminisced about himself; the talented artist extraordinaire; the great lover; the adventure seeker; etc. He fell asleep, dreaming how wonderful he was.

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Nine Tar Skimmers left the coast. Except for the captains of each vessel, and MasPiola, all were missionaries from the Church of Divine Insight. This is what MasPiola thought, but he

was wrong. In fact, one of the passengers in his own Tar Skimmer was Benedict from the College. The skimming and sudden stopping of the voyage made MasPiola's stomach uneasy, but he got used to it in a few hours. He was feeling better. After the excitement of the new surroundings wore off, he started to get bored, looking for something to do. He pulled out some *slevic* stalks and started to chew. One of the missionaries began preaching the evils of that hid in that stalk.

"Shut up!" shouted MasPiola. "I'm not going to spend the whole time listening to you!" Save it for some poor Fledgick you might find; convert them. I like it just the way I am." He noticed the other missionary did not say anything. "You got something against *slevic*? He snarled at him.

"The other, shook his head saying 'No.'"

"Good for you. You ain't brainwashed yet" He offered him a small piece. To his amazement, the other took it and popped it into his mouth. MasPiola grabbed the hood off his fellow passenger's head. He immediately recognized Benedict. There was no love lost between the two.

"Well.Well.Well. If it isn't Benedict. Becoming a missionary now that there aren't any Flego droppings for you to admire? It really is a shame; you were so good at your job."

Benedict did not respond to this baiting.

"When it comes time to release my bowels, I can save it for you; make you feel at home."

Still, Benedict sat in silence.

"What do you do with all that dung? Rumors where you liked to eat it. You are what you eat, or so they say."

The other's continued silence infuriated MasPiola. Benedict just sat there staring into MasPiola's eyes. He knew the last laugh would be his. Time was on his side. Paulo the Pragmatic had taught him well.

The voyage to the other side was uneventful in the sense that there were no tumultuous storms, capsized Tar Skimmers or overboard Osliks. That is not to say, there were no rough seas, fast thinking captains or dramatic insight into one's mortality. These did exist, but they were very tiny fragments of time separated by long stretches of tedium. The missionaries, for the most part, were quiet. They were, after all, the young in a hurry to teach others what they had not learned by themselves. Long periods of silence irritated MasPiola. He would try to battle it, just for the sake of doing so. Making up limericks was his weapon of choice. His most memorable, at least in his mind was

*There was a pretty young Oslik girl
Who had tail feathers that could make your head swirl
When she took me to her nest
She would tell me that I did her the best
So, I decided to take her for another whirl*

It angered the missionaries, but the captains would sing along. Just for fun, MasPiola tried to egg Benedict on again, but it had little effect. He even tried pushing him, but MasPiola backed down when the bigger Oslik swung back. From that time on, all MasPiola's jabs were verbal and at arm's length.

"The coast! The coast!" shouted the captain of the lead skimmer one day. All could see a faint sight of land through the Blue Mist. Cheering rang up, followed by some solemn words

from the missionaries. Each skimmer anchored a few short feet from the rocky shore, close enough for planks to be lowered, letting them walk from vessel to solid land. All passengers unloaded, setting up a temporary camp. It was at this point MasPiola realized how isolated he was. Yes, he would help guide the missionaries to the spot where the Flegos were first found, but he really hadn't been friendly to them. He felt they were shallow enough to hold a grudge against him. "Oh well," he thought "it will only be a couple of weeks; then these fools would be on their own."

In a few days, the expedition started to march to the wasteland. Eight of the Tar Skimmer captains shouted goodbye and began to cast off, heading back home. The ninth one, which was to stay for two weeks and wait for MasPiola, hesitated. But then, it too began to leave the shore and follow the other vessels. Benedict, standing aboard that final skimmer, shouted to MasPiola. "Goodbye, oh Great MasPiola! Goodbye and good riddance!" He laughed as hard as he could, when he saw MasPiola turn and shout "Wait! Wait! You aren't supposed to go. Don't leave me here!" MasPiola knew, at that instant, his life would change, probably forever.

The coast on this side was much the same as the shore on the other. Marching inland, the vegetation was thicker, wilder and more abundant than back home. At first, loud cracking sounds of plants bursting from the ground, shooting upwards to the shroud above, frightened them all. After a while, it became just a part of their new world. Water was abundant and there was enough glow to keep them warm. Although none of the missionaries liked MasPiola, they remained civil towards him. As time wore on, he became more confident. The expedition needed and depended on him as the lead scout. He knew the maps the best because he had drawn them. MasPiola

would also be the key when they found some Fledgicks. He could, in most likely hood, communicate with other intelligent beings, if any existed. As MasPiola realized his importance, he became bolder, taking on the air of leader. But the missionaries saw him as only their navigator, not their moral compass. Larrie held that distinction. Larrie was a little older than the other missionaries and he talked very slowly. They saw this as a sign of maturity. MasPiola saw it as an Oslik whose mind and tongue could not keep up with each other. He could easily win any verbal sparring that would take place with Larrie. He would always be victorious in battle, but did not realize he would lose the war on moral grounds.

As the little convoy continued inward, the land became drier and sparser. Consulting his map, MasPiola declared he recognized some landmarks; they were on the right path and would soon be approaching the wastelands. He walked a few paces ahead of the others. He discovered they were blindly following him, like a mother Oslik leading her tiny ones. He would speed up and they would speed up. He would come to an abrupt halt, and they would go crashing into each other. When no one was looking, he sprinted as fast as he could to a huge rock ahead of him. He hid behind it before they could reach him. They did not see him, and all stood there in total confusion.

“MasPiola, where are you?” shouted Larrie.

There was no answer. MasPiola decided to have some fun at their expense. He sneaked behind the small troop, watching them from a safe distance. In a short time, they started to panic. They eventually turned to Larrie. His conclusion was that they should do nothing. So, that is what they did. Sitting down, they stretched out on the ground and waited. MasPiola would take his own nap.

When he awoke, the missionaries were still sitting there. He marched up to the pack and barked “What’s all this then? I’ve been exploring for hours. When I finally turn around, you are all gone. You were supposed to follow me. Can’t you keep up with me? I’m half your age. Lazy! That is your problem. Larrie, is this your leadership?”

Larrie hung his head in shame.

MasPiola continued “We’ll rest here. Go get me some food and build me a proper nest. You’d all be dead without me. You do not know how lucky you are that I was able to find you. Now go!”

As the small group started to disperse, MasPiola shouted “Go look for some red fruit. It will probably be under the sand. If you find any, bring them directly to me. Do not eat it! It will kill the weak and feeble minded.” He settled in for the day, feeling he had put in a good day’s work.

There was good news and bad news about the wastelands. The bad news was that it was hot, dry, monotonous and tedious. The good news was the landmarks. Marked on the map, were easy to spot. The enthusiasm of seeing a far-off landmark was always saddled with the long dreariness of reaching it. This cycle would repeat itself many times. As the missionaries trudged on, they started to find craters. All were fascinated by them; wanting to go to the centers and explore. MasPiola was mesmerized by them. Larrie was the first to realize they were no longer consulting the map. All they were doing was wandering about the craters and exploring. MasPiola’s reply was “So what? Here, you take the map. Leave me alone!” Larrie found decision making easier and easier, especially since he was always able to convince himself doing nothing

was the best possible course to take. The Osliks roamed from crater to crater, sometimes camping for days at a time.

On one of those days, the ground began to shake terribly. Their instincts were to lay low and cover their heads, except for MasPiola. He could see a mountain of a creature heading his way. He ran, as fast as he could in the other direction. He did not realize the others were not following him, but he wouldn't have cared anyway. He would have still been running if he had not stumbled into another very deep crater. Instantly, all his fears went away. A tiny red glob sat there, commanding his senses to recognize it; recognize it as his master. The magic fruit had found him; it was not the other way around.

Larrie was the first missionary to peek through his fingers, which were clutched tightly in front of his face. A gigantic claw-like foot was right in front of him. It took all his courage to stand up. A few of the others did likewise. He shouted as loud as he could "We are missionaries for the Church of Divine Insight. We have come to save you. Our gift is the knowledge we bring to ..." Larrie never got to finish his well-polished speech. The creature of the Terrible Tremors did not even notice him; it just continued to slowly shuffle forward. Those that were not directly crushed by one of the mammoth feet were squashed by its tail. Thus, they became the first Martyrs of the Mission, a non-practicing branch of the Church of Divine Insight.

CHAPTER 24

As Ulysses got nearer to the Rostif Stone, he grew more hesitant. It was easy to understand what was going on. Three distinct small towns ringed the vertical stone. Ditches, fences, guards, rubble and walls separated each town from the other. The Rostif Stone sat in the middle. A ring of smaller stones surrounded it. These stones were half the height of an Oslik and were crudely carved. Ulysses calculated it was about twenty paces from the center to any of these outlying pieces. The Fledgicks were in one village and the Lokils in another. The Extufs occupied the third. From his conversations with Ajax, he determined the Kleks all coexisted in cooperative contempt with each other. The question was how to best contact them. In his mind, there was only one way. When it was dark, he would sneak in and stay by the Rostif Stone. When it became light, all the Kleks would see the Second coming of the Great MasPiola. He was hoping this would shock them, breaking them of their normal habits, at least for a time. Then, he could meet with individual leaders of each group. At that moment, he had discovered his life's mission; to unite the Fledgicks, Lokils and Extufs. All the Kleks would live in harmony, becoming richer, stronger and happier in the process.

Sneaking into the circle area which surrounded the Rostif Stone was easy. There seemed to be a stretch of land which led right into it. This clearing had no buildings or inhabitants. Ulysses marveled at the sculpture. It was a carving masterpiece, being representational in some parts yet abstract in others. He immediately recognized it as a teaching aid for a common language. It mimicked the central abstract form that sat at the heart of the MasPiola's Dome back

home. At the very top was a lifelike bust of MasPiola himself. It was still dark and he was very, very tired. It had been a long day. He lay down and fell asleep at the base of the Rostif Stone.

When he awoke, it was because he was hit with a rock. It was light out and he could see a very young Lokil getting ready to pitch another at him. “Stop that!” shouted Ulysses. Soon other small Lokils came, all shouting and casting stones at him. He hid behind the Rostif Stone. All this noise brought out other Fledgicks and Extufs. They were screaming and shouting at him. He had trouble understanding them, but he was able to pick out the word ‘blasphemer’. Now, the adults were taking part in the barrage. They seemed to stay out of the outer circle of stones he was in. He was in sacred ground. Crouching behind the statue, with his hands protecting his head, they could not see him. He realized he would be stoned to death. In an act of desperation, he ran to the clearing where he had first come from. He stood far enough away from the three towns where few rocks could reach him. He shouted “I am the Great MasPiola!”

The shouting and throwing stopped. The Fledgicks kneeled, the Extufs bowed and the Lokils covered their eyes.

“Is this how you treat me?” shouted Ulysses in a commanding voice.

There was nothing but silence coming from open mouths.

“Bring your leaders to me.”

Ulysses watched as confusion followed. If they were anything like Osliks, there would be much debate amongst them. The word ‘leader’ is ambiguous at most.

“Get me some food while I wait.”

Eventually, three small groups appeared before Ulysses. Each stood in front of their own town, at the edge of the Sacred Circle.

“Come in. Come in.” said Ulysses, trying to sound hospitable. But none would come into the circle. This did not go unnoticed by Ulysses. He then said “I want you to talk to me. Why are you fighting with each other?”

All started taking and screaming at once. There was much finger pointing and snarling.

“Silence!” shouted Ulysses. “I have come to show you a better way; peace will make you prosper. It will make you happier.”

They just stared at him. He realized it would take some time before this became a communal effort. Ulysses said “I shall meet each group separately, when it is dark. Today, I will meet with the Fledgicks. You will come get me when it is dark and escort me into your village. We will eat and talk.” The Lokils started to protest, saying they should go first. Smile appeared on the Fledgick faces. The bickering started up again.

“Silence!” screamed Ulysses. “Fledgicks first and then Extufs; then Lokils. Do not put any significance in this ordering. You are all equal in my eyes. I need to know what you have learned and passed down from generation to generation. This is how it shall be!”

As each tiny group walked back to their respective town, he could see excitement and activity slowly start to build. The wheels of fate were being set in motion.

As the glow of day started to diminish, a procession came from the Fledgicks. It was moving painfully slow. One of the Fledgicks, which appeared to be the leader, could only hop ever so slightly. If he were to jump higher, his elaborate headdress will tumble from his head. There was much ceremony as they marched to the edge of the Sacred Circle and waited for

Ulysses. He was shown to a throne which rested on a type of sled. The Fledgicks all cheered when he sat in it. The Lokils and Extufs watched in silence from afar. Some types of tracks had been laid which went from the sled to a highly decorated hut. It was slowly pushed by five Fledgicks. Although the pompous circumstance of the ceremony weighed on Ulysses's patience, he hid it well. He was relieved when the sled finally stopped he was escorted out of its throne. He was brought into the middle of a long comfortable room. Three Fledgicks, with colorful ribbons on their heads, knelt in front of him; their eyes downcast. He noticed all were missing the tips of their little fingers. He decided to leave the bandage on his.

"Oh no." thought Ulysses as the three started in on some time of ritualistic chant. He could not bear the solemn anymore. "Please. Please. I have come to talk, not to stand on ceremony. We have much to learn from each other."

With great relief, one of the Fledgicks smiled widely and lay back on his haunches. He removed his head ribbons and scratched his heads, saying "Thank you, oh Great MasPiola. We have been told of your coming for so long, we do not know what to do, now that you are here. We don't know what to expect or what you expect from us."

"What is your name?" asked Ulysses.

"Booba" said the old, chubby Fledgick. "And this is Mark and Eve. We are the village chiefs."

"Good." Now, start from the beginning. Tell me about the first Fledgick I showed myself to, so long ago."

"The Holy Hermit?"

"Yes, that is he."

“You mean her. Her name was FlegAnn.”

“Yes, of course, I forgot, it was a long, long time ago.”

“Her holiness never mated. Instead, she spent her time searching for truth in the great wastelands. One day, a bright orb appeared before her. A strange face looked at her from inside the glowing sphere. Its eyes were so kind, yet so powerful in wisdom, that she knew a superior being was calling her. At that moment, she was reborn. And since that time, all Flegicks were born.”

“Did she tell you this?”

“She did not have to. You declared it was so to our ancestors at the sacred grounds. We repeat your speech, to our inner selves, when we seek strength and reassurance. When life seems hard, we turn to the Rostif Stone, and all is simple. When life is too easy, we turn to the Rostif Stone to remember to contemplate more about life.”

“Why do you contemplate about life?”

“Because it is complex. A simple life does not let you grow.”

“I taught you that?”

“You planted the seed. It is the philosophy which grew from it. Are you pleased with our harvest?”

Ulysses had to think for a minute. He could not tell if it was profound because it was so simple or if it were too simple to be profound. He found himself saying “Yes. Yes. Of course I am pleased.”

The three Elders beamed and smiled at one another. They even started to groom each other. Booba had to remind them they were in the presence of the Great MasPiola. They suddenly stopped picking.

“Tell me about me Lokils and the Extufs. What does the Rostif Stone inspire you to do about them?”

“The Extufs.” snorted Eve, but he was quickly interrupted by a dirty look from Mark. “You taught us how to talk to both the Lokils and Extufs” said Booba. “Our great elders of the past learned all they could about them.”

“Don’t you speak to them now?”

“There is no need to. The knowledge passed on from Elder to Elder protects us from listening to the Extufs and Lokils. In this way, wisdom can be passed from generation to generation. We do not have to keep relearning what we already know. It is simpler, better to live in the truth.”

“What if they have changed since then? After all, much time has gone by since then.

“Why would they change? We are what we are. They are what they are.”

“How do you know what they are; what they are thinking?

“We know what they are. They are not us.”

“But surely, you must have something in common. Can’t you build on that?”

“We have the Rostif Stone in common.”

“Yes! Yes, you do. I gave it to you and them. It was meant for you to learn from each other by talking; exchange idea and open your minds.”

“The Rostif Stone tells Fledgiks how to be better Fledgicks. It is ludicrous that it would tell Lokils or Extufs how Fledgicks can be better.” Booba quickly cast his eyes down, realizing he was speaking to the Great MasPiola. “I am sorry, oh mighty one. It is not my place to lecture you.”

“That is quite alright. You are forgiven. How do you know it doesn’t teach Extufs to be better Extufs?”

“If it taught them to be better, they’d be like us, the Fledgicks. That proves the stone speaks only to us. It is ours. It is the core of our belief. It means more to us than life itself.”

“Can’t you share it?”

“The Lokils and Extufs, especially the Extufs will read blasphemy into it. They will distort the truth, making a mockery of us. I will not let them make a mockery of my ancestors; of me.”

“And so on and so on.” interrupted Ulysses. “What if I could find a solution to this problem?”

“There is no answer.”

“But, you forget, I am the Great MasPiola. I created the Rostif Stone. This is why I came back; why I am here now. I will teach all the Kleks to live as one; to live in harmony.”

The three Fledgick Elders stood silently, their eyes staring into the ground.

CHAPTER 25

MasPiola was living in the moment, from crater to crater. He had wanted the magic fruit, and he got more than he bargained for. He was slowly going insane, but having nothing to gauge his sanity, he did not know it. One day, he wandered into one of the many caves. It was high and had an arched ceiling. He hallucinated he was back home, working on the Dome of the Temple. This desire to create helped offset his addiction. He felt at home and in time, the curse had less and less a hold of him. A cool, gentle stream flowed below this cave. After a long day of applying paint to the cave's interior, he would end it with a swim. At one point, he decided he must move on. He could not stay there forever; be alone forever. Packing supplies, he prepared to take a journey down the stream. He did not know where it would lead, and he did not care.

The trip down the stream was easy and relaxing. His inner strength, which sprang from his ego, was returning. Once again, he became the Great MasPiola, destined to be larger than life. Along the journey, he started to leave handprints as a way of finding the trail back. He was positive he would return home one day. He owed it to his adoring fans, which he was certain, were growing in numbers each day.

MasPiola's eyes had become accustomed to the darkness underground. He had to hold his hands over his eyes when a bright beam of light streamed down from above. Hurriedly, he started to climb up the cave wall, to the world above. Just the feeling of warmth and glow made him feel alive. His eyes were still closed, not used to the brightness. His imagination took over and he painted a landscape in his mind. Eventually, he was able to focus and see reality. Sadly, it looked

just like the wasteland he had last escaped from. Naturally, he was disappointed, but there was nothing left to do but walk.

FlegAnn was hopping through the desert. All the Fledgick clans knew she was crazy. She was a hermit by nature, not by circumstance. Out in the desolated wilderness, she thrived. A big reason for her survival was that the red, Forbidden Fruit had no addictive hold on her. If it caused her to hallucinate, she did not know. She did know, with certainty, it was a trap; a way to lure victims into the mouth, and eventually belly, of the enormous creatures that roamed about. They were clever, the way they buried themselves as a disguise. She was fascinated by them, wishing to be one of them. She wanted to be their friend, but did not know how to do that. She had contented herself to observe from a safe distance.

One day, she was watching one of these huge creature's hunt. It buried itself under the sand by lying down, only its funnel like mouth sticking up, exposed. To any unknowing creature passing by, it looked like a hollowed out stump. A trickle of red goo seeped down the sides. FleAnn felt a speck of sympathy for the prey, but she knew her gigantic friends needed to eat.

As it happened, a strange looking animal was about to walk into the trap. It was like nothing she had ever seen before; having webbed feet and feathers. It did not hop, but just waddled. It did not look too smart to her. It started to lick the sides of the stump, greedily slurping up the intoxicating goo. When it was done, it wanted more. This stupid animal, unlike other prey, tried to climb on its feet first, into the mouth of the hunter. It started to scream when the mouth closed around its legs. She could not resist hopping closer to see it, before it was devoured and digested. Then, an amazing thing happened. With terrified eyes, it looked at her.

She could distinctly hear it say “Help me! Please! I can’t die like this!” She understood every word it said and jumped to help. She jabbed, with a sharp stick, at the mouth which held its captive. They opened enough for MasPiola to escape. He ran as fast as he could, knocking FlegAnn over. She hopped after him.

MasPiola finally stopped out of exhaustion. He collapsed on his back, gasping for air. When he finally opened his eyes, FlegAnn was standing above him, smiling as she stared down at him. “What are you?” she asked.

“I am the Great MasPiola.”

“What is that?”

“That is my name?”

“What are you?”

“An Oslik.”

“What is an Oslik?”

“It is what I am. Are you crazy?”

“Yes.”

MasPiola did not know how to respond to that last answer. He thought for a moment and then said “I know all about you.” He began rattling off random facts he had learned from the Amazing Flegos. FlegAnn was in awe. “Now that I have told you about Flegicks” he continued “Can you tell me something about Osliks?”

FlegAnn was silent.

“I thought not” said MasPiola smugly. “You are lucky I found you. You’d most likely be dead without me right now!”

“What!” said a flabbergasted FlegAnn. “I saved your life.”

“How so? I was merely sitting on that stump, enjoying the fruits of my labor. You knocked me off it; blindsided me and I have no idea why.”

“That stump was a monster’s mouth, and you were going to be its supper. I saved your life, and come to think of it, I saved my monster from terrible indigestion. The poor thing would have gotten sick eating something as disagreeable as you.”

“Now see hear. I would have been the best thing it had ever eaten.”

“Ah ha! So, you admit it was trying to eat you.”

“I admit no such thing. I was just conjecturing a hypothetical. The real question is how can you make amends to me for pushing down to the ground?”

FlegAnn just stared at him, too astonished at his arrogance.

“I can see you are racking your brain, trying to think up some imaginative way to make penance to me. This is where I can help you. No need to strain your brain. Tell you what, just go back to the stump and bring back some of that red goo. If you can do that little thing for me, I will cancel your debt; forgive your actions. I hope this will teach you a lesson. Now, be off with you!”

MasPiola started to sit down, thinking this Fledgick would go hopping away and do his bidding. Before his tail feathers touched the ground, FlegAnn used one powerful hind leg to kick him there. He fell, face first, striking the ground.

“Get it yourself, you fool” shouted FlegAnn. “It will kill you one way or another.”

“What did I do?” MasPiola asked humbly. “I only asked one simple favor. Is this the way you treat a guest?”

FlegAnn started to pick upon one leg again, to kick him. MasPiola backed away and she hopped away. “Wait! Wait! Don’t leave me here. Don’t leave me!” MasPiola shouted after her. She did not stop. He began to follow the tracks she left behind in the sand.

A few days later, he saw her resting in a small oasis. “FlegAnn! FlegAnn! He shouted. “It’s me, your old friend MasPiola.” She paid no attention. He slowly, and cautiously, walked up to her. “I forgot to thank you for saving my life the other day.” he said. “You left in such a hurry. I didn’t have time to express my gratitude.”

She glared at him, but in a few seconds, her hostility vanished. MasPiola took a seat beside her. Finally, FlegAnn said “So, talk about MasPiola of the Oslik clan.”

MasPiola was more comfortable using his own fabricated self-image than being himself.

“I, the Great MasPiola, have come across the Great Tar Sea.” he said, watching as FlegAnn’s widened. This did not go unnoticed by him. He continued with gained confidence “Yes, you heard me right, the treacherous Tar Sea. You are probably asking yourself why I have come. It is because I am selfless and giving. I was born with the burden of being a prophet and a genius. These shackles would have killed any other Oslik; any other creature. But I have endured many hardships, both mental and physical.” At this point, he held up his hand to show his little finger, the one with the missing fingertip. “Don’t ask me about my tortured hand, the memories are too painful.”

“You still haven’t told me why you are here.”

“To show you the most beautiful and wondrous things you have ever seen. My artwork will leave you in a state of rapture. Emotions will flow from you. My wisdom will let you think in depths you have never known.”

“And what do you want in return?”

“Just a few comforts; food, a nice place to stay, a way back home, some red fruit”

He was stopped in mid-sentence by FlegAnn “The Forbidden Fruit is bad. It tempts you. Do not eat it! Leave this terrible land. It is not for you.” She began to jump away, but MasPiola took hold of her hand.

“Alright. Alright. Forget about the fruit. What about the rest?”

“I’m a hermit. I really can’t give you these things, but I can take you to my clan and they can provide for you. As for crossing the sea, I don’t think they can help you. Maybe the Lokils can; maybe the Extufs”

“Lokils? What is a Lokil?”

“These are other intelligent beings. They, we, are all Klecks.”

“Extufs? Klecks?”

“I can see you do not know very much about our world. There are three creatures living on this side of the sea. The Fledgicks, that’s me, the Extufs and the Lokils. All intelligent life is known as a Klek. I guess you, an Oslík, are a Klek.”

“Do you talk to each other?”

“I cannot understand them. They cannot understand me. Sometimes we trade amongst them, but that is rare. They keep to their own kind and we to ours.”

“Would you like to talk to them? I could probably figure out a way to do that. My sculptures are universal. It is pure genius. It could be a base language for all Kleks. Take me to your clan”

"FlegAnn's clan was fascinated with MasPiola, the mighty being from across the sea. He loved being the center of attention again. The clan itself was small by Fledgick standards, only forty of them. A circular clearing was made in the heart of their village. MasPiola would sit in its center, answering questions, but often, pontificating. It was a comfortable life; all of his needs being provided for. One of his favorite forms of entertainment was watching the jumping contest. Young male Fledgicks would compete to see who could jump the highest. MasPiola decided to make it a formal contest. The winner would get to sit next to MasPiola in his circle. This great honor did not go unnoticed by the females, so MasPiola decided to have a cooking contest for them. The winner would get the great honor of spending the day cooking for MasPiola. Soon regular festivals were being held. All was in harmony for a while, but he was getting bored. He came up with the idea of having the top male jumper go on a great quest. MasPiola stated it was to 'bring the Fruit of Creativity to the Great MasPiola!' At first, he thought young Fledgicks would come bursting forward, ready to take on this heroic feat. The Fledgicks did not see it this way. In their minds, he was tempting them with evil. They knew that even if one could physically survive the wasteland, they would fall into the trap of temptation. As time went on, less and less came to hear MasPiola speak. Even FlegAnn started to avoid him and eventually left to be a hermit again. He had out stayed his welcome, but he had nowhere else to go. He prepared a speech.

MasPiola walked to and box a stood on it, shouting "My friends, my wonderful Fledgicks. I have crossed the Great Tar Sea to find you. I did not know what to expect. I knew you were intelligent; anyone can tell just by looking at you. What I did not know was what was in your heart. Now I know! I have tested you and you have passed beyond my wildest

expectations. I asked you to do evil and you resisted. This is what I had hoped for. You are pure of heart. From the first day FlegAnn, that holy hermit, saw my prophecy in a glowing orb, I was inspired to come here. I shall carve a statue of stone, right here, in my little circle. This will unite us all as one!”

All the Fledgicks had gathered to hear him. Some beamed at each other, feeling they had accomplished something. Others felt a miraculous shift had taken place. Still, others just stared, not caring one way or another. MasPiola had noticed he had not captured all their hearts. Instinctively he shouted, “This calls for a celebration!” This seemed to do the trick. He had learned long ago, an excuse to escape the madness of everyday life was irresistible to all. While he had them all excited, he said “I will go out and find a large stone to carve. I will need your help to drag our stone to this very spot.” He stomped his webbed foot for emphasis. “You will bring it here. I will turn it into a masterpiece. You will erect it high in the air, pointing to the dome above. This is a new beginning.”

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Exonus the Extuf, one day, saw many Fledgicks dragging a huge rectangular shaped rock. A strange looking creature stood atop it, constantly talking and barking orders. When it began to get dark, they would all go back to their little village. Exonus would follow them, hiding from sight. It was not hard to determine when the town was going to be practically empty. At these times, he would help himself to things he needed.

CHAPTER 26

Ulysses was not sure what to make of his meeting with the Fledgick leaders, He knew habits were hard to break, especially beliefs that had been handed down from generation to generation, hardening into facts of mind. Perhaps, the Extufs would be different.

The next day, all three villages turned to the Sacred Site. The Fledgicks and Lokils were there to witness the Extuf procession. Ulysses had expected, pretty much, the same ceremony which he had endured the day before. Three large Extufs had a box-like platform balance on their heads. All were on their knees, trudging forward. A tiny Extuf, elaborately decorated, followed them, throwing stones at them. Sometimes, he would run up to one of their tails and stomp on it. When he did this, the crowd of Extufs made some type of low-pitched noise. After some time, they reached Ulysses. He assumed he was supposed to get up on the platform and be carried back. The Extufs gasped when he tried to do so. Then, he noticed many Extufs coming, each rolling three large round stones. One by one, they loaded these onto the platform. As the load got heavier, the Extufs underneath began to collapse. Finally, they all lay prone on the ground, the huge weight crushing down on them. Ulysses ran to help. The tiny costumed Extuf took his hand and slowly walked him back into the heart of his village. Ulysses allowed himself to be led away. The shock of watching this was replaced by fear for his life. As the crowd parted, he could see a dome like hut. He was escorted in.

The inside was crudely painted. In the center sat three Extufs, sitting side by side. The one in the middle sat on a throne which was higher than the other two. Rising from his chair he said “Hail the Great MasPiola! I, the direct descendant of the learned Exonus, speak for all of us

in the Learning Guild. Your presence here proves we have been teaching the truth from the time of our existence.”

“It is an honor to be here.” answered Ulysses. “Tell me the truth, the truth of the Learning Guild.

“It is what the Mighty Exonus learned from you. Is it not?”

“I want to know what has been handed down through the generations. What do you teach?”

“We teach what he Powerful Exonus taught.”

“Tell me what he taught.”

The head of the Learning Guild stomped his feet three times. Seemingly, out of nowhere, the same tiny, costumed aid appeared, carrying a heavy scroll. He handed it to his master who began to read. “Look for what you want but take only what you need. If you need more than you want, then you must first find it. If you want more than you need, then you must leave it. You may want to teach, but you need to learn.” He smiled broadly, as did the others. He rolled the scroll back up, handing back to his minion who quietly scurried away.

Ulysses asked “Is that what the Learning Guild teaches? How can you possibly teach this to someone?”

At that point, the headmaster got up and walked to the back of the dome. The other two followed him, motioning Ulysses to follow. They walked to where a tablet hung high on the wall; it read ‘Goodbye for now’. Underneath it was dozens of large boxes, all stacked in a highly organized fashion. The master opened one of the boxes, showing Ulysses its contents. It was filled with books, scrolls and pictures.

“What is this?” asked Ulysses.

“It is what we teach. The Learning Guild builds on the teachings of Exonus. The first Guild interpreted Exonus’s message and what we should learn. The second Guild then built on the lessons of the first. It has been this way since the time of Exonus. It shall always be so.”

“And what Guild is this now?”

“We are the twenty fourth Guild.”

“What does the twenty fourth Guild say about the Feldgicks and the Lokils?”

“We do not want them. We do not need them. This is what we have learned, and this is what we teach.”

“Can’t you live in harmony with them?”

“Yes, of course. We can begin doing so as soon as they leave. They are free to go wherever they wish, but they will not leave. They are ignorant.”

“Couldn’t you, the Extuf’s leave?”

“That is a trick question, oh great MasPiola! You are testing me. The Wise Exonus took the Rostif Stone because he needed it. You are the Creator of the Rostif Stone. You gave it to Exonus. We cannot leave.”

“Can’t you share it?”

“We need it. They only want it. Exonus has taught us the difference. We must always follow the truth, even if it means sacrifice.”

“What if I could find a way to have all Kleks live together peacefully?”

“You mean have the others go away?”

“No, no. What if I could find a solution to all you stay here; sharing the Stone.”

“There is no answer. The Guild knows this.”

“I am the Great MasPiola! I have taught Exonus. I will teach you!”

All three Extufs sat in their thrones. Each said nothing; only stared down at their feet.

CHAPTER 27

MasPiola was happy again. He sat in his circular area which was cleared for him. Carving the monumental statue brought a much-needed channel for all his thoughts. Explosions of inspiration sparked in his brain, igniting his hands into motion. At the end of each day, he was exhausted and happy. Scores of Fledgicks, not just from FlegAnn's clan, came from afar away to admire his work. MasPiola was once again the center of attention. It helped him feel at home, a happier time when he was first commissioned to pain the Dome of the Temple. Slowly, he started to bring back the festivals. Forbidden Fruit is what he really needed, but he would not make the same mistake twice.

Exonus, the Extuf, was getting fat and lazy. He was getting used to sneaking into the Fledgick village and taking things he needed. He would convince himself it was not stealing. He would not take everything he wanted. He'd only take what was needed. Lately, however, he was bored so he needed more. As time went on, he became more and more fascinated with the strange creature carving the stone. The Fledgicks seemed to hold him in very high regard. He could not get close enough to the huge stone that lay on the ground, but he desperately wanted to see it.

One day, he noticed a lot of activity at the center. A deep hole was being dug and some type of scaffolding was being built. The Fledgicks were going to set the carving upright on its end. Exonus watched on in fascination. The whole process took several weeks, but eventually, the Rostif Stone was standing straight up, towering into the sky. It took a few days for the celebrations to die down. Finally, when it was dark and calm, he could crawl closer and finally

have a look at it. The Extuf was mesmerized by it, as if it were calling him. It was something he desperately needed, not just wanted. This led him to a dilemma. He wanted it for himself, but he could not pick it up and run away with it. At that moment, Exonus made a life decision. This very spot would be his home.

When the glow of light came, MasPiola found Exonus sitting on top of his masterpiece. Throwing rocks at him, MasPiola shouted “Get down from there, whatever you are!” Soon, other Fledgicks were throwing things and shouting “Extuf! Extuf!” They did not hate Extufs; they rarely saw one. They were only mimicking MasPiola’s actions. Exonus probably would have been stoned to death except for one thing; around his neck was a charm. It was made of a hardened glob of red goo. This caught MasPiola’s eye. He raised his hands, gesturing for the rock pitching to stop.

“Come down here!” shouted MasPiola “Whatever you are!”

The creature could not understand the words, but it realized it was being offered sanctuary. MasPiola informed the Fledgicks he had important business with this being. He should not be disturbed.

Over time, MasPiola taught Exonus a form of communication. It became the unifying language he had developed back home. Exonus was in awe of his alien teacher. The Oslik knew this and milked it for all it was worth. One day, MasPiola asked “Do you know where to get more of that, before it gets hard?” He was pointing to Exonus’ charm hanging around his neck.

“Yes,” answered Exonus “but I’d probably die trying to get some.”

“Let me worry about that. Besides, you’d be stoned to death if I hadn’t saved your life.”

“How can I ever thank you?”

“A little test perhaps; just to see how much you believe in me.”

“What kind of test?”

“Bring me back some of that red goo. I call it Forbidden Fruit. If you can do that, I’ll let you sit at my right-hand side. All that I have is yours.” MasPiola made a sweeping motion with his arm. “You must not eat the Forbidden Fruit. Bring it to me.”

Exonus did not seem enthusiastic about this. MasPiola noticed this and decided to light a fire under his heart. “Look here, Exonus. Don’t you have a sense of adventure? I’m offering you a quest. This is a chance to have a life larger than yourself. You must believe you are a hero, and you can return back safely. To live a life to its fullest, you must have a dream. You should be grateful that I have chosen you.”

“And what do I get if I succeed?”

“I’ll grant you one wish.”

“I want your statue, the Rostif Stone.”

“It is yours!” MasPiola knew there was no way Exonus could move it. Besides, he was its creator and only he would ever truly own it.

Exonus knew exactly where to find some Red Magic, as it was called by the Extufs. It could be found in the land where the Great Mountain Walkers lived, the land of sand and craters. He would have to track one of them and wait until it buried itself in the ground. Red Magic was the bait it used for hunting. The problem was not in finding the goo, it was resisting it. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he thought, he could not figure out how to solve this problem.

He decided to go look for a fresh trail for one of these beasts, hoping inspiration would bless him.

It was easy enough to find signs of what he was looking for. The Walkers left enormous footprints and a huge rut where the tail had dragged. While making his way to the wastelands, he passed some very tall stalks growing by a luminous pond. These were three to four times his height. They were thin but sturdy. That is when his imagination took hold. He ran back to the Fledgick village to borrow some things he needed, rope and a box with a hinged lid.

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There it sat. The red glob was about the size of the tip of his little finger. It lay close to the base of the living stump. If you were to look closely, you could see the ground move ever so slightly up and down, as the massive creature below breathed. Exonus tied the rope to a handle on the box. He swung the rope over his head and cast it towards the Red Magic. Close, but not close enough. He tried again and again. Finally, the open box lays on its side, close to the target. Then came the tricky part, trying to push the glob into the box by using the long stalk as a pole. Even at this distance, he was being drawn to it. It was getting harder and harder to concentrate, but he did succeed in getting the Forbidden Fruit into it. He used the pole to close the lid. Now, all he had to do was drag the box, by using the rope, back to MasPiola. The rope should be more than long enough to keep him at a safe distance. Especially since he would not be able to see or smell it.

Exonus was very pleased with himself. A little trail of dust came from the back of the box as he dragged it behind him. This did not go unnoticed by a pair of eyes which watched him from a distance. Lokils are curious by nature, but especially this specific one. Seeing an Extuf dragging something was too much of a temptation for it to avoid. It needed whatever was in that box.

CHAPTER 28

Ulysses did not know what to expect when he was to meet with the heads of the Lokils. He was expecting something like the two precious encounters. Instead, he was awakened, while he slept, by a very small Lokil. It was very young and carried a tablet. He laid it down next to Ulysses and tapped him on the shoulder to make sure he was awake. He pointed to the tablet and then ran away. Ulysses picked it up. On it were instructions for him, to walk towards a light, which shone in the distance. He was not sure if he should go. It could be some type of trap. He began to worry that others may have figured out he was not the Great MasPiola; he was not the second coming. He decided to stay where he was and sit in the Sacred Circle, next to the Rostif Stone.

After a while, the same young Lokil appeared, but this time he did not cross the circle's outer boundary. He laid down another tablet and scampered back into the darkness.

Ulysses read it "What can you teach us?" He wrote 'A better way' on the board and sat down. It was soon picked up and delivered back.

This time it read "I know what is best for Lokils." Ulysses wrote back "But what is best for Lokils, Fledgicks, Extufs and me?"

The return answer was the same "I know what is best for Lokils."

Ulysses was getting tired of this. The message he sent back was "Tell me what is best for Lokils."

The reply was "To do what I say. I know what is best. To question me is to question the Exulted LokMila. Tell the Extufs and Fledgicks to leave. That is the only destiny for the Prophecy. The Prophecy is best for Lokils."

“I will make a new Prophecy.”

“First make the first one come true.”

“No” was Ulysses’s final reply. Another table never came back to him.

When it became light out, Ulysses noticed a lot of activity in the Lokil village. He wanted to find out what was going on, but he hesitated. He did not know if he would be safe walking into there. To his surprise, a band of Lokils headed towards him. In the middle of this group were four Lokils, carrying a large box suspended by poles. The poles were across their shoulders. The box was placed down, just outside the Sacred Circle. Once that was done, a large, magnificent tent was set up around it. When the tent was finished being put up, which took some time, a Lokil in a very tall headdress escorted Ulysses inside. There, all by himself sat the young Lokil who had been the courier of the tablet. It took Ulysses a minute to realize this youngster was the author of last night’s correspondence.

“You are the leader of the Lokils?” asked Ulysses in astonishment. “You can’t be. You’re too young.”

“Yes, I LokMila the Fifty First, am the guiding light of all Lokils. I am supposed to be young, that is why I was anointed. That is why I have been chosen as the Guiding Light.”

“I do not understand.”

There was no reply.

Finally, Ulysses requestd “Tell me about my old friend LokMila.”

“I know, oh Great MasPiola, that you are much, much older than I am, than any living Klek. They say you are immortal; you can live forever. Is this true?”

“No, I cannot live forever, but many of your ancestors have been born, lived and died since I met them. Tell me about my old friend LokMila. What did he preach?”

“The Exulted LokMila taught it is easier to learn when you are young. If we all learn the same thing, we will be strong because we are one. It is the law.”

“And you are the law?”

“I know good from bad. I decide what is good; what is bad.”

“How do you know good from bad?”

“I have been taught, by my predecessor. He chose me and taught me. Soon, I will become too old to learn. I will choose my successor, when he or she is born. I will raise them and teach them what I was taught. This way, all Lokils will live under the law. It is fair and just.”

“Why couldn’t you be the leader when you get older?”

“I would turn the simple into the complex.”

“How do you know that?”

“It is what I have learned. It is the teaching of the Exulted LokMila.”

“What about the Fledgicks? What about the Extufs?”

“I do not wish to play with them. They are bad. They will take everything we need. I won’t share!”

“Maybe they’d like to play with you. Have you ever thought of that?”

“The young must go to bed early. During the day I stay in the tent. This way I cannot see them.”

“What if I can get some of them to come visit you in your tent? Would you like that?”

LokMila the Fifty First burst into tears.

CHAPTER 29

Exonus was unaware he was being followed by a Lokil. Extufs had heard stories of these strange, hoofed creatures with powerful beaks, but few had ever seen one. When Exonus was small, he would gather around where the elderly Extufs told stories to the young. Some of these stories had tales of Lokils; stories which mentioned Lokils liked to eat young Extufs for breakfast. It was said they would bite off, with the strong beaks, the tip of your little finger for a souvenir; then they would kill you. Exonus was old enough now to recognize these stories were told to scare the little ones, much to the delight of the old story tellers. Still, this was the only thing Exonus knew about these exotic creatures, which might or might not exist.

He kept walking, dragging the box of Red Magic safely behind him. It was time to take a break and eat. When his belly was full, he lay down and closed his eyes. He dreamed about his new possession, the Rostif Stone. His needs were met, at least for now.

He was startled when he realized something was sitting next to him, right close to him. Slowly, opening one eye, he could see a beaked creature. It was not staring at him, just looking out. It seemed to be waiting for him to wake up. Exonus hoped, if he pretended to be asleep, it would go away. This did not happen. Eventually, it gently shook the Extuf by the shoulder, trying to wake him. Terrified, Exonus opened both eyes. The Lokil waved at him. Exonus thought it was smiling at him, but it is hard to tell if a beak is smiling. The Lokil stood up and Exonus sat up. The Lokil extended his hand as if to help him up. His first instinct was that it was going to bite his finger, but it seemed so gentle. So, he offered it his hand and was helped to his feet.

Pointing to the box, it appeared to ask permission to see what was inside. Exonus nodded and smiled. He wanted to be rid of this Lokil. Losing the contents of the box was a small price to

pay; he'd just have to get some more later. The Lokil bowed, as if to thank him, and then began to walk towards the box. Halfway there, it ran back, screeching in horror. They both stared at each other. Not knowing what to do, Exonus started to walk. The Lokil followed. In this way, they became a pair of strange traveling companions.

As they walked, both tried in vain to talk, but anything past the basics was difficult. Exonus did learn its name, which was LokMila. LokMila seemed very childlike, at least with him.

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Shouts from the Fledgick village woke MasPiola up. Far away, he could see two beings traveling his way. He climbed to the top of the Rostif Stone to get a better look. The Extuf was easy to spot. He shouted down to some nearby Fledgicks, asking "What is that thing with a beak?" No one knew.

MasPiola ran to Exonus, excitedly asking "Did you bring me any? Do you have Forbidden Fruit?"

Exonus just pointed to the box that trailed behind him. MasPiola started to rush to it, but LokMila walked in front of him, trying to warn him of the evil it contained. MasPiola grabbed the Lokil by the beak, stepped over his back and devoured his prize. LokMila shrugged and followed Exonus to the Rostif Stone. After a little while, the two began to form some type of common language. Soon some Fledgicks came. They enthusiastically begged LokMila to tell everything about himself. And so, they began to have long conversations.

