

Nexus

By Jeff Dunne

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ISBN: 978-1-936033-41-6

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For information, address correspondence to:

Wyrder Books, a division of
ICRL Press
P.O. Box 113
Sykesville, MD 21784

This book is dedicated to the life and memory of my mother, Brenda, the woman who taught me the nature and criticality of balance. She dedicated her life to laying the groundwork for the scientific world to accept what most people appreciate at a subconscious level but often cannot remember on a day-to-day basis: that cause without purpose... how without why... entropy without syntropy... past without future... yang without yin... can never do more than tell half the story.

And we are, without question, creatures of story.

And we deserve more than half.

My mother showed me that peace lies in accepting others for who and what they are, and that lesson too is woven into this story. She taught me to value what is different from myself, and to realize that every flavor of person is necessary to realize the great ice cream sundae that is humanity. She gave me the space and encouragement to be true to myself, to be the person I want to be and not submit or conform to the expectations that others may try to force upon me.

And I hope that if you are reading this dedication, you too will follow that wisdom.

Prologue

Valerie Guerrero awoke to the sound of breaking glass. She sat bolt upright in her bed, little fingers clutching the flowered pink of her comforter. A moment later the other sounds came... the door of her parents' room slamming open against the wall, her father's footsteps clambering down the staircase.

Something was wrong.

Near the edge of her bed lay the pink and yellow Frombit that was her constant companion, with its worn fabrics that weren't quite a creature yet unmistakably a friend. She grabbed it, hugging it close as the door to her room slowly opened. The fair skin of her mother's face became visible, almost spectral in its paleness. The fear was unmistakable, and Valerie's knuckles whitened to match as she gripped the Frombit even tighter.

"Get under the bed, sweetheart!" Her mother's voice was a fierce whisper. Valerie was frozen in place. "Now!"

She scrambled out from beneath the covers, and a moment later was hiding between boxes in the cave beneath her big-girl bed. With a deft flick of the wrist, her mother rearranged the blankets so Valerie could only see the beige carpet. Then a fold of the blanket was lifted to reveal her mother's face again.

"Now stay there and don't make a sound. Not a sound, you understand?"

Valerie nodded, eyes wide with fear, and then her mother was gone. The door closed with the faintest of clicks, and there was only the beating of her pulse. The stillness was eerie, stifling, but only for a few breaths. A gunshot shattered the silence and her mother screamed. Then another burst of gunfire. Then everything was silent once more.

Valerie held her breath until her lungs began to burn, and then she heard something. Sirens. The wails of distant police cars, faint but growing steadily louder. Downstairs, a door slammed. She closed her eyes as tightly as she could...

"Valerie?"

She opened her eyes. The soft blue walls of the psychologist's office felt like a cartoon rendering of the afternoon sky, and Elena Harkins, the counselor she was supposed to call 'Elle' but never could, was watching her with kind eyes. The notepad was in her lap. Sometimes Val wondered whether the woman took it with her when she went to the bathroom. Elena inclined her head forward, a silent repeat of her question.

"No, ma'am," Valerie lied. "I don't really remember a lot about that night. I guess I kind of blotted it out."

Counselor Harkins smiled softly. "That's perfectly natural, Valerie. Really. Nothing to be concerned about. I just wanted to know if anything had changed since the last time we spoke."

Valerie shook her head as she pushed her hands down into the soft fabric of the couch. Elena had told her she could lie down if she wanted, but that felt too weird. Besides, she had to leave someplace for—

"Your grandparents tell me that you have a new friend." Valerie's attention snapped back to the woman. "Do you want to tell me about her?"

Involuntarily, Valerie turned to look by the office door where a little girl stood. It was hard to say how old Kelly seemed. Val didn't really care. Seven? Eight? Maybe even nine, but certainly not younger than herself. She was dressed in red, the color she nearly always chose—a simple sundress with a pattern of white, wavy lines that hugged the waist and made it unquestionably the attire of an elegant young lady.

“They said her name is Kelly.” Valerie's stare returned to the psychologist. “Is that right?”

Val glanced back at her friend, who was twirling a lock of her straight, blond hair around a finger. Kelly scrunched her face, then shook her head. The way her left eye squinted just a little more than the right always gave Valerie the feeling that her friend found everything just a little amusing. Kelly walked forward, passing through the couch as if it didn't exist, but then sat on it solidly next to her friend.

“Valerie?” the psychologist prompted.

“Yes. Kelly.”

“Would you like to talk about her?”

Valerie shrugged. “There isn't anything to say.”

“That's okay. Maybe another time.”