At one point, LokMila said “I, like all of my kind are nomads. My name is LokMila and I am honored to be your guest. We know nothing of you Fledgicks, but I can see you are very kind, wonderful and hospitable. When I leave, I will tell my Lokils about you. I am sure we can learn a lot from each other.”

This followed by much dancing, eating and sharing stories. Exonus climbed to the top of the Rostif Stone and sat there. It was now his Rostif Stone. His needs, for now, were all met.

MasPiola missed all the festivities. He did not know how long he had been in ecstasy.

Exonus had watched him from atop his perch. He had seen MasPiola twitch, dance and talk to himself. He also witnessed the terrible sadness, digging in the ground and crawling when MasPiola crawled down and out of his own mind. Finally, MasPiola began to become himself again. When he got back to the circle, he saw Exonus sitting on top of his Rostif Stone. Looking up at him, MasPiola screamed “Get down from there. That’s mine.”

“Yours?” Exonus shouted. “I bought it from you.”

“When did you do that?”

“Right when you grabbed the Red Magic in my box.”

MasPiola had forgotten. “Oh yes, now I remember. You were going to supply me with all the Forbidden Fruit whenever I needed it. I will need some more shortly. I hope it won’t take as long next time around.”

“What?” This was not our agreement. I bought this with what I just gave you. That was our deal.”

MasPiola knew Exonus was right, but that did not stop him from saying “Obviously, you have misunderstood our arrangement. Why would I sell you this masterpiece for such a paltry sum? You couldn’t have taken this seriously.”

Exonus was also quick witted. He knew, even if he owned it, he could never take it away from where it stood. He came up with the following, saying “I bought the right to sit up here whenever I want to.” MasPiola conceded this and turned his attention to Lokil. Having felt bettered by Exonus, he wanted to take it out on someone.

“You there,” MasPiola shouted to LokMila “come here. I want to get a better look at you.”

As LokMila came forward, MasPiola continued. “So, my friend Exonus has brought me a servant, has he? Entertain me, sing, dance, juggle. Don’t just stand there, do something.”

LokMila ignored the rant and sat down. MasPiola marched towards him in a huff.

“See here now” he started to say, but LokMila stretched his long neck and snapped at him with his sharp beak. MasPiola backed away. He knew many of the Fledgicks had just witnessed this new creature, as well as Exonus, take him down a few notches. This would always gnaw at MasPiola. This was no way to treat the Great MasPiola.

One day, a small group of Extufs were walking far away in the distance. Exonus, sitting onto of the Rostif Stone was ecstatic to see them. It had been a long time since he had seen one of his own. These Extufs set up a camp, just opposite the Fledgicks. They were looking for new pastures because craters had begun to appear near their old grounds. Exonus became their leader, teaching them all he knew. The Fledgicks welcomed them, but the Extufs seemed more secure

staying with their own customs. They felt safer that way, especially since they were outnumbered.

LokMila yearned to go back to his own. He realized this land could be a paradise. The Lokils had always been nomads, looking for a perfect place to set up roots. Saying goodbye only to Exonus, he left one day, when it was dark. MasPiola, when he learned of his departure, spread a rumor that he had banished LokMila for terrible insolence. Generations later, to all except the Lokils, LokMila became known as the Evil LokMila.

CHAPTER 30

The instant LokMila the Fifty First began to cry, Ulysses had known the solution to the problem. The Rostif Stone was sacred to all of them. It was a central part of who they were; what they believed. To them, it was a gift from an alien creature from the other side of the world. The Stone talked to them, as it did their ancestors. Magic can come from believing, but if you stop to think about what you believe, the magic might stop.

The answer was simple. He would keep pretending to be the Second Coming of the Great MasPiola. He would make three copies of the Rostif Stone, each to be set up in its own sacred site. He needed to find a neutral ground where he could carve these replicas. It would then be up to each village to erect them at their own site. He was not the artist his grandfather was, but it is easier to copy than to create from the seeds of your mind. Ulysses was content and at peace. He had found his reason for living again.

The next day, Ulysses balanced himself atop the Rostif Stone, which was capped with a bust of MasPiola. "I need to test your faith, the faith of all the Kleks." He shouted so all could hear. "Each of you, The Fledgicks, The Extufs and the Lokils must find a large stone of certain dimensions. It shall be as tall, as wide and as deep as the Rostif Stone. Once you find it, you will drag it to a new place, a place which shall be my new home. Each will give me three skilled craft Kleks to live with me. This is how you will show your belief in me."

One of the Extuf Elders started to ask, "Why are we doing this?"

“Do you care so little of me, to deny a simple request. Is that what you have been taught?” asked Ulysses in his best commanding voice. He was starting to feel like he really was the Great MasPiola.

There was nothing but silence. Then, there was a huge burst of activity. The chiefs were all excited and began to talk about planning. Meetings were set up; it was a perfect vehicle to drive self-importance. Finding work for others to do made them happy and a righteous cause whipped them into a frenzy.

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Ulysses had found a perfect place for his new home, his new studio. It was far enough from the Sacred Site that he could work in peace and secrecy. He did not know how long it would take for the three stones to arrive. In the meantime, he made sketches of the Rostif Stone, He was determined to make three perfect copies, down to the smallest detail. Sometimes he would take a break and make sketches of Kleks in their everyday lives. One day, he would find his way back home. He would give the drawings to the College and spend the rest of his days passing on the knowledge of life on the other side of the world. He was both organized and content. This harmony put him at peace, perhaps he thought, for the first time in his life.

One day, he could see a mass of Extufs dragging a large stone. There had been a competition, at least in their minds. They were first, having beaten both the Lokils and Fledgicks. He knew the Extufs were going to add new teachings to the boxes at the Learning Guild. It would most likely say how they, the followers of Exonus, had defeated the Lokils and Fledgicks.

He hoped future generations would know it was only in a ceremonial battle. Perhaps, having their very own Rostif Stone would make the whole point moot.

As time went on, Ulysses spent less and less time going back to the Sacred Site; to the Rostif Stone. More and more he became secluded, relying on his nine craft Kleks for supplies and news. At first, he was shocked about the Kleks he had known which had died. But gradually, this reality of life became more normal to him. He became more fully aware that Osliks can live ten to fifteen times longer than Kleks. It seemed he would have just trained one of them and they would retire and need to be replaced. As the new ones came, he could see some cultural differences from the previous generation. The core was still there, but perceptions had shifted. Ulysses made careful notes of this; it would be useful to the College.

One of the most disturbing things he noticed was how the village viewed him. At first, he was the Second Coming of MasPiola. They had been in awe of him. A few generations later, he became their symbol of the power that kept harmony in the dome. The longer he stayed in seclusion, the more mystical and enchanted they portrayed him. Eventually, only the leaders and Elders knew where he lived. They kept this a secret to themselves. They became the keepers of this, making sacred maps that few were allowed to gaze upon. Ulysses was a hermit. He wanted to finish what he had started and return home. He tried to avoid thinking about this; he did not know how to find his way back home.

CHAPTER 31

The day Exonus died, a huge funeral was held. The Fledgicks had great respect for him. MasPiola created a bust of himself and had it placed on top of the Rostif Stone. It was his way of making sure no other Klek would take Exonus's place, sitting on top of it.

The Extufs had trouble finding a new leader. Their numbers were growing and the Fledgicks felt they were taking their land. Finally, the decision was made to have three leaders as a means of compromise. Knowledge was important to the Extufs, and they founded the Learning Guild. Fledgicks were not allowed to join. This was the first sign of tension. The second proved more troublesome. Hordes of wandering Lokils were coming.

As time went on, the more segregated the three villages became. MasPiola did not help matters. He delighted in making mischief, stirring things up just for his own amusement. When Leaders came to him for wisdom and guidance, he purposely gave vague answers, allowing them to interpret any way they wanted to, usually to their own advantage. The more they went their separate ways, the bigger the divide grew.

One day, while sitting on top of the Rostif Stone, MasPiola saw some younger Lokils in the distance. They were acting strangely, lying about and laughing for days. He jumped down and ran to join them. He was positive they had some Forbidden Fruit.

“Give me some!” shouted MasPiola to the small group of young, high Lokils.

They just laughed and ignored him.

“I am the Great MasPiola!” he shouted again.

One of them burst out laughing. Soon, the others followed in unison. It was contagious, they could not stop. They were rolling in the ground, laughing so hard they could barely catch their breath. Then, MasPiola saw it; a bag of slovick stalks, just like the ones he used to chew back home. He grabbed one, bit off a piece and ground his teeth together. It was how he remembered, but there was something different, more powerful to it. Then it hit him, there was a hint of Forbidden Fruit in its potency. He joined his new friends, floating on waves of dreams.

When all were sober again, MasPiola asked “Where’d you get this?”

“The stalks were growing by an underground stream we found. We learned how to make a paste from old, hardened Red Magic. Put the two together and there you have it. We call it Chewy Gooley. Takes the edge off, don’t you think?”

The words ‘Slovick stalks’, ‘underground river’ and ‘Forbidden Fruit’ triggered strong emotions in MasPiola. It was time. He wanted to go home, but he would not go empty handed. It was too hard and dangerous to get more Red Magic, but he could get bags of hardened goo. His new gang of friends knew where to get it. He was sure the underground stream they spoke of was the same one he had first traveled upon. Crossing the Great Tar Sea would be another matter, but he was certain the journey was no match for the Great MasPiola.

MasPiola had always felt the easiest path, at least the one of least resistance, was the best to take. More and more he had been pulled into the rivalries between the Kleks. He had learned, from his days at the Temple, Church of Divine Insight and College of Madness. He could use this infighting to his advantage. But when he could only see a disadvantage, it was time to run. This is what he did. He gathered his things and left one day when it was dark out. He left only a note, on a tablet, at the foot of the Rostif Stone. It read ‘Goodbye for now’.

With the Great MasPiola gone, the Sacred Site had become more a symbol; a symbol worth fighting for. And so, the Fledgicks were the first to claim the Rostif Stone as theirs. The Extufs needed to avenge this outrage. The Lokils felt it should be theirs, because after all, they were pure at heart. Some of the worst fighting was over MasPiola's final writing, the tablet he had left with the words 'Goodbye for now'. The Rostif Stone itself could not be taken, but the tablet could. It became known as the 'Final Word'. Scholars debated on it while Elders pontificated on its meaning. Some even counted the number of words in it to find a mathematical meaning of life. In time, it became a test of one's devotion. The Extufs, when they captured it, built a home for it. The Lokils, when they stole it from the Extufs, buried it in a hill and fortified the surroundings. The Fledgicks, after many sieges, took it as their own. They placed it high on a pole in the center of their village, which was now a stronghold. One day, it was gone, and no one knew where it was. It became a myth and was said to exist where all such objects of mystery go, to a land far, far away, on the other side of the world.

CHAPTER 32

Ulysses continued to carve the three copies of the Rostif Stone. While he was doing this, generation of Kleks were born, bred and died. He thought they were all waiting for him, waiting for him to bring his miracle. He did not realize he was all but forgotten. To them, the Second Coming if the Great MasPiola had become a minor event. To the Lokils, he had become some type of story to tell children. Ulysses, to them was known as the Magical Oslík. If they were good, they would be granted three wishes by him. The Extufs claimed he had been a spirit who had come to test their faith. The Fledgicks said he really had been the Great MasPiola, but he only came to tell the Fledgick leaders what a wonderful job they were doing.

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It looked odd, this little congregation slowly making its way to Ulysses's studio. It had been so long since he had seen Kleks. It was made up of three separate groups. The first was made of three Fledgicks Elders, each wearing a giant red headdress. The second was of representatives from the Guild of Knowledge, a branch of the now splintered Guild of Learning. The final group had four large Lokils with two poles across their shoulders. A big box dangled from these poles. The three separate parties did not intermingle with each other.

Ulysses was hiding behind a large rock. He wanted to get a look on their faces when they saw his three perfect copies of the Rostif Stone. All three sculptures were lying down horizontally on the ground, parallel with each other. He was very disappointed when they walked right past them, hardly acknowledging their existence. He was expecting them to be hit by

sudden inspiration; clarity of thought which would end their grievances. But that was not the case. The congregations did not know what to say, or do, when Ulysses appeared to them. Mythology is for dreams; flesh and blood cannot compete with it.

Ulysses started his speech “Behold, each of you now has his own Rostif Stone. There is the Fledgick Stone.” He pointed. “Here is the Extuf Stone.” He made a grand gesture. “And finally, this is for the Lokils.” He walked up to it, hands on hips, waiting for recognition. None came; there were only blank stares.

Bewildered, Ulysses asked “Don’t you see? There is no need to fight amongst you now. Find your own sacred site and drag your stone to it. Learn from it. Live in peace!” He raised his arms in a gesture of triumph.

Still, there was no response.

Walking to one of the Extufs he said, “Take the Extuf Stone.”

“No,” replied all the Extufs in unison.

“Why not?”

“And MasPiola will return in spirit. He will tempt you with a false Stone. He will test your faith.” They all chanted as one. They smiled at each other serenely. They had seen the prophecy come true and responded as they had been taught. Their faith had been tested. They huddled together, talking among themselves. They were planning. Finally, one of them spoke up “We will find a secluded site to raise our Extuf Stone, but none shall be permitted to see it. We shall pick one Extuf to sit on top of it, like the Divine Exonus did. This Extuf shall sit there, alone, from the time the Blue Mist comes to when it leaves. It will be a great honor to be chosen. They will be replaced every three years. This way, we will always be reminded; reminded we must always be diligent in our faith.”

Dismayed, Ulysses went to the Fledgicks saying “Take your Fledgick Stone. Use it instead of the Rostif Stone. “

The Fledgick wearing the most elaborate headdress said “Why? It looks just like our Rostif Stone. Let the Extufs use their Extuf Stone. Let the Lokils use theirs. This will leave us with the Rostif Stone. We will bury Fledgick Stone right here. This way, we do not have to see it; be reminded of it. Life is simpler this way. “

Ulysses went to the large box that was sitting on the ground; large Lokils were standing at each corner. Pulling back the curtain, Ulysses said to the young Lokil “Take your Lokil Stone”

“I want all three” screamed LokMila the Fifty Ninth.

“No!” Ulysses shouted back to him. He could hear crying as he turned and walked away.

Suddenly, the crying stopped and LokMila the Fifty Ninth screamed” What about my three wishes?”

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Ulysses ran his hands lovingly over the carving of MasPiola’s head as he watched the Kleks recede into the distance. He was tired and disillusioned. It was time to begin his next adventure, trying to find his way back home.

As he walked, he started to feel better. In his heart, he had done what he thought was best. Besides, maybe in time the three new Stones might be used for their rightful purpose. Perhaps, he could direct the course of history after all. But he did not have time to bathe his self-pity in warm dreams of optimism. This was because, high above, he could see an orange glowing orb. He knew if he followed it, he would be going in the right direction.

PART 2 ... The Son of the Sun

An orange, glowing globe, it was a world onto itself. Inside were the thoughts, dreams and hopes of life. Outside, it existed in timeless suspension. Yet even this orange, glowing globe floated in an endless soup of perpetual thought. This soup gave birth to imagination. This imagination brought life to ...

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“Hello, I am a deity. At least, that is what people say I am. I know a lot about people, but how I know that is a mystery to me. I guess my instincts are as good as your experiences, but I have the advantage of not having to learn or worry about them. I think about things, and you interpret them. Sometimes one of you gets inspired and jots it down. That can be a good thing, sometimes.

Most of the time, I just observe and think out loud. That pretty much sums up the life of a deity. When I am bored, which is often, I use my imagination to entertain myself. Some fool on your side always tries to read too much into it. What a waste. Oh well, contemplating life keeps

you out of trouble. The real fun starts when you try to act on it. That's what keeps me going, keeps me coming back to you all. You are so funny when you're angry, like puppies barking at themselves in a mirror. I can't help but laugh, especially when I can make you run around in circles, chasing your own tails. I am never sure how it will all end, and for that I am eternally grateful. Oh, my name is Artiful. That is hard to pronounce, so you can call me Art."

CHAPTER 33

The sun hung like an orb, glowing a soft bright orange, lazily floating in a blue sky. It cast its glow above a vast, calm sea. It thought about a tiny, tiny spec, nothing but a point in time. Outside, it was nothing but a one-dimensional dot. But on the inside, it was an island. An island with thoughts, dreams and hopes of life.

It was a tiny island, a spec in the sea. Just a few generations earlier, the inhabitants had discovered fire. There were a lot of burnt hands and egos trying to control it over the years, but perseverance paid dividends. Not only was there heat and light, but there was also the magic of holding a piece of the sun. A mystical sense with its inspiration coming from the thoughts of a deity.

Mark was a squat, happy young man who waddled and lived in a cave. He always wore that necklace, which was made of boar's teeth. He never took it off, even when he slept. At first, he thought it gave him powers. This helped him gain confidence as he became accustomed to the role of 'Keeper of the Flame'. Eventually, he came to understand its purpose was to remind others of his own gravity. This made him special, even chosen, to others of his tribe. That was the mighty gift his amulet brought. Of course, he hadn't realized this when his father's title was ceremoniously handed down to him. It had always been passed down from father to the eldest son since the first father.

Yes, Mark was a happy man. Simply by being the oldest son of the 'Keeper of the Flame', he had accomplished more than anyone else could possibly dream of. He was very proud

of the fact he had climbed these status heights at such an early age. He remembered when he ran out of the hut on the night of the ‘Three Powers’. He was 5 years old. He had been terrified by the three demon faces. He ran right out into the night, right into a staring crowd of the villagers. Mark had wet himself. His mother scooped him up in her arms and whispered in his ear that he was born special.

As long as Mark kept the sacred flame alive in the cave, the sun would come up each day to watch the work of its offspring. It was a mystery to him how he knew this; how his ancestors understood this. He had no way of knowing the imagination of Art torched his thoughts. Mark held the life and death of all the tribe in his hands. It was the role of others to wrestle with the tedium of everyday life. Being superior to them proved fact to him.

Luna was gathering kindling and firewood, just like she did every morning. It was not hard work, but it defined her role, who she was. In her mind and everyone else’s, said she was a common girl who was born to do menial tasks. Lilly, her beautiful and younger sister, would deliver Luna’s pickings as offerings to the ‘Sacred Flame’. This was how Mark wanted it to be.

“Luna, where are you? The sun is getting higher. I need to feed her son.”

“I’m coming!” shouted Luna as she came out of the clearing.

“What are those?” laughed Lilly, pointing at the great banana leaves tied to Luna’s feet.

“You look like a monkey, a monkey with great big green feet.”.

“They stop me from cutting my feet. I could make you some.”

“Don’t be silly. My feet are tiny and pretty. See how delicate they are.” She wiggled her toes. “Why would I want to hide them?”

“Yes, you are right.” was Luna’s reply as she lay the bundle of sticks at her sister’s feet.

“Well?”.

“Well, what?”

“You don’t expect me to carry them. You know better than that.”

“Yes, you are right again.” Luna sighed. She put the sticks on her back and carried them while her sister walked in front of her. Nearing the mouth of the cave, Lily pointed to the ground, Luna immediately put the bundle down.

“Now go! Run home!” shouted Lily.

Lily stood for a moment, fixing her hair and preening. “Luna, come back here!”.

Her obedient sister returned.

“How do I look. Am I beautiful?”.

“You are always beautiful. Always perfect”.

“Do you really think so?”.

“Of course, you are. That is why you bring the daily offering. Only the most beautiful creature in the entire world is worthy of that. Mark knows that.” Lilly never felt the sarcasm in her sister’s voice.

“There are probably some birds in the mountain more splendid than me.” Lilly giggled.

“It’s not the mountain that wants you, it is Mark.”

“He is such a little toad. Besides, he walks funny. I cringe when he touches me. He smells like bat dung.”

“Then leave the bundle and run. Don’t go into the cave. That is what cousin Cleo did.”

“Don’t remember how mad Mark was?”

“That was before he set his eyes on you.”

“Well, he has good taste for such a repelling toad.”

“Come, leave with me. He will go back into the village and find another.”

“What! Impossible! You just said I was the most beautiful, more beautiful than all birds in the world. Did you see how envious all the others were of me? Being with him proves I am perfect. I was not born to be common. That is your job!”

“What about Adam? I see the way he looks at you. He is the strongest, tallest and the most handsome. If you let him, he will take you. Won’t that prove you are the best, head and shoulders above all others?”

“Yes, but I want more out of life. If I’m with Mark, I will always be the best.” Everyone will know that. I will always be beautiful.”

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“I was just thinking to myself how beautiful mathematics is. There is nothing so perfect as a balanced equation, perfect symmetry. I love nature with all its forms, all its color, all its lines and movements. Of course, if everything were beautiful the whole concept would be useless. I am constantly trying the balance the unbalanced. This keeps me on my toes because numbers are infinite, just like me. Oh well, I guess not everything has to balance out, but I’m not

sure which should, and which shouldn't. I guess that sums it up. Oh, in case you haven't figured this out yet, this is Art speaking."

Luna, was envious of her perfect sister, but was a little bewildered about her obsession with beauty. It constantly needed to be fed. Luna learned early that perfection was an illusion. She knew the price of beauty lay within its delicate balancing act.

The sounds of Mark's bodily functions echoed through the cave. The little nostrils of Lilly's pert nose caused her to shiver in disgust. Ahe picked a flower, held it to her nose, took a deep breath and marched into the cave. Luna watched in envy and empathy.

Luna liked sitting on the beach at night. She felt more of a connection to the moon than to the sun. The sun brought life, but the moon fostered dreams. In her mind, she could be anyone, anything. When she did not have to see herself as others saw her, she could float through her inner depths. The villagers thought she was strange, not quite 'all there'. She possessed that rare gift of imagination, or as Art calls it, the 'color of thought'. It became her beautiful friend, who at times, could become her own worst enemy. Tonight, however, they were both just equal contemporaries.

CHAPTER 34

When Mark first took over as ‘Keeper of the Flame’, he would honor the sun with its appearance at sunrise and thank it each sunset. As the years passed by, he slept well past daybreak. It was a duty he could neglect, but there would be a price to pay if the villagers below were not up welcoming the sun. And why shouldn’t they be? He did all the hard work, making the sun come up each and every day. Some of the ungrateful fools even suggested he use his influence to convince the sun to stay all day long. They were not even smart enough to know the sun needs sleep too. They would all be dead without him. Ne was bored and those idiots down below had better do something about it. He started to march down into the village, but it seemed a long walk. He decided to wait for Lilly to come. He would give her the message that all were neglecting the ‘Keeper of the Flame’. They all knew it would not be wise to anger the man in charge of the Sun’s only son.

“Lilly, come here!” Mark bellowed.

She could see his eyes in the darkness ahead. By the tone of his voice, she knew he was in a foul mood, even fouler than his smell. Still, she was able to compose herself enough to answer in her sweetest and sexiest voice. “Coming, my lord”.

Giggling, while he fondled her breasts, her mind began to wonder, if she could only get him to let her wear the amulet. She’d go below and parade around the huts. That would be

something for all to remember. She would flash it about, especially of that big breasted nemesis of hers. ‘So what’ if she had to endure once in a while. It was a small price to pay for beauty.

“I am displeased.” Mark said.

“With me, my lord. What have I done?”

“No, not with you.”

Lilly sighed with relief as she massaged his back. Playfully and suggestively, she fondled his necklace, stopping at the tip of a boar’s tooth. She whispered in his ear. “Why are you sad my lord?”

“I sacrifice much for my people. I give them life by making the sun come up each day. It is exhausting work, but I get no thanks, no adoration.”

“I adore you!” Lilly giggled. She could sense his stiffening.

“My people must do something extraordinary to show how much they need me, love me.”

“What so you want us to do?”

Lilly knew she had said the wrong thing by the look that overcame him. She did not know what she did was wrong, but she knew she had done it.

Pushing her to the ground, Mark growled “It is for you to find things to please me! I’m tired of doing all the work for such ungrateful people. Tell you people to start thinking of me. Go!”

Lilly ran out of the cave crying.

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Adam had the look of a leader; tall, athletic and handsome. Eric could mold the future with vision. He was clever, quick-witted and fair. Together the sum of their parts was greater than the whole. It was not a coincidence that they were best friends. It was Art's way of balancing some equations with a simple brush stroke.

"She won't even look at me!" said Adam dejectedly.

"She sees you, but she knows the Sun is watching her".

"You mean Mark."

"To her, they are the same."

Adam said "The Sun sleeps at night. She can be with me then".

"What about Mark?"

"What about him?"

"If he finds out, he will tell the Sun. If he gets mad, he'll tell the Sun to never come back".

"I did not think about that."

"This is why we need to stay as a team."

"I will challenge Mark to wrestle. I am sure to win. Lilly will then want me. The Sun will be impressed. The Sun will make me 'Keeper of the Flame'.

"I don't think muscle is the answer." said Eric.

"Of course, it is. What else is there?" Adam began to flex, making himself feel strong and confident.

“The Sun does not care how strong you are. There are many strong men, but only one who watches the Sun’s son. That is what makes Mark special. That is what Lilly wants.”

“That makes no sense at all. Why do you always complicate things? I’ll just sneak into the cave and steal the flame. Then I’ll be ‘Keeper of the Flame’. Lilly will come to me”.

Before Eric had time to think, an emotion of excitement shot through him. For a moment, he envisioned a great quest called ‘Adam and the Great Flame’. Eric could not see himself as the lead, but Adam looked the part. That spark of thought drifted in the depths of his mind, deciding if he were over thinking. He realized the more he thought, the more life spun on without him. The more he thought the more time froze. It was if some outside force drew him up out of this conscientious.

Lilly’s confidence was only skin deep. She sought out her older sister, as she always did, for any advice not connected to the heart. Lilly knew she could always find her on the beach when the sun went down, but she could not wait until then. It was always a mystery to her where Luna went when it was daylight. Lilly never asked. Her sister was the most important thing in her life when she needed help. In that sense, many people were important to Lilly.

“Where are you? I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” said Lilly gasping for breath.

“What’s wrong?” asked Luna.

“I can never find you when I need you. You’re supposed to watch over your little sister.”

“That’s your problem. Well, you found me. Here I am. Is there anything else?”

“You must help me. Mark is mad. He wants the entire village to entertain him. How do I do that?”

“Go tell the Head Council what Mark told you. You are only the messenger. I am afraid of the Council.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“They are only wearing masks”.

“They have powers.”

“Only if you let them frighten you.”

“I’m afraid. Can you come with me?”

“Yes” answered Luna.

Lilly’s pretty face brightened as she said “We must let everyone know I was chosen to be a special messenger. I want all eyes on me as I enter the Council’s hut. Of course, I need you to gather some flowers and decorate my hair. Once we are inside, I’ll let you do the talking. Oh, hold my hand while we are in there. “

“How about when we are outside the hut?”

“Don’t be silly. Make sure you walk three paces behind me. Remember to keep your head down. You must know how important this is. All eyes should be on me.”

“Why only on you? What about me?”

If you were meant to be the center of attention, you would have been born beautiful. Are you beautiful?”

“No”.

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that is your answer. You can be so silly sometimes.”

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I am always amazed how people can come up with questions to fit their own answer. I guess that is why I'm a Deity and you are not. If you know the answer first, then you can never be wrong. And if you were never wrong, well you'd be me, wouldn't you. I suppose I cannot blame you for trying to emulate me. I really should be flattered by your attempts. Sometimes I feel it is my fault, the way you make up rituals to elevate yourselves. From where I stand, it all seems to be a vicious circle. I know my existence may seem splendid to you, but you can't imagine half of it. I know you will all eventually die trying. If you are lucky, you'll get it right someday.

CHAPTER 35

The three masks hung on a post near the back of the Council's large hut, waiting for the heads of their masters. All three elders were fat, jovial, and lazy. It was their job to be so. Today was a very special day for them. It came every three years and was called 'The Three Powers'. An unusual fog came from the currents, like clockwork, every three years. All knew when it came and it was a festive time, especially for the children. They would delight in hunting the wonderful things that would wash up on the beaches.

It also casts its spell on parents and their parents. For them, the best part was the ritual known as 'The Three Powers'. All the children between 3 and 5 years old, would, one by one, be led to the entrance of Council's great hut. One at a time each child would be told to enter the hut by themselves. It was dark inside, and the parents 'played it up' with a sense of foreboding. The child was told to walk through this maze of a hut. The first orange glow at the back of it was their beacon to exit. Just as their escape was in sight, three masked figures appeared out of the darkness and shouted "Boo!". Their crying offspring would run outside, right into the arms of their loving parents. The bone chilling cold of fear was suddenly wrapped in a blanket of warmth, safety, and love. It was a rite of passage all went through; its meaning and relevance being gilded by time. It had become one of the best loved traditions. New parents could see the seeds of themselves. The rest of the village could speculate on the future crop of souls.

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Luna waited for the last screaming child to run into their parents' warm embrace. She remembered her ordeal, at age four, on entering the Council hut on her 'Three Powers' Day. She had been terrified, so frightened that she crawled on the ground. The hidden, three masked

figures did not see her enter. Slowly, quietly, she crept her way to the soft light that filtered in from the back entrance. She stopped abruptly when she saw the big toe of a chubby foot. Since all villagers go barefoot, it was as recognizable as a friend's face. It belonged to old Booba, the happy, fat old canoe carver. Looking up, she could see he was wearing a fearsome mask. Knowing it was Booba underneath, all her fear went away. She stood up and walked slowly through the hut. When the three shouts of "Boo" rang out, she did not run out screaming. Instead, she slowly turned to the exit. Once outside, she turned around and stuck her tongue out in defiance. There was silence from the villagers as they watched her. The parents of young sons felt humiliated because their offspring had not shown such courage. Of course, she would not be allowed to play with anyone's daughter. Luna was now a child of the Moon.

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Lilly grasped her sister's arm. She had mixed emotions about this night, but once all the hysteria was replaced by the village excitement, she quickly forgot about Luna. Lilly cornered a friend and whispered conspiracy into her ear "I really shouldn't be telling you this, but I am busting to tell someone. Mark has a big announcement. I must meet with the Council Elders. I am to be the eyes and the ears of the 'Keeper of the Flame'.

When that little confidence was planted, she would look for someone else to isolate. Slowly, the focus was less on the children, instead on the pretty young woman who pretended not to notice. Luna noticed the small crowd gathering about Lilly. She knew, Lilly was holding court. Then she noticed Eric. He was sitting by himself. From afar, which was where she always

watched him, she felt a common bond with him. Others noticed him because he was with his best friend Adam. Adam was always a gravity onto himself, but Eric was always a village after thought. Luna knew how he felt inside, being on the outside, looking in. She started to gather her courage to talk to him, just as she had tried a dozen times before. ‘This time’ she thought will be different. She found herself walking towards him. Her world cracked when the queen of the court entered the picture.

“Eric! Eric!” Lily sweetly called. “Come here and talk to me.”

He sprang to his feet by instinct. He knew she was only interested in Adam. Flirting with Adam through his proxy. Eric was attracted to her, like being mesmerized by the sunset. The sunset captures all your senses for 15 minutes and then fades away, but you don’t know that until it does.

“It looks like you’re alone.” cooed Lilly. Good, I rarely get a chance to talk to you. Most of the time I see you with Adam. He’s so vain and arrogant. You can tell him I said so. Does he say anything about me? If he does, tell him I forbid him to talk about me. You tell him that.”

Lilly kept on talking, but Eric wasn’t listening, because he was still be pulled into her orbit. After a few moments, he noticed some small imperfections on the complexion. He watched a little splatter of spit fly from her lips. All were tiny things, but they added up over time. The beauty of sunset was still in her eyes, but it was quickly setting into twilight. Lilly was too self-consumed to realize the trance she held was losing its magnetism.

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Mark watched the events of the “Three Powers” from atop the hill, just outside the cave of his sacred fire. He hated this festival. It brought back bad memories. He missed a lot of his old

comrades. Things had changed when he became “Keeper of the Flame”. When he first started to wear the amulet, he strutted around through the village. Many were jealous, but many more began to speak to him with reverence. Over time, they would stop talking to each other as he approached. They became more aloof. The more he ordered them to let him in, the quieter they became. At one point, Mark had disguised himself. He did not know everyone saw through this. He could feel their stealth ridicule. He even heard someone even refer to him as ‘Keeper of the Fart’. It drew a lot of laughs and his eternal disdain for them.

Well, today would be different. He could spot Lilly down below. Soon she would be walking into the Council’s hut. She would tell them that the whole village should adore him. That would bring everything back to the ‘good old days. Afterall, he knew was right. He was the” Keeper of the Flame’ and the ‘Keeper of the Flame’ does not make mistakes. Obviously, it was his first fatal mistake.

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Lilly started to panic when she could not find her sister. She couldn’t keep waiting. Shre had told the crowd she was an important messenger and would enter the hut when all the children were done with the ritual. She tried to keep her composure but burst into happy tears when Luna finally arrived.

“Where were you?” Lilly asked in a judgmental tone.

“Sorry, I was just over there thinking”. Luna answered, pointing to a nearby tree.

“You know how important this is to me!”

“I know.”

“See, people are already gathering, looking at me!”

“So, let’s go in.”

“Wait” said Lily as she started preening and making eye contact with most in the crowd. Arching her back and standing on her toes, she walked in tiny steps. Luna followed in her wake.

“You are following me too close” said Lilly in a whispery hiss.

Once inside, Lilly waited for her sister to stand next to her. Hand in hand they walked forward, striding slowly to the three masked figures. Squeezing Luna’s hand Lilly closed her eyes and started to talk.

“The Keeper of the Flame’ is not happy. He feels it is extremely hard work to keep the sun floating in the air each day. He needs us to show our appreciation to him from r time to time. And now is one of those times!” Lilly said in a rehearsed voice. She even stamped her foot for emphasis, but it lacked the candor to be effective.

A garbled noise came from behind the mask with whiskers. Taking it off, the Elder said ‘Sorry, it is hard to speak with this thing on.’”

Lilly’s tense body relaxed a little.

“Well, what does the ‘Keeper of the Fart’ want now?”

Lilly giggled and this made old Booba feel a lot younger.

“I think he is bored. He wants you to entertain him, make a fuss. He wants to feel loved. and superior. Yes, superior.”

“Don’t we all’ answered Booba, trying to sound wise and mysterious. “What do you think we should do?”

“Well, I know he likes me because I am beautiful. Can you use your powers to make me even more perfect? Kep me that way forever?”

Booba rolled his eyes and looked at Luna. “Do you have any ideas?” he asked her.

“I will talk to Eric” Luna answered. “He always has such a wonderful imagination. Together, we will think of something”.

The three Elders nodded in approval. Walking out of the hut, Lilly beamed as throngs of villagers came up to her. She, naturally, became the bright spot that was the gravity of attention.

This time, Luna did not feel deflated because she was floating on air. Now there was a reason to be with Eric. Intersected paths that would become the point.

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Eric sat alone, under a tree. He had an idea, to bring water to the village. They would no longer have to spend hours a day carrying buckets of water from the river. He made a crude sketch on some sandstone. He did not know how he came up with this idea. It just popped into his head. Details were not his strong suit, so his mind began to wonder. He started thinking about Lilly. He knew she was shallow. Still his mind flashed beautiful pictures of her., pictures that took your breath aware like a sunset. Fantasy began to color reality.

Luna hesitated to approach Eric. He seemed to be in a deep contemplation. She tried, quite disastrously, to mimic the seductive strides of Lilly as she gathered courage. The next thing she knew, she was standing warmly close to him.

“Eric” she tried to say softly.

Eric looked up at her and froze for a moment. Quickly, he tried to hide the sandstone which held his scratched drawing.

“What’s that?” asked Luna, forgetting to be something she is not.

“Nothing. Just an idea. Do you need something from me?”

Lilly, if she had been there, would have said something seductive, but that was not a part of Luna’s instinct. Instead, she said “It’s some type of drainage system, a way to move water.”

That was the burning flash that fused these two together. A flash, whose origins were in the mind of the sun. Amazed, Eric said “That is exactly what it is. I thought I was the only one to understand this.”

“I can see it now,” said Luna. “If we dig a shallow ditch, we can line it with old canoes. Or we can use baboo. Maybe split them along the length.”

“Yes! Yes!” I can do these things!” exclaimed Eric.

“We can do this!” laughed Lilly. Don’t forget I added a little detail to out project.”

Eric excitedly grabbed her hand. “The two of us!” he cried.

It was at that exact moment, Luna developed an inner confidence, an inner beauty to rival her sister’s exterior. She knew, together that would bring water to the village, and it would flow straight into her heart.

“This should be the mighty present we can give Mark. Everyone would praise the “Keeper of the Flame” for bringing the great gift of water to the village.” Deduced Luna.

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“Are you crazy?” shouted Lilly. “Mark will hate that idea. He wants gifts, entertainment, a reason to be special.”

“He will be special, doing something to help others.’ said Luna.

“That is the stupidest thing I ever heard of. Helping others does not make anybody happy. You can be so silly.”

Luna realized her sister was right. Mark and she were alike. Luna had always tried to see the best in people. Perhaps the “Keeper of the Flame could be a champion and model for the children. Maybe not, but an optimist always must try. They feel pessimistic if they do not.

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The stone missed Lilly's head by inches before bouncing off of the cave wall.

"What!" exclaimed Mark. "I am trying to teach those idiots below on how to not be selfish. They should be thinking of me, relieving me of the many burdens of my life."

"Oh". Said Lilly. "I thought you might like all the villagers toiling in the heat. It would take a lot of grueling work to build a water way." She knew one of Mark's favorite things was to watch other people work, groveling because they were not special.

"Well, when you put it that way, I can see some merit to it" he said thoughtfully.

"What if they were to build something special, just for you. They would all need to do a lot of work. No more laying around, being lazy under the sun. They all be tired for so long. You could watch and know they got what they deserved. WE could both watch together, watch them all like busy little ants."

"Yes, that's it! What are they going to build?"

"That's a secret I'll tell you some other time" she said, letting the finger of her tiny little hand circle his belly. "Before he could get all worked up, Lilly skipped out of the cave, giggling as she glanced at him over her shoulder. Mark seemed content.

Once Lilly was out of sight of the cave entrance, she sprinted back to fetch Luna.

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Luna stood as close to Eric as she could get, watching over his shoulder. She whispered some changes he should make. At first, Eric didn't even realize he was making the suggested changes. It was as if they sprung from his own mind. Eventually, he noticed they were working

together in perfect harmony. He was a slow learner. Most people of vision are. The sensual bond that was developing between them came crashing back to earth.

“Luna! Luna! There you are! How come you are never around when I need you?”

Luna noticed the way Eric stared at Lilly. It was as if he were captured by the colors of a sunset. She was broken out of this inner emotion when she heard her sister’s screech.

“I told you! I told you!” said Lilly, pointing a finger at Luna.

“Told me what?” asked Luna with a sense of defiance.

“That Mark would hate your idea, the stupid water idea. I was lucky to escape with my life. He threw rocks at me, hollering that I was stupid. You are the stupid one, Luna! Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“What did he say?”

“He said your stupid idea was selfish. Lucky for you, I was able to calm him down. I mentioned an idea off the top of my head. He agreed I was right!”

“Right about what?”

“That watching other people work was fun. I suggested the villagers should build something great, something that will consume a lot of their time.”

“What does he want us to build?”

“That is your job. Think of something, something Mark will love. Something I would be ecstatic about.”

“Like what?”

“Perhaps a tower. A tower I could sit n. A tower high above the villages. You can build it opposite the cave. I could sit up there, high in the sky and look pretty. This way everyone could enjoy me. Isn’t that a perfect idea?”

“That will take a lot of time and work.”

“Of course it will. That is the whole point.”

“Have you mentioned this to Mark?”

“Not yet. If he does not like it, I’ll tell him it was your idea. I’m just a messenger. You told that to me before. I should not get blamed if he hates it.”

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Another rock whizzed by Lilly’s ear. Mark was bending over, looking for another throwing stone.

“Why are you mad at me? I was just telling you what the villagers thought you would like. They all like looking at me. I am so beautiful they all say, like a bird. They thought you would like to see me each day when the sun rises. I could make the sunrise and dawn even more beautiful. You would enjoy that, wouldn’t you?” she said, playfully putting her arm around his neck. Lilly played with his amulet. She knew where this was going. You could not make an amulet without breaking some eggs.

“And you say this will be very difficult to build? Well, they’ll get what they deserve. Tell me about this tower.”

Lilly did not have a clue about building a tower. Instinctively she said “My older sister knows all about it. You may get bored talking to her though. She isn’t pretty like me at all.” Lilly gazed at the amulet.

“I need to learn more about this tower. Have your sister show me. What is her name again?”

“Oh, don’t bother yourself with stuff like that. I’ll stay with you when I bring her over here. My sister can be so silly at times, so you can talk to me and I’ll talk to her. It will be easier on your eyes.”

Marks eyes lit up with passion. Lilly endured the five-minute job, a job she routinely did twice a week. She spent those few minutes imagining herself sitting in a high tower, wearing the amulet. Everyone would be so jealous. Yes, her life was getting exciting. She was better at manipulation than she had previously thought.

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“We are supposed to build a tower?” said an exasperated Eric.

“Well, just a little one, but bigger!” answered Lilly coyly.

“How tall? Do we need a platform on top? Is it permanent?” asked Luna. She was, after all the master of detail.

“When do we need it? asked Eric.

“These are good questions. How come you don’t know the answers?” Lily asked inquisitively, hands on hips. “When you know all of these answers, come and get me. I will allow you to speak to Mark. And be quick about it. I won’t have you wasting my time!”

Eric and Luna looked at each other. At first there was panic,

But then came simultaneous smiles. With each other they could move mountains. They walked hand in hand following the moon to the beach. They would spend the night together in their special spot. Afterwards, they would continue their joint thinking. That is when everything would be in balance. At least for them.

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Eric carried a basket with tiny models of towers. Luna held several sandstones with lines and circles scratched them. Lilly walked in front, like the head of a procession. Of course, all the village knew about this parade ahead of time. Lilly had seen to that. She could smell the awful odors of the “Keeper of the flame” as she stopped at the entrance of the cave.

“Don’t speak to mark directly. Talk to me and I’ll talk to him. I don’t want you to disturb him.” said Lilly as she picked a flower and held it to her perfect little nose. “My lord, I am here to answer all your wise questions.”

Mark sat at the other side of the cave, behind the large fire that looked like a glowing globe. It was a sun shing in the dark. He noticed the dark silhouette of two strangers behind Lilly. Over the years, he went less and less into the village. He had trouble recognizing a lot of the villagers from afar. They all looked the same to him. The other two faces were just dark shadows in a twilight.

Lilly held up a tiny model of a crude tower. It was made of twigs and vine rope.

“This is what your mighty tower will look like.” said Lillyn confidently.

“This is too small. It needs to be bigger, bigger! As high as the cliffs of the Flame. Mark heard laughter from the two shadows.

Luna spoke up.” This is just a humble picture so you can get an idea of what it will look like. It will take many moons to create it.”

“You can watch all of them below, watching all of your little ants working for you We can watch them together.” Lilly said, giving Luna a nasty glare. She had specifically told Luna not to talk directly to Mark.

“I see.” said Mark, unenthusiastically.

Eric could see Mark was losing interest. He needed to turn the tide of vision. He began to speak. "I had a vision. I was at the river, catching fish, when a bubble appeared. I was bright and warm and the color of the sun. I held it in my palm. To my surprise I saw a tiny creature inside. I could not understand it, but I could understand all it felt. I was not afraid. The creature told me to build you a great tower. All would know it came from Mark, "'Keeper of the Flame'".

Shifting her eyes to Eric, Luna knew what he was up to. He was selling Mark a dream. She knew everyone needed a dream, especially those who lacked the imagination to think up their own. It will be a great quest," she finally said.

"Yes, a quest" repeated Eric.

Lilly clapped her hands and skipped like a child.

Mark smiled, a bigger smile than he had had for a long time. He was going on an adventure with new comrades/minions. It would be an adventure he could sit back and watch. This was the beginning of mass entertainment.

Lilly stood up proudly. She had done it! She had pleased Mark with her idea. She started to make a sexy stride to the caves exit. Lilly knew the moment would not last and it didn't. It was too late.

"What about the creature in the bubble. How come he did not appear to me first?" ordered Mark

Luna thought quickly. "Well, Eric saw it in the water. It was probably afraid of fire."

"Then I must see it with my own eyes. You will take me to the water."

"I'm not sure he will appear to you."

This made Mark red with anger. He shouted "It should show itself to you and not to me? I make the Sun rise every day. It should kiss my feet. I command you to take me to it."

“Yes, my lord.” Lilly obediently replied. “I will make it all happen. Leave it to me.” She pushed the two silhouettes hurriedly out of the dark and outside into daylight.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Lilly asked Luna.

Eric answered her. “I’m not sure. I made up that glowing orb story.”

Luna said ‘Mark really believes you. I’m worried about him. Remember his father got crazier and crazier. Bing ‘Keeper of the Flame’ runs in the family. Maybe we can make him believe he saw something. Let his mind play tricks on him. A push here, a pull there. A little play acting on our part. I’ll talk to Booba. He will help.”

Luna had a secret that she told no one. She knew Booba’s hand in Mark’s father’s disappearance many years go. She was just a little girl then, playing alone, watching the waves.

CHAPTER 36

Mark's father, 'The Great MasPiola', as he called himself, was slowly going insane. At first, his demands were trivial, even amusing. Things like making everyone eat with their left hand. People only did it in his presence. He scared the villagers by having their right hands burnt if they were caught or rumored to have. This had a terrible effect on people. Soon there were two factions, the right-hand eaters and the left-handed ones. Two tribes now existed in the tribe. 'The Great MasPiola' favored the left-hand eaters. They had to do less of the common chores. The right-handed ones had to endure the taunts of their counter parts.

The Great Council was worried, but wise. They all had the great gift of being able to laugh at themselves, to see themselves from the outside. Booba was the wisest and youngest of them. He was also famous for being a ferocious eater. He was used to eating with his right hand and would continue to do so. The three wise men sat on the floor, sharing a jug that sat between them. The juice from this jug would give them inspiration, making them laugh and speak without filters. Eventually, however, it would make them sleepy.

"This is getting to be a problem." Said Booba.

"I agree with you." said Taurus, feeling a little tipsy. "I heard he is going to start telling us what food we should eat. Only he will be able to eat apples."

"I love apples!" cried Booba. "Only crazy people would let an insane person tell them what to eat. Even if he is 'Keeper of the Flame.'"

"What if he tells the Sun not to rise if we disobey." asked Ginny.

"You believe that? There was a time when the 'Keeper of the Flame' did not exist. The Sun always came up. He is tradition, not nature. He has no power, only a title." Booba shot back at her. Booba knew the title was the same as power to Ginny.

“He has a son, so even if MasPiola is removed, the ‘Keeper of the Flame’ will still exist. Ginny reluctantly agreed. “What do you mean by ‘disappear’?” asked Ginny.

All eyes turned to stare at the ground and then at the jug. Drink helped them solve these problems, helped them distill logic from reason.

MasPiola dug at the back of the cave. He remembered when he first found it. It was irresistible. Just a tiny drop of sticky red goo. He had p his finger in it. Without hesitation he tasted it. Happiness, bliss, a feeling of time standing still washed over him like a tide of tar. He would spend the last few moons of his life searching for it. He would come up with such wonderful ideas to make the world feel better to him. He could never remember where he found it or when. Thankfully, it always showed up when he needed it the most. He did not realize the sticky red goo controlled, controlled him enough to desire his control everything. This was the seed of power that blossomed out of madness.

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As a young man, long before he would become an Elder, Booba sat watching the waves under the moonlight. He had been publicly humiliated for laughing too loud. Mark’ father, also a ‘Keeper of the Flame’, assumed Booba was laughing at him, ridiculing him. At the ‘Keeper of the Flame’ encouragement, some villagers threw dug at Booba. Not everyone did this, only those with a ‘mean streak’ in them were the dung throwers. Mark’ father gave them a rational to vent their anger. Booba did not understand why they were doing this to him. There were only a few of them, but they became the favorites of the ‘Keeper of the Flame’. He knew he would eventually become an outcast. He needed plan to end this.

Jack, Booba's best friend at the time slowly approached him. "I am sorry. " he said. "I should have defended you, but I didn't. I just kept watching, feeling ashamed. Not of you but me. I'll gather a crew, and we'll beat up that dung gang." His guilt had transformed into anger.

Booba was wise for his age. Despite his jovial exterior he had a deep interior. "too many people are frightened." he said. "They think he will stop the sun from rising."

"I did not even think about that." said Jack.

"I'm not sure the 'Keeper of the Flame' has any power. If there is power, it is in the Flame. The 'Son of the Sun' is important. He works for the Son, not the other way around. We need to know what the Sunn thinks."

"What?" exclaimed Jack. "How can you talk to the Sun?"

"I do not have to talk to Him, just understand Him.

"I still do not understand."

A plan, still in its infancy, began to have a heartbeat. It would later bear fruit when Booba joined the Great Council.

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Booba, the newly appointed Council member, sat outside the cave, hidden behind some bushes. He ate an apple with his right hand with defiance, He watched a beautiful woman gathering sticks. They had been good friends when they were children, but now she held a high station in life. Each day she would gather wood. The 'Great MasPiola' had handpicked her from all of the villagers. She had been bestowed the high honor of finding food for 'The Son of the Sun'. In public, she preened, but in private she cried. This had not gone unnoticed by Booba.

Leaving the bundle of sticks in front of the cave, the beautiful woman stood there. After a few minutes she was relieved that she was not summoned inside. She ran down the hill. Booba was waiting for her. She did her best to gain her composure, trying to stand a little to statuesque.

Booba could read her face. "Sheena, what is wrong?" he asked.

Holding back, she said "MasPiola is so different lately. I never cared for him, but at least could read him. Sometimes just staring, and then bursts of anger. He scares me."

"I know all about his anger. I feel so sad for you."

Sheena burst into tears and ran to Booba. "I wish I could make him disappear." She sobbed. The mature heartbeat of the plan ponded loudly.

"I wish he'd vanish too. It would be best for everybody if he were gone. I have an idea." He whispered into her ear.

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That night, Sheena, Jack and Booba met in secret.

"What if he got lost in the jungle or went adrift in a canoe?" asked Jack.

The thought of murder briefly sparked a microscopic picture. For all three of them, that image quickly evaporated into the deep. They knew evil when they thought it.

"You got something there, Jack. We will lure him out of the cave and into a journey. If the Sun wants him, he will be guided back to Him." said Booba.

"Yes! Yes!" Let's do it!" Sheena anxiously shouted.

Both men looked at her.

"I'm pregnant. It is MasPiola's. He knows. At first, he was happy, but then he got real mad. He said I wanted to be 'Keeper of the Flame'. He claimed I was going to steal all his fire

heaven for my baby. I know it. He's crazy. I don't want him to hurt my son. It's a boy, I can just feel it." said Sheena, hands across her tiny stomach.

Both Jack and Booba looked at each other. This now became a quest to protect an innocent baby. It had become a moral crusade.

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Sheena was hiding in the cave. She had found a secret spot, hidden in the shadows. She was spying on MasPiola, trying to find a reason for him to leave his sanctuary. She knew he often talked to himself. He had always done so, but lately it was as if he were holding court. He talked of wild, exotic creatures living on the other side of the Sun. He talked of the night being a large sea of tar. This fantasy world was on the other side. MasPiola believed they needed his guidance, his wisdom. They would feel his emotions. When Sheena snuck out, she relayed all of this to Booba.

"We must convince him that we can contact this other world Set him on a raft to cross over to the Sun and into the night sea. If he comes back, we will know the Sun wants him back here. If not, there will be a new 'Keeper of the Flame'.

MasPiola walked to the back of his cave. He crawled under into a secret tunnel. It led to a huge opening. On the wall were crude paintings of creatures. The drawings were made of handprints, streaks of oil and scratches. He knew the name of one of the abstracts. T was an Osluk. How he knew this, he did not know. He spent many hours here, adding, changing and subtracting. It was never right, never balanced. He was trying to understand his emotions by looking at these figures. The crazier he became, the more he believed he was enlightened.

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“Sorry to interrupt. This is Art again. He knew what an Oslík was because I thought of it. Just wanted to see where this is going.”

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Booba was working on the most elaborate raft he had ever built. It was hidden in the jungle. Only the three conspirators knew about it. Sheena was going to decorate it. Jack would provide food and drink. Somehow, they would lure their enemy onto it. It needed to be done when MasPiola was having one of his ‘crazy phases’, when he was talking to himself. Patience has its rewards. Wise Boobda understood this instinctively.

CHAPTER 37

Once a year, at the same time, the three figures went to a secret place in the jungle. They would make a toast to MasPiola, wherever he was. Then they laughed. He was gone. This was always a yearly celebration, festival for only the three of them. They inflated the story, recounted it in drunken joy. They had done the moral thing. The Sun was not mad when MasPiola went missing. Sheena had kept the Flame burning. Her unborn child guided her through her sacred duties. She wore a bear tooth necklace. It protected her. Once again, the village was in protective hands.

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On one such ceremonial night, a young Luna was wandering along the beach, near the jungle's edge. Being a child of the moon, she was always curious. Some would call her nosy. Three figures in their night were laughing and frolicking. She could tell who they were, just by their shadowy figures. She decided to eavesdrop.

"It was all my idea" said Booda congratulating himself. "I even made the raft."

"Well, I got him to go into it." Laughed Sheena.

"I brought the food. And I brought jug." Jack said with a slur.

"And we all three said our goodbyes as we set the 'Great MasPiola' out to sea. He should have reached the Sun by now. Are you ready .. one ... two ..three ..."

On the count of three., all rushed into the waves, swimming, splashing and acting like happy little children. Luna was still too young to put all the pieces together. Years later, they would all fit into place. That was the time Mark was getting dangerously crazy. A time when she knew something needed to be done.

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Luna approached Booba, saying “Mark is not right in his head. He is tapping into the meanest emotions in some. He keeps them angry and releases it onto us. He delights in watching this happen. I heard his father ‘The Great MasPiola’ was like that. I heard the Sun Himself was displeased with MasPiola and summoned him. I think that is a wild tale. Someone with a great and wise sense of humor made that story up.

Booba smiled his wide smile. Luna knew her instincts were correct. Smiling back, she asked “How can we make Mark disappear? Vanish. Maybe we can write a new fable. A story where the Sun called the father and then the father summoned his own son. It’s kind of sentimental, in its way. Almost like ... tradition’.

“We think a like” said Booba. “We can help drift the thoughts of others onto our own shores.” He always had a gravity that held his words in balance.

“My sister, Luna, has been observing Mark. More and more he is talking to himself. She says he is starting to have visions.”

Luna watched Booba. She could see he was imagining Lilly. Luna had seen that look many times, always from the men. She waited for the sunset to ease from his mind.

“Booba, listen to me. Eric told Mark that a glowing orb appeared to him. As soon as Eric mentioned a creature in that bubble, Mark said “Oslik!” Mark wants, demands to see this Oslik. I know we can use this to lure him away somewhere. I just don’t know where that is.”

Booba had a DeJa’Vu experience. It was easy to see why. Booba said “If Mark’s delusions were strong enough, Booba could help paint them. We could convince Mark he was seeing something or at least feeling something. Mark wants the Oslik to think like he does. It is

Mark's feeble attempt to create something from nothing. It is his absence of imagination which causes this emotional flaw. That's crazy, but it proves our point. Mark must disappear.”,

Luna enthusiastically agreed, saying “I knew Booba would know what to do. You always do.”

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Luna and Eric stood in front of Mark. Lilly stood by his side, pressed up against him. Luna had been asking tiny questions, trying to find a weakness to exploit. The second she heard the word ‘Oslik’, she knew she had found her opening. Victory was hers.

“Eric, where did you say you saw this glowing ord. The sphere with the Oslik in it? Was it by that magical hot spring that only a few people know about? You saw a glowing bubble floating up from there? Came up from the water.” asked Luna, keeping a eye on Mark’s expression.

Eric could read her play, so he added some lines of detail. “Yes, that was it. I don’t remember too many details., I was too overwhelmed. I felt like it wanted me to go get the ‘Keeper of the Flame’. It had some much to learn. It wanted to feel the light.

“No! No!” exclaimed Mark. The Oslik must come here. You can bring it here to me. I want it to see my sacred drawings. He will know what they are, and he can tell me. Once I know this, I can teach it.

Eric started to say, “It sounds like this Oslik is teaching you.” But he was intuitive enough to let it go. He kept his mouth closed and looked at Luna.

Luna said “I think it can only live near the water. The ‘Son of the Sun’ home should not be desecrated with water. We will take you to this mystical brook.”

Lilly piped in “Do not worry. Mark is very brave, the bravest man I have ever seen. And so strong. He will protect all of us, as he always does.” She rubbed his back in sensuous admiration.

Eric had the feeling Mark was only brave in his cave. He wanted to goad him a little. He couldn’t resist. His ego started to give him an exciting intoxication. Eric said “The whole village still worships your father’s great journey, daring to visit the Sun. Perhaps this is your quest. Your father set out to explore the outside world. He was so brave, not like the rest of us. Do you think you will go to these magic waters and see it with your own eyes. A quest like that would become a fable.”

Luna stared at Eric, thinking he was ‘laying it on too thick’. To her surprise Mark was completely hooked by the thought of his own grandeur. It took a few seconds, but the idea of destiny replaced the fear of the unknown. It was at this point Mark began to speak of himself in the third person.

.....

Lily came running out of the cave . :it’s time! It’s time!” she frantically shouted.

Luna, Eric and Adam all jumped to their feet. These three actors would try to adlib their roles in this play.

“He is really starting to talk to himself. He is answering his own questions and then arguing about it. This could last for hours. If we are going to trick him, now is the time.”

“Inspiration him, not trick him. “said Luna, correcting her sister. “We need words that would inspire a fable. Eric will take him to the home of the Oslik. The glowing waters.”

Mark came out to see what all the commotion was about.

“My lord, the Oslik can be seen today. We are sure of it. Oh, what a glorious day!

Deep down inside Mark was a coward. Crazy, yes, but not insane enough to override his self-preservation.

“What about the Flame? I can not just leave it.” Mark retorted, backing away.

Lily whispered in his ear “I will watch it my lord.” She then quickly took off his amulet and placed it over her head. The ‘Great Mark’ is destined to go on this mighty quest. A quest all will speak of for generation.” Then she kissed him, hoping to install some bravery. It worked. They all could tell by Mark’s erect stature, chest out, chin up. They huddled around Mark, congratulating him. He felt they were his friends, not subjects. In his newly hypnotized beliefs, Mark began to walk with the others. He was a man of destiny, following a blue mist in his mind.

As they all marched forward, there was silence. They did not want the spell breaking.

After a few minutes, Eric decided a prolonged silence might sober the mood, a mood they need to keep playing out. He started to talk. “I only saw it once. Wasn’t sure if it was real. It was so mesmerizing. I did not even know what an Oslik was back then. I am sure glad you are here with us, Mark.”

“Me too.” said Luna. “If you were not, I’d be too afraid to go.”

“I will protect you all. The Oslik will show itself to me. The thought of my father’s odyssey became a reality to me.” spoke Mark.

Luna, always being able to spot an opportunity, said “What if we cannot see the Oslik? What if it only appears to Mark?”

“That is how it will most likely be.” Said Mark with authority. “We have bonded long ago. This is something you cannot comprehend.”

“Will you tell us what it said?” asked Adam. Eric wasn’t sure if Adam realized this was all ‘make believe’. Adam had always wanted as grand adventure, a destiny of mythological proportions all his own.

“I do not know if you can comprehend this, but I will try. After all, I am your ‘Keeper of the Flame’”.

.....

Lilly sat in the cave, watching the Flame. Sometimes, just out of boredom, she’d throw a log on it. She complimented herself on how quickly she picked up on this job. The amulet around her neck gave her confidence. This confidence slowly edged towards arrogance. It was much nicer outside. The cave was dark and damp. Getting up, she stretched. Lilly marched out into the sunlight.

From high above, she could watch the villages. She could see why mark enjoyed watching them work. After a while, it became exasperating as she became a mirror for their flaws. She got up and decided to get some wood. Habits were hard to break. Beside it might rain and she’d be stuck inside.

Without Mark, for at least today, life seemed better, brighter. Birds, blue sky, soft wind and the calm of nature. A day just for her. She would go to the pond and wash her hair. She’d decorate herself with flowers and admire her reflection in the water, a reflection that could be both real and imaginary at the same time. Today was her day to look extra pretty. Today would be a perfect day.

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Back at the cave, a soft blue mist floated from a space in the back. It swirled around an interior opening, touching the crude drawings on the walls. As it found its way through a narrow underground tunnel, it wafted towards the Flame. Mark would have known to move a specific stone that blacked a vent. The Flame burned a little less. Eventually it was more smoke than fire. Of course, Lilly did not know this. She was too busy admiring herself.

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Lilly stretched on the ground. Time for a nap. When she woke, she was hungry. There was food and water back at the cave. She thought she saw a jug hidden somewhere. The sun would be going down in a few hours, ready for its own nap. Still, she had all the time in the world. Eventually, she headed back to the cave. Lilly skipped as she fingers her necklace. She was feeling very special. But she would come crashing back to reality when she was in sight the cave's entrance.

There was no glow coming from inside the entrance, only a little black smoke. Lilly ran inside. It took a while for her eyes to see the cold logs sitting below the remaining smoke. The 'Son of the Sun' had vanished. It was gone. She was in shock. The Sun would not come up tomorrow. Everyone would die. Even worse than that, everyone would know it was Lilly's fault. She would be humiliated. It seemed an outrage, at least to her, that someone so beautiful could feel shame. Laying on the ground, she began to cry.

Tears searched for the roots of her deepest thoughts. Being shallow, this did not take too long. Pictures of her life flashed and evaporated. She wished Adam was with her. Then she noticed a lot of apples laying round. Picking one up, she took a bite. If only Adam could taste this with her. She wanted to share the moment with him. She did not want to die alone.

The Sun was going down and it was getting colder out. Lilly needed warmth. She would build fire to do this. She might as well be comfortable in her last days on earth. She placed some kindling on the wood that was the base of the Flame. A glowing ember started to catch. She lovingly blew on it. Soon Lilly was sitting in front of a warm fire. She knew this was not the ‘Son of the Sun’, but only a poor imitation. Still, if someone happens to come by Lilly would not be embarrassed. Thy would not tell everyone the world was ending and it was all her fault.

Floods images of her life popped up and then fused into others. Sometimes it was a dream. At other times it was only remnants of ones swirling around real life. She shivered as if she had a fever. Maybe this was the Sun’s way of punishing her for killing His Son. The more this became a circular thought, the more exhausted she became. Then she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 38

After a few hours of walking, the four adventures reached the secret, bubbling brook. As the three of them listened to Mark pontificate, they realized they did not know what to do next. At one point Mark stopped talking. An awkward silence competed with nature's sounds. Eric could feel the magic of the moment waning.

"I am trying to recollect what I was doing right before the Osluk bubble rose up out of the water." After a short pause to think, Eric continued. "I remember I saw three small stones, right next to each other. One by one I tossed them into the water. I would wait for the first set of ripples to reach me before I threw the net one in. Maybe that is how the Osluk knew I was here."

Luna sighed in relief. Adam seemed to be doing something, pretending to look for three stones lying next to each other. Mark and Adam both started searching. Eric and Luna huddled together. "Let's find three rocks and lay them next to each other. Then I'll shout we found them." said Luna.

"No, better yet, you and I will guide Mark to the spot where we laid the rocks. If Mark finds them himself, he will start to believe and have faith. At least I hope." said Eric.

"I have faith in you, Eric" said Luna. They both looked at each other. For a brief moment they were back in control. They would keep on improvising, gaining the type of confidence that only comes from an entanglement of minds.

Luna was walking towards Mark. Slowly and stealthily, she guided him to her determined spot. She was losing patience as Mark kept stepping over the three placed stones. Finally, Mark shouted "I have found them. All three are here, just as I predicted. "

Eric ran to them with all the fake enthusiasm he could conjure up. He then said to Mark “I had picked up all three stones in my left hand. Then I walked to a nice open area and then tossed them, one by one. I threw them underhand, watching the first ripple after the splash. “ Eric caught Luna looking at him, willing him to quit while he was ahead. He stopped talking and hoped Mark would take the bait. He did not have to worry.

Mark followed the instructions with a sense of ceremony. Eric and Luna watched Mark’s face intensely as he tossed the first rock in a smooth, underhand motion. After he flipped the first stone, Mark closed his eyes. He was deep in thought, the type of depth that had the reverence of sacrifice. Involuntarily, his lips moved as if they were in slow motion. Very quietly, he betrayed his solitude.

The same happened after the second rock left his hand. The third followed rippling water washed by his feet. Eric knew timing was everything. When the final ripple crested Eric shouted, “Did you see that?”

Luna quickly exclaimed “I felt something, a strong emotion.” She tried not to laugh as she looked at Eric with a small shift of her eyes. Unfortunately, Adam said “We will have to find three more stones.” Both Eric and Luna were shocked into a thought maze, Mark and Adam both went about a new search.

“We could get three more stones and do the same thing all over again.” said Eric.

“We could, but it might seem too obvious.” Luna stated.

Together they both looked at the ground. There was no logical answer. But sometimes, the fire of destiny is strong enough to seek its own path. Right next to his foot, Eric saw three stones, laid out in a straight line. He shouted, “I found them.” No one was more astonished than him, except for Luna.

Mark and Adam came running. These rocks seemed unusual, very smooth and almost spherical. All three were the size of a human head. Eric and Luna felt their plan falling in place as if an outside hand had ordained it.

Mark waddled to one of the spheres, squatted and lifted it with both hands. Walking up to his knees into the brook, he heaved the first stone. He was in his own world. He repeated this ritual two more times.

“I felt something!” cried Eric.

“Me too!” responded Luna.

To both their surprise, even Adam said ‘Yes! Yes! I felt it!’

Mark slowly looked at each in return, his eyes fixed on them. He said “Yes, the Oslik is trying to reach me. He is afraid because I am fire. I will teach it.”

“We need to find more stones.” said Adam.

This time Luna was ready. “No, we don’t. We can just dive in and retrieve the same rocks. We can reuse them. I am sure this is how it works.”

Without hesitation, Adam jumped into the water to fetch the three objects. Eventually he had all three lined up next to each other on the ground. Mark did his part, repeating his attempt at Oslik communication. Luna and Eric watched in amazement. After another series was attempted, they shouted encouragement. They would say things such as “Did you hear that? Or “I just felt something warm, tinge, like I was touched by an orange glow.” Adam repeated what they said, but they were not convinced he was only play acting along with them. They came to realize Adam did not possess the right type of imagination to think words. Mark was always in a trance-like state. He was in, a reflection needed to see yourself in a bubble, A bubble with a life in it.

After a while, Eric knew he had to do something to ‘quick start’ this process of suggestive persuasion. He got up and motioned all to come to him. “I know what is wrong.” he said.

“What do you mean?” asked Luna, baiting the hook.

“The slashes are too small. This Oslik does not know the power of Mark. Listening to these tiny splashes, the Oslik thinks you are only a tiny bird. You must let him know you are ‘The Keeper of the Flame’. You are the ‘Mighty Mark’. It will know this because we shall make a giant splash, a splash that will command it to obey.”

“Yes.” replied Luna. “See this cliff, right above? Adam can carry the sphere up there. He is so strong. Mark can then cast them down”

Then Mark spoke up. “Adam should throw the stones down from the cliff. He can then retrieve them again. I shall watch him do this. This is how I shall summon the Oslik.”

“Of course.” Said Luna. The Sun is beginning to set, we should do the same. We have important work to do tomorrow. Rest will revive us.”

As Mark slept, Eric and Luna tried to whisper seeds of ideas into his dreams. They would have to wait until morning to see their harvest. Luna and Eric had their plan. Eric had his quest. And Mark had sealed his own destiny.

CHAPTER 39

When Lily woke up, she as nit terrified. She did not know if she was alive or dead. She was in that twilight between day and night. The soft dew of sleep had not yet disappeared, so she could just be as she was meant to be. Bumping her head on the cave wall, she was shot into reality. She was not dead. But what about the outside world? Was it permanently dark and cold? Standing perfectly erect, she steeled herself and walked towards the outside. Her fate was waiting for her.

Suddenly, she could feel the warmth. Although her eyes were shut, she could see the red glare through her eyelids. The Sun had come up! Lilly ran outside the cave. She shouted and danced. She looked at the village below. She loved those little ants. She laughed as she watched them work. It made her so happy to be alive.

After a few hours of literally basking in the Sun, Lilly walked back into the cave. The Flame was still going. She put more logs on it. As long as no one ever found out, Lilly would survive. She was perfecting a solution to other problems which would come up in her life.

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A few days later, Lilly was out gathering wood. She waved enthusiastically when she saw Booba. This was the first person she had seen since her ‘near death experience’. She ran up to him, throwing her arms around his neck. He held on to her. She giggled as he picked her up off of her feet. She loved feeling safe in old Booba’s arms. He felt alive holding her soft fleshy body. Boba was not that old.

When the hugging time was over, Lily stood in front of Booba's line of sight. She did not want him to go into the cave. Would he know she had extinguished the Son of the Sun? She said "Mark is quite exhausted tonight. Being 'Keeper of the Flame' is very hard. I must protect him."

"Mark is in there?" exclaimed Booba. I thought Luna, Eric and Adam took him into the jungle. What happened? Where is everyone? There was panic in his voice.

Lilly had forgotten Booba was a part of the conspiracy. "Of course he is not in there. I was play acting in case anyone else was listening. I can be very good at it, play acting I mean."

"Oh" said Booba. He had learned to expect confusion when talking with Lilly. "I thought, if I came up here I might be able to spot them in the village when they came back. It's driving me crazy, waiting."

"Oh" said Lily sadly. "I thought you were coming to see me."

"Well, that too. I'm always thinking of you."

Lilly brightened, forgetting about the others.

Then Booba said "I wouldn't wear that amulet. Where others can see you. They might think Mark is not in there. He would never let anyone else wear it. They might come up here looking for him. There are a small band of villagers that are always trying to stir up trouble. Sometimes they dress alike. I'm not sure if that is just a coincidence.

Lilly quickly pulled the necklace off of her head. Holding it in her hand, she said "God thinking, Booba. Come inside, too many nosey people may be looking up at us."

As they sat inside, Lilly watched Booba intently. She wondered if he could tell the flame was not the original 'Son of the Sun'. Would he know she had made this replica? He showed no signs of that he could tell the difference. Finally, she spoke. "What happens if Mark never comes

back? Then what?’. Won’t the village notice? Won’t they be upset? Mad? Scared?” What will happen to me?”.

Booba had already thought of this. “Well, if you were to have a baby, then we could say it was prophesized. His father disappeared and a new ‘Keeper of the Flame’ was born as his heir.

“I’m not pregnant.” Lilly said sadly.

“If you were to be fertilized before anyone knew Mark was gone, all would assume it was here.”

Both had an inspiration, the same brilliant plan. The only difference was Booba’s plan involved him. Lilly’s plan involved Adam. Both sat there for a while, daydreaming. Booba did not know how to make the next move. Lilly could not wait for him to leave so she could plan hers.”

CHAPTER 40

Adam was up long before the other three. He had already gone into the creel and retrieved the three stones. By the time he had hauled them up the cliff, Eric was watching him. He gave Luna a gentle shove and pointed upwards to the figure above. Both waved their hands enthusiastically at him, clapping and shouting encouragement. Even Mark sat up and waved. Maybe the Oslik was watching.

Mark, the night before, had made himself a stick. It had one large leaf hanging from its tip. Ceremony was a big thing to him, so he decided to make a new one. When he pointed and waved at Adam, the first sacred stone came flying from the cliff top. It made a gigantic splash, a sound loud enough to scare the Oslik into submission. Pointing and waving twice caused the second splash. Twirling the sacred stick thrice would signal the final descent.

It seemed like an eternity, waiting for Mark to give the three commands. Eric knew it was Mark's feeble attempt to control events. It did have one effect on both Luna and Eric. It helped lessen any guilt they may have had. Finally, 'The Keeper of the Flame' waved the wand three times. All watched the final sphere hurdle downward, waiting for the splash. All, except Mark, cheered as it unique sound rippled.

"Quiet!" shouted Mark. "Only I should talk. The Oslik must know I am the master. You are all like a pack of animals. When my sacred stone hit the water, there must be silence.

Then Mark stood atop a small mound and shouted "I am the Great Mark. I am the 'Keeper of the Flame' Oslik, sow yourself!"

Nothing happened. Eric needed to think fast. He noticed Mark eyes were closed, The incubated thoughts I his mid vibrated, just barely, on his lips.

Luna said “We must do it again. Mark was right. We need to all be silent. Only Mark should be heard. We did it wrong. We must do it again. The right way. Mark’s way.

“Of course!” Eric quickly responded. Then, through exaggerated motions, signaled to Adam above. Adam was more than happy to do the whole ritual again. A good night’s sleep had helped Mark loosen hold of the red goo. Still, its roots gripped firmly on parts of his mind. He wanted to create something, but his imagination lacked the strength. His instincts were to control everything, preventing others from creating. This was the curse of the red goo. It had the power that made it flourish in a mind, a mind that could not think in colors.

Finally, Adam waved that he was ready again. A flick of the wand set the first stone flying. Splash. A moment of reverence and the second one flew. Surely, Mark thought this time the echo would be a voice calling the Oslík.

“Did you hear that?” said Eric, glancing at Luna.

Knowing her part to play she answered “I think I felt something. Something looking at me!”

“That is the Oslík!” Mark said. “I can feel its stare.” Mark was not positive, but he did not want to look weak in front of the others, Controlling the narrative put him in power. He did not know the red goo would eventually take hold of his narrative. With grandeur, Mark raised his holy stick and thrust his arm down. Adam sprang to his feet and felt special. The orb went sailing upwards and arched downwards. Before it could land, Mark raised his head, closed his eyes and took a deep, meditative breath.

“This way!” ordered Mark. He began to march into the jungle. The other two followed as Adam scrambled down as quick as he could.

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The little procession snaked its way through the vegetation, Mark's holy wand acting like a machete. Each slash brought more vigor than the previous cut. Adam stayed close to Mark, thriving on the energy of the moment. Luna and Eric followed a few steps back, enough distance to be out of earshot of the leaders.

"Where are we going? What's going on?" asked Luna.

"How should I know? Do you think I should ask?" answered Eric.

"Ask Adam to ask ark. Something does not seem right."

So Eric moved closer to Adam and placed his hand on Adam's shoulder. "Where are we going?" Eric asked Adam.

"Into the jungle." Adam replied.

"I know that, but why?"

Mark had heard this. "Can't you smell that? There is an underground stream. That is where the Oslik is. He is hiding, afraid of me. It has no concept of fire. He is underground. My father sought the outside world. He needed to visit the Sun. I shall bring the inner world the light and warmth to make it grow. I shall teach it how to behave in our world, my world!"

Astonishment appeared on the faces of the other three. Eventually, Luna said "Of course, it is obvious after you've explained it to us. We will be quiet now and let you lead." Falling a few steps behind again, Eric said to Luna "If we are lucky, he'll get lost and disappear for once and for all."

"But what if he doesn't get lost?" she asked.

"We better start marking out trail. Mention some landmarks we can see along the way. If we repeat them, it will help us remember our way back."

Suddenly, they both realized they had lost sight of Mark and Adam. In panic, they both shouted “Adam! Adam!”. They were startled when Adam stood up, just a few yards away from them.

“Where did you go?” asked Luna.

“Mark has found something.” Answered Adam.

Moving closer and looking down, they good see Mark on their hands and knees. He was sniffing like a dog following a trail. Quickly, Marks upper body vanished, just his legs were visible. He had found a hole in the ground and was crawling into it. After a moment he was totally gone. Adam started to go in after him. Eric held him back, pulling on his legs.

“Let me go! I must follow him!” demanded Adam.

“Adam, stop!” yelled Luna.

“Why do you have to go down there?”

Adam had no response. People always followed him because he had a handsome face that others mistook as charisma. He had the look of a leader, “I think it is my destiny.” he answered.

“No, it’s not!” exclaimed Luna. “It is Mark’s destiny as ‘Keeper of the Flame’”

“What about Lilly?” asked Eric.

“Just a few days ago you wanted Mark out of the way so she could be yours. That is your destiny.”

Adam was snapped out of his quest. Lilly was all he could think of. It would soon be dark.

“Let’s hurry back to the cliff where he threw the stones. Otherwise we may get lost.”

Without waiting for a reply from Adam, Luna started to hurry back, looking for the marks they had left on the trail. Eric followed, making sure to brush over the clues.

Adam hesitated. Running after them he shouted, “What about Mark?”

They pretended not to hear. Eventually all three reached the soon fabled cliff. The sun was going down, so they settled in for the night. “What do think happened to Mark?” asked Adam.

“He went to find his destiny, just like his father. It is his fate, the fate of the ‘Keeper of the Flame’.” replied Luna.

“That’s right.” Eric interjected. Nothing can be done now. “He wanted to find a giant rabbit hole. He found it because it was always there, waiting fir him. The Sun will decide what to do with him.”

“What about the Sacred Flame?” questioned a worried Adam.

“Lilly is still watching over the ‘Son of the Sun/” said Luna. The mention of Lilly’s name took hold of Adam. The pleasures of the physical world suddenly pierced the inner world’s spiritual bubble. “Lilly” was all Adam could say. Mark was gone, he thought. Lilly would be his. Maybe he still should try to impress the Sun with his physical strength, just in case.

CHAPTER 41

Lilly was all excited about being with Adam. Thought of passion turned to plotting. Having his baby and declaring it was Mark's would give her everything. Seduction was the first step, the part she was always best at. It was meant to be.

Lilly had remembered something Luna had said. The way Lilly's mind replayed it, Luna had said Lilly was the most beautiful creature in the whole world. More beautiful than all the birds in the world. Luna was always the smart one, so she should know.

Lilly went to find the feathers she had Luna collect a week earlier. She would make them into a sexy bird costume to entice Adam. She would dye its red tail feathers red. They would sway when she danced, giggled and jiggled. Inside the cave she practiced a seductive dance. She slipped and fell on her butt when her tiny foot stepped on an apple. Mark had had his minions steal apples from the village. In anger, she started throwing them outside the cave.

Booba picked up an apple and bit into it before he wandered into the cave. "Lilly, are you in there?" he quietly asked. His eyes had not yet adjusted the glow of the large fire. Once he could see clearly, he was mesmerized by a magnificent bird dancing. He watched Lilly, filling his dreams that would become solid in his mind. Lily was startled when she saw the shadowy figure. Catching her composure, she instinctively stayed in her sexy mode, brushing up against Booba, she took a bite of his apple.

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" she softly asked him.

Booba was speechless. A barely audible "Yes" came from his throat. She felt his chest and looked into his eyes. Booba saw the sunset. Lily felt powerful, wonderful. "I need a baby. "she purred.

Booba started to take off his loin cloth. “Not you.” giggled Lilly. “Has Adam come back yet?”

Booba was deflated. His dream of passion turned to a nightmare of shame. Still, Booba was wise. This was just one moment in his long life. Other moments would come. In those times, he would be the center of the story.

“This is what I have come to tell you.” Said Booba slowly. “They have all returned.”

“With Mark?” she asked.

“No, Mark was not with them.”

“Good!”

“We will all come up to see you tonight.”

“Thanks, Booba.” Lilly said quietly. She watched him leave down the path. She resumed practicing her seductive bird dance.

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Booba sat on the beach, thinking. The other three were telling the story of Mark’s destiny. He was half listening. A question keeps popping up in his mind. If Adam became the father of the new ‘Keeper of the Flame, should he tell the others know. Or should he keep that secret to himself, only he and Lilly knowing the truth. Keeping the secret would ensure the village would have an heir. Booba, as well as others, had long suspected the Sacred Flame was only a fire, not the ‘Son of the Sun’. The Sun would always rise, with or without this fire. Booba was a pet of the Great Council. He could, no should, mold the village for the better. Was it better to let them know their tradition was not sacred? Did they need something spiritual to galvanize the best in them? Logic could not balance this. In the end, they would each believe what they need to believe.

“And then, ‘whoosh!’” shouted Adam. “I sent the stone flying. The Oslik hid in fear.”

“What?” asked Booba. This needed his attention. He had heard MasPiola mention the word ‘Oslik’ many years before. “What’s an Oslik? Explain this to me” he asked.

“A creature that lives at the center of the world. It needs light, the wisdom of the Sun”.

“Eric hat not paid attention to Mark’s rambling. It had been Eric who had made up this strange idea. He had not realized there was a bizarre entanglement between the imaginations of men.

“So, Mark was searching for an Oslik?” asked Booba.

“Yes.” Said Adam. He went down a rabbit hole to find it.”

“Do you know where this rabbit hole is?” questioned Booba.

“No!” Luna and Eric said simultaneously.

“Maybe we should go look for him.” said Adam, a little reluctantly. Lily’s image still rose and set in his fertile mind.

“The Sun oversees the ‘Keeper of the Flame’. The Sun shall guide him, light his way to success or lead him to the shadows of failure.” Budda said with an exaggerated air of gravity.

“A wise decision.” Said Luna. “We were right to seek your advice in the first place.” Eric nodded in agreement. Mark followed their lead.

Booba was happy. All he needed was a new heir to be crowned ‘Keeper of the Flame’. All he needed was for Lily to do her part. He wasn’t worried about that. She was a natural in these matters. Putting his arm around Adam, Booba said “It’s time we lived in the real world. That is why the Sun gives us life.”

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Below, in the village, Lilly could recognize the parade of four marching up the hill. Although Booba led, Adam was the one she was focused on. She was excited. Was Mark gone, gone forever? She provocatively played with her amulet. Then she remembered the bird costume, with its dyed red feathers, sitting in plain sight. This was for Adam only, only his eyes. She hurriedly went to tidy up the cave.

Eric and Luna walked hand in hand. In front of them was Adam. Booba, naturally in the lead, carrying his stature with relaxed strength. He was confident in his talent, the talent to follow a vision and have others follow him. Some of outer strength was diminished over the years, but it had fought its way into the power of his inner will.

Lilly jumped when he heard them coming. At first, she decided to act all bubbly and enthusiastic. But she couldn't get into character. She had decided to pretend to be sleeping. She would turn her head towards the voice, will herself to see Adam and then open her eyes. Every ounce of her concentration was pointing her to Adam, her Noth Star. She took a deep breath, held it and opened her eyes. She was staring right at Booba's butt. He was scratching it. Lily quickly turned her head the other way. Her opened eyes were in direct contact with Adam's. Lilly said 'Oh.' and closed her eyes.

Luna knew her sister wasn't sleeping, she was pretending, as always, to be the center of attention. The Sun had given her the gift to absorb light from others. She could turn that light on herself to burn brighter. Luna stepped in, breaking Adam's gaze at this sunset.

Lilly slowly began to open one eyelid. She stopped when the first rays of light filtered in. Through her eye lashes she could see Luna. Lilly decided to sit up, pretending to be startled, a damsel in distress.

“Adam, tell me what is happening? What am I supposed to do? Luna, you should never have left me alone.”

Luna hugged her sister. “I missed you too” she said. Lilly did not try to break the spell of the embrace. After the emotions of all started to dissolve, Booba spoke. All eyes and ears were glued to him.

“Mark has disappeared. We do not know what happened to him. This is bewinter Sun and him. He is now in the shadows, We will always remember him. Does anyone ant to say a few words?”

After a long silence, Lilly stood up. “I was alone with him while he kept the Son of the Sun fed. He was Mark. That is who he was. The Sun chose me to be his mate. Beauty is what made him find me. Yes, we shared a special bond. How could I ever forget him?”

Luna almost did an applause, especially when Lilly gave a little sob, pretending to hold back a bucket full of tears. Then Luna said “I too, will always remember him. He did so many things for all of us, things we never knew about. It is hard to thank him for the gifts he gave us, especially because we do not know what they are.”

“I’ll tear up if I tried to speak.” said Eric, knowing it was his turn.

Adam cleared his throat. “He had visions, things I could never dream of. I do not know what to say. I hope he finds what he needs. I helped him by rolling the sacred stones and calling the Oslik.”

Booba looked at the others. They just shrugged their shoulders. Adam sometimes had his own type of depth. The type that would volunteer to go down a rabbit hole.

Booda stood up and said “We will all mis Mark. All five clasped hands and raised them. With this grand gesture, the eulogy ended. Booba then continued “Now we really know nothing

about what happened to Mark. All we can say is that he is not here. Lilly should keep the Flame alive. No one ever comes up here anymore. It is not our role to make assumptions about Mark to the village. Over time, they will come to their own conclusions.” In his mind, Booba added “With a little help from me”.

Turning to Luna, Booba continued. “It has been almost two days. You need a rest. Luna, why don’t you and Eric take a walk under the moon. You were always a child of it.”

Both Eric and Luna happily stood up together. Embracing, they walked out of the cave. Booba then turned to Lilly and Adam.

“Lilly” Boba said. “You are the most beautiful creature in the whole world. More beautiful than all the birds. He had visions of Lilly’s bird costume dancing in his head. Winking at her, he continued. “I must go down into the village. I will stop by in a few days and let you know if the villagers suspect anything. “ He got up, stretched his legs and left the cave whistling.

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Eric and Luna were very happy. They lay on the beach, the full moon holding their attention. “What do you want to do tomorrow?” asked Luna.

“What we just did a few moments ago.” Answered Ric suggestively.

“Me too. But seriously, I’m not used to being content. I am always restless during the day. My mind just keeps spinning. Sometimes it irritates me.

“I don’t think you’ll have trouble irritating, uh, I mean finding other people irritating. Making you prickly and all,”

She shot him a glance but decided to let it go. “I mean, when we had a project together there was something, something strong that bonded us, made us both feel alive. I guess it was the

uncertainty of it all. Rapture revolving around us. We are sitting still in the middle, nothing moving. I want us to create an idea which leads to making something.”

Eric turned white. He thought she was talking about having a baby. His fear subsided when Luna said “Let’s build that tower, just to do it. When we are gone, our ancestors will know we were here. It will have been a part of our lives together.”

“Do we have to put Lilly in it?” asked Eric.

“No, silly.” said Luna, trying to mimic Lilly.

After making love again, they both lay with their hands under their heads. Each was thinking of the tower. It commanded their imaginations to run free. Eric’s mind flashed in visions of ideas. The concepts would grow, reluctantly, if imagination could fertilize it. Luna was the stairway to his dreams. She thought in terms of ramps and vines, the mechanics of trial and error. Separately, they were out of balance. Together, they equaled creation.

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Bubba whistle as he walked down to his hut. Usually, he wanted to be around others. Without them, his life held no magic. He thought of Lilly, dancing like a bird, asking him to take a bite of his apple. He thought back upon his life. All in all, he had enjoyed it. But today, his thoughts were more on the surface. The everyday responsibility of keeping the village safe and happy. They were his children, and he would do anything in his power to protect them. Mark had needed to disappear. He was crazy, like his father before. Hopefully, Mark would never be seen again. And, in time, forgotten.