“Maybe,” she mumbled. She watched, and then... there it was. The little note on the pad. If she put the pen down now, Valerie knew... Yes. The session was over.

“I just want you to know,” the counselor said, “that it is not uncommon for children who have been through severe trauma, like you have, to...” She struggled to find the right word. “To find a friend, like Kelly, who can help them work through the experience. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that.”

Valerie endured a brief eternity in awkward, fidgety silence before Elena continued.

“I suppose that's enough for today,” she finally said, and gave Val a kind, slightly-too-clinical smile. “Please keep writing or drawing in your journal, and we'll talk again next week, okay?”

Valerie mumbled a quiet “okay” in response, then slipped off the couch and walked out of the office to join her grandparents in the reception area. Kelly stayed a moment longer, smiling warmly at the psychologist.

“Thank you, Elle. She may not say it, but I know she really appreciates your help.” Kelly's voice was steady, confident, and completely imperceptible to the psychologist, who had already started flipping through her notes in preparation for her next appointment.

Chapter One
Legacy Claimed

The village of Woodhome Heights, where few if any of the innumerable, quaint little houses were actually made of wood, was a suburb for people who liked to go to bed early and sleep through quiet nights of gentle breezes and serenading crickets. The residents on Canterbury Road, however, didn't always enjoy this luxury. From time to time they would be awakened by the roar of a black Yamaha YZF-R1 sports motorbike blasting its way beneath their street's canopy of green ash. It was an unpredictable event, sometimes absent for weeks at a stretch but occasionally happening several nights in a row.

This particular evening fell into the noisy category.

Two figures were atop the sleek motorcycle as it screamed along the street before pulling a dangerously sharp turn into the driveway of a two-story Colonial that had remained all but unoccupied over the past five years. The passenger hung on tightly, one might even say desperately, to the lithe form in front. His arms remained wrapped around her waist after they skidded to a stop, at least until she peeled them away. He stumbled off the bike and inhaled deeply to calm his nerves. It didn't really work. The woman swung a leg over in an effortless motion, and before the man finished his second exhale, Valerie had removed her helmet and was pressed against him, a mischievous smile flickering in her eyes as she studied Mike's features.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then her lips were on his. He stumbled backward, nearly knocking over the bike.

"Careful," she warned, playful but with an unsettling edge. "I like that bike more than I like you."

He laughed nervously, trying to decide if he should believe the words or the smile. Before he reached a conclusion she was pulling him toward the house. He blinked in uncertainty.

"I hope the ride wasn't too rough for you," she laughed as she reached around to squeeze his backside.

"No." He swallowed, then took the lie one more step. "Not at all."

"Good, because that was the gentle part of the evening." She pulled him to her again, claiming another moment of passion, then drew away and withdrew a set of keys from her jacket pocket.

"I thought you said you lived downtown."

"I do. But this place is mine too." She opened the front door. "Sort of."

"Sort of yours?"

She pushed him into the house with an aggressive kiss. By the time the door was closed, her jacket had hit the floor and she was starting on his.

"Technically it belongs to my grandparents' est—"

"Your grandparents?" He stiffened. "What if they...?"

"Their *estate*. Trust me. No one's going to interrupt us. Unless maybe their ghosts are hanging around." She laughed, then went for another kiss.

Mike leaned back. "Their *ghosts*?"

She grabbed him by the neck, pulled him close, and whispered into his ear. “Relax. If their spirits didn’t want me using the place, they’ve had plenty of chances to let me know.” Then she was on him again, her face buried in his neck.

“Plenty of... just how many—”

She put a finger to his lips. “Shhh.” Another long, grinding kiss. “You talk too much.”

They marked a path through the dusty living room one article of clothing after another. It was clearly the home of an elderly couple who believed the décor of 1972 never went out of style, and who, equally clearly, had doted on their granddaughter with boundless affection. An expansive matrix of framed photographs revealed only narrow slivers of a pale green wall, and each row was organized by topic. At the top was a progression of Valerie winning Krav Maga competitions, starting around ten-years-old and concluding in her early twenties. Two more rows depicted family life; early photos included Valerie’s parents, but most were scenes of her with her grandparents, Maria and Julio. Still another row spoke of a lifelong friendship with a short, auburn-haired girl who eventually matured into an attractive woman several inches taller than Valerie.

Shirts and belts were discarded by the time Mike and Val had reached the far end of the living room.

“Door,” she warned. Before Mike could mutter ‘what?’ he was slammed against it. “Warned you,” Valerie whispered with an impish smile.

“Ah, door.” He fumbled with the handle. Her bra was on the carpet by the time he had the door open. She pushed him through into the master bedroom.