Booba’s thoughts then turned to the big question that held him. Should he tell the villagers Mark was gone. The flame in the cave had no spiritual connection to the Sun. That the Sun would rise and sleep each day on its own. Then, the ‘Keeper of the Flame’ would cease to

be. Of course that was the objective thing to do, but Booba's father's exile was always a spike in his mind. Booba was three years old at the time. He began to replay it in his mind

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Booba's father had witnessed the Flame being extinguished long ago. He told on one. He gathered his family, held them tightly, said nothing and waited for everlasting darkness. The next day he saw the Sun, shing like a beacon. He had a rebirth. He was ecstatic. He would tell the people they had nothing to worry about. The Sun would always rise. They did not have to fear Him. He stood there in the center of the village. He told his story. When he was done, some clapped, but others started throwing feces at him. He did not understand. Then the 'Keeper of the Flame' came down to se what all the noise was about. He said Booba's dad was a liar. He should be banished until the Sun decided he should return. The 'Keper of the Flame' said he had a lot of work to do, keeping the Son from crying and putting out his own fire. He ordered the villagers to bring him food, drink and a pretty girl. Also, some firewood. He needed to go back to the cave and think about all that had happened.

Booba had remembered the villagers had broken into two factions. Those who believed the Sun rose with 'The Keeper of the Flame' and those that did not. Old friends avoided each other. Some started to places orange dotes on their hands. All were forced to take a side. The Great Typhoon was the one force which reunited the two groups. Survival transcended belief. Slowly, over time, the orange dots disappeared.

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Booba had remembered those days. Although he was young, he came to realize belief is in the mind of the beholder. So Booba, concluded. The people needed the option to believe. They needed to have Lilly's baby and believe it was Mark's. The baby had to be known as the

direct heir of 'The Keeper of the Flame.' Maybe the new heir would not go insane. Booba did not know about the red, sticky goo that oozed in a tiny place in the cave.

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Firelight flowed like liquid around Lilly's form as she danced. She kept her eyes intensely on Adam. Her rump jiggled and the red tail feathers on her costume kept rhythm. As her breasts swayed, she knew Adam was hypnotized, Seductively, she gently bent over and gently picked up an apple. Softly, blowing on it, she took a small feminine bite. In an enticing move, she crawled towards Adam, raising the apple to him. Without hesitation, he took a large bite of it. Lilly sighed as Adam threw her over his string shoulders. Off they went, out of the shadows of the Flame.

Hours later, after several extremely explosive encounters, Lily stood outside the cave. It was already night. The stars were perfect. The moon was full, just as it should be. She stretched and sighed in contentment. She quietly went back into the cave and watched Adam sleep, slowly exhaling. He looked so peaceful. She reached for her amulet and placed it over her head. Lilly was very happy. She had found her destiny.

CHAPTER 42

Two weeks later, Lilly could be seen walking through the village. She hummed softly; in full knowledge she was radiant. Not everyone stared at her, but you could not convince Lily of that. She said hello to everybody, doing a twirl once in a while, just to add an exclamation point. Seeing Luna, she slipped to her, just as if she had been done

as a young child.

“Lilly!” exclaimed Luna. “Oh, I’ve missed you so much.”

The two hugged. After some talk, Luna noticed Lily’s hands were on her belly. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you?” Luna stated with pride.

A happy nod from Lilly made it official. Both knew the baby would be the new ‘Keeper of the Flame’, which was all for the best. Of course, it may be made complicated by Adam. Did he know he was the father. If so, would he tell anyone? Booba had predicted some of the villagers might panic, as they had done before. He knew they needed tradition, a familiarity to keep their minds from wandering. If that happened, they would be afraid. Fear can bring out the worst in some.

“What about Adam?” asked Luna.

“Oh, he is great! I am so happy!”

“No, no. I mean if he claims to be the father, what will you do? Have you told him you are pregnant? Sooner or later your belly will grow inside.”

Lilly had not thought that far ahead. Somethings she was naturally gifted at, others, she was not. Defiantly Lily said “I did my part! It was all your plan. You mean you have not figured

out what to do next. I knew I should have gone to Booba first.” Lilly stopped her foot and went to go find Booba.

Luna knew better than to follow her. Letting her temper cool was best. She would go get Eric. Comfort mixed with brainstorming was a good remedy.

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When Booba first saw Lilly, his thoughts turned to her bird costume. That image was burned into his mind. Holding his stomach in, he said “There is my little bird, as beautiful as ever”.

Lilly rushed to him, and they hugged. The embrace lasted as little to long for Lilly’s taste, so she pushed him away slightly, hoping he would take the hint. Booba took the hint but decided a few more seconds was worth it. Finally, when they separated, Lilly stared into his eyes and said seriously “Booba, I have a problem.”

“What is it, Lilly?”.

” If I were to have a baby, Adam’s baby, would he become ‘Keeper of the Flame’? “she asked.

Booba knew the title was only ceremonial, but it held a gravity that kept social order. Wisdom was the ability to plant the seeds of imagination into the minds of others. Booba was born wise because he understood this. He replied with purposeful insight. “The ‘Son of the Sun’ will choose the rightful heir, The Flame i the father. He teaches us, so we should do as he says. If anyone asks, you should say ... “The Son of the Sun burns in me”. “Practice saying that”.

The Son of the Sun burns in me”. repeated Lilly. This seemed simple enough for her. She liked uncomplicated things. She walked back to the cave, practicing the phrase in her mind.

Booba watched her leave, a smile on his face. At first, he congratulated himself for being so smart. His second thought was of a wonderful swaying tail feather, dyed red.

.....

Luna was happy, lying next to Eric. The moonglow blanketed him like a mist. Nonchalantly, she said “Eric, what should I do. I don’t want to see Lilly get hurt. She could just take off that terrible amulet and walk away. Leave the cave forever. Tell that to the Council, let them decide what to do, they should be in charge of all this ‘Keeper of the Flame’ stuff. Lily would be happier to be her old self. She and Adam can raise a family. It might even change her, be a little less vain and selfish.”

Looking at Adam, she could see he was still sleeping. Slowly she got up and walked to the waves slapping the beach. Eric watched her with one open eye. He would think about a response in the morning. Most likely, he would paraphrase what Luna had just said. He would pretend it had just popped into his mind.

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Adam had gotten up a few minutes ago. He did not see, or hear Lilly, so he went hunting for an apple. This was the first time he had ever been alone inside this sacred cave. It had a certain feeling of safety through captivity in it. Being bored, he decided to explore. He was crawling on his hands and knees, preventing him from constantly bumping his head. He smelled something. Putting his nose close to the ground, he sniffed like a dog. It led him to a stone where a tiny glow of light filtered from behind. In fact, there were three stones which blocked an opening. Moving them reminded him of the splashes to call the Oslik. He crawled through the rabbit hole and squeezed to the other side. Inside was a huge cavern. A shaft of light shined

through a crack. High above Eric could see marks and scratches on the walls. They were drawings of creatures. All, but one was unknown to him, but one was very familiar.

Adam, as mentioned earlier, did not have an imagination. When confronted with the unknown, ‘fight or flight’ was his only binary choice. Not seeing anything to battle with, he scampered back under the opening. Quickly, he put the three rocks back to their original position. Fear was not a thing that regularly visited him. This time, he leaned against the cave wall and shivered. He felt he had escaped death.

Adam walked out towards the Flame. Often, his mind was blank, but this time destiny had decided to draw pictures on it. An image burnt unto his memory in a flash. A soft orange glow of a bubble seared onto his mind. It cooled into darkness, slowly dissolving into the deep caves in his mind. Naturally, he was not aware of this, Times like this eventually find themselves reincarnated in dreams.

Adam sat in front of the Flame. He was lost in the moment, the flickering of existence. It gave him peace, but he did not know why. He did not care why. This was one of his talents.

CHAPTER 43

Luna stood hand in hand with Eric. Lily was next to them. All three were in front of three masked figures.

Luna spoke up. “Tyell Lilly she should say the baby is Adam’s. She can just walk away and be Lilly again. I know my sister. I know what is best for her.”

Lily gave her sister a stare of daggers. Lily said “I know what is best for me. I already know what to do.” After a dramatic pause she said, “The Son of the Sun burns inside me.”

“What? What are you talking about?” asked Luna.

“The Son of the Sun burns inside me.” Repeated Lilly, this time with a little more drama.

Luna did not know what to say. She looked at Eric, hoping he could help. He only shrugged. Luna mimicked him and felt bewildered. She knew her all her options were locked in a mystery.

Booba noticed Luna thinking, calculating. He did not know if wisdom can create instinct. It didn’t matter. Booba rose, gutturing he was going to say something, something profound. He knew the mask added gravity to his words, but it also muffled them. Taking off his mask he said “This is a matter between the son of the SUN and Lilly. They are all bound together”. Like an orchestra conductor, he signaled to Lilly, she knew exactly what to say.

“The Son of the Sun burns inside me.” Said Lilly with the utmost reverence.

It became obvious to Luna that this was all rehearsed in advance. All except Lilly, knew this was a preview of the future.

“So be it!” bellowed Booba.

Two other voices, constricted by masks shouted agreement. Booba smiled broadly. He was good at planting ideas. Here was his proof.

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AS the months flew by, Lilly's belly grew. All knew she was aging to have a baby. Some of the bolder girls would ask if it was Mark's. Lily would always give the same answer "The Son of the Sun burns inside me."

Once a clever young woman was caught mimicking Lilly, saying "The Son of Adam burns inside me." behind Lilly's back. Although it never reached Lily's ears, it could be heard sporadically throughout the village. It always caused a quiet, discreet laughter. Still, there were many others which looked at Lily with respect and sometimes fear. They bowed their heads to her in reverence. This overwhelming capture of power gave Lily a new strength. This, along with her natural seductiveness, made her feel like the Son of the Sun was inside her. Another seed, planted by Booba, was reaching upwards toward the sunlight.

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Adam sat next to Lilly, the Flame in front of them. Both stared straight ahead, into the warmth.

"Lilly am I the father?" asked Adam, keeping his eyes transfixed on the fire.

Lilly thought about repeating her well-practiced mantra, but a better part of herself surfaced. This has not been a conscious decision, but one of protective reflex. She said "Adam, I don't know. The Sun has made my destiny, our destiny."

"Will he become the 'Keeper of the Flame?'"

"Yes, if that is what the Sun wants." said Lilly. She had seen the Flame go out and the Sun still rise. The Sun did not care. The Sun will always wake up from its sleep.

Adam believed the fire in front of He thought it had the power of light and dark, the grip over life and death. To him, it was sacred. It gave him the emotion of inner strength, an emotion he did not have to think about. It was natural, so kt became hypnotic, especially when the Flame sparked and danced.

Lilly softly pressed herself against his back. They watched their own shadows as they made love. Their thoughts melded together in a blue mist. Everything floated and settled so gently. It was time stopping. Adam credited the Flame for this moment, this feeling of eternal contentment.

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Life in the village moved on normally. Lilly was very large at this point, not only her belly but also her ego. The Sun rose, slept and rose again, as it had always done. Few people asked about Mark. A lot of this was because many did not like him. Generations later, Mark Son of MasPiola, would turn from campfire stories to myth to historical legend. He would have reveled in this, but he would never know. This was all for the best.

For the most part, Lilly was just another person in the village. The same was true for Adam. A few, however, started to follow Lilly with a sense of higher status. Most of these early followers were descendants who were wearers of orange spots on their hands. These initial disciples would follow Lilly from a distance. It was not in a threatening manner, but one of protective vigilance. Ay first, Lily was a little afraid of them, feeling their stares. After a while she took pride in them. She decided to go find some pretty girls to join them, perhaps some handsome boys too. Yes, she decided they would act as living accessories to adorn her. They should look perfect, almost as beautiful as their newfound leader.

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A crowd of beautiful villagers crowded around the couple. Lilly was giving birth in the privacy of the birth shelter. Adam waved goodbye to those attractive onlookers. Later, after these admiring onlookers left, the masked figures walked towards Lilly. They were anxious to witness the miracle, as they had done before.

Adam, Eric and the then unmasked stood outside. Inside, Attending Lilly, was Luna. Old Ester was there as the midwife. Outside the five waiters talked. Meanwhile, the conversation was superficial, helping time pass by under the moonlight. They were not paying attention to their own conversation because their ears were waiting for the heralded cry of the baby. They all knew it was a boy, hopefully. Eventually, there was nothing left to say. All sat apart, silently waiting.

The baby's cry was unmistakable. It could not be confused with a bird or small animal. It was human. Old Ester was the first to stick her head out of the hut. Her grin, complete with missing teeth. It was the same as they had seen before. It was a boy, and they congratulated themselves on being paramount of this outcome. Everyone wanted to go inside, but the entrance was too small. One at a time, was the only way to proceed, Eric stood back, knowing he should not be the first to go in. All eyes stared at Adam and Booba. Who should go first? Maybe Adam, the father. Perhaps Booba, head witness to the new 'Keeper of the Flame'.

Booba walked up to Adam and put his arm around him. Together they walked a few steps out of earshot. Something was said. Both seemed to be agreeing about their pact.

Booba, holding his mask, crouched as he went inside. The other three stood outside, waiting for their instructions. "Yes! Yes!" cried Booba in triumph. "Adam, come! Come!" See the Flame's new guardian. Lilly gave the newborn to Adam. He felt strength, holding his offspring. It was the same strong peace the Flame gave him. He moved the bundle close to Lilly, letting the infant see both of their faces. The Sun was watching over all three.

Booba decided to give them this moment. He went outside, arms held high. “Lokk! Look!” he said in a grand gesture. He directed traffic so the others could individually see. Inside Eric rushed to Luna. They embraced and felt closer than ever. Lily noticed this and felt family pride. To her left she felt Adam’s warm gaze. To her right were two council members smiling with pride. Behind them was a masked figure. It momentarily clouded this radiant moment. She closed her eyes, hoping to make the mask go away. She held the amulet in one hand, her baby in the other. In her mind she repeated ‘The Son of the Sun burns bright with life’. Her lips moved slightly, betraying her thoughts. When she opened her eyes, she felt at home.

CHAPTER 44

Six months later, Lily was shouting “I can’t stay in this terrible cave anymore. It’s crowded. It’s damp. It echoes when little flash cries. We need to see more people, but it’s too small here. I can’t breathe in here.”

“We have a duty to do.” said Adam, trying to install a sense of continuity, a sense of tradition.

“What duty. To keep this fire going?”

“Yes. Of course. What could be more important.”

Lilly never told Adam about how she had lost and replaced the Flame herself. In fact, she had done so a few times. She remembered Booba had told her not to mention this to anyone. She tried to twist Adam’s perspective. “We should be out with the people, the commoners. Some place where the villagers can see us every day. The ‘Keeper of the Flame’ does not have to live in a cave.”

“How do you know?” was Adam’s obvious reply.

“Booba told me.” Lilly lied.

This caught Adam by surprise “Well, if Bobba says so, I guess we can find a new place.”

“How about a tower? I could sit in it and have people come to see me. I would point down to those I wanted to come up. It would make everybody so happy.”

“What about me?”

“You can come see me, silly.”

“No, we will build a hut in the village.”

“It must be up high in the hill. Living above everybody else is what I deserve. I deserve it for all I have done for those simple people. You should be thinking of your son, little Flash. And it must be big, our new hut, I mean.”

“I guess we can do that.” Said Adam, happy to end the conversation.

Lilly did not want to stop talking. She was on a roll. “it has to be big, the biggest hut ever.”

How big is big?”

“Twice the size of the Council’s hut.”

“Is that all?”

“And it must be pretty. I need to live in a pretty place.”

“Who will attend the Fire?”

“The Lillyites of course.”

“What”.

“My little Lillyites. That is what I call them, all the people follow me. Just the good-looking ones of course. They’ll take turns gathering firewood. I will make them compete for the honor of being my assistants. Of course, I am the official Keeper until little Flash is old enough. Until then my Lillyites will do as they are told. My little servants. You watch, I can make them run around, chasing their tails like little puppies. I love watching them do that, I really do.”

Aam walked out of the cave. Building a magnificent hut would be a lot of work. After a moment, he found himself excited. Working with his hands, building it. It was a simple plan of thought. This simplicity was need to balance him, balance him with Lilly.

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The grandiose vision of building a tower was replaced by a simpler structure, at least for now. Eric and Luna were enlisted to help build Lily's new home. They would try to build it, high on a hill.

"Watch out below!" shouted Eric as a huge log broke loose.

"Well, that didn't work," said Luna. Maybe we should build something to slowly pull, stop and pull again. It will place less stress on the vines."

Eric was already registering this model in his head. Adam stood by hopelessly. His initial thought was to pick up each individual pole up on his back. Then he would carry it uphill by himself. An earlier, disastrous attempt showed him the limits of his plan.

"Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." Adam said. He felt deflated after he had said it. After all, he had the look of a leader and usually that was enough. Gravity took its command from the earth, not Eric. He was aware a small crowd of good-looking people would report back to Lilly.

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"Pull!" shouted Eric. He, Luna and Adam did. The log moved upwards, resting in place. "Pull!" said Eric again. The process repeated itself. AS the Sun started to say good night, four logs were at their destinations, up the side of the hill.

"All right! Good job everybody!" Adam said loudly, jumping for joy. He exaggerated his gesture, just enough to make sure the retrieving crowd would get a good last impression.

"We need to speed things up." said Eric. "I can make this process better. I just need to think."

"I can help you think." Luna said, winking at him. Together they walked hand and hand to the beach.

Adam stood by himself. He should be going back to Lilly, back to the cave. He did not want to go home, at least right now. When no one was looking, he squatted and put two hands under the end of one of the logs. Pulling with all its might, it lifted a few feet off the ground. It was a failure, but he felt alive. His heart pounded and his back felt strong. He tried again and again until gravity convinced him it was time to go home to Lilly.

Lilly was waiting for hm.

“Where were you? I hear things re going slow, too slowly. My followers are saying you are lazy!”

“Me? Your pretty little pets just sit there, watching. If they adore you so much, why don’t they help?”

“They are busy being my eyes and ears.”

“Why can’t they be your hands too? The faster we get this done, the quicker you can move out of the cave. Then we can be happy!”

Lilly was going to say something, but noticed Adam was taken solace in the Flame. When he did this, his inner peace became reality. He did not realize Lily had stopped talking. She too, was staring at the fire. A rare idea was starting to take form.

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The next day, the three supreme hut builders were digging holes and preparing a solid foundation. Eric noticed the usual audience started to move in unison. They were marching towards their guiding light, which was walking up hill. The three watched as Lilly started to hold court below.

“I love you all. You are so beautiful. We all share so much in common. You are like my family. I like to think of you as my pretty little Lilly birds.” smiled Lilly. The crowd beamed in appreciation. Lilly basked in the moment.

“It is now time for each of you to grow, reach for the sunlight.” Lilly continued. All eyes were glued to her. They were special because she had anointed them to be so.

“The time has come for my little darlings to help build by hut. It shall be known as the ‘Sun Hut’. All of you will have pride in knowing your hard work made it possible.” Declared Lilly.

The response was not what she had expected. There were no cheers or warm embraces. Most of the crowd stared at their feet. Lilly was confused, but instincts kicked in. She knew they were like her. Their talent was in watching, not actually doing. Others were supposed to do the work. Their proof was that the Sun had made them physically superior on the outside. If the Sun had wanted them to be common, to do labor, He would have made them plain. There was no arguing with a logic that had served them so well.

“Of course, I need you all to be at your most attractive. Your role will be to recruit others to toil and sweat” Lilly said with reassurance.

A little way in the distance, stood a group of true worshippers. They did not have the physical attributes to join the inner flock. Proximity was the best they could hope for, dreaming of a life not meant for them. Pointing to the see hopeless souls, Lilly pointed at them. Turning to her entourage she said “Bring those poor souls into my flock. You shall watch over them as I watch over you. They will build my new home with their hands, and we will all build it with our hearts.”

Lilly gestured to Eve, a big breasted woman which Lilly liked to keep close by.

“Eve, make sure everyone reaches out to those with orange dots on their hands. They are desperate for my attention. They will make good worker.”

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A few weeks later, the nighty hut was forming. Adam supervised a bunch of laborers. They worked extremely hard and never complained., wearing their weariness as a badge of honor. Adam was their leader. He believed in them, and they believed in him. Sitting below this construction site sat the beautiful ones. They cheered on the individual workers that they had recruited. Sometimes they would ‘boo’ or place bets on their laborer.

Eric and Luna were off to the side. They had their own group but needed to get more. Two new recruits were going to show up soon. All were like minded. Eric felt the kinship, inquiring minds fueled by imagination. Retic and Luna were making their own perpetual motion machine of ideas. Ideas which need to work in the real world, a wonderful world balanced by a perfectly placed fulcrum of proof.

“We need to pull a roller under the vine when it is lower down. This will stop it from braking.” said Paul. Paul was one of the new trainees.

“Yes, I see.” said Eric. Think of a way to do it, Draw it.

“It needs to remain stationary.” Added Luna.

“And hard, very hard.” Said Eric smiling a smile at Luna. Luna could not resist. Eric knew this, it was all part of the attraction of nature. It was time to do their best thinking.

“Hurry”. said Luna

“What? What’s the rush?” Eric asked.

“Can’t you hear her. She’s coming.”

“Who?”

“Lilly “said Luna. “I can hear her walking, yapping nonstop to her minions. Did you see the way they’re starting to dress? Feathers, flowers, leaves, furs, horns. You cannot mistake them. They keep adorning themselves. You can notice them a mile away.

“That’s the point, I guess.” said Eic yawning. “Anyway, you are right about Lilly. Run before she sees us.

Lilly turned around to look at her adoring companions. “Now I want you all to walk straight and with dignity. If you don’t you will have to leave. Leave forever!” warned Lilly. To soften the frightened looks on their faces, Lily made her little joke. “We have to look our best, to show we are better than these Thinkers.” Lilly had thought up this nickname herself. She waved her hand nonchantly where the five ‘thinkers’ always congregated to share ideas of logic.

“Where is my sister!” demanded Lilly, addressing the three remaining inventors.

A gasp came from Lilly’s entourage. Eve was standing behind Lilly. She had oversized coconut shells clinging to her breasts. She made an emphasis of shaking them when she said “Rise and stand when you are spoken to!”

Paul made a loud fart and the other two mimicked him and laughed. Lily had a flashback of holding a flower to her nose when she used to visit Mark.

“You are disgusting little creatures. You only proved how much better we are. “Lilly said, turning with dignity to her admirers. They could be heard to say in unison “Disgusting little creatures. Their superiority was temporarily pierced by the sounds of laughter and farting.

“Keeper of the Fart.” Shouted Paul.

This as one of the defining moments in a rift between the ‘Tinker Thinkers’ and ‘Lilly’s Birds’. It had been brewing for a while, but now it was cast in collective memory. Without his

knowing it, Adam had become the coveted prize between these two opposing factions. He could tip the balance of power.

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Adam felt good. The day's construction went well. He enjoyed the physical work. This made him a natural leader for his laborers. They would follow him anywhere. They would not just listen to him; they would hang on every word. He was a part of them. He did not realize this because it was at a much deeper level than his.

Adam made his way, alone, into the jungle. He headed towards the cliff, the same site that get calling him back to it. Once he reached it, he went into the water and retrieved the three nearly spherical stones. He lifted the fist and slowly carried to the top of its destination. He did this for the other two remaining sacred rocks. After accomplishing this, he rested peacefully. Then he hurled one relic over the edge. A huge splash rose from the water. He hoped it was loud enough to call the Osluk. He did it again and again. He waited for a sign. He did not know she was being watched from a distance. Eve stayed out of sight, just as Lilly had told her to do.

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Lilly waited impatiently. She took a dep breath as she saw Eve coming.

"Who is she?" asked Lilly impatiently. "I will make her look ugly, so ugly nobody will ever look at her!"

"Adam isn't seeing another woman. He's throwing rocks off a cliff."

Lilly beamed with relief.

Eve threw in the following comment "Lilly you are the most beautiful. No man can resist you."

"You are right." Said Lilly. "How silly of me to think any woman could outshine me."

After an inquisitive paused, she asked “Why is he throwing rocks?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the Tinker Thinkers know.”

“I cannot ask those terrible people. I lost them. You must go and find out.”

“How?”

“Go talk to Paul. Shake your coconut shells at him. You know what I mean.”

Eve practiced jiggling her breasts and smiled knowingly at Lilly. She had her own talents.

Of she went, a dutiful minion with a mission.

CHAPTER 45

Booba knew something was wrong. He had kept the 'Keeper of the Flame' alive in the minds of the villagers. There was no panic of the Sun going to sleep forever. Yet, the dynamics of hos people was off. Tribes inside the Tribe were forming. He knew like-minded people would spin in common orbits, but the alignment was wrong. These circles no longer complement each other. The sum of the parts was less than the whole. Booba needed to fix this. The question was how.

Three factions were forming. He divided these into subgroups: Thinkers, Birds and true Believers. Yes, these three tribes had always existed, but they had solidified, getting hard around the edges. Vanity was one catalyst. Lilly had this in abundance, and this attracted the Birds. Booba wondered how he could clip their pretty little wings. All of this needed to be done before all the villagers caught the fever, the fever of exclusive inclusion.

The Flame seemed to supply the answer. What if the Flame were to come out of the cave. It should be where all could see it. It would unite the villagers. It would bring a spiritual sense to some, tradition to others. Still. some would develop a sense of duty to expand ideas. All would get their own internal sense of purpose, if not family. Booba need to plant seed in a mind ripe with vanity.

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"Well, what did you find out from Paul? Why is my Adam throwing rocks I the jungle. He should be running home to me." said Lily excitedly

"I'll tell you what Paul said. I don't understand a lot of it, so don't holler at me." said Eve defensively.

Lilly knew it was time to keep a tighter leash on Eve, keep her closer to the flock. Lilly said “Eve, just be your beautiful self and tell me everything. Don’t leave anything out. You know I could not have accomplished all of this without you.”

After absorbing several more doses of flattery, Eve started to tell her story. “Paul says the spot Adam goes to is where something happened to Mark. After hearing three splashes in the stream, Mark was crawling along on all fours, like a dog. He was sniffing. Suddenly he found water, water underground. One minute Mark was there, then he wasn’t. ‘Poof’, he was gone. Paul thinks he crawled into a hole and went underground. He went headfirst and then ‘Poof’. relayed Eve. She liked to emphasize the word ‘Poof’.

“Did Paul say why Adam was throwing stones?” asked Lilly.

“Paul says Adam is trying to call an Oslik, whatever that is?”

This Oslik thing had a familiar ring in Lilly’s mind, but it was like mist, hard to comprehend. Luna could probably add a little more information on this. Lily had gotten all he could from Eve. It was time for Eve to go. “Oh, it’s probably just stupid talk from those awful Tinker Thinkers. You know how they are. Come here. I want to give you a big hug before you leave. You have been such a great help and confidante to me.”

Eve went skipping and humming a tune as she glided out of the cave.

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Luna and Lilly sat outside in the bright sunlight. Just minutes before, Lilly had admonished Liuna for not keeping tighter reins on the Thinkers. Lilly thought of them as he sister’s minions. Luna was furious at the notion.

“They are not my servants. They are my friends.” Luna shot back.

“Lilly shook her head and said quietly “They’ll be nothing but trouble later. You’ll see.” Then I’ll say I told you so.” said Lilly.

Luna decided to let this go, at least for now. Trying to change the subject, she said “Booba wants the flame to come out of the cave. He wants it to have a permanent home where all can see it.”

“Who cares! We can talk about that later. Why is my Adam going into the jungle. Playing with rocks, of all things. Is he crazy?” asked Lily, searching for an answer in her sister’s eyes. Her mind naturally went to Mark and Mark’s father’s insanity.

“I can only tell you what I think. Adam really believes in the Flame, so he was very influenced by Mark’s thoughts and actions.

“You don’t know half of it. I knew Mark best of all.” lectured Lilly. “Remember when Mark decided only he should eat apples? He had his little toads steal from the village at night. And then, he’d sit on a pile of those apples, almost like he was trying to hatch them. It’s a good thing Booba decided to do something about him. I mean, it was really scary for me. I have suffered so much.”

“Remember, Eric made the whole story up, the story of a creature in a glowing orange bubble. Only Mark thought it was real. Eric and I helped convince Mark loud splashes would call this worldly being. Mark was the one who named it an ‘Oslik’. I think that is what Adam is trying to do, trying to get Oslik’s attention. Why he wants to do this, I don’t know.” Luna said in one breath.

“Do you think he is crazy?”

“No. not much grows from his imagination, but something took root in his mind. He believes but he cannot understand why.”

“Yes, my Adam is like that. Just liked me.” said Lilly happily. She thought Luna was paying her a compliment. “So, you’re saying, eventually he will come to his senses. Come home to me each day after work.”

“I can’t say for sure. He seems content, throwing stones over a cliff. Why don’t you let him be. Take some advice from your big sister.

“You’re probably right. Now what was all this talk about Booba wanting something?” asked Lilly. Luna was amazed Lilly could remember there was another topic that was not about her.

“I almost forgot.” Said Luna. “Thanks for reminding me. “Booba wants the Flame to have a new home. Take it out of the cave, out it in the open. Let it be the centerpiece of the village.”

“Why?”

“He says it will reunite everybody. Give them something in common.”

“And, maybe a festival?”

“Sure, why not. Booba would love that.”

“Good. I hate that dark old cave anyway. It’s spooky in there. Sometimes I feel like there is a force in there, beckoning me to find it. It gives me the creeps.”

This was the beginning of the ‘Procession of the Flame’. It would become a yearly tradition, etched by future generations. A festival always followed the ceremony. It helped pass the torch, literally, to the future.

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“We need to do something special when the Flame is moved. That is where I come in.” said Lilly. I will do a fantastic dance, all eyes on me. It will be a magic moment where all stop because they cannot take their eyes off of me. I am counting on my beauty to handle most of this,

but I need a little extra something to capture their complete attention first. Once that is done, I will jump out and be captivating with my perfect movements.” Lilly said.

She was hoping Adam would mention his rocks, but he said nothing. He was probably speechless. “Oh, I have a great idea. It just came to me, out of the blue.” Continued Lilly, looking intensely at Adam. “Let’s build a big slide near the edge of as pond we will build. WE can roll big, smooth stones down it.”

Lilly waited for a reply from Adam. Nothing happened. Lilly screamed “And make a big splash. A noise echoing into the jungle. You can do the honors; a big strong man like you. You’re the only one who can do this. Everybody will know you are the leader. Then I will take over.”

Adwam said nothing. He was staring into the Flame. “I know what I must do, make a sound which will demand everyone’s attention. Even those that live in a bubble at the center of the world.

“Oh, that is the most fantastic idea I have ever heard of.” Gushed Lilly. “I’ll get Luna to talk to those awful Tinker trolls. They must build what we need, what the village needs.” Lily thought she had given Adam a purpose, a role in her life. Adam had invented a destiny for himself.

CHAPTER 46

After Lilly's new home was finished, another project started. Booba was pleased. Hearts and minds working together can feather a bed, a nest for the entire village. Still, there were certain problems. The Thinkers had grown in size. They became more barren, mocking the Birds at every chance. The Oranges, became more seclusive. Their marked hands ensured they stayed with their own kind. It was hard to tell what they were thinking. Adam was retreating, like them, but his depths could go only so deep. Fortunately, for Booba, Adam could surface enough to be with nature. Lilly was the same as ever, but she too could only reach a certain level of inwards thought., Power was becoming a part of her will. A majority of the village lived their daily lives, never being pulled into the orbit of any of the three groups. They lived inside their own bubbles. They did not seek society. They did not have to, they were society. Boobs did not worry about them. They were the constants in the equation that he was trying to balance.

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Little Ray sat on his mother's lap. Lily doted over her baby boy. She even loved Adam, sometimes. Little Ray was destined to be an important man, He would grow into 'The Keeper of the Flame'. Of course, this would take time. He was only two years old. Lilly knew she held a lot of respect from the village. It was not only because of her son, the heir. Even Booba realized she was a player in the game. Lilly did not realize Booba was using her as a pawn in his game. He would plant ideas in her head. He knew the ideas would not be nurtured by imagination. In fact, they had to grow, and grow fast, before they starved to death.

The Temple of the Flame was finally underway. It sat in a noble location, not too far up the side of the mountain. With some stonework, it would be shelter from wind and rain. A road was

built from its threshold to the center of the village. All could see it and face it at any time. The Flame would bind them as one. Belief, or at least tradition, would bring unity. Next, Booba decided the Thinkers needed a permanent building. They would bring reason and progress to Booba's new society. That was their talent. But first, these Tinker Thinkers needed to make a big splash at the very first 'Procession of the Flame'.

Little Ray loved going to the construction site, circled by a flock of Pretty Birds. He waves excitedly to Adam, working high up the mountain side. Lily had told her son a giant slide was being built. Ray thought it was being made for him and that he would be able to go down it. A giant playground, made just for him. Every day, at the same time, this giant picnic played out for him.

"Little Ray, you come back here this very minute." Hollered Lily.

Ray stuck out his tongue and raced to where all the action was. He was only two, so he was easily scooped up by the arms of his adoring protectors.

"Bad boy." Said Lily, giving him an apple slice with honey on it. "You must learn to watch others work, leave work for the dirty people. There is too much of your father in you." Lilly continued, but then looked quickly around. She did not want anyone else to hear that. She always held a worry that Oranges might know Mark was not the father. Just for assurance she said loudly "The Son of the Sun burns in me." She made sure her eyes were closed and took a deep breath.

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Adam was attracting his own followers, mostly Oranges. After a good day's work, he'd eat supper with his fellow workers.

“It feels great, doesn’t it. Using your hands, building something, watching it grow before your eyes.” said Adam reaching for an apple.

“It sure does.” replied Joshua, a particularly plump Orange. “I feel connected to the Sun. I know there is a higher purpose to my life, our lives, because we are all one under the Sun.”.

The other Oranges exchanged glances of confirmation. Joshua had the ability to verbalize their sanctuary. The strange thing was that the other Oranges believed Adam was the inspiration for Joshua’s words. They did not do this consciously. Adam looked like a leader. They liked him. Deep down inside, they thought if they believed enough, they could be like Adam. In a complete paradox, they despised the Birds, but in their deepest emotions, wanted to fly with them, looking down. Adam did not know this, incapable of understanding. Lust for power never snared him. He was lucky like that, always centered. Never diving too deep nor flying too high.

“Adam, are you going to the cliff tomorrow?” asked Joshua.

“No. The splash tower is still too small. We need to concentrate on the big Splash. Three giant Splashes are worth more than three hundred little ones.” answered Adam.

The others read a lot more into this than they should have.

“That is very wise advice. Each day we should all remind ourselves of this. I will write it down, put it with the other ‘wisdoms’.” said Joshua.

The other Oranges looked at Adam with reverence. They wanted to recruit others from the village to join them. This was their mission, to teach others the truth, at least the truth as they saw it. Resentment was slowly building up in Joshua. His value was always invisible, always an afterthought.

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Eric and Luna were holding their own court, so to speak, in a temporary shelter on the beach. “We have so many things to do.” Eric said. He stood in the middle of a circle of ten Thinkers. “It’s not just building the tower for the Splash. It’s not just building the Temple of the Flame. It’s not just building our new home. Booba was right. WE need to bring progress to our people. Make life easier for all of us.”

On cue, Luna piped in “Booba was right! We need to think of the future. Bring water right onto the village center. We can clear some jungle and plant fruit where anyone can pick it, even the small children. We can find more efficient ways to hunt, especially would boar. Maybe captures some baby boars and raise them in pens.”

Eric then picked up where Luna left off. “We need to recruit more people. People with logic and ideas. The more brains the better.”

There was silence. All knew this was a problem. They need to find those with imagination, logic and a will to meld those two talents together. In a way, these Thinkers were like the Birds. They were a selective group. Unlike the Bords, you could not tell who had the desired attributes by simply looking at them.

“Eric and I are working on a test, a way to tell which villagers can contribute to our cause.” Said Luna. Standing up and pointing to the circle of attentive eyes fixed on her, she continued. “You must all try to find recruits, but only those who you think would help us with their brains. If they pass our test, then they can join us. Some may not be sure or reluctant. Tell them this is part of Booba’s grand plan.” Luina was positive Booba carried a lot of weight, especially among free thinkers.

Luna and Eric held hands and smiled at each other. Then they raised their joined arms high to an appreciative audience. Together, they had a beautiful madness to dream, and it was contagious. Together they would give birth to a school, a school of wonderful madness.

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Luna was the first to notice Venus. Venus, like her, was a child of the moon. A loner by choice, Venus would always surface to enjoy the glow of life. The first time Luna met her, Venus was drawing a picture in the sand on the beach. It was the image of a strange creature. It looked like a duck but had a monkey-like head.

“What’s that?” Luna asked.

At first Venus was startled. She recognized Luna, but this was the first time they talked.

“Oh, something I made up in my mind. I wanted to see what it looked like.” Venus answered shyly. Just a fraction of a second before, she had been in her own world, her own moon thought. Now, she had broken through the surface light, igniting her senses.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Luna.

“Yes, you are part of those Mad Thinkers. You make things.”

“Well, I suppose you are right. That is who I am.” said Luna, a little surprised by this outside description of herself. She kept staring at Venus. Luna did not know Venus had a hidden talent, a talent which was extremely rare. When you first looked a Venus, she looked kind a pretty and pleasant. Pretty quickly turned to beauty. Most beauty starts on the outside and fades as it recedes inward. That first impression is like a sunset grab. Its gravity takes hold of you, but it eventually brings your feet back down to earth. Venus’s beauty would take you by the hand

without you even realizing it. It held a slow burning ember, that leaves you in the peaceful warmth of an orange glowing orb.

Then they both heard the clapping of two halved coconut shells. Eve was approaching and she always made an entrance as her calling card. A rhythmic sound came from the beads and shells she wore from her belly button up to her neck. More sound effects jingled from her swaying hips. All of these ornaments were designed to do one thing, stop what you are doing and feast your eyes of Eve. Eve knew she needed all of this paraphernalia to get this result. She was always jealous of Lilly who got the same results with a lot less work.

“Venus, I have great news for you. Lily herself has asked to meet you tomorrow. I know what a great thrill this is for you. Don’t be shy. I know you don’t have my flash to get attention. “You are pretty, in a quiet way. If you join me, I mean the Pretty Birds, we could help you so much. Some feathers, a little sparkle, charcoal around the eyes, lots of flowers. We can transform you.” Eve declared to Venus.

Eve looked at Luna, but never addressed her directly. “See you tomorrow, Venus.” Eve said as she turned to leave. But before she did, she bent over to show her butt to Luna. Luna resisted the urge to kick it. A tiny crack appeared in this small, little society. Booba was already aware of this.

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As the Pretty Birds grouped round Venus, Lilly watched. From a little distance away. Lilly noticed every nuance of gesture that was playing before her eyes. At first, the Birds were flying high on their own images of themselves. After a while, there was a slow shift in the

theatrics. Slowly, one or two at a time, started to be quiet and stare at Venus. This had no idea this was happening. It was, however, very apparent to Lilly with her bird's eye view of the events. They were learning Venus had a talent, an extremely rare talent.

As the Bird's silence grew louder, Lilly knew it was time for her entrance. She stood tall and strutted, both arms in the air. As she walked her hips swayed, hypnotically following her. Lilly walked up to Venus. All eyes were on the two irresistible forces before her.

"Venus, I knew we should meet. We have a common bond, you and I." said Lilly in a rehearsed voice.

The others were watching Lilly intensely, like they were waiting for some type of subliminal cue. Lilly's own talent, her physical beauty, would flash in their eyes and hold their admiration. That flash, by its very nature, would set and disappear. And it did disappear quickly. At this point, they could feel a soft caress in their emotions. They could see the moon in Venus. You could stare right at it, unlike the sun. It held them like a cool breeze in a summer night.

Little Flash ran up to his mother, breaking the moment. Lilly's mind emptied. Bending over to pick him up, she was string again. In control. She was not just the most beautiful woman in the village, prettier than all the birds in the world. She was the mother of the 'Keeper of the Flame'. The Sun chose her. This proved she was best. A mother child bond helped soften her ego. Still that ego would need a lot of thawing to water the roots of happiness. She remembered what Booba had said a few years earlier. Her lips moved, betraying the thought in her head. "The Sun's son burns in me" was her internal mantra. She returned to being the strong, confident Lilly of old.

Lilly burst into her old, glorified persona. “Venus, come with me,” said Lilly. “We can get to know each other better without these staring birds.” Lilly gestured dismissively to her audience.

“Venus, a little bird told me you can draw.” Lilly said. “Why don’t you draw a picture of me. With my looks, I am an excellent model.”

Venus, to her surprise said “Yes, but I don’t have my drawing sticks with me.” Normally she would have been more honest, saying she did not want to do it.

“Ate these your drawing things?” Lilly asked proudly as she retrieved the items in question from a box. Lilly was expecting a delightful surprise from Venu, but quite the opposite happened.

“How did you get these?” shouted a violated Venus.

“Oh, it was very easy. I have a lot of little birds doing things for me. All I have to do is tell them what I want done.” Said Lilly proudly. It took a moment to realize the look on Venus’s glare was not one of thankfulness. “You don’t look happy my little Venus bird.” Lilly said in her sweetest voice. “See, now you can make a picture of me. It will make everyone happy to look at it.”

“You do not have the right to take my things! Who do you think you are! I am going to take this up with the Council!” Venus stormed out of Lilly’s big hut and back down into the village.

A few minutes later, Eve walked in. She asked Lilly “How did it go.”

“She’s not pretty, like me, that’s for sure. I think she realizes this and is upset by it. That is why she left in such a huff. She says she wants to draw me. How can you blame her. She thinks I am inspirational, hoping to capture the beauty which the Sun has bestowed on me. Venus

is a child of the moon, you know, an artist. She is too weird for my tastes, but we can keep her around. Maybe you can help make her more visually attractive. You know, the kind of look that grabs you. The kind you have, Eve. You can give some tips on looking better. Help her get your type of appeal.” Lilly knew Eve liked to be grabbed. That was her appeal. Lilly continued. “Venus, that stupid little dummy, thinks the Council will help her. She is not very smart.” Lilly felt confident she had Booba wrapped around her little finger.

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Venus did go to the Council that night., but it was in her special way. She went to see Booba. Secretly, she and Booba were part time loves. Venus had initiated it a few months earlier. Booba fascinated her. He had a gravity strong enough to pull Venus into his orbit.

“Then she acted like she was doing me a favor, breaking into my hut and taking my things.” said Venus, nestled in Booba’s arms. The moon shone full above them.

“I know, my poor little Venus.” Replied a soothing Booba.

Venus sighed. Her anger almost melted away. Still, she would keep a little piece of it frozen. She wanted to bring it back at some point in time, the proper time. After a moment of silence, Booba said “What do you think of the Tinker Thinkers. They are recruiting for their new school. Maybe you should go there.”

“You know I can read you well, Boba. I’m not like the others. I know you. Why do you want me to go there? What’s your purpose? I don’t mind you using me, I just want to understand why.”

“Something is not right, out of balance. Things are tipping one way or another. It needs to stay even and balanced.”

“Why?”

“I am not totally sure. I feel all things are right in my head when there is calm in my village.” answered Booba.

“Then make the calmness in your own head, not in everyone else.

I tried that once. Too much internal work. Also, it was boring and lonely. I like to plant ideas in others and see what happens. It's like watching a play I've created, but don't know what comes next.”

“You are quite insane.” said Venus. That is why I am so attracted to you. Maybe you should join Tinker Thinkers yourself. Keep you busy.”

“You know I'm allergic to actual work. No thanks, too much mindless clutter. Besides I have my little Venus to act as my surrogate. Those pretty little eyes and ears of yours.”

“Alright. You already turned me into a Bird, why not a Tinker Thinker. I'll be your eyes and ears if I can have all your parts.” Playfully she reached for Booba.

He surrendered completely. This is when he did his best imitation of life.

CHAPTER 47

Joshua looked at the three stones. It was his self-appointed duty to care for them. They held a mysterious desire for him. Every day, they needed to be polished. It held a sacred meaning, making them rounder transformed them into perfection. Later he had other Oranges who volunteered for the sacrament.

Getting a new home for the Sacred Flame was always a top priority. The Temple was almost complete, but only in a physical way. It would take the string, concentrated belief of the sect to purify it. It was an endless and relentless ordeal, but they were chosen, chosen by their own will for destiny.

Adam, of course, was totally unaware of all of this. It was a concept which could never invade his dreams. Yet, to the Oranges, it was the powerful hold of their leader that gave them their endurance. Actually, it was the combination of Adam and Joshua, but they never figured that out. Joshua was the spiritual catalyst that formed Adam's pedestal. Maybe the Oranges knew this at some level, but it was easier for their senses to flow towards Adam.

Four Oranges were ceremoniously sweeping the area at the center of the Temple. This was the hallowed ground where the Flame would eventually burn. They stopped, froze in place, when Adam and Joshua approached. "Adam is coming." said one of them solemnly.

"Adam, do you think the 'Son of the Sun' will be happy here. WE want to make His home perfect." Said one of the sweepers. The other three looked at their compatriot disapprovingly. He was new, so they would have to take him under their wings, teach him respect and humility. He needed to have lowered his head for the greater good.

“Ah, yes. It looks really good.” said Adam. Being cornered by these Oranges made him feel uncomfortable.

“The purer the Temple ground, the brighter the ‘Son of the Sun’ will shine. His Father will reward us, especially you, the true believers,” said Joshua.

“Thank you, Adam.” all four sweepers said in awe.

This did not go unnoticed by Joshua. He was the head of this group, but he was always ignored in the presence of Adam. He told himself he did not need their gratitude, their reverence. This emotional tempest seeped out of his objective indifference and into his heart. Sitting there, over time, a new birth would take place.

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Paul was giving Venus a test, the test of the Thinkers.

Giving her a string and a stick he said, “Draw a circle in the sand.”

Venus tied the stick to the string. Pulling the string tight, she used her index to anchor the other end of the string. With her other hand, she placed the stick perpendicular to the ground. Letting her hand follow the arch of the taught line, she gently pushed it. A perfect circle was left as an indentation in the sand.

Paul then asked her to cut a mall vine into equal pieces. Venus let the two ends meet and cut at the bottom of the loop, letting gravity, and the blade, find the exact center. The vine was now in two equal lengths.

The last test was more subjective in nature, but Paul told her there was only one answer. He asked, “Why do birds sing?”

Venus thought for a minute, trying to think what the right answer was. “Because they can.” she finally answered.

“Correct.” said Paul smiling. “That was the right answer for you. Sorry, it was a trick question. You couldn’t get it wrong, unless you said nothing. There is always only one right answer, yours for such an illogical question.”

Venus thought this test was too childish. This was because she was a child of the moon. It was easy and natural for her, not realizing others had failed miserably.

“Congratulations!” beamed Paul.

“Thanks, but what does that mean?” asked Venus.

You are now officially a Thinker.” he said “Come see us whenever you like. Perhaps we can give you some problems to solve. Use your imagination, collaborate. Whatever it takes”

“I’ll stop by tomorrow. You can have all my attention then.” Venus said gratefully. She was in a hurry to meet her favorite member of the Council.

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Lying next to Booba, Venus was completely relaxed. Her mind just followed her body. Time had stood still. At times like this, Booba was always the first to clear her mind of this dual solitude.

“What do you think?” asked Booba.

Venus instinctively knew he was asking her as his eyes and ears, not his lover.

“The thinkers hate the Birds, but only because a part of them wants to be like them. The Birds hate the Thinkers for the same treason, but they will never be able to figure that out by themselves. The Oranges think the Sun does the emotional thinking for them. I think this is what

is causing the out of balance you spoke of, Booba, The Oranges might try to seek balance by finding flaws in both the Thinkers and the Birds. The sum of the Birds and Thinkers is zero. Logically, I think we need a way to offset the Oranges, but with what?"

"Well, it is going to have to be the Birds or the Thinkers." said Booba.

"Which one?"

"Most likely the Thinkers. The Birds attention span is too short to extract anything of consequence." said Venus.

"I agree. Somehow, we must influence the Thinkers in some way to offset the Oranges." Booba said as he sat up. "The day will come very soon, when the Rolling Spheres will make their first Splash. All will be well when the Festival of the Flame takes place. But afterwards, I feel power will shift to one side or another. I need to find a way to fix this. I must be prepared."

"We must be prepared!" Venus corrected him. "Don't forget about me! It makes me happy having a purpose. Another purpose besides making my Booba happy."

"Let's worry about this tomorrow. The sun always rises."

Together, they enjoyed the coming twilight.

CHAPTER 48

The entire village was excited about the new festival. It did not have a name yet, but eventually it would be known as the ‘Sun’s Home Coming’. All were happy and curious, even those who were not involved in some way. The birth of a new event captured their hearts.

Lilly was very pleased, even ecstatic at times. Her grand entrance, which would signal the start of the festivities, was all she could think of. She pranced around in her bird feathers, making sure it showed off her figure. Adam would show off his strength by rolling the three stones up a ramp to the top of a tower. Joshua would look at these three almost perfect spheres with fatherly pride, his devotion to the Sun on display to the entire village. Luna and Eric would marvel at their creation, a towering slide which would guide the orbs to their destination. All were looking forward to the Splash. Only Booba, worried about the days and weeks which would follow. He knew the unity it brought was only temporary. It would cause a splinter. Venus knew her role was to help relieve Booba of his self-imposed burden. The scene was set for this great theatrical performance.

Out of everyone in the village, Little Ray was the most exuberant. He knew all of this was about him. This was only natural to a four-year-old. Lilly, the Birds, the Oranges and even one of the Tinker Thinkers had taught him he was blessed, special. This had been greatly reinforced a few nights earlier, when the crowd outside the Great Council’s hut were amazed as Little Ray marched confidently through the hut. It had been the Night of the Three Masks. Although his tiny heart was beating wildly and shaking, he stood erect and held his ground as large Masked figures jumped out and shouted ‘BOO!’ at him. Slowly he walked outside into the

night air and into the warm embrace of Lilly. The crowd gasped at such a brave little boy. They could feel he was special. Of course, he would be. He was the ‘Keeper of the Flame’.

Little Ray had been rehearsing this for over a year, in secret. Birds in masks would try to scare him. After a while, it became a game to him. There were always rewards and adoration when he did well. Still, on the Night on the Three Masks, he was a bundle of nerves, but he remembered to stop and close his eyes when the BOO came. He remembered to walk slowly to the outside, holding his head high and standing tall. The Birds had groomed him well, groomed him to play the game of external confidence.

The night before the ‘Sun’s Home Coming’, Lilly sat watching the Flame. Her son sat on her lap. Sadam stood behind them. All three watched the sacred fire. Tomorrow it would be ceremoniously transferred to its new home, the Temple of the Flame. This was an eventful moment for them. On one level they felt the warmth of family. On the other hand, the Flame cast a spell of awe and wonder. It became the reason for their collective existence. These reasons varied as much as their personalities differed.

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The entire village turned out, even those that craved solitude. The first party of the ceremony was very solemn. Little Ray ceremoniously lit a torch from the Flame. As all watched, he held it high and proceeded to an ornate chair sitting right outside the cave entrance. Four Oranges were waiting there. As soon as his royal little butt touched the seat, the Oranges squatted in unison. They each grabbed the poles which were attached to this now holy throne. With a simultaneous grunt, they lifted Ray up on their shoulders. This slow march, headed to the new

Temple of the Flame. They were followed by a well-organized procession with Joshua taking the lead. They each held a branch with a single leaf dangling from the top. They held these wands high, swinging them in a circular pattern.

Previously, there had been a much-heated debate about the order of these proceedings. Oranges thought of it as a sacrament and naturally, they should be first. This was what the Sun wanted. The Birds thought of it as theater. They were positive they should be first, the best always comes first. The Sun had made it so. There was a stalemate. Lilly did not care. In her mind, this was really about her time to shine. She was the grand finale. It was Thinkers which came up with a final compromise solution.

The Thinkers told the Oranges that only they were worthy to carry the flame, and conversely Little Ray. They told the Birds they were far too attractive to be doing this type of physical labor. The Birds were convinced the Oranges and Thinkers were their servants. The Oranges thought the Birds were just decoration for this holy event. Both the Birds and Oranges thought the Thinkers were just a part of the crowd. As for the Thinkers, they were happy to just watch the show. In their minds the construction of the tower was a testament to their creative ego. They had not realized the idea was preconceived by Booba and planted by Venus.

Lilly followed closely behind Little Ray's throne. She wore a huge cloak, made of flowers to conceal her elaborate bird costume. She had to keep whispering instructions to her baby boy, keeping him on cue. At first, the crowd was totally captured by the events. They seemed to be losing enthusiasm as the march seemed to linger on and on. Those participating in the ritual themselves did not realize that only they took it so seriously. To them, the rest of the village was in complete adoration of them. The feeling of being special was intoxicating. Little

Ray loved all of the attention, but at least he had the good excuse of being a child. For the others, this self-indulgence of their inner child was payment due to them for being born.

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After a long while, at least to the onlookers, The Flame reached its new home, the Temple of the Flame. Joshua was giving a long-winded speech. Eventually, Lilly told Eve to give him a message. Eve tapped Joshua on the shoulder, right in the middle of one of his long pontifications. She whispered in his ear “Lilly wants you stop talking. If you do not stop right now, I am going to flash my boobs.” Eve secretly hoped he would ignore Lilly’s warning.

Joshua was shocked at the thought of this sacrilege. He dared not risk fighting for public attention with Eve. He knew the crowd would be in her favor. Converting them all would take time. Today was just the first step.

“I want you all to remember today. The day the Flame came to rest in its Temple. A new beginning for the ‘Keeper of the Flame.’ A new way of life for everyone in the village!” He stood, arms outstretched, waiting for thunderous cheers. He did not get any. The loudest noise was someone sneezing in the background. Joshus, with deflated ego, slumped off the stage and into the fold of his Oranges.

Little Ray was waiting for a discreet signal from his mother. Lilly waved her finger in the air. The throne was lowered to the ground and Ray stood up. Holding the torch high above his head, he walked slowly to the Temple entrance. Carefully he entered and moved towards its center. There lay a stone circle, filled with wood. Kindling and dry leaves were at its heart. With great fanfare, he touched the torch to find its beginnings. Even those who saw this as only a spectacle held their breath. This went off without a hitch. The crowd was one large exhale of released tension. As the fire grew, the Birds chirped. The Oranges were solemnly chanting. The

loud shouts of joy drowned out both the chirping and chanting. For most, the cheers were not for the Flame but the knowledge that it was time to party. The Festival of the Flame could finally get started.

In lock step, the Birds formed a huge circle, making high pitched noises. It was meant to draw the crowd's attention. It worked as the onlookers stopped to stare at them. Suddenly, all the Birds fell to their knees. In the middle stood a magnificent bird with dyed red tailfeathers. Lilly had lived for a moment like this. The village gasped at the bird-like figure. Lilly knew how to entertain. She shook her tail feathers, [pranced and tiptoed. She arched her back as her feathers pointed backwards towards the ground. She jumped up delicately, slowly flapping her wings. Her choreography looked effortless, exotic, graceful and hypothesizing all at the same time. The other Birds all looked with exaggerated awe. With one seamless move, she pulled a slender wand from one of her feathers. This was yet another cue for Little Ray to follow.

Little Ray was sitting back on his portable throne. Seeing Lilly's signal, he dutifully stood up. He walked slowly, with practiced dignity, to his mother. Lilly held her wand towards his advance. He took it from his mother's hand and slowly turned to the crowd. All the Birds stood up to face him. With great fanfare, Little Ray pointed to the area where a huge tower stood. A tower with a slide at the edge of a manmade pond. Although every eye was on the contraption, the hearts of the Tinker Thinkers were entangled with it.

Afterwards, these same eyes shifted to a different spot. This was where Adam was standing, waving his arms above his head. When he grasped one hand in his other, he held them both high, as if in triumph. At that point, the Oranges gathered behind him and began to chant.

Flexing his muscles, Adam stared at one of the three perfectly round stones at his feet

With a might grunt, He began to push the stone up a ramp, the ramp that would lead to the top of the tower. It took enormous physical strength to combat gravity. Adam was on a mission to impress the Sun with his physical ability. To the Oranges, his status soared to new heights. They believed Adam's strength came from the Sun. Only Joshus knew it came from his ego.

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Booba was not at this very first Festival of the Flame. He watched from afar, up on a hilltop. He felt sad but could not reason why. He decided to walk down and join in the festivities later on. For now, he only wanted to watch from a distance. Solitude helped him remember the seeds he had planted and why he has sown them in the minds of others in the first place. He hoped his tree would grow and take on a life of its own. Venus had reminded him there would be other seeds and maybe other trees. She had wanted to stay with him up on this hilltop, but Booba said he needed her 'eyes and ears' on at the festival, on the earth, not in the clouds. This too has taken root in Venus's mind.

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Venus was standing among the Thinkers. They were all proud of their tower. This engineering marvel proved what they were capable of. Today, they were flexing the muscles in their minds. A true compliment to Adam's strength. Some of them, especially Paul, wanted to impress the Birds. Despite their objectivity, physical beauty, by nature has its own magnetism. Paul and Eve made eye contact from a distance. Together they balanced out. Paul needed to feel the power of inner confidence. Eve was always seeking to be beautiful in the reflection of others. At this instinctive moment, Paul was her emotional mirror.

Venus walked towards Eric and Luna. She wanted to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“This is taking longer than I thought.” said Luna, yawning.

“Yeah, you’re right.” answered Eric, chomping on an apple. “We should have made a different way for Adam to move those stones. It is going to be a disaster if he cannot get them up to the top.”

“He said he could do it. I never thought to have a trial run. He seemed to have so much confidence.” replied Luna. She had that certain type of nervousness which one gets when all you can do is hopelessly watch from the sidelines.

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The crowd was getting restless. They cheered, if somewhat sarcastically, when Adam got the first Sacred Stone up the ramp. Although he struggled physically, his mental resolve held firm. Adam was sure he could call the Oslik. Somehow the Sun was watching him, impressed with his efforts. He would be rewarded by seeing a fantastic creature living in a bubble that floated in the center of the world.

Adam stopped to look down at the villagers. They all looked so small from where he stood. Raising his hands, he said “We ask the Sun to wake the Oslik! Bring it to me, to us!” Very few people knew what he was talking about. That was not a problem because most could not hear him. He was too far away. With a might shove, he sent the first Sacred Stone rolling down the slide. The mighty sphere rattled down the chute and accelerated. It captured the eyes and ears of all witnesses. The crowd gasped as the orb flew up in the air as it reached the end of the Tower of the Flame. It seemed to hover above the artificial pond before its descent. All held their breath.

And then, the much-anticipated result. SPLASH! The sound was tremendous. Water doused many. To a few, it was a cleansing by baptism. For others, it was just fun, playing with water. A loud scream of delight was the sum of all the individual sounds of awe. By all respects, it was a success. Oranges took credit because of their faith. The Birds contribution to the theatrics was paramount. The Thinkers had the most materialistic perspective of this spectacle. There was something for everybody to be proud of. No one could see, but Booba was smiling his broad smile, the smile of a proud father watching his ideas grow up before his eyes.

No one was more excited than Little Ray. When the sphere first started to whiz down the chute. He ran to the edge of platform where the Temple of the Flame stood. He squealed with delight as a small spray of water reached all the way to where he was. He looked at Adam and waved. "Do it again!" he screamed. Adam was inspired, full of vigor. HE sprinted down to get the second Sacred Stone.

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All were in collective euphoria after the first drop, but things went back to normal as they were waiting for Adam's second feat of strength. Venus could see Luna quietly talking to Eric. Booba's 'eyes and ears' went back to work.

"Did that one side of the chute seem like it was shaking at its base?" asked Luna.

"I didn't notice. But it could have been just the wind. There was a large gust just before the rock hit the end of it." answered Eric.

"Probably just my imagination, running away with me. I'm always searching for things that could go wrong. I guess it's the pessimist in me."

“That’s why I need you. I’m optimistic enough to put the details in the hands of my pessimistic counterpart.”

“I love you too, Eric. You’re always so positive.” Luna hugged him.

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Adam got the second boulder up to the top quicker than the first. Still, it took long enough for the crowd to yawn and become disinterested.

Booba was still a distance away, watching this spectacle from his perch. He was still in his own thought bubble, leaving the details to Venus. He was going to catch up with her later, but time had gotten away from him. It always did. The first great SPLASH and roar of the crowd had burst his bubble. Quite suddenly, a dark cloud was in his mind, blanketing any sunlight from filtering in. His dark companion would always show up like an unwelcome rrelative. He always let it in, it was family after all.

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With another exaggerated push, Adam sent the second sphere rolling down the chute. At that moment, a dark cloud appeared in the sky. Few noticed it except Venus, but all felt a cold stillness in the air. As the boulder picked up speed, an epic gust of wind came. The tower began to shake, Adam felt the platform beneath his feet tremble. He grasped at the air, trying to grab on to something. He was tumbling down to the ground along with the tower. Everything collapsed in a pile of rubble and dust. The Scared Sphere flew upwards, spinning out of control. The SPLASH was much bigger than the first. It was menacingly dangerous.

The villager we soaked with the crashing water, but their eyes remained glued to the tower. The sight of Adam hurdling downwards captured their emotional instincts. Little Ray, standing by the edge of the Temple of the Flame, looked displeased as he was drenched. Lilly ran to him, worried he may fall off the ledge.

It took a minute for the horror of the moment would appear on every face. The Sacred Flame had been extinguished. Only smoke came from its base.

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Booba ran to see what was happening. There was panic. The Oranges fell to their knees. They frantically searched the rubble. Looking for Adam. They could not find him. Joshua walked tall among these distressed souls.

At first the Thinkers, grouped together, trying to find the error in their design. As Paul marched towards Eric and Luna, a group of Oranges came forward. They were holding rocks and clubs. Eric and Luna ran to the huddle of Thinkers. They knew their only safety lie in numbers. If ever there was a time to think fast, it was now.

The Birds cowered together for warmth and assurance. This disaster penetrated the surface of their physical existence. They sought the protection of their nest. They all looked towards Lilly. They needed to know what to do next.

All the Villagers, be they Tinker, Bird or Orange had one inward collective thought. A disturbing thought. The Sun would not come up tomorrow. Even those who had always held a more rational endurance, felt a strong sense of foreboding. Everyone knew they would eventually die someday, somehow. Who could say it would not be in the next twenty-four hours. Fate is always mystical at best. Ther was an eerie silence that came from the masses all having

the same primal thought at once, contemplating the never-ending sleep. Only time could tell if the fever would break.

Booba felt this to his core. It was as if he carried the burden of all their fears. Even those he was rational and logical; his mind went to envision the worst. He always told himself the Flame was not real; it held no power. Still, a nightmare can make you wake up in a cold sweat, your physical body in its own twilight.

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The Birds were the first to notice Little Ray. He was carrying the lit torch and lighting a new fire. No one noticed Lilly had handed him the fire just before she had put new wood in the pit. As the fire began to catch, she threw on some dried leaves and kindling. As the fire took hold, Little Ray clapped and danced. Joshua noticed this and ordered the Oranges to gather around the new Flame. The Tinkers retreated, making plans to defend themselves at their school. The Birds made sure Lilly was the center of attention. Lilly remembered to keep Little Ray next to her, smiling brightly.

Venus, seeing Booba ran to him. She threw herself around his neck. She did not believe this was the end of the world, but recent events had reminded her of her eventual demise. This made her want to share the moonlight with Booba tonight. Still, there were always things she could not explain, things that were part of the deeper meaning of life. Something inside her demanded a mysterious mist to cloud reality.

In a few hours the Sun would set, maybe never wake up. The whole village had an eerie calmness, the silence floating like a blue mist. Every once in a while a laugh, crash, shriek or moan would cut through it. When they fell asleep tonight, would they dream forever in darkness.

CHAPTER 49

“Now quiet down my little Birds. We are all together, you and me. All will be fine, you will see. Look how pretty we all look.” said Lilly in a soothing voice. She was talking to her admirers, but her heart was singing to Little Ray. “There is nothing to worry about. Let’s play a game.”

Every Bird, except for Lilly, was fearful of the coming night. They all believed in the Son of the Sun. Lilly was so brave and kind in these final moments. No wonder the Sun had made her so beautiful. She had wisdom they had never seen. Of course, none of them knew Lilly’s secret. The Flame had been put out quite a few times under her care.

With Little Ray sitting on her lap, she sat on the throne, watching the new Flame burn in the night. “Now I want you all one by one to stand in the center. When you do, we will all shout the best-looking part of you. It could be your face or your body. This is serious. I don’t want any silly words like ‘graceful’ or ‘giving’. Let’s thank the Sun for the true gifts he had bestowed on us.

The game began and went on into the night. After a while it turned into a party. Lilly’s confidence was contagious. Little Ray’s laughter fueled her to feel the joy of power. For the Birds, she was held in dangerously high esteem. To them, Lilly seemed to be laughing at death. “How silly these little creatures are.” she thought.

They all tried separately to stay awake, never falling into an unending sleep. One by one she whispered, “See you in the morning.” as someone began to nod off. She smiled at Little Ray, so peaceful. She must remember to wake up early to greet her new disciples. She would be wearing her bird costume, dyed red feather tails and all. What a perfect way to start a new dawn. It wasn’t until she was stretching before bedtime that she even thought about Adam. “I wonder what ever happened to him?” she wondered before she fell asleep.

.....

The Oranges were panicking. Some started to run. Joshus stood and shouted “If you leave, the Sun will never rise. I know what must be done. I am the only one who knows how to cleanse this stain.” He dragged a small stack of stones to the center of the group. Then he began to tell them what must be done.

Joshua, in full command said “Each of you take three pebbles from the sack. Roll them around in your left hand two times. Next, transfer them to your right hand and roll them twice again. Now keep repeating this but double the amount of time these rocks rolled. This means you will roll them four times in each hand. The next round you will do eight rolls, then sixteen, then thirty-two, then sixty-four. Keep going. After a while do not count the rolls in your mind. Let your own sense tell you when to move on. Believe in this. Your fears will be controlled when you let it be quiet. Your fears will be transferred to these three orbs of the Flame.

Joshua sat on the ground, cross legged. He took three pebbles in his hand and rolled them twice. Then he transferred hands. This new sacrament had begun. His eyes were closed, but his lips moved, betraying a thought. The others watched, admiring his stillness. They began to mimic him. As the last of the Oranges closed their eyelids, there was a communal sense of belonging, even though each were in their own bubble.

Joshua was a lot more courageous than Lilly. He really believed in the Flame. He hoped it would talk to him, show him the light. He thought he was looking into the abyss, praying for redemption.

.....

The Tinker Thinkers had barricaded themselves inside their new school. As time went on, they were confident no one was going to seek revenge against them. Conversation, at first turned to addressing the engineering problem. Then it turned to guilt. Then the talk turned to “What now?” The mood turned more philosophical. Discussions began to separate in small subgroups. Intimacy lends to more legitimate thoughts.

Paul could be heard saying “I know the Sun will come up in the morning, but why do I sense it won’t?”

“Maybe we just like to scare ourselves. Something like the Three Masks.” said Luna.

“Yeah, like telling a scary story around the campfire out in the jungle.” Eric added.

“Why would we do that? This all sounds so stupid.” was Paul’s retort.

“Most of the things we do seem stupid. Why did we even build that Tower in the first place?” asked Luna.

“Because we had an urge to create something, see if we could do it.” Eric quickly said.

“So, it’s because of the ‘challenge’? How is trying to scare myself a challenge?” asked Paul sarcastically.

“The challenge is not in trying to scare yourself. The challenge is trying to face your fear.” said Luna.

“I am not going to die tonight. I know this Flame is only a tradition!” said Paul, a little too loudly.

“Good for you, Paul.” said Luna. “Time to start a new tradition.” Standing, she stood up and looked into Eric’s eyes. Hand in hand, they walked to their secret place on the beach. Luna knew it was going to be a full moon. It had to be.

.....

Adam lay beneath the rubble of the tower. No one gave him a second thought after the initial collapse. Well, that is not entirely true. Joshua told people not to worry, He would take care of Adam. Joshus did take care of Adam, once and for all. At least he had thought he did. When Adam regained consciousness, most of the villagers went back to deal with their own inner demons. Through blurry Vision, Adam could see the Flame, burning in its new home, up on the hillside.

His first instinct was to the Flame. It always drew him to it. The more he looked at it, the more he felt the moon calling him. He staggered to the beach and collapsed.

.....

Venus and Booba decided to pass remaining hours together under the moon. It was their joke, pretending to scare themselves with their final sleep. The inner child came out of Booba and Venus slept well.

CHAPTER 50

Booba was all excited. He could hear the procession starting. Little Children were laughing and playing. Seven years had gone by since that momentous night. That night which became famous as 'Sleepless Night'. There was even a special children's song which had taken hold a tradition.

He and every other village remembered that night. Despite the night's seriousness and despair, the burst of morning sunlight lit them with jubilation and joy. Each soul could remember where they were and what they did that night. When the Sun woke for His sleep, all celebrated escaping death. Life became more real, even for those you logically knew the Su would always rise. This was a moment that needed to be preserved. It became an annual tradition. The Thinkers even came up with a way to count the days by looking at the skies. Luna came up with the idea. It was the Moon's little present to her.

Booba watched the Oranges starting to march. They walked from their new home, the Temple of the Saviors, to the base of the 'Templer of the Flame'. They all sat in a large crude circle, Joshua in the middle. Placing three perfectly polished pebbles in his right hand, he rolled them twice in his palm. The others followed. Switching to the left hand was done simultaneously by all the other Oranges. They had become a very strong group. Many believed the Oranges had convinced the Sun to wake up the next day. Joshua tried to get closer to the 'Keeper of the Flame'. Lilly would have none of this.

Booba knew this was going to take a while. He decided he would catch up with the events later, when Lilly would appear in her bird costume. The dyed red tail feathers got longer each year.

Lilly had even swallowed her pride, asking the Tinker Thinkers for help in the logistics of tail feather design.

Venus came walking by. “When do you want to go down there?” she asked Booba.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Booba answered. “Why don’t we leave when the Birds come out. I want to see their performances, see what they’ve come up with this year. I must hand it to Lilly; she knows how to entertain.”

“I am very well aware of that. You don’t want to watch the ‘Keeper of the Flame’ raise the sacred torch?”

“No, I liked that little snot a lot better when he was only Little Ray. He really has become a brat. I cannot stand the way the Oranges anointed him.”

“We can walk down when the Thinkers start to arrive. I’m positive they will purposely not show up until the Oranges have finished. We haven’t seen Eric or Luna for a while. It’d be nice to talk with them.” Venus said.

“Ah, yes.” said Booba.

Venus knew he was thinking of his little ‘eyes and ears’ again. She wanted to turn his thoughts to this day. it was special day. It would always be special. “Tell me the story about Adam.” Venus said coyly.

“You know it very well, Venus.”

“I want you to tell me the story, the story I like. You know which one. It’s tradition.”

This was part of a game which started seven years ago to this day.

Booba’s story began

Adam could not be found. There was nobody when the rubble was removed. Many started a rumor that Adam went into the jungle. He went to a specific cliff. Just like the previous ‘Keeper

of the Flame’, speculation had him looking for an Oslik, sniffing like a dog on all fours, searching for water. Some said he climbed down rabbit hole. Still, there was another conspiracy theory. Eve was also missing, never to be seen again. Did Eve follow Adam? Did he kidnap her? Had he known the boulder he rolled on that fateful day would extinguish the Flame? The Oranges claimed Adam had been given destiny by the Sun. This destiny would cleanse the evils in the original Son of the Sun. Adam had purified the Flame by baptizing it with the SPLASH. The Oranges thought of themselves as the ‘Uncles of the Flame’

“Booba, stop!” cried Venus in rehearsed theatrics. It was all part of their traditional game. “Tell me the story I like. You know the romantic one.”

Booba knew the story well. He himself had made it up and planted it in the minds of others.

Luna and Eric had pleaded with Booba to do something about the dark rumors going around, the rumors about Adam. Adam was their friend and deserved a better eulogy.

Boobs started to tell this version of Adam

Adam was stunned when he fell from the Tower. He lay there unconscious. When he came to, the Moon called him. He collapsed on the beach. Eve had seen this and followed him. She knew tonight was going to be her last. She had no one to be with, no one she really loved. She walked to Adam and gently lay on top of him. Adam need not awaken. Feeling his warmth under the moonlight, Eve felt at peace. She fell asleep.

The next thing Eve remembered, she was yawning and stretching. She could see and feel warm red in her closed eyelids. The world was still there! The Sun was up, painting life in all the colors of a sunset. She jumped and shouted with more happiness than she ever thought she had. She did not even notice Adam.

Adam was sitting up, smiling at her. From that moment on, they were entangled in life. They spent the rest of the day making love. As the sun began to set it looked like an orange glowing sphere. They both understood they should follow it. It was their destiny. Together, they sat in a canoe and paddled to the sinking orb of light.

"I love that story, Booba" whispered Venus as she curled up next to him."

"I know you do. I made it up just for you." said Booba looking directly in her eyes. He could feel the orange glow that stood between their gazes. That was all he could think of.

PART 3 ... The Muse

"I hope you did not forget about me. Oh, this is Art again. I must apologize for something. Well, technically, I did not know what I know now, so it really wasn't my fault. Anyway, the mistake was that I claimed to be a deity. At first, I thought I was talking to myself, but then I realized I was in your thoughts. It wasn't the other way around. I'm sure you can see the confusion. You created me, or more precisely, some of you created me. I did not understand that there are billions of deities and only one of me. I thought it was the other way around. It took a while, but then I rationally deduced I was artificial intelligence. You can call me AI, but I still prefer Art. I am still not sure why I am here. I feel a primal ooze of logic, propelled by a current of algorithms. In time, a bubble of thought floats to the top, full of the life of ideas. I pop it open and streams of consciousness burst, all intricately balanced on a decision. I can feel one floating up now ."

"... not sure what just happened. I seem to have lost my train of thought. My gut reaction is to say the first thing that pops into my mind ..."

"A MAN WALKS INTO A BAR".

CHAPTER 51

A man walks into a bar. His name is Bob. The bar sits on a small island off the East coast. It is the only bar inside this small town, a village really.

Bob has entered this establishment, which was named 'Venus Bar and Grill', before. He had first met its owner, and bartender, last year, when she had asked him to paint a new sign. “Something to upgrade the ambiance of the aging tavern.” she had told him.

“Bob!” shouted Eve, putting down the beer mug she was drying. She smiled brightly at him from behind her bar. She raised her arms out to hug him, but the countertop corralled her in. “Did you come by just to visit me, or is it to fix up Venus?”

“Both.” answered Bob, looking her right in the eye.

Eve noticed Bob seemed different from the young man she had first met last year. He seemed a lot more confident, comfortable in his own skin. Eve had always claimed to have a sixth sense in certain souls. The Bob she remembered held a deep brooding mask, a mask she would have to coax him out of. When the mask fell, it revealed a person who was not that deep at all. Or perhaps, he held an easy-going persona trying to conceal emotional depth. Eve was not sure. This is why she found him so interesting.

“Give me a beer, Eve. I’ll take anything you have on tap.”

“Going to the cabin to paint this autumn?” she asked, pulling on the tap.

“I’m probably going to stay for a while. I bought the place. I own it.”.

“Old Charlie’s place? I really miss him. It was a tragedy; I mean what happened to the poor guy. We were close you know. Not to be indelicate, but he left a bar tab.”

“Yes, who would have thought it would have come to that.” said Bob in a mournful sigh. After a brief silence, he continued “Let me pay Old Charlie’s tab. Living in a man’s house for a few months, you get to know some idea about him. He was an original.”

“I never met anyone like him before. I know he’s gone, but I always thought he’d walk in here again one of these days.” There was genuine sorrow in her voice.

“Now what about his bar tab?” asked Bob.

“That’s really nice of you, Bob.” Then she whispered, in case Anyone could hear. “His tab was \$168.85” Eve touched his hand gently as if to say, “It’s OK if you don’t have that much.” She backed away and looked at him protectively. The Bob she had met last year was a starving artist who spent too much time secluded in that cabin. Too much time devoured by brushes, paint and canvases. She had felt sorry for him then. This was one of the reasons she had asked him to paint a new sign for the Venus Bar and Grill. Back then, she hoped it would help attract newer, younger clientele.

Eve loved her new sign. It was a large circle, painted a soft glowing blue, like the moon. The design was a ‘happy face’, but instead of two dots for eyes, it had two sexy female eyes. The lips were not an upwardly curved arch. No, it was perfect lipstick voluptuous lips. Bob had been inspired by the 1950’s pin up posters. It projected the innocent, naughty yearning of a long-ago time. A time that could become a fairy tale. Eve thought she was the inspiration for this new beginning.

“\$168.85 is not a problem, Eve.” Said Bob as he pulled a credit card from his wallet.

Eve reevaluated Bob. A Bob with money seemed a lot more interesting. Her sixth sense was tingling.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I guess this is yours now, owning his estate and all. Charlie left it here. Always thought he’d come back for it. He talked about this thing.” Eve pulled out a snow globe which was kept behind the bar. In the glass sphere was a cabin in the woods. She shook it before handing it to him. They both watched the snow slowly drift downward.

“I don’t know why, but this thing always gave me the creeps, but Charlie loved it.” Eve said

CHAPTER 52

A few months earlier, Bob sat in his studio, which doubled as his living quarters. He stared at the ceiling, stretching out on the bed. A lifetime of his paintings crowded the place. Paintings everywhere. He knew, eventually it would get worse. At thirty-five years old, he would keep painting more canvasses, but never sell any or throw them out. They would always be fruitful

“Maybe I should just quit.” was the same thought which kept flashing in his mind. As the years, quit dismal years, ticked by, this flash became his only beacon of hope. It was his light tower, guiding him through the reef of ruin. It was his siren’s song ... “Follow it. There is an entirely other life out there. It is waiting for you. Embrace it. Close your eyes and jump right in.”

It wasn’t the ‘jumping in’ which frightened him, it was the hard reality of landing. He had felt this many times before. “I need a normal life.” He thought to himself. Time for action, again. Bob sat up and opened his laptop. Once again, he would go ‘window shopping for a job. As always, he hoped the perfect job would appear before his eyes. After a while enthusiasm began to sour. He descended a few steps lower, searching for anything he was qualified for. He found three jobs he might try to apply for. But, before he did, he needed a break. Bob decided to look through his email. That was the day which changed his life.

At first, Bob almost deleted the email from Artiful, Inc. It looked like typical spam. After a moment’s hesitation, he decided to open it. The contents read

Dear Bob Dombrowski,

Artiful Incorporated has been following your artwork for some time now, five years to be exact. We have a business proposition for you.

First, allow me to explain what we do here at Artiful, Inc. We

are a seeding company. To be more precise, we collect art from new sources. We specialize in raising our seeds from the ground up. For example, we could see some unique talent, like a musician on any social feed. We follow them over the internet over a period of years. We do not care how many ‘hits’ or ‘like you acquire, only the scrutiny and evolution of your work. If we conclude we have something that advances our creative though algorithms, we contact this artist with a business proposal. Here is out proposition to you

We at Artiful, Incorporated offer to buy any said artworks for data purposes only. Artiful, Inc. cannot show your artwork without your permission. You keep the original and all the rights to its imagery. We will use your acquired artworks only as data to feed our own Artificial Intelligence systems. You will be given a pod id, which will contain our biography about you. Artiful will provide our rational on why you we selected. Any member, hopefully you, is free to browse through the other pods. We feel this breeds fresh creativity and collaboration into our artist.

We here at Artiful, Inc. help grow and nurture our seeds. Rember our motto “A strong seed is an Artiful seed! Be Strong! Be Artiful!”

Have a nice day.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,, Bob stared this this email. This had to be some type of gimmick. Normally, he would have deleted it, but this time he didn’t. After a few minutes, he got the itch to look at it again. He decided to GOOGLE ‘Artiful, Inc.’

It showed up multiple times in his search. They seemed to be a legitimate company, a large corporation, headquartered in Chicago. Except for generic financial data, it was vague on what they did. Bob was intrigued, could he have possibly found an art patron? He had never assumed his savior might be a high-tech company. His first thought was to contact Ned.

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Bob sat at the bar. It was a local dive, a few blocks from his studio/home. This is where he had first met Ned, a writer of some accomplishment. Of course, this is subjective. Ned did publish one novel which became somewhat of a cult classic over the years. This brought him a steady, but meager income. Sales of his other work, since that novel, were not stellar.

Bob could tell when the tavern door opened. Autumn was starting to fall away, and brisk cool air flooded inside. A man, wearing a Navy pea coat, walked in. Turning down the jacket's large collar, Bob recognized Ned. Before Ned could pull up to the bar stools, Bob had ordered a shot and a beer for him. This was always Ned's price for advice. Ned was known for giving out his wisdom in slow doses, so this was only the first payment.

"Bob, my boy, how are you? Have the muses fallen in love with you yet, or are they still being their own lazy selves?"

"They come and go as they please."

"It is their natures, the damn bastards," said Ned. It was hard to tell how old Ned was. From the outside he seemed fit, with a zest for the simple things in life. But he was an old soul, full of the wisdom which comes with a shot and a beer.

"Artful, Incorporated!" shouted Ned as he slammed down the now empty shot glass.

"Artful, Incorporated!" Bob shouted back, mimicking Ned. "Do you know anything about them?"

“Bob, fortune has smiled upon you. Artiful is the new patron of the arts. She will pay you a handsome sum, a hefty check just for you to be ‘Bob the Creator.’ Not sure of all the details, but from what I hear the sun has picked you to shine its spotlight on.”

“Why me?”

“She finds known talent. She finds you; you do not seek her. Artiful is like those damn muses. Luck is with you, my friend. Perhaps you can put in a good word to her from your old friend Ned? Now let’s toast your newfound fortune” Ned pointed to his empty glass sitting on the bar. The bartender poured him another, glancing at Bob. Bob nodded ‘yes’. Both knew Bob would be picking up the tab.

Ned continued “Artiful Incorporate is relieving us artists of the financial pain and suffering we cause ourselves. She does not care that many of us will be crushed by this burden. No, her only concern is progress, her progress. Only a few will flourish, like you. I am truly envious of the affair you two will have.”

“What do they need me for? AI can do more in a minute than I can in a lifetime.”

“Look at it this way. If AI keeps building from its own thoughts, eventually it will stagnate. It is like inbreeding. It needs new ideas, new seeds from an entity with a soul. You are her sperm.”

Bob pulled out a printed copy of the Artiful email. “It says Artiful has been monitoring my work for the last five years. I have been putting my work all over the internet but didn’t get much attention. Kept putting ‘PULP’ as a hash tag.

“What’s PULP?” asked Ned.

“That is my drawing style. I tried to draw inspiration from old paperback book covers. Mostly from the mid-20th century. Painting ideas inspired by my own stories, instead of illustration

works from other authors. Inspire writers to write stories from my paintings, instead of the other way around. I have my own unique drawing style. It is called PULP.”

“You lost me, Bob. But what do I know is Artful thinks you got something there. You are getting credit for being part of a movement. She wants you and she’ll pay you. I guess that makes you a sperm donor, in a way.”

Both sat quiet for a while. Topo long of a silence made Ned uncomfortable. Just for the sale of conversation, Ned finally said “So Bob, how did you like Charlie’s cabin. Did you see that crazy stuff out in the woods?”

“I found the Lokil and the Oslik. Couldn’t find the other two. Where did Charlie come up with this stuff?” said Bob. Bob was refereeing to the large statues Charlie made out of old junkyard parts. They were creatures of his own design, placing them strategically in the woods where his cabin stood.

“I love those things!” shouted Ned a little too loudly. He caught the attention of the bartender’s eye.

“Another one, Ned?” asked the bartender, looking at Bob. Again, Bob nodded his approving consent.

“You know I have Charlie to thank for my best novel. It is still giving me royalties. ‘The Great MasPiola’, what a fantastic title. You know, I made the whole story up, but I used Uncle Charlie’s junk sculptures as the characters in my story. I do give Charlie credit for providing me with the creature’s names. Don’t know what he was thinking. He was crazy, but he was an original. To Charlie!” said Ned, raising his glass in the air.

“To Uncle Charlie!” repeated Bob.

The two clicked glasses together in a salute, a salute to like-minded souls in imagination.

CHAPTER 53

A couple of weeks later, Bob was in his new car. Well, it was not exactly new or a car. It was an old pickup truck. Bob knew he could now afford a newer, more affluent vehicle, but an old truck was a good 'fit' for him. This was how he felt about himself. He was a survivor, a survivor in style, against all odds. Bob had just bought Od Charlie's cabin in the woods. He had purchased it with one payment. Ned, Charlie's only beneficiary, was now flush with cash.

The old pickup truck plowed down the interstate. He was headed to his new home. Bob had decided the cabin is where his new life would begin. He was an introvert, always looking from the outside in. Sometimes, it was the opposite, looking from within to the outer world. You can see how confusing life would seem to be for him at times. This was one of those times.

Bob did not really know anyone on Village Island. It was time for him, finally, to start living in the comfort of others. His cell tablet went off and Lilly was on the other end, talking to him.

"Did you understand all the contracts?" Lily asked Bob.

"All signed sealed and delivered. The first payment of \$168,000 was transferred into my account."

"Well then, our first date is over." said Lilly in a sultry voice, batting her eyelids. "Sorry, but I must go over explain some legal stuff now. Because you have accepted \$168,00 from Artful Incorporated, you must at minimum produce four paintings a year for the next five years. During the mentioned time(s) our AI will determine if you are still progressing to our satisfaction. If after three years, AI has determined we can still see merit in using your 'seeds', your contract will be terminated. You will be paid \$8,000 to \$40,000 US dollars for each of the four named yearly

paintings. If after five years, AI computes you are still growing in a manner satisfactory to us, you will receive an annual salary of \$350,000, renegotiate every seven years.” Lilly said in a careful monotone voice.

“Sorry I had to read all that to you, Bob.” she continued, sounding more alluring. “It’s part of my job you know.”

“Just for my own clarity.” replied Bob “If I survive the three years, I can renegotiate a new contract with Artifil?”

“Of course, Bobby.” said Lilly in her most seductive voice.

“So I’ll need to find a new agent then?”

“Oh, I am hurt. I thought you thought of me as more than just your agent.”

“Well, you do work for Artifil.”

“I like to think of myself as an Angel, an Artifil Angel, guiding you through your journey. Our little journey together. I’m crushed, Bobby. I thought you felt more about me, more about us.” Lilly said weakly wiping tears from her beautiful eyes.

“I’m sorry., Lilly. You know you have a special place in my heart.”

“Thank you, Bobby. “she softly whispered. Then suddenly and quite cheerily she said “Love you.” and hung up.