The chamber was sparsely populated with old, worn furniture. A scratched dressing table of dark wood and two matching dressers lined the walls on either side. An unmade king-sized bed—the kind with four posters intended to support some missing canopy of heavy felt or velvet—was centered on the far wall and framed by curtained windows. Mike couldn’t stop himself from wondering when the sheets had last been washed, but the thought quickly evaporated as Valerie pulled him around to face her. Her jeans were crumpled on the floor and his eyes fell momentarily to her black panties, that is until she pushed him onto the bed and started pulling off his own jeans. They got as far as his shins, but she unexpectedly stopped and looked around.

“What’s that sound?” Valerie twisted her head back and forth, trying to localize the source.

“What sound?”

“You can’t hear that humming?”

Mike listened. He heard it, a faint buzz, rhythmically pulsing louder then diminishing. It sounded perhaps like a distant exhaust fan that was slightly out of balance.

“I... I guess I hear something. Maybe it’s the A/C system?”

“With that throbbing sound?”

“If you’re interested in throbbing—”

“Don’t be an ass, Mitch.”

“Mike,” he corrected with a touch of indignation.

“Whatever. What the hell *is* that?” Valerie stepped back, leaving his jeans abandoned just above his ankles.

He sat up and pulled them off the rest of the way. “Like I said, it’s probably the air conditioning. Maybe the blower’s out of balance or something.”

“The A/C isn’t on, m—” She stopped herself at the last moment, replacing ‘moron’ with, “Mitch. Why would I run the A/C when I’m not living here?”

Mike opened his mouth to reply, but Valerie had already turned around, and was now crossing back and forth across the room. The humming seemed loudest near the bed, and she bent down to listen.

Definitely louder.

She grasped one of the bedposts. Mike watched her momentarily, earning him an irate glare. He stood, and she gave the bed a push. It barely budged. She gave him a second, colder glare. Its meaning was clear: *why aren’t you helping?*

Together they were able to walk the bed over by several feet, and Valerie bent down to examine the carpet.

“Get the lights,” she ordered without looking up.

Mike walked back to the door and flipped a switch. Nothing happened. “There’s a metaphor for the evening,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He hit a second switch and two lamps, one on each dresser, threw pale yellow light into the room. Through dusty lampshades it was only a little brighter than what the moon was casting through the uncurtained windows, but it was enough. Valerie traced the edges of a square hatch, perhaps two and a half feet across. There was no question why she hadn’t seen it when she had been living in the house. With the carpet as thick as it was, the trap door would be impossible to detect without moving the bed.

She caught a glint of metal, and pushed the threads apart to reveal a small keyhole near one edge. Valerie’s eyes grew wide, and she reached out with a hesitant finger. “No,” she muttered.

“What’s that?” Mike asked from the doorway. She ignored him.

“No. It can’t be.”

“Can’t be what?”

But there was no doubt in her mind. *This* was the matching keyhole.

All but naked, she rushed out of the bedroom and towards the stairway off the kitchen, interrupting Mike’s, “What are you—” with her own “Be right back!”

Despite an overwhelming sense of urgency, Valerie stopped at the foot of the stairs. She hadn’t ascended this flight for years, and it felt like a tunnel back in time. Slowly, step by step, she allowed herself the journey.

The door to her old room at the end of the hall was closed. She approached it hesitantly, running her fingers along the walls as she went. Valerie had worked very hard to leave her past behind and suddenly here it was again, standing between her and whatever secret was hidden beneath that mysterious hatch in her grandparents’ bedroom.

She turned the handle and pushed gently. The door swung open, revealing a landscape of adolescent clutter. Clothes covered the floor, and nearly everything else upon which a garment could be flung. Jutting out from beneath the landscape of fabric was an amalgam of old martial arts magazines, books, CDs, and rocks and shells from vacations long past. Each artifact evoked flashes of buried memories, and for the briefest of moments she

was a teenager again. Her grandparents were calling, summoning her to come down for... dinner, school, to say hello to the neighbors. If one could truly forget the trauma of her parents' murder, it really wasn't a bad childhood.

And then it was gone. She was twenty-seven once more, standing in the room of the teenager left far behind, and she finally knew what mystery that key would unlock.

Val waded through the mess, nearly tripping on a set of nunchaku waiting beneath a hooded sweatshirt to ambush the unwary foot. She lifted the corner of her old bed to reveal a stash of her most personal memories. Photographs, scraps of poetry, and a dozen other items that had once seemed so important all pleaded for her attention, but only one item mattered.