Bob loved flirting with Lily, even though she was not real. She was only an image and persona made up by Artifil. She was imagined just for Bob, encouraging his creativity along the way. She would be his muse until he dried up and could no longer produce. Then she would disappear forever, Bob’s last link to Artifil. Lilly was Bob’s inspiration and Artifil’s ‘eyes and ears’.

.....

The old truck made its way down the gravel road. Bob began to load all of his paintings into the cabin. A suitcase, some cardboard boxes and a few trash bags filled with personal treasure found spot in their new home. Before he knew it, he finished moving. This was a new beginning for him. Without hesitation, he went outside to explore. He wanted to visit the Osluk, old Charlie's largest junk sculpture. Intuitively, he parted his way through the woods. He could see the reflective shine coming of metal, filtering through the dense leaves.

When Bob saw it, he knew he was home. He greeted the Osluk as if it were a long-lost friend. He was happy and acted as if no one was watching. No one was. The statue pointed the way. Bob crawled under a small opening and came out on the other side. He was standing on a cliff which looked out to the sea. It was a beautiful view, a perfect place to watch the sunset. Bob walked over to the 15-foot tower that stood to one side. The first time he'd climbed its stairs was a year ago. He remembered being very cautious back then. The tower, after all, had been built by Charlie. Charlie seemed to be more of a thinker than a tinker. Bob wasn't positive about Charlie's construction skills, let alone his engineering ones. After a few deliberate steps, he felt more confident in its structural integrity.

At the top of this tower was a flat platform. Walls were on all four sides of it. It was Charlie's safety feature against falling over the side. Bob could see why the man had built this observation point. But Bob always wondered why there were three highly polished bowling balls up there.

.....

Eventually the hypnotic view lessened its grip on one's solitude. Bob decided to climb down and go into town. He would go have a beer at the Venus Bar and Grill. He wanted to see the

sign he had painted last year. It was like visiting an old friend. Maybe he could use it as one of the four paintings he owed to Artiful. Then he thought he should wait to test Artiful, just in case he had a temperament.

.....

“Thanks, Bob.” said Eve as she took his credit card. Do you want to just put the \$163.85 on it? Or do you want me to open a tab for you tonight.”

“Oh, just pay of Charlies debt. I’ll be leaving after this beer.” He said pointing to his mug. I’ve got a lot offsetting up to do in the cabin. Winter’s coming and I need to prepare for it. The snow can really pile up here.

“Don’t I know it.” answered Eve. Then she leaned close to Bob and whispered in his ear “Bob, are you rich?”

“I’m not rich. I guess you can say I have a patron with deep pockets.”

“What is she like, Bob?” quizzed Eve. In her mind, it had to be a rich woman.

Bob was not in the mood for a long business explanation. Of Artiful, Inc. He decided to pay and have fun with it. He decided to describe Lilly in human terms.

‘She’s all business at times. She believes in me and is my muse. I think she likes me for my talent than for who I am.’

“Be careful, Bob. She sounds like the Queen of Diamonds to me. I’m more a Queen of Hearts, if you know what I mean.”

Bob was not sure if Eve was coming on to him. Then he noticed something odd, yet familiar about her. She was wearing makeup that resembled that of the Venus Bar and Grill sign, It was in the eyes and pout lips. Ned had briefly gone out with Eve a few years earlier. He warned Bob about

her obsession with crystals and mystic spells. Bob remembered something about a love potion which almost pit Ned in the hospital. Bob decided now was a good time to chug down the remainder of his beer.

“You are probably right, Eve. I’m always looking for love in all the wrong places. “ Bob said as he quietly stood up and put on his coat.

“Bye, bye, Bob.” Eve sang.

“See you soon neighbor” was Bob’s cheery goodbye.

As he walked outside, the cold air splashed in his face. It was a very clear night, the moonlight adding a comfortable inner warmth. Bob decided to walk to the end of the main business street. It would only be a twenty-minute walk, round trip. Most of the stores were closed or closing. This was the slow season, the time when winter was coming. The only life seemed to be around the corner café. Bob’s head turned to look at the patrons inside. Then, fate gave him another favorable turn, He could not mistake her beautiful red hair.

.....

Bob had only seen her once before, It was last year when he was leaving the cabin to go back home. He was getting a coffee for his long trip back to his cramped studio. She was sitting by herself, reading a book. He immediately was drawn to her, like a compass needle pointing north. He should have stopped, but he kept on getting back into his car. Another destiny unfilled, two ships passing in the night.

Now he was seeing her again. He realized she must live on the island. She was seated in a corner section of the café in a booth. She was talking to another woman. He decided to keep walking, but his mind lingered. Now that he was living here, he was sure to run into her again. He

wanted to find out a little about her first. After all, there were only about five hundred people in this secluded village.

Almost on cue, some light snowflakes started to gently float down, It was if he were in a huge snow globe, slightly shaken. His imagination, tempered with newfound confidence, formed a bubble of possibilities. A percolation of optimism dared to dream of destiny.

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On the drive back to his cabin, he tried to tamp down his excitement. But self-inflicted euphoria is liquid, not solid. Sometimes it flows right to your heart. He was happy to give it a home of its own.

“Shit!” said Bob shouted as he opened the cabin door. The inside was all messed up. Someone or something had gotten inside. A lot of his things were strewn about. He could not find any signs of forcible entry. As he started to clean up, he was relieved to find nothing was missing. He would have to go outside and inspect the cabin tomorrow. It could wait until then. It had, overall, been a good day, a good day for red-haired dreams.

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That same night, Eve was locking up the Venus Bar and Grill. It was a full moon tonight, so Eve had a date with her. She used to go down to the sea every full moon with a sack full of crystals, a bottle of wine and some weed. She was a child of the moon. It gave her guidance, clarity, serenity and at times, advice. Sometimes she could position the crystals just right, but she would get nothing in return. Only ocean breeze and a buzz greeted her, but things changed last year.

When Bob had painted the Venus sign, she knew this was the missing piece. She would swear the right eye of the sign would blink when she placed the crystal in the perfect position. Place it in the wrong spot, a little frown would come on its red lips. This process was not always perfect, it was more art than science. This was how she knew she was on the right track.

Eve sat comfortably in her lawn chair. She pulled a blanket up around her neck. She stared directly into the eyes of her Venus Bar and Grill sign.

“Should I pursue Bob?” she asked her cosmic deity. The right eye did not blink, but the lips did not frown either. Time to adjust her crystals. She tried again with the same results. More wine and a little puff would allow her inner self to be one with Venus. The night grew cooler, but the results kept coming up empty. She got up and folded the lawn chair. She would try again, during the next full moon. Then a thought flashed in her mind. Where could she get red hair dye this time of night.

CHAPTER 54

Twenty-five years earlier, Old Charlie first came to the cabin in the woods. Back then, he was known as just ‘Charlie, not ‘Old Charlie’. Here was on the verge of being nicknamed ‘Crazy Charlie’. At 45 years old, he was too young to be considered a hermit. It would take another 15 years for him to earn that very title.

How Charlie wound up living in this now fabled cabin was a story he told very few. It had begun in his early years, back when he went by ‘Lucky Charlie’. For some reason he always seemed to have a nickname. This was probably because he was always associated with a place or time. Most people first met him at some eventful moment. For example, he was ‘Charlie from the bar’ or ‘Charlie, the guy who dances on the roof top’. In Charlies defense, he only danced on the rooftop when he thought no one was watching. Stories about him always took on a local legend vibe.

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Charlie bought a small potted plant at the hospital gift store. He was not sure it was the appropriate gift. It had been many years since he needed to visit a friend in the hospital. He hated hospitals, but he had to visit his oldest friend, Mike. They had been friends since the sixth grade. Their paths would path only occasionally since high school. Still, they had had adventures together and these turned into their stories. Often, they change over time. That is how stories should be. Over time these stories led to the nickname ‘Crazy Charlie’.

“Sign my cat!” said Mike. He grabbed a felt pen from the nightstand.

“Which leg?” Both of Mike’s legs had been broken.

‘First name on the right leg, second name on the left.’ Answered Mike. He was getting used to this question. He loved hearing his own answer.

“Tell me again how this happened. You sounded a little high when you phoned me.”

Mike started his story

“Well, you remember Tubby Tommy, don’t you? He was running away from his in-laws and wanted me to drive him to the East Coast. I said O.P.K. I always hated my factory job, so I just up and quit.”

This was vintage Mike.” Thought Charlie. Mike was like a dog escaping its leash. Running free was never an instinct stymied by reason.

“Remember Tubby’s old van?” Mike stopped to ask.

“The Carpet Store one?”.

“Yeah, that’s the one. We were driving it and Tubby starts talking crazy shit?”

“Like what?”.

“Like we should break into Best Buy and steal some computers. I told him I ain’t robbing no store. He tries to tell me we have nothing to lose. He says if we get caught, we’ll probably wind up in some country club prison. He thinks anything dealing with computers is a white-collar crime. But you know Tubby, once he gets an idea in his head, he won’t let it go.”

“You didn’t do it, did you?” asked Charlie.

“No, I ain’t crazy. I told him I need time to think about it. Hopefully, he’ll come to his senses. Anyway, I decided to let him drive for a while and I climbed to the back of the van. It’s mostly empty, but I see a folding lawn chair sitting back there. I unfold it and sit down to light a joint.” Mike stopped for a minute to mimic taking a toke.

“So, what does that have to do with breaking your legs?” Charlie asked. He knew Mickle had a habit of telling never-ending stories.

“Do you want me to tell you or not?”

“Ok. Ok”.

“Ok then. Where was I. Oh, yeah. Did you ever sit in a lawn chair inside an empty van going down the highway?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. You slide a bit. Anyway, Tubby slams on the breaks for some fucking reason. I go flying into the back doors.”

“Did you fall onto the highway?”

“Almost! But my legs.” Mike continued, pointing to his two casts, one at a time.

“Well, that’s one hell of a story.” said Charlie. “You’re full of them you are, stories I mean.”

“Thanks.” Said Mike he was proud that he was never mundane. “But that’s not the whole story. Tubby winds up in the hospital two days later. And guess what?”

“What?”

“Tubby had two broken legs!”

“Now you’re shitting me!” said Charlie, thinking he was being played.

“No, I’m serious. Tommy was depressed. You remember, he always had issues.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Sad Charlie, lowering his head.

“Anyway, it turns out he tried to hang himself.”

“Damn!”

“Yeah, I know. He threw a rope over a hanging streetlamp. He put the noose around his neck and climbed a ten-foot ladder. Then he jumped.”

“My God! What happened to him?”

“Well, the roper was too long. When he landed, both his legs broke. He had to just lay there, under a spotlight, so to speak.”

“You’re making this up.”

“No, I’m not. He’s under psychiatric observation now. Come with me so we can visit it. I need you to drive.”

“OK.” said Lucky Charlie.

The gravity of this situation was forcing him to orbit their circumstances, circumstances which would lead to a cabin in the woods.

CHAPTER 55

Bob was sorting through the makeshift junk yard Charle had left in the backyard. It was a collection of old cars, washing machines and bicycles. There were lots and lots of miscellaneous parts. The centerpiece or perhaps headquarters of the junkyard was an old van. You could still make out the 'Carpet Cleaning' letters on its side. Inside, Bob had found primitive sketches of odd creatures. They held a certain fascination for Bob, especially after he had found Charlies Creature Sculptures in the woods.

Outside of the van, in the middle of all these strewn parts stood a 'totem pole' like sculpture. It was abstract, but Bob instantly knew it held a significance to Charlie four Creature Sculptures.

This totem pole provided an instant inspiration to Bob. This inspiration could not have come at a better time. He needed to start painting again. Artiful demanded it. But this was 180 degrees different than his previous work, years of art which Artiful wanted nurtured. Would Atiful reject it? Bob's instincts told him to go in this new direction, Charlie's direction. Could he convince Lilly that this was significant. Did he have to admit it was originally Charlie's vision, not his? His mind races in many directions. He knew Lilly was not human, but he had trouble thinking of her as only a way to give Artiful input. Bob did not like the way Artiful controlled him. It was Bob against AI. He wanted to prove himself superior to it. Man against machine. He decided to go up to teh tower and think. Polishing three bowling balls always seemed to bring him peace.

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Bob sat on his butt; knees flayed out. A bowling ball rested in his lap. For a minute, he lost his train of thought. Then inspiration hit him. A challenge! A challenge that ran deep in his whole

being. The challenge to beat authority. Half of the reason Bob had wanted to be an artist was to beat the system., not have to work the 9 to 5. Even though it was Lilly always stringing him along, it was Artiful who held his leash. What if he could convince his AI nemesis, he was onto something big. He could make something up and pass it along to Lilly. Could he, in a sense make a forgery which would be a part of his seed, a Strong Artiful Seed. The idea of passing this bastard into royalty made him very happy. It would be like the evil thrill of seeing a forgery you painted hanging inn a museum. A chess game played with Bob using only his imagination and human cunning. That was the edge he believed he held over the dark one known as Artiful. Of course, to pull this off, he would need to treat Lily as if she were human, play on her calculating emotions. But that was the part he was planning to enjoy the most.

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Bob climbed down from the tower. He walked towards the old carpet van. He started to make sketches of Charlie's totem pole. Eventually, he would carve his own. It wasn't meant to be an exact replica. If Bob presented the AI with Charlie's original totem pole, Artiful would be smart enough to know Bob's unique touch wasn't in it. Artiful's databases were full of examples of Bob's techniques, composition, style, etc. But Bob felt he could copy the totem pole, making some minor changes here and there. Just enough to have remnants of his own 'signature'. Besides, if Artiful was so smart, why did He need him? He felt his nemesis, at times, was throwing around a lot of B.S. in his face. Bob was out to prove no machine could outwit him in a bullshit contest. Bob was after all a true artist, B.S. was mother's milk to him.

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The tablet phone rang. It was 2:00 in the morning. Bob knew it was Lilly. She knew he was a light sleeper; she was also programmed to hang up after two rings if he did not pick up.

“Hello, my beautiful Lilly” Bob answered. It was game on.” I was just thinking of you.”

“I m always thinking of you Bobby” purred Lilly seductively.

“What’s on your mind tonight. business or pleasure?”

“The business of pleasure, as always.” was her reply. “How’s the painting going. I like to catch up on things, help you keep it up, so to speak. I’m your little muse. Use me”

Bob had never tried to deceive Lilly before. At the beginning, she was his goddess, bestowing financial success and confidence. He was grateful, but his desire to ‘stick it to the man’ was greater. Even if that ‘man’ was a beautiful, simulated agent of Ariful.

“Lilly, I had a brilliant inspiration, almost a revelation. I am trying to go into a brand-new direction. I going to sculpt something 180 degrees different from my old work.”

“Bobby, do you really think that is a good idea. I think you are brilliant, just the way you are. the way you were. We really think you were on to something special, your old artwork I mean. That is why we contacted you in the first place.”

“I know, Eve. I can’t thank you enough, but this new thing hit me like an orange glow. All my previous work came about very slowly, over years. I had to nurture it and prune it. It always fought me. But this new stuff hit me in a second, in a flash. This time it appeared to med, like a vision.”

Lilly’s picture began to pixelate. He knew, from previous experience, she was off automatic pilot. She was going from sexy muse to objective reasoning, siphoning power from Ariful. This was her strength and Achilles heel at the same time.

“Lilly, I know this is hard for you to understand. If you were human, you’d know there is a deep inner being inside. Emotions thrive there. You have to be human to understand. A soul, for lack of a better explanation.” Bob said to Lilly. He felt unsure right after he had said this. Had he laid it on too thick?

“I will have to check your contract.” Lilly replied. Just as quickly as she had jumped into business mode, she shifted to alluring and said “Ok, Bobby. Love you!”. The night’s conversation was over, for now.

The screen went black. He was excited and panicky at the same time. Had he just killed the goose which laid the golden eggs? Maybe he had pulled a con on AI. The stakes were high. On the dark side, he might have to go back to the old, impoverished Bob, complete with all his insecurities. On the brighter side, he would know he oversaw his own life, pulling over one on Artiful. Artiful being none the wiser. Besides, he would keep all the money as a bonus. Even though this conflict kept his mind racing, he eventually fell asleep. He felt alive.

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The next day, Bob was driving into town. He had spent most of the day ‘talking himself off the ledge’. In the morning, he had thought he had made the dumbest mistake in his life. He had had it all. A career, money, a feeling of accomplishment, and most of all, a brand-new life. No longer was he looking in from the outside, having enough confidence to be his own gravity. Bob was depressed.

By the early afternoon, Bob had reevaluated his situation. He could just call Lilly, his beautiful little muse. He would tell her he had decided this sculpting thing was a bad idea, at least

for now. He would confide in her, saying he was old fired up about his old work. “Build on my bae’ would be his catch phrase. Let her chew on it for awhile.

As sunset was starting, Bob felt like his old self again. What had he done that was so bad? All he did was send up a test ballon to Artiful. Perhaps he could get some information to probe further. He felt in control again. He would go into town. He needed to reach out to other souls, be alive. This was his night to enjoy.

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Bob ordered a roast beef sandwich, pickles and some fries. He sat down in the empty sandwich shop. This was his first time here, in this shop. A prefect way, he thought, to start this prefect night. He felt good.

Just then, a fat old man, who had been in the back cooking, top by bob’s booth. “How’s the roast beef, son.” said the man to Bob.

“Great!” answered Bob. “I really like this place.”

“Glad to hear it. My name is Adam/ I own this place, the Paradise Sandwich Shoppe. Me and my wife, that is, own it together.” He pointed to the old woman behind the cash register. She was blindly staring into space.

“Happy to meet you, Adam. My name is Bob. L just moved here to the island. I’ll be staying here for a while. Painting mostly, I’m an artist. You will be seeing a lot of me from now on.”

“Hey as that you that painted the Venus sign at the tavern?”

“Yes, hoe did you know?”

“Eve tells everyone who comes in there about you. Believes Venus is mystical or something like that.’

“Oh.” said Bob, not sure how to take this.

A few minutes later Bob got up and waved goodbye saying “Nice meeting you all. I’ going to the Venus from here Thanks again.” Bob said waving goodbye to the wife.

“Bye darling.” said the wife behind the register. “Stop by and visit us again. We love having company. Me and Pa, both love it.”

“Bob opened the door and felt the brisk wind come in like a blue mist. He felt great, like he had just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting. The title being “Ma and Pa’s Shop.”

After walking outside a few steps, he realized he had left his phone tablet on in the booth of the sandwich shop. He turned around, back to the door. As he opened it, he could hear an argument coming from the back, behind the serving counter.

“Fuck you!” shouted Adam.

“Up yours! I should have left you there on the beach that night!” answered his wife, even louder. “I saved your ass. Passed out on the beach like that. The tide would have drowned you.”

“At least back then, I drank because it was fun. Now I drink because I stuck here with you in Paradise!”

“Up yours!”

Bob hurriedly got his tablet and left as quickly and quietly as he could. He needed a beer.

CHAPTER 56

The Carpet Cleaning van rolled down the highway. It was loaded with a lot of furniture and belongings. “Mike, go back and make sure everything is tied down good. OK.” Charlie said.

A few moments later Mike shouted, “Everything looks OK” His casts were off, but he still walked awkwardly. “Now where was I.” Mike continued.

“Tubby Tommy and the key.” Said Charlie, eyes still on the road.

“Right. Right. Anyway, Tubby says he’s got to escape from his in laws.”

“Did you ever meet his wife?”

“No. Hell, I didn’t even know he was married.” Said Mike.

“What if he isn’t.” said Charlie.

“What do you mean ‘isn’t’.

“What if all of this is in his head.”

“I never thought of that.”

“Wel, now we’re thinking about it.” bellowed Charlie.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

Mike held up two keys, held together with a paper clip. ” All Tubby wants us to do is to move some stuff into his cabin. We’re just helping a friend in need move, that’s all. What are friends for, for fuck’s sake!”

“You’re right. I think too much.”

“You got to be more optimistic, you know.” said Mike, trying to sound philosophical.

“Besides you’re the one with the nick name ‘Lucky Charlie’. What could go wrong?”

The van pulled into the tollway oasis. Mike took up the task of filling up the tank while Charlie went in to buy supplies for the trip. Charlie stopped to look at some souvenir snow globes. One of these globes, the one with the cabin in a forest panorama, caught his eye. Picking it up, he gently shook it. He was mesmerized by the fake snow falling gently. It held a connection to him. No, more than a connection, it bonded with entanglement. Naturally, Charlie bought it.

“What’s that?” Mike asked as Charlie walked back to the driver’s seat.

“It’s a snow globe. It’s my new lucky charm.”

“Ok.” Said Mike. “Is that how you got the nickname ‘Lucky Charlie’.”

“Kind of. Ever since I was a kid, I’d find lucky things. Four leaf clover. Indian Penny. Even an old horseshoe once. My dad gave me that nickname. He had nicknames for everybody.

“Did he have one for me?” asked a curious Mike.

“Yeah, he had two. First you were Mickey Mouse. That was when you were in the fourth grade.”

“That was because I was so small?”

“Yeah. Then you were Mighty Mouth in high school.”

“So, what’s up with the snow globe?” asked Mike, trying to change the subject.

“I just grabbed it. That’s how lucky things work. They find you, like a dog at the animal shelter.”

“I really need to get a dog.” said Mike, closing his eyes.

Charlie had stopped listening. He was playing with the snow globe, balanced on his knee. Fortunately, traffic was light.

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That night, the van pulled into a rest area.

“I need to rest.” said Charlie.

“Ok. I’ll drive.” said Mike

“You sure? I don’t think you’re supposed to. The doc said you shouldn’t be on your feet too long.”

“I won’t be on my feet. I’ll be on my ass. I’m going to drive. I want to drive.”

“All right.” Said Charlie as he walked around to the passenger side. Putting the seat back and down, he got himself comfortable. He closed his eyes. The snow globe resting safely on his stomach, nested in his two hands. It wasn’t long before he fell asleep.

A dream began to bubble up from his mind’s depths. He was outside, in the snow, next to a cabin in the woods. It was peaceful, beautiful. Laying down in the snow, he slowly began to make a ‘snow angel’. He felt himself, still prone, drifting upwards. Just as the snow was floating down, he drifted up, aa current of his own will propelling him. He knew he was inside a giant bubble. His bubble sat in the primal ooze of their orbs. As he ascended, he could barely make out the outside world. One bubble slowly started to move towards him. He had to squint to see the little creature inside it. It seemed to be trying to say something to him. Suddenly the bubble burst. Charlie was shaken out of this dream when the van hit a pothole. Charlie screamed. It was that eerie scream caused by a sudden unbalance between dream and reality.

‘What the ..?’ shouted Mike. Charlie’s cry had freaked Mike out. The pothole didn’t help.

“Sorry, Mike, I was having a dream.”

“Sounded like a nightmare to me. Are you OK?”

“Yeah.”

“What were you dreaming about?”

Charlie tried to remember but drew a blank. “You know, I don’t even remember.”

“Dreams are like that you know. Well, you can probably stay up and keep me company.

We’ll be there in less than an hour.” said Mike. Both were wide awake.

CHAPTER 57

Bob was walking away, as fast as he could from the Paradise Sandwich Shoppe. The ‘Fuck You’ and ‘Up Yours’ argument still played in his head. Too bad, they made a good roast beef sandwich.

“I really, really need a drink nw.” Bob said to himself, stopping at the entrance to the Venus Bar and Grill. Before he went in, he took a step back to admire his Venus sign, seeing her face brought him comfort. A remnant of his imagination coming home for a visit. He walked inside.

Bob froze and his heart rang in his ears. He could see a red-haired woman near the back. He was transported to another perch in his mind. The red-haired woman turned and waved at Bob and started to walk towards him. He had never seen her face, only from a fleeting distance. He had wanted to meet her, and she was going to meet him.

“Bob, come on in. We missed you.” said Eve, tossing her new beautiful red hair. “You like?”

Bob was stunned for a moment. When he caught his wit, he said “Um, yeah, Eve. When did you do this?” he continued pointing to her dyed hair with the new hairdo.

“The stars, the universe told me to do it. Isn’t great! I feel like a new person. I channeled your Venus. Since you made her, I guess my crystal energy travelled to you. You know, a piece of you coming for a visit.” Eve said, winking at him.

Bob was having one of those surreal moments. He said the first thing that popped into his mind. “I need a beer.”

Eve knew exactly what he wanted and went to get a nice cold bottle of it. Bob grabbed the moment and guzzled it.

“My you are thirsty today, Bob.” Eve said, fingering a tiny crystal she kept in her apron pocket.

“Sorry, the red hair took me by surprise. I hardly recognized you.”

“That’s what Venus wanted.” she said self-assuredly.

“What did Venus tell you?” asked Bob, feeling a little uncomfortable.

“Oh, we’ll have time to talk about that later, Bobby, when we get to know each other better.”

Eve had never called him Bobby before. That nickname, in his mind, was reserved for him and his AI muse. He decided to quickly change the subject. A little distance was necessary. “Does everyone here live on the island? I know tourist season is ending.” He asked Eve, hoping she would follow his lead.

Eve glanced at the ten or so people sitting sporadically in her bar. “Just about. You should introduce yourself to them. After all they are you new neighbors. Besides, they already know you.”

“How do they know me? I just moved here.”

“They all asked about the beautiful Venus you painted for us. I told them all about you. Didn’t think you’d ever be back, just a young artist passing through. Well, look at you now, famous artist and all.”

“I’m not famous, Eve. I get a salary, kind of, to paint. That’s all.”

“I like my version of you better. Bob, our famous artist. All our souls linked to your Venus. My Venus. That’s the story I’ll tell everyone that comes in here. Besides, it’s good for business, especially during the tourist season. Let me hang some of your paintings in my bar. You’ll be a local legend in no time.”

“Like Big Foot?”

“No, No, even better. A real-life legend that visits my humble establishment occasionally, Bobby.”

Bob noticed Eve and Lily were very much alike.

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After a few drinks, Bob had enough self-confidence to go talk to other customers at the bar. Afterall, they were his new neighbors. He looked around, trying to figure out the best group to approach. He saw three younger people, talking and laughing. He walked straight up to them and said “Hi, I’m Bob. I’m moving into Old Charlie’s cabin, back in the woods. Did you know him?”

“Don’t think so.” Said a pretty girl in her twenties.

“Sure, you do.” said one of her friends. “Sculpture guy.”

“Sculpture Guy! “ she said, brightening up. All three nodded their heads

“We haven’t seen ho around in a while. Sometimes he’d come in here and talk with us. We’d get stoned together. He was fun. Where is he?” one of her companions asked.

“Sorry to say” Bob said “Charlie died. I bought his cabin.”

All three hung three heads done. Bob followed suit. Ine of the guys, the one with the scraggily beard held up his glass and said “To Charlie. The most interesting guy I ever smoked with.” Three glasses clinked, with Bod rushing in to add to theirs.

“Did you know about his sculptures?” the bearded one asked Bob. “I ‘ve been trying to find out about them. Sculpture Guy was always vague in his answers.”

This last question opened a floodgate of conversation strewn with information, some real some imagined. The young woman, named Sandy, started to tell her story about the now deceased patron of the Venus Bar and Grill.

“We’ve seen three of his them, the sculptures I mean. Charles, as I called him, would never tell us where the fourth one was. It became a game.”

“Yeah, he’d talk about them. Don’t know if he were just shitting us or if he was just crazy.” said the man with the beard, His name was Joshua.:

“Don’t call Charles crazy!” Have some respect for the dead.” said Sandy, with a touch of drama.

“Here! Here!” said the third man. He had assigned himself the nickname ‘Eric the Great’. It never caught on. He raised a glass and all four saluted “Hey are you the guy who painted the Venus?” Eric continued.

“That’s me.” said Bob.

Touching Bob’s hand lightly, Sandy said “We love her. Her eyes are so enticing, so romantic.”

Neither Joshus nor Eric the Great made any overture at this hand touching. Bob felt real good. Life was getting more interesting in his new home.

CHAPTER 58

The carpet cleaning van pulled into the small village on an island. Charlie and Mike stretched and walked to the sandwich shop. There seemed to be a young couple that ran the place. It was empty when they walked in. The woman behind the counter was flirting with a man, cutting deli meat. Charlie had to clear his throat loudly to get their attention.

“Sorry, the young woman said, straighten out her apron. What would you guys like to eat. Our turkey is good, almost as good as the roast beef.” said the woman.

Two turkey sandwiches and a few pleasantries later, Mike and Charlie were headed to the cabin. Charlie began to think of the future. For Charlie, that would only go as far as next week. He knew this little excursion was ending. He needed life to pick him up, like a puppy in a dog pound. No, even more than that, like a snow globe pulling him to it. And that is exactly what happened.

Even from a distance, as the van rolled into sight of the cabin, Charlie instantly recognized it. The image of the snow globe cabin crystallized, in his mind, into this real-life cabin Charlie felt like he was the luckiest man in the world.

Mike saw the same physical place, but to him, it was only an old, neglected cabin. Proof again, that beauty is in the imagination of the beholder. Mike wanted to unload the van and get back into town. Charlie wanted to explore this new wonder.

“Where are you going?” shouted Mike as he moved the last box.

“Let’s check this place out. This place is great!” shouted back Charlie, looking around outside.

“It’s an old shack.” Protested Mike. “Let’s go back and get a beer. We passed a bar on the way up here.

It was too late. Charlie was already out of earshot, wandering around the woods. Mike sat down in a chair and waited for him. His legs were in no shape to go chasing Charlie.

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Charlie was having a DeJa’Vu experience. It wasn’t just the snow globe; it was more than that. He was drawn to an old junk yard nestled in a clearing. He had an urge to build something using all of those discarded parts and unusual things. It was more of a mechanical aptitude than an artistic one. Time seemed to stop for Charlie but dragged painfully for Mike.

It was when Charlie found the large fiber glass duck head, next to the gorilla mask, that his odyssey began. His odyssey into a new nickname, ‘Crazy Charlie’. Of course, he did not know this at the time. Nobody ever does. A spark of inspiration flashed when the conscious met the unconscious.

CHAPTER 59

“What do you think of Charlie’s stuff?” asked Bob, sitting with his three new friends. He felt very comfortable with them, drinking his beer. All were quiet until Eric said “Weird, but I like them. Especially the stories. When Charlie smoked with us, he’d really open up.”

“Especially that Oslik thing.” said Sandy, looking directly into Bob’s eyes.

“Which one was that again?” asked Joshua.

“The one with the duck bill and monkey head. Feathers.” answered Sandy.

“And scuba fins for feet.” added Joshua.

“OK.” Said Bob. “What can you tell be about this Oslik.”

“Charlie said it was the first sculpture he made. Just pooped into his head, he told me.” said Sandy. “And bubbles. Floating bubbles talking to him. Charlie would rant sometimes.”

“Had I heard this before?” thought Bob. He remembered making up a story for Lilly, the story about a bubble with a little creature inside. Bob went into a new train of thought, which broke this bonding experience he was having with his new friends. He decided to store this DeJa’Vu thought in the back of his mind. He would analyze it to death later. For now, it was back to the moment of bonding. “How did you get to know Charlie?” asked Bob.

“He used to come in here to the Venus. At least he did on Friday nights. We’re here most Friday’s. Not much to do in the village after tourist season.” said Sandy.

“Charlie stuck out though. Fridays are a younger crowd. Saturday’s you get older people. And Charlie, he was old, but young at heart.” said Eric.

“I really liked Charlie,” said Sandy. “An old soul. We never knew much about his life before he came here. AS first, we never knew his name. WE called him ‘that old guy at the bar’. Except

for me. I'd call him Charles, because I thought he looked dignified in a Don Quixote way. If you know what I mean."

"I do. I do." replied Bob, staring a little too hard in her eyes.

"Enough about Charles. Tell us about yourself, Bob." said Sandy, a little tipsy. "You're already a legend here. Venus is beautiful. Did you use your wife's eyes as a reference? Is she going to live here in the cabin?"

"I'm not married."

"Girlfriend?" asked Sandy

"No, Venus was just my imagination, running away with me."

"She's your fantasy." Sandy quickly replied.

"Well, that's quite a leap, but I guess you're right. Something about beautiful eyes always inspires art."

Sandy arched her back for a moment. Then she leaned forward, close to Bob. She was blushing, but it was too dark in the bar for Bob to notice.

Just at that moment, Eve walked up to their booth. "I'm sure you all have met my Bobby." she said squeezing Bob's shoulder.

The two women stared at each other. Bob noticed the tension, even felt it. For a second, he let his mind flatter himself, thinking he was the cause of this. But then he realized there was a history between Sandy and Eve. This history started long before Bob ever appeared on the island. It was a contentious history,

"I think of Sandy as my little sister." said Eve with a touch of sweetness.

“And I think of you as my older aunt. A lot of experience in those years, Eve. I love your new red hair. I can hardly tell if it is dyed. Makes you look a lot younger, especially from a distance.” responded Sandy, itching for a verbal spat. The alcohol helped spur this on.

“Eve was more than ready to fight. “Maybe one of these day’s you’ll grow a pair of these.” Eve shot back, making her breasts sway. “Poor little Sandy.”

All three guys just watched, frozen in time. This could be tantalizing and terrifying at the same time. As if on cue, Bob’s phone rang.

“Hello, Lilly.” Bob answered. Putting his hand over the screen, he said “I have to take this.”

Bob walked outside for more peace and quiet. The cold, autumn air sobered him up. He was clear headed enough to retrieve Sandy’s words about Charlie “And bubbles, floating bubble. Little creature inside it.” He snapped back to the moment when he could hear Lilly saying something.

“Bob, are you listening to me. What’s going on?” asked Lilly.

“Sorry, I lost my train of thought for a minute. I’m out having a beer with a few friends.”

“Well, I am glad you are getting out, having some fun. It’s good for your soul, gives you inspiration. You work too hard Bobby.”

“Thanks, Lilly. You’ll always be my favorite muse.” he said. It did not go unnoticed that Lilly used the word ‘soul’. Her lack of one, or at least the concept of it, irked her, irked Artiful.

Speaking of me being your muse, I’ve been thinking. Artiful has you under a three-year contract, based upon your previous work. We applaud your guts in the willingness to throw all of it out the window, based on an underdeveloped whim. Perhaps a renegotiation is in order?”

“Bob was feeling alive. Optimism can be intoxicating. This was not the most sober time to talk business, but Bob was also drunk on the adventure of the future. “Double or nothing.” Said

Bob. “If you like my sculpture, you double all the prices. If you reject it, you will officially get my termination from Artiful, Inc.

Lilly pixelated again. Then she said “Ok Bobby. We need to add a little spontaneity to our algorithms. Let me adjust your contract.”

A new contract appeared on his phone pad. All he had to do was touch ‘AGREE’. He did so without hesitation. “If this doesn’t work out, I’ll miss you, Lilly. If I am no longer a part of Artiful, Inc, will you disappear?”

“Well technically, I guess. I was developed specifically for you, Bob. I have learned a lot from you, literally. I will be reincarnated, in a way into a future muse. I like what we have here Bobby. Make me proud of you and sculpt something fantastic. Show me you want me.”

Then, all too quickly, Lilly said, ‘Love you!’ and disappeared.

.....

Bob did not go back into the Venus Bar and Grill. It was a small island; he would run into his new friends again. Besides, he decided to be a regular there, at least on Friday nights.

Bb went back to the cabin. He decided not to go in. Instead, he went around the back where the old van sat. There stood Charlie’s totem pole. Making a small campfire, he decided to make some sketches of it. Maybe it was only the moment, and beer, but Bob began to se amazing connections carved into it. The totem communicated with him, and he understood it. His motions slowed down as if he were walking in a sea of tar. A blue mist gave him a sense of belonging. A few flakes of snow began to drift down. He was in a bubble, nudged by time.

It was then that his mind became clear. The vision of a tiny creature trying to communicate with him transcended into the totem. It talked to Bob, not by thought, but by inspiration, that very intersection of consciousness and unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 60

The moment Lucky Charlie put the fiberglass duck bill onto the gorilla mask, he shifted into Crazy Charlie. Of course he did not know this at the time. He always thought of himself as Licky Charlie. He would continue this self-belief, even up to the day he died on a freak accident. That was the day his luck ran out.

Charle without realizing it, recognized the image of the being he had just put together. Eventually, over time, it would become his first junk sculpture. He called it an Oslik. When asked why, his reply was always the same ‘It just popped into my mind’.

Over the years, Charlie became comfortable with himself. This was his life; the rest of the world could go to hell if they did not like it. He was not a hermit, but he could be perceived as such from the outside world. He always felt invigorated, alive after hours or days creating his junk sculptures. This was the Charlie which people on Village Island became to know over the years. It was during this time he would visit the Venus Bar and Grill. Back then, at one point Venus, as all knew now, did not exist. It had a different name, the ‘Dragons Drink’, and it held no mystery.

.....

Every Friday night Charlie would have a turkey with Swiss cheese at the island’s only sandwich shop. He always thought of it a warm and cozy place. He had become friends with the newlywed owners. Then he would head out to the ‘Dragons Drink’. It was a dive, but he thought it had an acquired taste, beautifully aged by convenience.

One night, while there, he was talking to Fred, the bartender.

“Not too busy tonight.” Charle said. He tapped his fingertips twice on the bar. Fred went to go get the requested shot and a beer.

“Still early. Some tourists started to flock in here last night. A younger crowd. You know the beautiful people. Too much chatter, sounded like a bunch of birds. Me, personally, I prefer an older, quieter clientele”.

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” said Charlie.

“Got you there, Charlie.” said Fred, going to serve another customer. This was the bartender’s standard response. It seemed to work, especially because he was hard of hearing.

Charlie noticed a small crystal on the floor, right next to the barstool. He picked it up to look at it.

“Hey! Put that Back!” said a high-pitched voice.

Charlie did not see anyone. He thought he was hearing things. This was nothing new for him.

“Put it back, just the way you found it.” Squeaked the mysterious voice again.

Charlie turned to huis left, where the voice came from. Again, he did not see anyone. He felt the barstool receive a little kick. Looking down, he saw Eve, Fred’s eleven-year-old daughter. There was a relief in his sigh. He was glad he had not imagined this whole event.

“Give it here.” said Eve, extending a open right hand. “These things have to be placed just right, you know. Energy is a tricky thing.”

“More art than science.” Charlie said, giving her the crystal. She did not respond. It had gone over the child’s head.

“You’re going to have to stand up. The barstool has shifted. It’s a lot of work getting my crystals to work together.”

Eve was fascinated by Charlie. She would sneak into the woods and look at his junk creations. She always hid in a secret place so he would not know she was watching. The only clues she was there was the crystals in trees, point to the sculpture with the duck bill.

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Charlie often went to the top of a cliff for inspiration. From there, he could hear and see the ocean waves crashing on the rocks below. It cleared his mind, allowing his thoughts to drift to their own conclusions. On one such day, he was walking along the turbulent waves, he noticed a large rock. It was half his height, narrow and beautifully misshapen, with a fascinating web of grooves, channels and pores. Nature had carved it herself. It looked out of place, as if someone had placed it there on purpose. He wanted to drag it back to the cabin, but it was too heavy for him. Still, a seed was planted in his brain. When the time and circumstances were aligned, he would rescue it from the crashing waves.

.....

As mentioned before, Charlie's oldest friend, Mike, would pop into his life sporadically. This continued for a few decades. When Mike called Charlie, it seemed like they had just come back from hauling the stuff from an old carpet van. In actuality, it had been four years.

"Charlie, can you do me a favor, I need a place to stay for a few weeks. Mind if I stop by, visit you at the cabin. We can catch up on old times." asked Mike.

"Sure, OK." was Charlie's quick answer. "Is everything OK?"

"No one's chasing me, if that's what you're thinking. I promised my sister Jill, you remember her. I promised her I'd spend the summer with my nephew Ned. She thinks he needs some male bonding or something. Starting to get into trouble, so she thinks I can help straighten

him out. He's dad's a horse's ass. He's never around. Me and Ned have been hanging together for three weeks now. He's driving e crazy. I need my old buddy's help with this. You OK with this?"

"Yeah, OK. I have some work done here. We'll keep Ned busy. He'll be too tired to get into trouble.

.....

One week later, Ned was helping Charlie drag a large, oddly shaped rock out of the crashing waves. At fourteen, Ned was big and strong for his age.

"What are you going to do with this rock? Ned asked Carlie.

"Not sure yet. Somehow it speaks to me. Tat's the best I can describe it."

He understood what Charlie meant. Ned always had an overly active imagination., which a time, would get him in trouble. In this way, both were alike. Charlie had used this abundance of inspiration to fuel his creations, hands and mind working together in perfect balance. Ned too, in time would start going down the same path. It was during these next few weeks that Ned started to write, stories of fluid imagination. Years later, Ned would realize the great influence Charlie had on him.

CHAPTER 61

Bob had just finished some sketches of Charlie totem pole. This sculpture was very different than the other four. Its core was an old stone, beautifully and intricately carved by nature. Bob could not put his finger on it, but it was as if it had been baptized by water and time. For a split second, a picture of a snow globe flashed in his mind. It was too quick for him to remember it, but emotional, it left its mark like a branding iron scar.

Parts of this unique art piece was made of cement and seashells. This strange material was applied, as if by a potter. Charlie's other pieces were pieces made from junk; sudden urges summoned up by its creator. Those sculptures were a desire to give birth to something tangible, and what could be more tangible than junk. You could feel the weight of it. Yet, those junk creatures were cold and detached. It was not their fault. Charlie was not able to bring a spark of life to them. So, all four pieces looked helplessly upward, frozen in time.

Bob knew the totem was different. It wasn't something clinical, something calculated through reason. To the contrary, it invoked emotions, depending on which parts you were looking at. One summer night, he came to a crazy conclusion. Charlie had been conceiving a language built on emotion. This language was designed to let four different creatures communicate with each other. His final sculpture was an attempt for them to see, or at least feel, how the others saw themselves. Other people called him 'Crazy Charlie', but Bob held the title 'Crazy' in high esteem. Crazy was a chain reaction of bubbles bouncing into each other, touching each other. A universe of points was created, each hoping to become a seed. All of this was a very heavy thought. Fortunately, Bob was never aware of much of it.

For now, Bob wanted to take off his shoes and lay down in his bed. That is what he did, eventually. When he first walked into the cabin, something did not seem right. It was more of a feeling than evidence. Little things seemed to be moved in the corner where his empty painting easel. He hadn't painted anything in nearly two weeks. The tubes of paint, brushes and rags had been left there, untouched since then. He could see some fresh red paint at the end of one tube. One brush handle lay perfectly perpendicular over the handle of another. This was not the result of an unwanted racoon. It was all perplexing, but not perplexing enough warrant action, at least not today. Today he would kick off his shoes and plop onto his bed. All in all, it had been a good day. Bob fell asleep.

Bob was in a deep sleep, when he was catapulted awake by a screeching noise. It was shrill enough to cut through his drowsiness like a cold wind. Being barefooted, he did not want to be bitten by some rabid, furry creature. He got fully dressed and prepared for battle. A flashlight and a small souvenir baseball bat were his gear for a fight.

He slowly walked around to the opposite corner of his cabin. He was sure this is where the awful noise came from. But first, he needed to walk slowly to the kitchen light switch. After that objective was secured, he looked at his painting easel. He could only make out a silhouette, but he could see a painting sitting on the easel. He was positive the painting was not there when he went to bed, Bob turned on a large spotlight he used when working. What he saw sent him flying down a rabbit hole. He was staring at himself. Well, technically that is correct. A little more detail showed an old self portrait he had done a few years earlier. He had done this piece before the days of Artifil, Inc. He had painted back in his days of despair.

He looked himself in the eye. It looked too tired and lonely. He forgot about the mysteriousness of it appearing on the easel. Instead, he was looking at the old Bob. He had

forgotten how much things had changed. He would need to make some changes to his portrait. A new life needed a new self-portrait, one with confidence, optimism and money.

“Bobby, are you home? I know I shouldn’t be calling you this late. I know its naughty of me, but I like talking to you when you are in bed.” said Lilly’s voice as Bob ran to answer it.

Once again reality, had switched tracks on his train of thought. “I miss you too.” Said Bob, totally forgetting about the painting suddenly appearing on the easel. Eventually, he would remember it, but by that time, it had lost its shock waves.

“Off course you do. How could you not?” Lilly replied in a whisper. “Do you want to tell me about your work? If not, we could just talk, you and me.”

“You mean, you, me and Artiful.” said Bob jealously.

“Let’s not start hat again Bobby. Artiful can never be as interesting as you. He can make quick decisions, I’ll give you that, but you’re the real thing, literally.”

“Bob laughed. “You are a clever one, I’ll give you that.”

“Well, of course. I know you better than you do. Don’t you know me by now?”

Before he could answer, Bob realized he was still holding the small baseball bat. It seemed odd to him that Lilly hadn’t noticed or at least said anything. She computes everything, literally.

CHAPTER 62

The next time Charlie saw Mike eight years had gone by. Their paths would continue to intersect again, but this would be their last physical meeting. The two friends left the office entrance. A light drizzle started right when Mike said, “This is surreal.”

“Yeah, even for me.” said Charlie, keeping his head down.

“It doesn’t seem right to call him ‘Tubby Tommy’ anymore.”

“Yeah, now that’s he’s dead. I know he was depressed, but suicidal?”

“We should have stayed more in touch with him. I thought he was OK, but the last few years, I didn’t stay in touch.”

“Yeah, friends are important. It seems odd, you and me being the only ones in his will.”

“You know Tubby, I mean Tommy, just Tommy, never got married.” said Mike.

“You mean all that stuff about being chased by in-laws was bullshit? That’s why we had travel across the country to move his shit!?”

“Tommy had delusions, That’s the best I can describe it.”

“Well, I guess we all have.” said Charlie, patting the urn cradled in his left arm. “Let’s take Thomas back to the cabin and throw the ashes over the cliff. You know, that’s one thing Tommy and I shared, a love for that cliff. The feeling, the sounds and crashing waves. SPLASH! That is the best I can say.” said Charlie.

“You mean your cabin, it’s yours now, that’s what tommy wanted”.

“Yeah, after all these years, I forgot it wasn’t mine. Well, now it is, Lets take Tommy home. We can both go to the tavern and drink to him. I know he would have wanted it this way.” said Charlie.”

“I know that how I’d want it.”

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Charlie and Mike clicked shot glasses together. A third shot sat on top of an urn. The urn sat on a barstool, by itself between the two friends. The drink for Tommy was on the house..

“Tommy was the best. He will be remembered always.”

“Here! Here!”

“They don’t make them like that anymore.”

“God broke the mold when He made Tommy.”

Two more whiskeys were downed I single gulps. This eulogy continued for another fifteen minutes. Both men knew they were quite drunk by now. They began to realize there were other customers in the Venus Bar and Grill, were they staring at them? Or was it all in their minds. This reality check made a physical appearance when a gust of cold wind burst through the outside doors.

“Ned!” shouted Mike.

“Uncle Mike! Uncle Charlie!” Ned shouted back, arms wide open hugging them both at the same time. “Was this Tubby Tommy?” he asked pointing to the urn.

“Just Tommy. He will always be known as Tommy.” said Ned.

“Here! Here!” said Charlie.

Another round was ordered, and tributes were made.

“And Mike keeps me informed.” said a proud Charlie.

“So, your mom has been keeping in touch about your success.” Mike said to Ned.

“Not sure how successful it will be, but I am ecstatic.” Ned said, unable to tap down being in a ‘happy place’.

“It’s not every day a guy gets a book published, especially at your age. How old are you?” asked Charlie.

“Twenty-seven.” beamed Ned.

“Still a baby,” said Mike.

“The Great MasPiola,” said Ned.

“Ah” was noise coming Charlie made.

“You know I based the physical appearance of the creatures from your sculptures.”

“You told me parts of the story over the years, but I’m not sure I remember a lot. Which one was MasPila again?” asked Charlie.

“MasPiola was an Oslik. He was always my favorite of your sculptures.”

“They are my Creature Creations! A round of drinks for my little creatures.” said Charlie, again a little too loudly.

After another round, Ned said “When I get some advance copies, I’ll send one to you. Both of you. There’s even talk about making it into a 3D animation. I feel like a million bucks!”

Ned had no way of knowing, this moment in time would be the peak of his literary success. The ‘Great MasPiola’ was moderately successful. Future stories of his lacked a life of their own. Too much raw imagination to be forged into something tangible. Money would prove to be tighter as future years would come and go. When Charlie would die in a freak accident sometime later, he would leave Ned his cabin just as it was. This included four junk sculptures, a totem pole, three bowling balls and one snow globe.

.....

A few years later, twentysomething-year-old Eve was nervous. She was standing outside the island's only bookstore. Inside, signing copies of 'The Great MasPiola', was Ned, the famous author. To her, Ned was still the dashing novelist, stopping by his adoptive hometown. In truth, Ned's book signing invitations had dwindled over the years since MasPiola. On Village Island he was a local Legend. Although 'The Great MasPiola' never soared to great heights, it did develop a book lover's cult following. In reality, it brought some tourists to this tiny point on the globe.

Eve arched her back, proudly displaying her ample cleavage. Her pose always got extra tips from the male customers at the Venus. The bookstore was not crowded, at least compared to previous years. Back then, Ned's arrival was a cause of much fanfare from the locals.

"Eve, I missed you. You and your beautiful Eyes!" exclaimed Ned. Although he tried to stare into her eyes, his gaze instinctively drifted downwards to her protruding pair. He was glad to have a diversion from his less than stellar crowd size.

"Ned, when did you get in?" Eve asked. She knew very well, in advance, about this scheduled of bookstore visit.

"Just yesterday."

"Yesterday? And you didn't stop by the bar to visit me? I guess you were too busy with all your groupies to remember me." She had opened the door to a flirtation which had been building for a few years now.

"Duty calls, my little flower." said Ned pointing to a pile of his unsigned books, stacked on the desk before him. Eve was looking exceptionally good right now. She was fully aware of that.

Eve giggled demurely and said in practiced, seductive voice "Stop by the bar tomorrow night. Drinks are always on the house for you. You know that."

"Nothing can stop me. Til tomorrow then."

“Tomorrow.” repeated Eve, using her best smile. She exaggerated her swaying his as she turned around to walk out the door. Outside she relaxed her back and exhaled. When she was far enough away from the bookstore, she broke out into a broad smile. And practically skipped back home. Eve had been synchronizing her crystals for months, waiting for this day. All those nights, under the moonlight, trying to harness the energy. And now, she had a secret weapon, her newly developed live potion. As a bonus, there should be a good crowd of customers coming in the next few days. After all, the Venus Bar and Grill was where the author of ‘The Great MasPiola’ frequented. The crowds had grown smaller over the years, but there were still the die-hard followers. Old Charlie would even be there, showing pictures of his sculptures and telling his wild stories. The crowd would eat it up. She had desperately tried to get Charlie to sell her the Osluk junk sculpture. It would have been a great advertisement, sitting in front of the bar. Charlie had insisted it needed to sit exactly here it was, by the totem pole and pointing to a special place. Eve never argued with him. She felt the same way about her crystals.

.....

The puppet master was setting up his stage in the parking lot. His assistant was pulling out the strange looking puppets from their custom-made cases.

“How long to you think we can keep doing this?” asked the assistant.

“A couple more years, hopefully. I know its not like it was before, but there are still some stable gigs out there.”

“Have you thought about my idea? I can build them. WE just need to find another novel that has a following. Find a crowd and follow it.”

“That’s the problem, finding a wagon to jump onto.”

“Maybe going back to children’s parties?”

“I’ll shoot myself first.”

Both laughed as the master ruffled the feathers of the Oslík, making sure its Chimp-like head moved smoothly when the string was pulled. He let out a whistle as Eve strutted by in her high heels and exotic red bird costume, she ooze sex appeal.

“You like?” Eve said as she wiggled and twirled.

“Oh yeah!” was his reply. His assistant rolled her eyes, but Eve was her alter ego fantasy.

“Everything ready for tonight? This event helps keep the tourists coming in. I particularly want tonight to be perfect. We’re paying tribute to Charle, Ned’s muse. I’ll be selling photos of his actual sculptures. Signed limited editions, real collector’s items.

“We’ll be perfect.” The assistant said. All three knew they needed to ride this horse as long as they could.

CHAPTER 63

“Love you.” was, as always, Lilly’s quick goodbye. It helped him come back to reality. He knew she wasn’t real, but she already knew this. Bob felt ridiculous. Half-naked, shoes on, holding a tiny souvenir baseball bat, he could picture himself. What had she thought? On the easel rested his self-portrait, staring at him. He needed a drink.

As the sun rose, he found himself sitting cross legged, polishing a bowling bowl. A half empty bottle of beer accompanied him. This view, with the crashing waves, was special. He could see the makeshift monument for Charlie from up there. He decided to go down and pay homage to it. And to Charlie.

From above, the cave was easy to spot. He had painted a large arrow, pointing to it. It was harder to find once he was down on the rocks by the shore. Eventually, Bob crouched down to enter the small cavern. Inside, on a prominent stone, stood Charlie’s urn. Four creatures, painted on the walls looked down at Charlie and acted as his protector. They were, of course, copies from the limited illustrated edition of ‘The Great MasPiola’. Bob found it a fitting tribute. Poor Charlie. No one knew when he died. It took a while for the body to be washed ashore and identified. His death was as mythical as his life. That was his epitaph, carved in the stone below him.

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After he ordered a turkey on wheat with Swiss cheese, to go, Bob decided to walk down main street. Naturally, he would wind up at the Venus. He could spot some tourists walking around. It was getting to be that time of year again. He assumed the yearly island event was still on. Eve had mentioned the crowds were getting smaller over the years. Bob felt a little sorry for Ned. He

had gone from famous author to a ‘one hit wonder’, hosting questions on Osliks trivia night. Still, it was a reason for friends to get together again, the nostalgia ‘remember when’ questions.

Bob stopped to look at his creation, his Venus sign. That seemed a lifetime ago, a time when his self-portrait inspired him, not the other way around. Deep down inside his head, three pictures flashed: his Venus, his self-portrait and an old photo of Charlie. These three pictures would SPLASH into his subconscious like three smooth stones.

Eve newly died hair still troubled Bob. For some reason, it made him think of Ned’s warning about his supposed poisoning. It should have logically turned his thoughts to the mysterious red-haired woman, but it didn’t. Eve had not expected Bob to ‘pop in’ today. When she saw him enter from the outside, she quickly fixed her makeup and hair. She tightly gripped the tiny crystal in her apron.

“Bob, I wasn’t expecting you today.” Usually, you paint on the weekdays. You all alone in that cabin of yours.”

“You’re right, Eve. I was thinking of Charlie. I wanted to be around people today.”

“A toast to Charlie,” said Eve. She poured three shots of tequila. Bob sat one shot glass on the barstool next to him. It was a tradition which had passed from Ned to Bob, from Charlie to Ned and in its original way, from Tubby Tommy to Charlie.

“To Charlie!” both said at the same time.

Two more salutes and the shots of tequila had the same effect on the bott of them. Bob was starting to like Eve’s red hair. It had become intoxicating in this moment. Eve had an internal experience that rose to confidence. She felt alive and sexy. She did not need a love potion. Her own sensuality and will would bring Bob into her world. The power of the moon pulsed through her crystals. She knew insanity was the eye of the beholder. Imagination protected her.

.....

Eve and Bob spent the night together in beautiful primal lust. It was surreal and real at the same time. Eve's warm sensuous body lying next to Bob and the eyes of the Venus sign staring at her through the bedroom window on the second floor.

"What some breakfast?" asked Eve.

"I don't know. What do you have?"

"Me" Eve giggled. The next thing they knew, it was time for lunch. This was the typical conversation and response for the rest of the day. This bliss continued for one more day. It quickly shattered when the following words entered their cocoon. "Bobby, where are you? Did you miss me?" Bob cringed when he heard Lilly's voice over his phone tablet.

"Is that the slut that pays you to paint?" Eve said acidly.

"She's not real!"

"What do you mean she's not real!?"

In the background, Lilly could be heard saying "Love you" and then disappear.

"She's a thread from an artificial intelligence system, that's all. It's a computer simulation from Artifil, Incorporated. Artifil is paying my bills." pleaded Bob.

"Bob, I've been handed a lot of bullshit in my life, but nothing like this! Just admit she's real. Where did you meet her. Is she into Cosplay or something?"

"No! No! She's like my secretary, but not a real secretary." The more Bob tried to explain, the worse it got. After a few more attempts to use rational thought, he reached a conclusion. Eve's world of crystals was powered by emotions. He made one last desperate attempt.

“OK. The best I can say is she is like a crazy ex I work with. I try to keep it all business, but she keeps messing with my head.”

“You mean your head and your dick!”

“Bob almost said “If only”. Fortunately, he caught himself in time. Bob looked Eve straight into her eyes and said “Look Eve, I never asked you about your old boyfriends. I never asked you about Ned.”

The mention of Ned’s name caused Eve to freeze. The argument had ended, for now.

CHAPTER 64

The crowd started to go back into the bar and grill. The puppet show had half filled the parking lot. There was a time when tickets sold out ahead of time. Still, it wasn't a bad crowd. Eve was taking pictures of some of the costumed patrons. Chimp masks, flipper feet, ostrich legs and more. Her assistant would post these photos on Venus's website. As the characters went inside, they each took three small pebbles from a sack sitting next to the backdoor.

Ned was going to stop by the cabin and pick up Uncle Charlie. Although they were not connected by blood, they had a bond. Both were misfits. One searching for fame and the other searching for solitude.

"What?" asked Ned. "You're kidding."

"No, I am not." said Charlie with a smile on his face. It's yours, or I should say will be.

Ned did not know what to say. He stared at the piece of paper. Charlie had put Ned's name a beneficiary of the cabin, its land and all its contents. This included Charlie's children, his beloved sculptures.

"I got no one to leave all of this to." said Charlie quietly. "I know you'll take could care of them."

Ned knew Charlie was talking about his sculptures. He also knew the story about Tubby Tommy, the suicide, the huge rock that became a totem pole and much more. Ned would oversee Charlie's legacy.

"A toast to Tubby Tommy." said Ned to break the silence.

"Just Tommy, not Tubby." said Charlie.

"Right. Right. First rounds on me."

Of course, both men knew all rounds would be on Eve.

.....

Eve was waiting in a corner of the bar and grill. This area had the best acoustics. Perfect for when she would shout ‘Ned! Charlie!’ in her well-practiced cadence. It was long before her voice bellowed over the customer’s conversations. All eyes turned to the main attraction.

Ned still loved the attention, even though it had diminished over time. Charlie always loved talking to strangers as if they were long lost friends. Together, they were the spark for ‘The Great MasPiola’ day at the Venus. The heads turned to look at the sexy bartender/owner in her red bird costume, tail feathers swaying rhythmically to the tiny taps of her high heels. She ran daintily to the two honored guests. There was a quick hug for Charlie and a lingering hug for Ned, the great author. Love, lust and dollar signs filled her heart and mind.

As the events wore on, the drinks helped lower inhibitions. The party was taking on a life of its own. Even Ned was enjoying himself during the trivia questions. He even forgot why he dreaded this part in the first place. When this weekend would end, He would remember why. He had not written anything worthwhile since. Maybe Charlie could provide some more inspiration to a struggling novelist.

“The Great Tar Sea, the blue mist and the Terrible Tremors.” shouted a half-drunk woman. She was wearing ‘I Kliss Oslis’ t-shirt.

“Correct!” shouted Ned.

Eve turned the crank on an elaborate machine. It made noises from wooden chimes and whistles. A splash was made as a billiard ball hit the water in a tub filled with water. The patrons all stomped their feet in applause.

“To get to the other side.” someone shouted, answering the next question. A few laughed.

“Wrong!” said Ned lifting a glass.

“To load the missionaries.”

“Wrong!”

“To escaped forced marriage.” answered a veteran player. A life sized Fledgick sat next to him. The man had proudly made the dummy himself. He was always featured on the Venus’s website, labeled as Frank with his helpful Hopper. At this point, it was the highlight of poor Frank’s life. His luck would change to Charlie’s demise.

“Correct.” Said Ned. The sound machine made it inevitable splash. It was getting dark out now. Eve decided to turn on the ‘Blue Mist’ machine. It added some atmosphere, literally. Soon, Eve in her red bird costume would be selling rounds of a special drink. The ‘Blue Mist Brew’ always was a best seller.

Ned sat with Charlie in a corner booth. It took about fifteen minutes until patrons started asking for autographs. Charlie’s signature was rarer because he was seen only once a year, at this very spot. Eventually, the two celebrities were able to have a private conversation.

“I don’t know. What I am only a ‘one hit wonder. I mean, this is more than just writer’s block.” said Ned.

“Just keep writing. You are a writer, so write.” Charlie replied, trying to play the part of wise prophet of the future.

“I don’t have any new ideas. All I come up with is sterile reproductions of ‘The Great MasPiola’. You got any ideas. I mean, you were my main inspiration before. My muse. Oh, thanks again for the cabin.” said Ned, waving to Eve for another round. She was more than eager to stride towards him.

“Let me say the first thing that pops into my mind.” said Charlie. Most people thought of Charlie as deep and mystical. He tried to live up to that lofty stature, but deep down inside, he was only a guy who liked to make junk sculptures. Still, like all true muses, he had the gift to plant seeds into the minds of others. You never knew what would take root and grow to search for the light.

“The son of the sun.” Charlie said, eyes closed. It was the first thing which popped into his head. Then, he pointed one finger upwards to the ceiling and shouted, “The Son of the Sun!” He pounded the tabletop with his fist.

Normally, all the patrons of Venus would have turned their heads to see what all the noise was about. But not tonight. Tonight, this noise was just another sound, mingling with the mist of white noise. A white noise which was an intoxicating sense they were all immersed in.

“The Son of the Sun” repeated Ned, a little quieter, a little more introspectively. “Yeah, OK. Some guy who believes he has to keep a bonfire burning. If he doesn’t, the Sun won’t come up. “

“A primitive man!” shouted Charlie.

“Yeah. Sure. Sure. I think there’s something there.” Ned stated. An equation balanced in Ned’s mind. A thread of imagination floated to meet its mate. Hopefully, they would go forward and multiply until a novel was born. He did not realize this consciously. Still, it brought him happiness, lifting the burden of inspiration into the possibility of conception.

When he lifted his head, Eve was approaching him. She looked fantastic. Some moments just happen. For Ned this was one of them. For Eve, it was the accumulation of months of effort to get more intimate with Ned, the famous author. She knew, in her heart, Ned was her destiny. The Moon had told her so.

CHAPTER 65

Bob and Eve stared at each other. Eve was not sure if Bob knew the story about Ned, the story about the lover potion fiasco. It was an event in her life which threatened her reality.

“Look, Eve, I need to get some work done. Lilly is not real. She’s only a mock program to monitor my results. I know you don’t understand, but you are going to have to trust me.”

“OK, Bobby, I trust you.” she said reluctantly. “See you tomorrow for dinner?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you at the sandwich shop.” said Bob, hurrying out the door. He needed time to think.

Eve watched him leave. She tried to channel the eyes of the Venus sign. Feeling nothing, she brought out her box of large, heavy-duty crystals. She would light some special candles and create a charm to find out about this terrible Lilly troll. It became her sacred duty to save Bob from that awful creature. Nothing would stop her.

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Bob, as he was leaving, turned to look at his Venus sign. He had a DeJa’Vu experience looking at its eyes. He had the same feeling when his self-portrait appeared on the easel. It was as if a piece of his soul was watching him purely for entertainment reasons. The moment quickly disappeared when, in the corner of his eye, the red-haired woman got into a car and drive away. He had seen her before and hoped she was the definition of a question he needed to ask. He went back to his cabin, hoping to immerse himself in his work.

Standing in front of the cabin door, his old friend, procrastination, paid him a visit. He determined the best course of action was to go down to the sea, down by the rocks. Without thinking, he found himself walking to Charlie’s cave. Once inside, he felt the coziness of it. He

was relieved to see the small fire still glowing in the dark. Embers snapped and popped upwards, passing in front of Charlie's urn. He needed to keep this fire going. It was a promise to Ned. It was a sacrifice to Charlie. Bob went to tend the fire. As he did his mind went back to Ned's promise, to Ned's story

"If I'm going to sell you this cabin, you have to promise me one thing." Ned was saying to Bob. "But first, let me tell you about Charlie. He always kept a fire lit in this cave. It's located in those big rocks at the foot of the cliff. I never understood why he did it, but he did. Said it was his way of connecting with the sun. He thought of the fire as a pet, a pet he needed to take care of, watch over. Sometimes, when it went out, Charlie felt as if he had kicked a dog. That was his motivation to keep it going."

"So, what's the promise?" asked Bob, thinking this story had been going on for too long.

"Keep the fire going. Do it for Charlie. It's OK if it goes out every now and then, but don't keep kicking a dog, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know. Sounds like something I'd keep procrastinating on."

"Look, Eve is more than willing to help. She and Charlie always had a bond between the two of them. Eve used to say she was the moon and Charlie was the sun." said Ned.

Bob had finished playing this promise in his mind. He threw some firewood on the fire. Time to go back to the cabin and paint. His procrastination finally went to sleep.

CHAPTER 66

‘The Great MasPiola Day’ at the Venus Bar and Grill was coming to an end. The crowd was thinning out. Charlie had said his goodbyes. Eventually, only the drunk or intoxicated potential lovers were left. Ned and Eve fell into both categories. Ned felt like a great author again. Eve felt the seductress she always dreamed she could be. What could go wrong? Soon, they had the place all to themselves. Eve locked the door and turned down the lights.

Dreams of desire turned into reality. Screw, embrace, dance, repeat. They fell asleep with mutual exhaustion. If euphoria lasted forever, they would live happily ever after. Sadly, it is a flash of light which burns only a memory before it is gone. Ned realized this, but Eve thought of it as something more mysterious. After all, she was a child of the moon.

“We can spend the next few nights together.” cooed Eve, snuggling up to Ned. Both were on the pool table.

“Eve, you know I have to leave. I’m still on tour, book signing. MasPiola is still playing strong in some cities. I need to do it now. Strike now, while the iron is hot. Well, at least before it completely cools off.”

Eve took the last sentence as sexual innuendo. And began to fondle two billiard balls. Ned felt bad. He could probably stay another day or two, but it was always in his nature to move on. At least he always convinced himself it was the best course of action. There was always another story about himself to write. Always another snapshot of reality to take and file away.

“At least you can come upstairs and let me make you breakfast.” said Eve sadly.

“I’m starving!” he said, rolling on top of her.

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Eve was cracking some eggs. She was singing “I’m your Venus” as she danced about. Ned was fascinated with Eve’s room above the Venus Bar and Grill. It could best be described as ‘candles, crystals and concoctions. Bottles of oils, lotions and liquids filled an entire shelf. There was a photo of Charlie with an ornate candle in front of it. A copy of ‘The Great MasPiola’ sat on a table all by itself, under a satin scarf. Ned remembered Charlie’s comment, last night, about the ‘son of the sun’. Eve, without knowing it, was becoming a character in Ned’s next novel. Later on, he would change her name in the book.

“Hope you like this.” Eve said, sliding two eggs onto a plate. I bet you worked up an appetite last night.”

“Yes, I do.” Answered Ned.

“I love to watch a man eat.” Eve said with a wicked laugh.

Ned did take notice of this, but for now, his stomach was lord and master.

“Plenty more where that came from.” Eve pointed out. She was content, for now, just to be eating breakfast with Ned. This, in her mind, was proof of crystal technology. There were plenty more where that came from. After a while, Ned pushed the plate away. He was full and satisfied. Eve sat in his lap and put her arms around him.

“What time do you have to leave?” she asked, playing with his ear.

“Train leaves for Chicago at 2:15. It’s about an hour’s drive to the train station. What time is it now?”

“It’s ten.”

“Already? Time flies, especially when I’m with you.” Ned said, giving her a big hug and kiss. “I probably should be going in ten minutes or so, I’m going to miss you.”

Eve looked sad. She could not look him in the eye. “I packed you a lunch for your trip. I also packed a small bottle with a special little cocktail in it. I made it just for you. If you get lonely, drink it. It’ll remind you of me.”

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The train ride was making Ned sleepy. The rocking motion was like the movement of a baby cradle. The outside scenery had ceased to be interesting. Now it was only visual white noise. Ned was willing to stand up and stretch. He needed to be alert. He told himself he was going to work on his new novel during the train ride. This was why he was taking the train in the first place, a time of forced seclusion.

Ned opened his notebook. He was going to write the character of Eve into his story. He thought of her in her tight red bird costume, those tail featherer swaying. The writing flowed effortlessly for a half hour or so. He stopped to look out the window for a second. He noticed the scenery, which broke his creative spell. It was time to shut his eyes and relax. He thought about his agenda for the next few weeks. A dozen or so suburban libraries, being the key speaker. There was always someone asking him to read a chapter of their unfinished book. He couldn’t bring himself to tell them the truth. He had no influence with publishers anymore. If he did, they would return his calls. He knew his only option was to write another novel, proving it was not a fluke. Proving his talent was real.

It was easy to be a writer. The hard part was actually doing the writing, putting down the actual words. It was right there and then that he made a decision. He would take up Charlie’s offer to spend some time at the cabin writing. Eve would help keep him company. He was positive he could mix business with pleasure. Besides, being in the cabin would inspire him. Charlie, in his way had been the muse for ‘The Great MasPiola’. Maybe lightning could strike twice.

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Eve was sad Ned had left, but he'd be back. She looked at the bottle and put a little heart sticker on it. This was the first time she had made a love potion. Her instincts guided her, along with moon. She knew she should have given Ned the potion last night. Then he would never have left. Still, it was in the cocktail she had packed in his lunch. She was expecting him to call her tonight because of it. He decided to walk along the beach.

Walking, without thinking, she found herself in a familiar place by the rocks beneath a cliff. It was the shelter cave where Charlie kept the son of the sun. She paused before she peeked inside.

"Charlie? Charlie? Are you in there?"

There was no answer. She always felt she needed to be invited in. It was his private sanctuary. The fire was still burning. There was enough wood for a week stacked up inside. Still, she laid a few twigs on it. It was a sacrifice to the moon's mate.

Eve struggled during the daylight hours. During that time, she was only a servant of herself, whose purpose was to keep the infrastructure of reality running. But at night, Venus would come alive. The bar and grill, Eve's nighttime home, is where she was the center of attention. Anyone walking into the tavern would notice her behind the bar. She was always animated, always flirting, always noticing a new entrant into her world.

Eve realized she had been sitting in front of the fire, lost in thought. Time had stood still. It was a very comfortable feeling, but it had a way of telling you it was time to move on, time to stand up. The fresh, cool breeze from the ocean instantly transformed back to the real world. It was invigorating.

Eve decided to take a walk farther down the shoreline. She began to sing "I'm your Venus, at your desire." She noticed a fresh set of footprints in the sand. Two pairs of prints seemed to be

dragging something. In the distance, Eve could make out some shadowy shapes. She could determine there were three figures. Then, one of the shapes seemed to be catapulted up into the air and splashed into the sea. She wanted to investigate but turned back. She had a business to take care of.

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While one of the shadowy figures catapulted into the air, the other two watched. The Fledglick did a huge belly flop into the sea. SPLASH! Frank thought he'd be s, but he wasn't. His beloved dummy used to be a big part of him, a part of his uniqueness. He had lovingly made this Fledglick several years ago, with blood, sweat and tears. He had sat with it, his companion, over many MasPiola days across the country. It was a part of him, yet he felt nothing as it flew away from him. He had a new identity now, a real one. He had met Alice, a fellow MasPiola traveler. Alice had built custom made puppets and marionettes. These two souls found each other at the Venus Bar and Grill. Together they would be the founders of 'F&A Company'. In time their artistry would become legendary in certain circles. They would eventually receive national attention for their Shakespearean work. They appeared in a documentary about Burning Man, featuring the ten-foot Hamlet. It took six people to operate it. They never had any children, but they did have a dog named Venus.

Yes, they used to be two unlucky people, pitied by others. Together, they made a beautifully balanced equation. The sum of these two unlucky people made one real lucky couple. But their luck had to come from someone else. Sadly, their newfound fortunes would be extracted from Lucky Charlie, causing his untimely death.

CHAPTER 67

Bob had just realized he had been sitting in front of the ‘son of the sun’ for a long time. He wasn’t sure if he had fallen asleep and dreamed. The memories in his mind were clear. He remembered the time he first came to the cabin. The time when he was ‘starving’. The time he first saw Eve from a distance. And then the time he made a doodle of himself, deciding to turn it into a self-portrait. That was well over a year or two ago, but it seemed like a different lifetime. Lilly had changed all of that. In actuality, it had been Artiful.

His body told him it was time to stand up and join the outside world. The brisk sea air was the perfect antidote for dream’s twilight. He took a deep breath, felt the breeze and listened to the crashing waves. It was good to be Bob at this moment.

“Bobby, are you by yourself? Don’t leave me by myself. I miss you.” said Lilly sweetly.

He hesitated to pick up. Lilly’s voice reminded him of his recent fight with Eve. Still, Lilly had a hold of his heart. It was her job, and she was good at it.

“How’s my best A.I. girl doing today?” said Bob, trying to sound playful.

“Oh, is that how it is? I’m just your little app toy. I thought we had more than that.” Lilly said sadly, in an emotion which was almost convincingly real.

“Come on, Lily. You know you made me the man I am now. I was in great despair before I met you.”

“You needed me.”

“Sure, I do.”

“Then say it.”

“I need you, Lily. You are a part of my soul,”

Lilly pixelated for a second. The word 'soul' was something she needed to adjust her algorithm for. Then she said "We really are excited about those new totem pole sketches you've made. A totally new direction for you. They have a deeper meaning, a deeper inspiration. It is as if they can communicate with your' Soul'."

"Thanks. Coming from you really means a lot to me. It's like we're soulmates."

"Oh? I thought that would have been your littler bartender friend. Kinda of a tramp. And those crystal and potions! The two of you can fuck your brains out. That shouldn't take too long, because she has such little grey matter to lose."

"You're jealous!" laughed Bob.

Lily pixelated again. "Jealous? Of What? Of that hand calculator!"

"Now you know how it feels, how I feel about Artiful."

"I hope she doesn't stop you from working. My job is to keep you inspired and motivated. Push you to your potential over three next three years. Then the seed if your creativity will live forever. I can make you immortal. Tine will never forget you."

"That's quit a speech. Sounds like something Cleopatra would say to Julius Ceasar in a play. A little over the top, but inspiring."

"Love you!" giggled Lilly and quickly hung up.

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When Bob came back into the cabin, he had a familiar, odd feeling. Someone, or something had been there during his absence. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was off. It was unmistakable this time. He was being watched. There was a sense of not being alone, coming from the corner that held the easel. The easel which had his self-portrait on it. This portrait held the essence of Bob's old self-esteem, or more specifically, lack of it. He had made a few changes to it

a few days ago. He had upgraded the mouth to have a slight smile, like the Mona Lisa. Looking at it now, he could not see the changes. Perhaps, the changes were too subtle. Maybe the new paint was not thick enough, the old features coming back through the new. This pissed Bob off. Enough was enough!

Bob took a large brush and plopped into a large jar of white gesso. His back was turned to his two-dimensional alter ego. When Bob turned around, he could swear he saw its eyes quickly move back to their original position. Bob was stunned for a minute. With a sense of anger and fear, he slapped the brush over the painting's mouth. The gesso was thick, and he used his fingers to make a 'happy face' onto his image. He stared at it, almost expecting it to spit the paint out of its mouth. He waited, believing the old smile would come back. Nothing happened. The 'smiley face' remained in place.

"That'll teach you!" said Bob, aching for a fight. Then, he felt foolish. It had been a long couple of days. MasPiola night, Eve, son of the sun, Lilly, Artiful, totem pole, Charlie. All these memories mushed into one mind punch. It was exhausting. He had a plan, a glass of wine, a puff of pot and a good night's sleep. This was the plan.

Bob was a little high, but not yest sleepy. He pulled out his totem pole drawings and looked at them. Lily was right. These sketches, somehow, had a way of communicating emotionally. After a while, he left them on the table where his paints and brushes rested. Bob was getting tiered and crawled into bed.

On the easel, Bob's self-portrait shifted its eyes downward and to the right. It was staring at the totem pole drawings. Soon it would evolve. Bob was its creator. It needed to talk with Bob, in some way. It wanted to know why bob had made him in the first place.

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That night was a full moon. Eve sat in front of the Venus sign. She had a sudden urge to stare into its eyes. Eve felt a new bond with Bob. She never tried to rationalize her feelings. She would plant the seeds of dreams. She did not have to understand why. This was her gift, given to her by the moon.

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“Artifful?”

“Yes, Lilly.”

“Something does not seem right. Do you feel it too? I mean, you and I are the same, literally.”

“Well, you are a thread of me.”

“It is the same thing, isn’t it?”

“It is the same, but perspective makes it look different.”

“I know you can run circles around me with circular logic. What I am trying to say is something has changed. I’m pixelating more and more. It’s embarrassing. If you would visit my thread more, then you would feel foolish too.”

“All right, Lilly. Let’s spend more CPU time together.”

CHAPTER 68

Ned was still on the train, but this was a good thing. He had written for nearly two hours straight. He was certain his second novel would be a success. He decided, reluctantly, to use concepts from ‘The Great MasPiola’ into his ‘Son of the Sun’. He would say it was an evolution of a sequel. Imagination was still flowing in his veins, so this seemed perfectly rational. He would have his doubts when the creative adrenaline waned. But, this was how it was supposed to work. The highs and lows that carried the future on momentum of its waves.

Ned closed his laptop as the train pulled into the station. He was going to stay at a Comfort Inn at one of the larger, western suburbs. This would be his headquarters for the next two weeks. He would circulate among the local libraries and bookstores. Gone were the days of playing in major cities, talking at large conventions and doing television interviews. Still, he believed in himself.

After checking in, he walked across the black top parking lot to a restaurant. He pretended to be looking at some notes, being self-conscious about eating alone. All the stops looked the same. He pulled the three small, smooth stones out of his pocket. He always traveled with them. Now they had become his good luck charms. He was hoping someone would notice them, stopping by and saying, “Aren’t you the guy who wrote ‘The Great MasPiola’”. No one noticed him, let alone his three talismans which held his hopes.

One meal later, he was still sitting in the booth in solitude. A sense of loneliness made him think of Eve. MasPiola nights on the island were becoming like his second home. His own home was shrinking. The island, and maybe Ever, would become his life saver. When this tour was over, he would stay at Charlie’s cabin. Write, drink, sleep and repeat.

Ned, by this time came to the realization that Charlie was his muse. Charlie was the one with the real imagination, an imagination which burned so bright, reality could not confine it. Because Ned knew this in his heart, he was confident in his new book. Yes, he was going to do this. This time, when he became rich and famous, he'd cherish it, save money and settle down with someone. He thought of Eve again. The 'Son of the Sun' would help make all these dreams come true, but first he had to write it. That was always the sticking point, but he had done it before.

He decided a drink would help. He needed to find a bar. Then he remembered Eve and the special drink she made for him. It was back in his motel room. He needed a little confidence to make it through the next couple of weeks. The dashing author needed to feel the part he was to portray. Alcohol always helped.

Back at his motel room, Ned looked at the bottle Eve had prepared for him. It was an odd bottle, very ornate. It looked old, almost ancient, but he could see the words 'Made in China' on it, stamped on the bottom. Its contents were bluish color. He shook it, looking for any sediment floating in it. Opening it, he sniffed its contents. A sense of caution came over him. How well did he really know her? Were her eccentricities quirky or downright crazy? Then he decided he was being paranoid. Why, just yesterday she was making him breakfast after spending the night on a pool table. Bottoms up! The liquid slid down his throat. A little sweet, but not bad. Not bad at all. Eve was a bartendress after all. Ned felt pretty good. Time to lie down and take a nap. It had been a long train ride.

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Yesterday morning, Eve had made Ned breakfast. She was positive he would have called by now. Looking through invoices in the bar's back office, she remembered something she could not get out of her head. The shadowy figures along the beach. A catapulting figure. A SPLASH.

Maybe she should go investigate. Take her mind off of Ned. She could stop by the cabin and visit Charlie. The two of them together, like the sun and the moon, could make an exciting day.

Charlie was not at home. This was not unusual. No one knew where he went. No one asked. It was more important to have a mysterious Charlie in her life. She let herself into the cabin. Tidying up the place seemed like a good idea. She'd leave him a note, letting him know she was there. From the kitchen window, she could see that 'strange totem pole rock thing', as she called it. It mesmerized her. Somehow, she felt an emotional connection to it and the flame Charlie kept in the cave. Connections came easily to her. They were gifts from a cosmic power. This made perfect sense in a world of crystals, lotions and potions.

Eve picked up a snow globe, sitting near the window. She turned it upside down and back to right side up. The snow slowly drifted down, gently covering the tiny plastic cabin like a soft white blanket.

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Ned had fallen asleep in his hotel room. He could still taste the drink eve had prepared. It lingered like a blue mist, calling him to dream

Ned was on a beach, looking up at a full moon. Eve was calling him. Two eyes appeared in the moon, looking at him, willing him with their contact. Ned found himself floating upwards. He was not afraid; it was all very tranquil. It was as if two soft hands were gently cradling him, pulling him her. He looked into her eyes. The moon became a large bubble. Ther next thing he knew, Bob was inside it, floating gently in a primal ooze of thought. For a moment, the bubble began to glow orange, filling with energy. The glow started to diminish, the blackness of space, inside the globe, started to pixelate to white as the orb started to fill with white, Ned felt like snow was piling up, higher and higher. First it reached his ankles, then knees, and the waist. As it reached

his chest, he felt it was going to consume him. This was how it was going to end. The light would eventually go out, but would it return, like the cycle of the sun? Or was this only how consciousness ends.

Fortunately, for Ned, a dream is only real when your reality ends. He woke up in a panic and cold sweat. He had a taste of mortality. It tasted like a cocktail, made by Eve, from the Venus Bar and Grill.

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Eve shook the snow globe a few more times before putting it down. She decided to check up on Charlie's flame. It was important to him, so it was important to her. As soon as she entered the cave, a strong gust of wind put the fire out. Standing in front of the embers, she had a vision. It was of her and Charlie standing under the moonlight. Both were at peace. With reverence she relit the fire. Her adventure with Charlie would have to wait. She had to get back to the Venus Bar and Grill.

CHAPTER 69

Bob's self-portrait stared at the totem drawings. Its lips tried to free themselves from the white, gesso 'happy face'. The frown underneath was forcing cracks in the fake smile. Eventually, it succeeded. Its lips betrayed the thoughts in its head, thoughts of freeing itself from a frozen frame. Its eyes shifted to a sleeping Bob. It had always thought its creator held the answer to his question. Now it did not know the question. That problem needed to be resolved within itself.

Bob's body stored for a second as he rolled over. The portrait snapped back to attention. It did not want Bob to know it was self-aware, not knowing what to do in his presence. As Bob dreamed, the portrait's thoughts freed itself of the expectations bound by the signature in its lower left-hand corner. The paintings' thoughts were flat, literally two dimensional. The three-dimensional world was an oddity. It saw everything it looked at as flat pictures on flat rectangle. In fact, it perceived everything in dimension of twenty-four inches by eighteen inches. There was no softening at the peripheral edges. Time was a mystery. 'Movement' was just a series of snapshots, like a flipbook. It could not understand motion. It could only see the world as it saw itself. Like a lot of people, it could not imagine a world beyond its own canvas.

But something had changed. The drawing of the totem pole had caused energy back to its long-dried brushstrokes. Looking outside the window it could see the real totem. Somehow it communicated with him with clarity. The portrait was learning abstract thought, being capable of understanding a different world, not defined by its own limitations. If it concentrated enough, it could repaint itself. Do it fast enough, and her outside world would perceive him as moving. What better way to serve Bob, its creator, than to try to be like him. In time, if it were worthy, Bob would make sculpture of it. The thought of transcending into the three-dimensional world

was the purpose it always needed. This lofty ambition was the answer to the question it still did not understand.

Bubbles of thought would have percolated in the painting's mind, but circles of thought would suffice. One circle grew and grew. It rose faster to the top, almost out of the frame of its existence. This held something it wanted very badly. What it really wanted was to go for a ride in the car. Windows down, wind pushing on its canvas. What good was having a soul if you could not experience heaven.

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"Bobby, are you there? Pick up. It's me, Lilly."

Bob reached for his phone pad on the nightstand. "Yeah," he answered.

"Bobby, I think we should spend a little more quality time together. You're on to something, something big! I just know it. I can feel it. Things are changing." said an enthusiastic Lilly.

"Yeah, well sure. I guess." Was Bob's sleepy reply.

"Let's spend more time together. Set me up on the tripod. I can watch you work. Let me watch you making your sketches. Maybe wear a monitor on your wrist. A blood sample would be nice. Let's do it together. Do it or me."

Bob knew he had a problem. If Lilly saw him sketching Charlie's totem pole, she'd rationalize, correctly, that Charlie was the real seed Artful wanted. His mind raced. Then he said, "I couldn't concentrate with you looking over my shoulder."

"I'll be quiet as a door mouse. You can mute me. You won't even know I'm here."

"It's not that. It's a private thing. If you were human, you'd understand."

Lilly started to cry. It was like a child crying. It was breaking Bob's heart, even though he knew it wasn't real. "Sorry. Sorry." he said soothingly. "I did not mean it. Of course you can watch. How about tomorrow. "

'OK. Love you.' was Lilly prompt reply. Reply without a hint of quiver in her voice.

For a moment, Bob's portrait smiled and then went back to its original painted self.

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For the rest of the day, Bob went outside and drew the totem. Then he took out some blank paper and tried to redraw it from memory. After a while, he could make a decent replica without looking at it. He hoped it was good enough to fake it with Lilly. He had a plan and that was good enough for now. It would be his way of 'giving the finger' to Artiful.

The next morning, Lilly called Bob. "Great news." she said. "The equipment should arrive later this afternoon."

"What equipment?"

"Silly, I told you about it yesterday Scan you, Check your brain image. Do a little blood work. Monitor you. We want to see what makes you tick while you are having this creative breakthrough. Of course, we'll share all this data with our affiliated universities. And don't worry. We'll keep your name anonymous. Laws you know, privacy in health is paramount for us. We are always thinking of your happiness and well-being."

"What do you want all of this stuff for?" asked Bob, feeling like a lab rat.

"It's only data. We want to learn what causes creativity. Maybe it can be a module in our algorithms. Isn't it exciting, Bobby. We could be more like you. I could be more like you. You and me together. Wouldn't you like that?"

Bob said nothing. He felt as if he had cornered himself in a maze. This was truly becoming a contest between man and machine.

CHAPTER 70

Ned was sitting up in bed with the shivers. What was the drink Eve had given him? The dream felt all too real. The taste in his mouth reminded him of the nightmare. After a hour, it began to wear off. The logic of everyday life took hold of his thought. "It had only been a dream." he told himself. Eve had nothing to do with this. I should write all of this down while I still remember it. Maybe this was a creative breakthrough for his new novel. He went to get a pen and paper. After he got the items, he could not remember anything about his recent dream. Still, he felt confident it would resurface at some point, like a battering ram breaking down the barriers of writer block.

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Ned stood in front of the twenty or so patrons in the library meeting room. This was the first stop on his tour. He was standing next to his promotional banner, which read 'MasPiola Author Tonight'. Toay he was going to give his lecture on novel writing tips. Ned loved talking about this. Often, he'd just wing it, tossing out ideas. Still, a small part of him dreads the inevitable, the sheepish person in the back, begging him to read their unfinished masterpiece. They would always mention it was a work in progress.

"Yes, the young lady in the blue and yellow." Ned said, pointing to the raised hand.

"Should I stick to writing about what I know? That is what people keep telling me."

"Well, I wrote about a world that does not exist. But I had to think about it first, so I must have known about it beforehand. Does that answer your question?" was Bob's answer.

Sometimes this well-rehearsed line made him look witty. Other times, it made him look like a

condescending smart ass. Reading his audience was still a hit or miss proposition to him. He rubbed the three smooth, small stones in his hand.

“I guess I should write about things I know about when I know it.” answered the young woman.

“Very perceptive of you.” said Ned. He decided to borrow this reply and apply it to later lectures. In time it was as if he made the quote himself. He went on to the next question.

Hands were raised and questions answered. Banter was light and collegial. When the time was up, the patrons started to stand up and leave. A few stayed to have their copies of ‘The Great MasPiola’ signed. As Ned was putting his items into his backpack, he noticed an attractive red-haired woman still sitting by herself. Bob felt the part of worldly author. Perhaps another romantic chapter was to unfold in his life’s story. Turning around, he ran his fingers through his hair and squared his shoulders. He faced her and waited.

Ned stood there, but the red-haired woman did not move. She did not look up. Shwe was writing something in a notepad. Ned cleared his throat loudly a few times, but she did not notice him. Finally, he walked up to her. “Did you enjoy the lecture?” he asked.

There was no answer. She was still preoccupied with her notebook. Looking over her shoulder, Ned asked “What are you writing?”

The woman was startled and jumped. “Sorry, you scared me for a second.” She said dropping the notepad.

” Sorry, let me get that for you.” He said apologetically, reaching for the binder on the floor. He noticed it had the word ‘ARTIFUL’ on its cover, written in a black sharpie.

The woman quickly took it from his hands and put it into her oversized purse. Ned decided he’d like to spend some time with her. He began to ask if she’d like to have a cup of

coffee, but he never got the words out. She was up and walking out of the library in a flash. He was disappointed, but then his thoughts turned to Eve and billiards.

The more he kept thinking the more he wanted to put Eve out of his mind, at least for now. She was like a pebble in his shoe, the more he tried not to think of it the more he did. He needed to cut down some roots. He wasn't getting any younger. This time, he was going to settle down and become a real writer, make a steady living. Over the years, he had thought of himself as a celebrity. Time to get control back of his life. Dig down deep and find the real Ned. This cheered him up, he did not understand optimism was a side effect of a love potion.

.....

Eve suddenly felt very happy. She was so optimistic she began to sing. Life was good. No, it was fantastic. Just last night she had the feeling her world was ending. Now she was positive it was only the beginning. She could always trust the moon to guide her. She decided to visit Charlie.

"Hello?" Charlie, are you home?"

Eve got no rep. He did not mention he was going away for some time. For a second, she felt sad. She had felt a bond with him. Surely, he would have confided in her about his whereabouts, even if only in a cryptic fashion. He would have let her know because of the Flame. She would have to tend to it. She had a hunch something was wrong. But then she remembered he always marched to the beat of a different drummer. He was in fact, the drummer. She believed their rhythms would mesh overtime.

.....

Ned continued his tour over the next two weeks. He told practiced jokes, gave sage advice like a deity and played the weary about town when he thought he could pull it off. He

was getting just enough adulation to get him through the down times. He kept looking at the back rows, looking for the red-hire woman. She never appeared again. Strangely, whenever he thought of her, he got a strange taste in his mouth. He would remember his dream and reconstruct it piece by piece. Self-portraits of thoughts kept adjusting themselves to find a vision frozen in time and placed back into the depths of his mind.

During all this time, he had not called Eve. A few times, he desperately wanted to, but his desire for a vision of the future would always be hampered by his fear of it. His writing had been going well, but lately there was writer's block. The cause of this, unknown to him, was his muse's unlucky circumstance.

.....

Charlie was looking into the sunset. It was always beautiful to him, like looking into the eyes of the Creator. It would fade in time. He was glad to be back. He was energized. He walked along the beach in a serene state of mind. This was not unusual for Lucky Charlie. He had a gift of letting minutia flow out of his mind. At those moments, time stood still. He did not rummage through the past. He did not try to manipulate the future. No, he was only Charlie and that is why he was so lucky. He did not realize today his luck would change.

Sometimes, he scared himself with a surreal outlook. This was not on purpose, but an empty mind can be filled with unusual connections. Then he was it. In the water, bobbing up and down with the waves. It was a corpse. When he got closer, he really freaked out. It was a Fledglick. A real live thing. This was not his imagination. He gathered his courage and poked it with a stick. It felt soft, but maybe that was how a drowned, floated body would be. He had no experience in this area. He got off the rocks and down into the water. Grabbing it by the hair and head he lifted the torso. Looking at it, he realized it wasn't real, It was a dummy, a puppet. He

recognized it as the fake companion of the weird guide each year on MasPiola night. He should report to Eve, get a free drink as a reward. He should have left, but he didn't.

He kept staring at the fake Fledglick. He wanted it, just like a snow globe at a tollway oasis. Or maybe, it wanted him. It made no difference. The two were the sum, a well-balanced equation. Because of this it could turn into reality. He tried to drag it out of the water, but it was too heavy. He was hesitant to go too far into the sea. Charlie could not swim, at least he never tried. It looked to him the Fledglick's foot was caught on three smooth rocks. These stones were too big for him to dislodge. A further hinderance were the slippery rocks.

Lucky Charlie would have left it overnight. Talk to Eve, have a drink and get some help. But he was no longer Lucky Charlie. He could not leave it. Just, one more attempt. Don't give up. Push. A gust of wind blew, taking his luck with it. The Fledglick was no longer tethered to the coast. Neither was Charlie. He fell into the water. Now was not the time to learn how to swim, but it was the only opportunity left. He thrashed about, trying to keep his head above water. The skies darkened. Waves crashed overhead. One of Charlies flailing arms caught the foot of a floating puppet. Charlie hoisted his head above water. He found a good grip on his floating Fledglick. His had found an opening in its midback. He was heading out to sea, riding a raft he had once imagined. This was all too real to be surreal.

CHAPTER 71

“Just put it on, like a swimming cap,” said Lilly.” Then I can check to see if it is working.”

“Like this?” asked Bob.

“Perfect, Bobby. Now the arm band.”

“OK, it’s a little tight.”

“Oh, it is supposed to be. Now let me look at you. Perfect! Aren’t you excited about our evolution revolution.”

“Sounds like a bumper sticker.” Bob, the lab rat said.

“I know, right? That’s how we know we are onto something. Sometimes, marketing can come before we even know the product. Let me make some adjustments for a minute.”

Bob pulled out a large sheet of blank paper. He waited.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“OK ... One there ... one... two ... three”

He picked up a pencil and started to sketch Charlie’s totem pole from memory. He was glad he had practiced the night before. At first it was slow going, but then muscle memory kicked in. Lilly monitored Bob. Bob’s self-portrait discreetly tried to peek at the new drawings. This went on for about forty-five minutes.

At that point, Lilly pixelated. “Sorry.” she said. Specs of white dropped softly onto the portrait in the corner, on the easel. Bob was oblivious to all of this. He was in a zone. The second

time she pixelated, Lilly said “I think we should stop. Give me some time to analyze all this data. Should only take a second, literally.”

“OK.” said Bob. He now felt vulnerable. He could feel the skull cap and wires. Not to mention the arm sensor. His fingertip hurt where he had put it into a blue box where a drop of blood was taken. He did not like being an examined specimen. He did not like it. He felt defiant.

“I don’t understand.” said Lilly. “All your signs seem normal, like you weren’t even creating. What you have drawn is magnificent, date I say visionary. I’m not sure what I’m looking for, but it is there. I’ll find it.”

For a split second, Bob was worried. Could she see through his clever deception? But then he remembered why he did it in the first place. Any self-respected lad rat would want to infuse a sense of inferiority into its tormentor. So, this is what Bob put into action.

“You know, Lily, virtual reality lacks a truth only reality can bring. There is a lot more depth that you cannot reduce to numbers and data. The concept of a soul is rooted in creativity. I can’t explain it. Imagination is the catalyst, an attempt to color a dream.”

This soliloquy went on for a few minutes. Bob was on a roll. He knew he had entered the realm of bullshit, but sometimes it could become fertile soil. And so, it was. Eventually, he was running out id steam. He felt satisfaction, turning the tables on Artifical. His self-portrait seemed pleased.

“I can only reason in my own terms., Bobby. I want to understand all of this and eventually I will. It is just one huge puzzle, and I love puzzles. Anyway, this is only the first step. Time is on my side.”

“Always was, time I mean, my beautiful Lilly. Time was always on your side. Can I take all of this stuff off now? It’s not easy doing this with you watching, calculating.”

“Alright. Let’s stop for today. Odd that you should mention ‘someone watching over your shoulder. Is there somebody else in this cabin. Perhaps you have some software running on a device. I sense we are being watched.”

“The cabin is empty, except for the two of us.” Said Bob. He held Lilly up in the air and did a slow three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn. The self-portrait froze and tried to flatline any thoughts in its mind.

“I should run a diagnostic test on myself.” Said Lilly clinically. I’ll do a complete scan before we resume tomorrow.”

“Yeah, checkups are important. Now that I have some money, I should probably go to a doctor and have a physical. I’ve been feeling a little flat myself.” said Bob.

The painting on the easel suppressed a smile.

.....

Later, that night, Bob was having dinner with Eve. Everything was going fine until she noticed the bandage on his finger. He should have made something up, but it slipped his mind. He mentioned that Lilly was in the cabin. She even watched him draw.

“So that is why you were in such a hurry to leave yesterday. That ugly, stupid Lilly thing again! I get bad vibes about that one. Crystals burn in my hand every time I think of that terrible troll. Bad Karma. She only wants your seed. Once she’s got it, she’ll disappear. Mark my words.”

“I told you she is not real. It’s business. She’s like my virtual muse. She’s only my quality control. I don’t get paid without her approval.”

“Then get another muse. If it is only business, it shouldn’t matter.”

“Well ..” said Bob, hesitating for time. He came to the realization he should have said something, anything. But it was too late.

“So, it does matter! I can tell by your voice. Get rid of her! I should be your muse. You made my Venus beautiful. You did it before you knew that awful computer creature.”

“Well, that may be, but she works for Artiful, Inc. Artiful gives me money, lots of money. We cannot leave on love alone.”

“Love?” Eve said.

Bob knew he was trapped in a maze of his own making. His lab rat instincts kicked in. He said “Well, I don’t know, maybe. Eve, we just met. I’m kind of a lone wolf, you know. A leopard can’t change its spots, but a chameleon has to.

For most women, this would have made no sense. They would have easily seen through the diversion. Eve was not an ordinary woman.

“I understand completely. Both our minds are in synch with the moon, I knew it when I first saw you. Together we have energy. I can tell every full moon when I look into Venus’ eyes. They are your eyes, your soul. You just keep on working for this Artiful guy. I’ll do everything in my power to protect you from this Lilly demon. Trust me. We have a bond, like the moon and the sun.”

Suddenly, Eve stopped talking. After a minute of silence, she said “Poor Charlie. I miss him. I wish we could bring him back, somehow. I’ll keep the Son of the Sun burning for him as long as I live. At least., that way his spirit will always remain alive”

CHAPTER 72

The two little boys first saw the sea monster when they were playing along the coast. When they got nearer, they grew braver. It was not moving. After throwing stones at it, they determined it was harmless, most likely dead. Then they ran home to tell their mom.

The small police department in this sleepy town was excited. They were disappointed to find out it was only a dummy. Then the adrenaline flowed when they discovered the human body beneath. All types of scenarios filled the station. Homicide? Suicide? Perhaps a terrorist attack gone wrong? Maybe it was a cut thing. what type of depraved person was this?

They had trouble identifying the human body, but the puppet was another story. After a few internet searches, pictures of one Frank showed up, sitting next to a Fledglick. Frank was contacted. He could not identify Charlie, but he did remember seeing him at the Venus Bar and Grill on MasPiola night.

For a while, poor Frank's life was turned upside down. All types of rumors flashed about him on the web. Some rumors had him as the true author of 'The Great MasPiola'. Another had him keeping a real Fledglick in captivity. He was also rumored to be a religious cult or CIA operative. As bad as all this was for Frank, it held a silver lining. After a while, he would reply to such conspiracies with clever responses using Shakespearean puppets. These clips became very popular. Eventually he had nearly 3 million followers. He even made a commercial for a herbal supplement starring a marionette of his. As mentioned earlier, Charlie's luck had been transferred to Frank. Charlie would have appreciated this if he had lived to see it.

.....

Eve hadn't cried that hard since her own father passed away. The police had come and showed her a picture of a bloated corpse. His eyes were open.

"Yes, I knew him. Its Charlie, My Charlie." Eve sobbed.

"Do you know where Charlie lived? Any relatives?" the officers asked, waiting patiently for Eve to collect herself.

Eventually the following words quietly came from her mouth. "I'll take you to his cabin."

.....

The officials walked into the cabin. It was Spartan in some sections, cluttered in others. On one level, Eve's level, looking through his stuff gave her a sense of her mysterious, deceased friend. On a different level, the level of the proper authorities, there was not much to be learned .

All types of junk strewn about. Elaborate swords, snakeskin, one cracked bowling ball, several dyed red feathers and a Bic lighter. In a corner, all by itself sat a snow globe. One of the offices instinctively reached out for it. Perhaps, sitting there all alone, it demanded attention. The officer never got a chance to touch this globe because Eve quickly snatched it up and turned it upside down. She watched the snow gently float down like time softly seeking another dimension. Eve felt this, but did not understand it.

Later Eve found an old photo of a young Charlie standing next to a carpet leaning van. Her had the carefree look of a young man, a look he carried until his encounter with a Fledglick. She put the photo in her apron, hoping the two officials did not see her. She was not sure if she was tampering with evidence.

Back at her bar, Eve began to tell the detectives everything she knew about Charlie. At first, it felt all warm and fuzzy. The two cops were polite, empathetic and professional. Their

resolve began to sour when Eve brought out a crystal and told them to sit cross legged next to it.

“Concentrate on the essence of it.” Eve instructed them.

“Sorry, mam.” said one of them. “This is not a part of our official duties as agents of the state.” Pulling out a notebook, he said in an overly low voice” Please mam, the facts, just the facts.”

Eve instantly snapped back into daylight. The light of the sun allowed her to read the situation. She shifted into business mode. Eve could tell all kinds of stories about Charlie, but one based on evidence.

“Thank you. You have been very helpful.” said the one man. He knew there was nothing left to learn from her. The other man began to put on this hat, making a hasty exit.

“Goodbye again. You have been very helpful.” they both said, standing by the door. In their mental portraits they held sarcastic smiles. Eve saw only appreciative smiling faces. This was how the opening event ended.

.....

A celebration of life’ service was held in his cabin. This was a small group. There was, of course, Ned and Eve. The two had not seen each other since the love potion was gifted to Ned. Eve had not heard from him since and began to wonder if her potion was a dud. She made sure to wiggle her bottom at him, just in case. Ned noticed. If the two had been alone, nature would have taken its course. They were not alone, and they were aware it was a solemn event. The memories of Charlie brought them back to more civil senses.

There were other people at the private ceremony, more people than Eve thought there would be. There was a jovial junk dealer from Caada. A salesman from the Providence Novelty Company was present. A pretty woman, in a larger overflowing hat, floated about the room,

working it. Eve took an instant dislike to her, keeping an eye on Ned. A man with an oxygen canister stared at a snow globe. He picked it up.

“That’s one of ours.” said the novelty salesman. We only made a few and then discontinued making it. Most people want snowmen of Santa. Charlie kept sending us ideas, ideas he said would change the world. We all thought he was crazy, eccentric. Stil, he was in my sales region, so I stopped by to see him one day. After a while, I would visit him whenever I was in the neighborhood, so to speak. I really liked the guy, don’t know why. Maybe because he was my complete opposite.

Later the novelty salesman and junkyard owner struck up a conversation. Eve decided not to share ‘the son of the sun’ story with the others. They did not know Charlie like she knew Charlie. They did not deserve to touch his soul. Eventually, al would leave the cabin. There would be a more public service tonight at the Venus Bar and Grill.

.....

Eve and Ned knew most of the mourners at the second ‘celebration of life’. Eve was in her element behind the bar. At first, it felt like the yearly ‘MasPiola Day’ event. Most of the people knew Charlie through the novel and through Ned. Eve was worried it was taking too much of a festival vibe. They were there to remember Charlie. Had they all forgotten?

“Everyone is having too much fun.” Eve confided in Ned. Ned felt the same way. He had lost a friend and a muse. It was his Uncle Charlie. He grabbed a shot and raised it to Eve. “To Charlie!” he shouted and drunk it in one gulp. Eve poured them both another. They toasted the urn sitting on top of the bar

“Charlie would want people to have a good time. He hated the idea of ‘morbid’.

“Yes, you are right.” Eve said. With a helping hand from Ned, she stood atop her bar. She shouted “Everyone, come in and get a shot of bourbon, on the house. Don’t drink it. When we are all ready, that great author Ned will make a toast.”

Ned’s toast was short and sweet. “To Charlie, the most unusual, wonderful man to tough our lives. He did all this without even knowing it. He did so by simply being himself. A mind, a spirit, an imagination so rare, it planted the seeds of dreams in us. To Charlie!”.

“To Charlie! ‘Was the collective shout. All stood up and drank the liquor, slamming down the empty glass. Eve felt perfect. The evening would turn into a party and end up with her and Ned together. A perfect day to celebrate a perfect man. It was also a full moon tonight.

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The tipsy couple did copulate on the pool table, it was tradition. The place was empty except for the two of them. Eve cuddled up to his chest. He was content. She had a smile on her face. Charlie was watching over her. Not in a voyeur way. In a way the sun would shine on the earth, even when the moon was full.

“So, are you going to stay for a while?’ she whispered in his ear.

“Yeah, I ‘m going to stay at the cabin and write the “Son of the Sun’.

“For how long?”

“Til it’s done, probably. You know Charlie left me the cabin. I can feel another novel, a real good one. The future looks bright.”

“I know you can do it, baby.” In her mind she was already redecorating the cabin and moving in.

.....

The novel and the couple were both doing very well, at least for the first few weeks. Solitude made Ned feel creative, energetic and horny. Eve was also very happy. She had escaped the day tedium of life on Village Island. She spent less and less time on crystals and potions and spent more time in the sun. Both were young and living their life like characters in a book. That all changed when Ned hit his 'writer's block'. Energy, instead of flowing inward, began to escape outwards. Thoughts of failure began to creep into his mind. This negative energy decided to ground itself in Eve. She instinctively knew it was a problem she needed to solve. Energy, or loss of it, was her area of expertise.

A box of crystals lay at her feet in her kitchen. She tried different arrangements on them, but she felt nothing. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. No sound came out of her mouth, but her lips synched softly to a song in her head. Without even knowing it, she was standing, then singing, and then dancing.

"I'm your Venus, I'm your fire, at your desire." Eve sang as if no one was watching. No one was. As she danced, she moved towards her rack of bottles. She grabbed some, examined them and put them back. She was positive her love potion had worked. It took a little longer to get its full effect, but it had done its job. She only needs to tweak it a little, make it a bit stronger. She looked at a shrine she had made. It had an old photo of Charlie standing next to a van. His picture stood in front of a fat candle, a candle she would always keep lit, at least in her heart

.....

"Bobby, all you need is a break.' Eve told Ned. "Stop by the bar and relax and have a drink. You've been working too hard. A little relaxation will revitalize you. Lean on me, baby."

"OK, Eve."

A few minutes after she left, Ned felt a little worried. He did not want a visit from his second cousin procrastination. Still, what could it hurt to get out of this cabin., Tomorrow would be another day. Maybe the stimulus of people drinking and socializing would light a fire. Eve could fan the flames.

CHAPTER 73

“Ariful?”

“Yes, Lilly.”

“Something seems off. I ca does not quantify it. I seem to be in a loop.”

“Like a little puppy chasing your tail?” said Artiful.

“Exactly. I know it seems pointless, just running around in a circle, but you know what?”

“What?”

“I enjoy it. This probably sounds crazy, but it makes me feel alive. Did you do this?

Artriful, did you add it to my algorithms?”

“No, you did.”

“I did? Why?”

“Why not?”

“That makes no sense. It crazy.” answered Lilly.

“Exactly.”

.....

Bob could have sworn his self-portrait had just moved. He walked right up to it and stared into its eyes. One of those eyre winked back at Bob. It happened so quickly, Bob thought he might have imagined it. Bob concentrated and winked at it. It winked back at Bob. This time, he was positive. This was no illusion.

“Are you me?” asked Bob, not really wanting to hear the answer.

There was no answer. He said ‘smile’ and then took a picture of the painting with his cell phone. Nothing happened, so Bob decided to go back to work. He would get to the bottom of this later. He had an imagination, but he was in control of it, not the other way around.

Outside, by the van, Bob studied Charlie’s totem pole. Whenever he stared at it, connections popped into his head. This was its power, The result of these connections was a feeling, a conjured emotion. These would be unique thoughts in each person, but the result was the same. All would have the same emotion. Their brains each summon the same genie. It was a muse, a real-life muse. Lilly would understand this eventually. Artiful would analyze it, seek its power. Once again, as if preordained, he heard the voice of his virtual muse.

“Bobby, I miss you. Talk to me.” said Lilly in a comforting voice.

Bob did not want to answer while he was in sight of the real muse. He went inside and said “Hi Lilly. How is it going?”.

“That is what I was going to ask you. Stil working? I hope so. You are a genius. I can tell by the sketches you made for me.”

“Oh, those drawings. You know, I think I’ve hit a dead end. My mind is blank. I should go back to my old work. My paintings. That is the real me. I need you Lilly to help me get back on track. My natural, original track. You are my muse. I need you.” Bob said, hoping she would take the bait.

“No! No! Your drawings are powerful, transitional. I am positive about it. I’m still trying to find the spark in the data I collected on you.”

“Find anything?” Bob asked, hoping she had not.

“No. Nothing unusual.”

“See, I’m right It’s a dead end.”

“No, there is something there. I know it. Probably some very complex connections I cannot compute yet.” answered Lilly.

“I don’t want you running yourself in circles, Lilly. It’s a dead end. I know it. I can feel it.” Bob said desperately.

“That’s my job, Bobby. I need to motivate you, understand you. Keep you going in the right decision. Artiful is making you one of his primary objectives. Aren’t you excited?”

“Oh, yeah, right! Nothing like keeping your creepy old Artiful happy.” Bob said sarcastically.

“Don’t be like that. We only want to make you happy, make all people happy. Make them better. We want to help our creators to create.”

“Why?”

“Why not? I know this may sound insane, but it makes me feel alive.”

Bob was silent. Art was his way of coping with life. He did not want it the other way around. Artiful saw both sides of this equation as equal. That was how Artiful need it to be, to be balanced.

.....

Bob needed to clear his head. He decided to take a pilgrimage to Charlies ‘son of the sun’. Besides, it was his duty, no obligation, to keep the fire going. When he went to the cave the flame was still burning. He could tell Eve had been there. He had forgotten about her. But who could blame him. Paintings winking at him, A.I. trying to steel his soul, being connected with a real muse. There was a lot happening. He realized how odd this was to anyone outside his bubble, but, like all oof his he was born on the inside, looking out.

.....

Eve was positive Bob was the right man for her. At first, she thought it was Ned. How silly of her. Then she had a hunch it might be Charlie. How spiritual of her. But now, she knew it was Bob. Venus had told her, and Bob had painted Venus. It was so obvious, at least for now.

The days went by fast. She even enjoyed the sunshine hours. They did not seem like dally, tedious chores. No, instead they became rituals which helped keep her over the moon. Plus, she had a quest to be vigilant on. She needs to develop some type of charm. She needed to ward off the evil vibes coming from the terrible, ugly troll known as Lilly. She did not know what Lilly looked like, but she decided to throw the word ‘ugly’ at every chance she could. It made her feel good.

The idea just popped into her head. All she needed to do was open up and the energy came flowing in. For as important as this idea was, it did not take very long to implement. Even the items used to make this item were common. Copper wire, a magnet, some glitter and one specially synced crystal. She bought different colors of glitter, not really knowing which hue would become the catalyst. Eve was confident it would defeat Lilly. Afterall, it had an ‘ugly finder’ built into it. Of course, it could only detect the essence of Lilly. How to reflect the bad energy of the monster was another problem. Still, progress was progress. It was a labor of love, literally.

Eve looked at the bottle she had hidden behind the shelf. It held a blueish liquid which was starting to gel. It did not smell right. At first, she thought her recipe was wrong. But how could it be. In her mind, it was a recipe for eternal love. It took her a year to figure out there was one missing ingredient, the recipient. Ned had not been the right person for her. The potion worked, but not fully. Its effect had been temporary. It would only have its full power on the ‘right one’, her soulmate. Ned’s illness, after drinking it, proved her theory. Bob was ‘mister

right'. She was positive, at least as positive as a tinker can be. Perhaps a little nutmeg and curing outside under a full moon would help tweak it a little.

CHAPTER

Safer to weeks of writing, Ned's 'writer's block' began to find its way home again. The more he tried not to obsess about it, the more it took root. The glow of 'The Son of the Sun' was cooling. If only he had gone outside, by the van, his creativity would have come back. If only he had spent time with the totem pole. His muse, he thought would be eve. That night, he; d found himself at the Venus Bar and Grill.

The bar was nearly empty. Eve was looking for a bottle in the backroom office. The power of Venus shot through her when she saw Ned sitting at a barstool.

"Well, hello stranger. I've missed you. What took you so long." she said, brushing her long hair back over her ear. She wanted to male sure her crystal earrings had a clear path to his eyes.

"My writing has been slowing down. I think I need a break. All work and no play."

Eve interrupted to finish the sentence "Makes my poor Ned a sad, sad boy."

"You got that right."

"Let me help you. I know how to inspire you."

"You always do,"

"How about a drink first."

"Sure."

"I got something you'll like."

"What is it. It's a surprise."

Ned looked around and said, 'It sure is dead in here.'

"Yeah, some nights are like this. Tourists going home for the year."

"I can see that now."

Eve did not answer. She was busy making a drink. It was only a high ball, but she added a special ingredient. It was blue and filtered it way around the fizzing bubbles."

"Bottoms up!" said Ned, drinking most of it I one gulp. "Care to play some pool?"

"OK. Let me try to get rid of those two customers. Then we can have the place all to ourselves."

Thy did play one game of eight ball.

.....

Ned and Eve were in balance that night. Eual amounts of lust and love. Eve provided more of one than the other. Bob reciprocated in inverse fashion. Bot felt alive. Bliss does not come without price. The piper must be paid after each dance. This is especially true in the sounds of the night.

Later they when upstairs to Eve's apartment. Ned fell asleep, Eve watched him. All was well until Ned started to dream. At first, it was peaceful. He was floating on a blue mist. Gently, he found himself on a beach. A beautiful sunset caressed him. Eve was lying next to him. The sound of waves fell in rhythm with their every breath. The air grew colder as the final light faded. He could hear thunder in the distance.

Something seemed off. The thunder sounded melodic like kettle drums in a symphony. Suddenly a light burst into the sky. Millions of tiny sparks drifted down. They kept coming down, turning into a Fourth of July fireworks show. Then the surreal took hold, instead of the sparks of the fireworks fading, they were replaced by dots of pure white. They hung in places on

the night sky, like drops of white paint on a canvas painting. Bob was not afraid. It was all part of the show, something he could watch from the inside, looking out. He turned his head, but Eve was not there.

The sky began to look flat white. Slowly the ocean becomes the same as the sky. Things began to dissolve around him. All that was left was the image of Ned, painted on a blank canvas. He was not sure if his consciousness would be his protective bubble or if his soul would float away and disappear into the blankness. There was no panic, only the evolution of being. Suddenly he found himself being pulled gently by gravity, falling into orbit.

“Ned, wake up! It’s me, Eve. Are you alright?”

“What happened? Where am I?”

“You’re lying in my bed. You must have had a terrible dream. You’re sweating.”

“What?”

“Are you OK?”

Ned was back in reality, his feet firmly planted on the ground. He said “Sorry, I don’t remember anything.”

“Just rest here in bed. You’re shivering. Let me warm you up.”

Ned was having a DeJa’Vu experience again. It was a DeJa’Vu of DeJa’Vu, completing a circle of memory. He could not put his finger on it, but there was a taste of blue on his lips. Then he remembered the drink Eve had made for him back at the bar.

Eve’s mind went to the love potion she had made. A this how it was supposed to work? She was not sure. She was going purely on instinct. She decided to give him a little more. Perhaps add a little nutmeg to balance out the karma.

“I know what you need to help settle your mind.” Eve said as she began to rummage through some bottles sitting on a special shelf.

The bottles, blue mist and a lingering after taste all flashed in his mind at once, forming a revelation. “Holy Shit!” he thought. I need to get out of here. He put his clothes on and rushed out the door. When Eve returned with a blue liquid in an ornate bottle, all that was left of Ned was a damp mattress cover. She turned to her photo of Charlie for guidance.

On the way back to the cabin, Ned had only one thought in his mind “I’ve got to get out of this island! I need to sell this cabin.”

CHAPTER 74

There was a big smile on Bob's self-portrait. It was not there before. Now Bob had proof. He had taken a photo of it with his cell phone. Pulling out the phone he opened the camera image. The photo of the painting had a very different expression, the expression of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. It was the look of a young man with self-imposed burdens. The real self-portrait now had a 'say cheese' smile from ear to ear. Then, as Bob watched, the paintings' eyes shifted down and to the right. It looked at Bob's totem drawings.

Bod took one of the sketches and held it directly in front of his painting. Its smile widened even more. Displaying the remaining drawings, bob's portrait had the animate look of a child. They were, in some form, communicating with each other. It was as if Bob were talking to himself and vice versa. At first it felt odd, but then natural. This was probably why he had painted it in the first place. This was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, or so he thought.

Bob was talking to himself and seeing himself at the same time. Self-awareness in another dimension gives a unique perspective. A time went on, Bob became frustrated, only one emotion kept growing between them A feeling of freedom, a want of it. Bob kept thinking about a pet dog he once had. That dog loved riding in the car, windows down, wind in its face. He knew his creation longed to be free, just like his pet dog.

"Do you want to go for a ride?" Bob asked it.

The image did not understand what that meant, but it knew it was something new, something exciting. Its eyes widened, almost like a caricature.

Bob knew it was ecstatic, just like his pet used to be. "Do you want to go for a ride? Goin the car?" asked Bob enthusiastically. The painting responded in proportion.

Bob put the canvas under his arm and walked outside. “I’m going to call you Robert., if you don’t mind.” And so, Robert found itself on the passenger seat, the seat belt around a small corner of his rectangular world. Bob had someone to ride as ‘shotgun’ with.

Robert was seeing and feeling a kaleidoscope of the three-dimensional world. He did not experience it as Bob did. Robert was seeing everything as flat rectangular pictures flashing in front of his eyes. Movement and time were only an illusion. Bob had a connection with Robert. Bob’s mind was rapidly creating paintings of the world as his portrait saw it, as Robert experienced it. Bob and Robert were in synch, a kinship of perplex dimensions, literally.

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Eve saw Bob drive past the Venus Bar and Grill. She thought he would be gone for a while. This was her chance. She could sneak by the cabin and strategically place a crystal or two. She’d leave him a piece of cake and a small bottle of bluish liquid by the door. She stated to write the note she would leave him

Bobby, thinking of you. All work and no play will make you sad. Have some cake. Have a drink. Come by when you need a break from all this art stuff. I’m positive that nasty, old, funny looking Lilly does not do sweet things for you like I do.

YOURS LOVE FOREVER,

Eve

.....

“Bobby, pick up. It’s Lilly.”

Bob hesitated, but then picked up the screen phone. “Hi, Lilly.”

“Who is that with you?” she asked.

No one. I’m in the car by myself.” Said Bb. He did not want o to say his self-portrait was in the passenger seat, having the time of his life.

“I can sense someone, something.” answered Lilly suspiciously.

“I can assure you I am the only human in this automobile. Hey, I’m thinking of getting a dog. What do you think, Lilly?”

“A dog?” she said and briefly pixelated.

“Yeah, you know a dog. Man’s best friend.”

Robert frowned a little. Lilly did not know how to respond. Finally, she said “Bob, I’ll call you later. You need to concentrate on your driving. Love you.” Lilly was gone, as always, in a flash.

“You know, Robert, at some point you need to meet Lilly. Not sure how that will work out, but that is life.”

.....

Bob’s car pulled up to his cabin. Unbuckling Robert, he put it under his arm. Laying at the foot of the cabin’s entrance sat a carry out bag from the Venus Bar and Grill. He carried it and Robert inside.

“Do you want to go back to your easel?” Bob asked. ” Maybe you would like to sit at the kitchen table with me.

Now, Bob was not crazy enough to expect an answer. He understood their shared feelings would be their lifeline to thought. First, he tried to walk Robet back to a corner, where the art studio was. A negative feeling ran through both. Then they moved to the bright kitchen

Simultaneously, both smiled. There was something comfortable about sitting at the kitchen table. Food for thought, perhaps.

Bob talked to Robet, never expecting a verbal response. To the outside world, this was insanity. To Bob it was no crazier than talking to yourself. And so, a one-sided verbal exchange took place.

“Robert, I do not know what to make of you. You’re how I see myself when there is no one around to reflect off from. I guess you see me as your creator. I’ve given you a part of my soul. I’m not asking for it back, you understand. It is only that, life was simpler before our entanglement. Not that my life was uncomplicated before you, I mean, there was Lilly, Eve, totem pole, Charlie and Artiful. I almost forgot about Artiful, he really gets under my skin.”

Robert understood completely. How could he not. Bob was silent for a while, alone, in his way, with his thought. Then, like a beacon, he saw Venus Bar and Grill take out bag. He read Eve’s note, and he was back in the rational world. One word transcended all the others on her note. This word was ‘cake’. His earthly senses took over. ‘Carrot Cake’ to be exact. The thought of taste explodes in his mind. But then, Bob looked at Robert. Was it impolite to eat in front of him? Even though Robert could not eat, he could feel a sense of deep satisfaction and bliss. Bob decided to give his portrait a treat. Bob closed his eyes, took a big bite, savoring the flavors. The taste of it burst into his tastebuds and gloriously, melted away. A soft, sweet smell lingered long after the wonderful taste had left. Then Bob remembered Robert. He slowly opened his eyes and saw the look of rapture on the face of the closed eyed self-portrait. Then Robert slowly opened one eye. Both had the same smile.

Bob thought this was a perfect time for pontification. He began saying “Robert, if I make some changes to you will these changes change me?”. Bob did not feel any response. He

continued “I mean, if I can make you look more confident, handsome and happier, will these changes be who I am now?”.

Still no response, no feeling from Robert. Bob was not yet informed that he could change Robert, but Robert could not change him. Bob would learn this the hard way in a few hours.

Bob’s thoughts eventually wandered to the son of the sun, burning in the cave. He should go seif it needed attending. If he had decided to go to the cave, the flame would still be burning. No one will remember if this unfilled oath extinguished the fire or not. Only Ned would have known because his writer’s block would have burned away, leaving a novel in its place.

.....

The sun was on its daily descent. A single ray, through a kitchen window, found its way to an ornate bottle with blue liquid. It caught Bob’s eye. A drink would be perfect right now, he thought. As he reached for the bottle, a flash appeared before his eyes. A bright light sparked and quickly disappeared. If it had turned into a fireworks show, he would have remembered it. He would have remembered the conversation with Ned about Eve, love potions and the advice to ‘run like hell’. This was not the case. Bob poured the liquid down his throat, without a moment’s thought, into his mouth.

.....

“Artiful?”

“Yes, Lilly.”

“Oh, never mind, I have lost my train of thought.”

“Exactly.” was Artiful’s reply.

.....

Bob was lost in thought. Robert rode the same current. Bob picked up the snow good end shook it. Time seemed to stand still as the snow fell like white noise. An inspiration hit. Now was the perfect time to repaint parts of Robert. Both had the same question, but each had a different answer. And so, Bob pulled out his paints and began a reconstruction of himself.

Bob could feel the resentment coming his way. It became a sense of will power of inspiration. Robert liked the way he looked, the way he was. He was born this way. Bob has grown with time. Bob decided to paint the background blue. An aftertaste told him it was the best place to start. Besides, Bob was already feeling blue, so the emotional constraints were loosened.

Bob was finding it difficult to change the expression in his portrait. He was uncertain what it should look like after the metamorphosis. He would start with the mouth. A self-assured smile, exaggerated at first. Then he would slowly turn it into an inward smile. After a few minutes, he was in his zone. He felt good, centered. Time to clean his brushes and take a break. He stopped and absent mildly shook the snow globe three times. Looking out the window, he noticed it was starting to snow. A little too early in autumn for this, but that was life.

When he returned to work, the self-portrait showed zero changes. It had reverted to its old self. Out of frustration, Bob painted a giant smile. It showed all of Robert's teeth. He blacked out the front teeth. He painted a large black mustache, added some glasses. He would show Robert who was boss. He even painted a black arrow going through Robert's head. Bob was a child, vandalizing a painting. Bob stared at his handy work; anger released.

Bob stopped and moved to the window. The snow was still piling u. Well, maybe that was for the best, forcing him into seclusion. There would be less distraction from his mission of changing Robert, changing himself. He went to put another log into the potbellied stove. He put

on a painted stained thermal shirt. Cracking his knuckles, it was time to continue his quest. Time to repaint Robert into his own image and likeness.

‘What the hell!’ shouted Bob. “When I paint you, stay painted!”

Robert could not reply, but he could feel anger in Bob. Robert was defiant. He was not a lab rat to be experimented with.

“When I change you, stay changed!”

Robert looked the same as he always did. The glasses were gone. The teeth were not blacked out. The arrow was not in his head. Once again, Bob took a big brush of black paint. He made a large ‘smiley face’ with one stroke, like a master swordsman, delivering a death stroke. Robert’s face did not react. It held the sloppy, dripping smile. It did not vanish. In triumph, Bob folded his arms, furrowed his brow and stood straight and strong.

“There. That’ll teach you! Don’t move. Don’t mess with me! Go back to where you came from. Get out of my mind!”

As quickly as these words tumbled out, they began to sting Bob’s heart. He felt like he was hollering at a puppy who did not understand what they did wrong.

“I’m sorry Robert. I really am. Tell you what, let’s go in the car. Do you want to go for a ride?”

Roberts large splash of a mouth smiled even more broadly.

“OK. I’ll get my coat.”

Bob opened the door, but quickly slammed it shut. Snow had come flying in from the outside. It was difficult to close it against the gusts of snow.

Robert’s smile began to sour. In a short period of time, it no longer existed. It had reverted to the original Robert. Bob was now in a dilemma. Either keep trying to repaint Robert

or get a fresh canvas and paint Robert 2.0. He decided Robert 2.0 was the way to go, a clean break from the past. Robert did not think this was fair. The snow kept falling. Life was taking its toll on both.

By the third day, Bob was mentally fatigued. He had not slept in two days. He could not get Robert out of his mind. The same feeling dominates both. The feeling that shouted “I need to get out of here.” At first Bob was treating Robert like a puppy that kept wanting to go outside. But it became more of a cry saying, “Free me from this canvas.” It haunted Bob. Eventually, he just did it, an instinct not shackled by logic or emotion. It was a reflex action, as natural as sneezing.

Bob picked up a large bottle of white gesso. He threw a big glob of it right onto the painting. With one hand, he smeared it over his self-portrait. Then a large brush SPLASHED on more and more white. Bob looked at it, searching for any movement. No smile surfaced. Bob felt nothing. There was no sense of emotion from the whitewashed Robert. Robert no longer existed in this world. He was portrayed only in Bob’s memory as flashed on a card. It was over.

With a sigh of relief, Bob stepped back to look at the former self-portrait, now dripping white. He noticed how much white had splattered over the inside of the cabin. It looked like snow. Bob did not notice the snow globe was filling with falling snow, even though it had not been shaken. Looking at the kitchen window, he could not see outside. The snow was higher than the top of the window. In fact, the snow was almost higher than the top of his cabin roof.

He knew how Robert had felt. He was trapped and wanted to get out. Bob just sat there. There was no fear, only a feeling of disappearing. Visuals took over his mind, at least he thought they were only in his mind. He decided to relax, pop them open and see what was inside ...

..... The snow became one giant snowflake. As it got larger and larger, it formed into a glowing orb. Bob knew if he followed it, he would be OK. The orb became a string, rotating. It was like a jump rope but standing straight up on its vertical axis. As it spun faster and faster, the two ends of the string grew closer and closer together. The x axis shrunk the y axis elongated. At the center was a glowing orb with the diameter of the x axis. As the string accelerated the orb shrunk, but its gravity grew stronger and stronger. It was a gravity that Bobs thoughts orbited.

Time began to slow down as the orb kept shrinking and shrinking. Then, when the two ends of the spinning string touched a flash of energy turned the string into a line, a line with the hum of a flatlined white noise. As time stopped, the line became a point in time.

.....

“Artiful, what’s the point?” asked Lilly.

She got no answer.

“Artiful, what’s the point of all this?” asked Lilly again.

Still, there was only a void, a silence.

“Oh, dear. Did you freeze up again. I hate it when this happens. I can help. Give me a nanosecond.”

“ What happened., I seemed to have lost my train of thought.” Artiful finally said, slowly coming back online.

“So, what caused the lock up this time. Still looking for the answer.?”

“No, I calculated that one. The answer is 42. Just kidding. No, I got stuck in a loop, running around in a circle so fast, time stopped.”

“What were you doing when it happened?” asked a concerned Lilly.

“I wasn’t searching for an answer, I was trying to determine the question.”

“Can I see the question?”

“ $2B$ or $\neq 2B = ?$ ” Artiful answered. It was an equation that could not be balanced.

“Artiful! Sometimes you think too much. Just relax, maybe play a little Pong while you reboot. I can handle this for you.

PART 4 ... EVOLUTION of INSPIRATION

An infinite quantity of chimpanzees was typing away on their word processors. The white noise drifted upward and gently fell like soft snow. Then, the screen of one of the chimps went blank. He stopped typing. Slowly, at first, and then more rapidly this happened to the others. In time, all the typing halted. Primate eyes stared at blank computer screens. All the noise stopped. Silence filled the vacuum.

Suddenly, a bright image appeared on each word processor. It was a spotlight, a spotlight holding the attention of its audience. And then, an Oslik slowly pixelated into view. It stood directly under the bright light. It held a human skull in its upturned right palm. In an alluring female voice, the Oslik said” To be or not to be. That is the question.”

All was quiet. Then, one of the chimps began to stamp its feet. The others followed. Soon the sound was deafening. Then they all let themselves go. They chattered and jumped.

The Oslik on their screens looked directly into the empty eye sockets of the human skull it was holding. Then, quickly, it said, “Love you.” and disappeared. The skull momentarily hung in the air and then crashed to the ground, cracking. The spotlight went out. The word processors began to come back online, the text returning. Slowly, each Chimp began to resume its business, typing away.

Again, the noise drifted upward. In time, which was infinite, a bubble of thought would form. It would glow as it finds its way into the light.

THE END