In the center of the hoard was a small combination lockbox. Valerie quickly rotated the dials, heard the soft click as the mechanism released, and opened the case. Posters of the world's great martial artists stood in silent witness as Valerie reached in and solemnly withdrew the silver teardrop locket that contained the tiny key.

Her grandmother had given the pendant to her in the last minutes of her life. Valerie had been across town, working in the dojo when the call reached her. She had raced home at breakneck speed, and burst into the living room to find Nana on the couch. Her grandmother had weakly motioned her over, and immediately held out her hand. Val took it, and felt the locket's smooth, warm shape on her palm. Then Nana smiled. Valerie would never forget the sense of peace and pride that shone from the woman's soft brown eyes in that moment. Nothing was spoken in those final moments. In fact, it was only after her grandfather had placed a shaking hand on Valerie's shoulder that she realized her grandmother had stopped breathing.

Val returned the lock box to its hidden shrine. Once the mattress was back in place, she trotted back downstairs and into the master bedroom. Mike stood by the doorway, rooted in the same spot as when she had dashed out, and she went past him without a word.

"What's that?" he asked, nodding at the delicate silver chain draped over her fist.

Valerie didn't respond. When she had reached the trap door, she opened the locket and withdrew a small brass key.

"What *is* that?" Mike repeated.

She shot the briefest of glances in his direction, but still said nothing. Valerie snapped the locket shut again and placed the chain over her head. The silver charm swung back and forth, flickering in the dim light as she knelt down in front of the trap door. With a deep breath, held in anticipation, she slipped the key into the lock. It fit perfectly, gliding into the chamber with a barely audible metallic whisper.

She twisted, the key turned, and the trapdoor sprang up a quarter of an inch. She slowly exhaled as the low, rhythmic humming became more intense.

"Holy shit," she muttered as she rocked back onto her heels, staring at the hatch. A strand of her dark hair escaped, falling in front of her eyes; she secured it behind an ear.

"What's down there?" Mike asked, suddenly right behind her. Valerie jumped at his nearness. She hadn't heard him approach, which was unusual for her.

She glanced over her shoulder, appreciating his nakedness for a fleeting moment, but the allure of what lay beyond the trapdoor was far greater.

"Let's find out."

Valerie lifted the carpeted square to reveal a steep, narrow staircase descending into the darkness. The pulsing surged in intensity, and Valerie's skin suddenly felt electrified. The teardrop locket vibrated against her chest.

She peered downwards, but the light from the bedroom lamps was too dim to reveal anything. She took a step down the stairs, then another. The darkness was complete.

"Mitch," she called back, "hand me my phone. It's in my pants pocket." She turned to see Mike buttoning his jeans. "What the hell are... You're not leaving, are you?"

"Honestly," he replied, "I don't know. But I'm pretty sure that whatever I *will* be doing, I don't need to be naked for it." He retrieved the phone from her pants and stepped over to where Valerie stood, clad in her panties like they would protect her from any danger the Underworld could dare present. He placed the phone in her outstretched hand. "You might want shoes."

Fully dressed, cell phone casting a stark white light before her, Valerie descended the staircase. With tall risers and treads less than half the length of her feet, it was a slow process. Mike followed a few steps behind. By the time he reached the bottom, Valerie had already made her way down a short passage and was examining a closed door. The pulsing hum had continued to grow in intensity and was now producing an unsettling sensation in the pits of their stomachs.

The door was unremarkable, but a sharp rap told Valerie that it was both wood and very thick. She waded through two decades of memories of living with her grandparents, trying desperately to recall any hint as to what lay beyond. Nothing surfaced.

"Only one way to find out," Kelly whispered in her ear.

Valerie didn't reply. She never spoke aloud to Kelly where others could hear, and certainly not a one-nighter like Mitch. An adolescent could get away with talking to imaginary friends, but that kind of thing was a big risk for a twenty-seven-year-old woman. Only her friend Amelia was privy to the relationship between Valerie and Kelly. Amelia would proclaim that she didn't truly understand it, but it was a part of Valerie, and that was enough for her. Kelly thought Amelia was tops, but then that was hardly a surprise. The minds of imaginary friends worked that way.

"Are you going to open the door at some point, or should I take a nap first?"

Kelly's sarcasm had, as usual, a calming effect on Valerie. Also not much of a surprise after twenty years. Val reached for the doorknob just as Mike came to stand behind her. She turned it and pushed. The door swung open with a creak.

The pulsed humming took another leap in magnitude, and Valerie felt her whole body quivering with it. She expected the sensation to be uncomfortable, but it was less a sense of loudness as a feeling of resonance. Her ears, like everything else in and on her, were vibrating intensely.

"It's like being strapped to a massage chair on steroids," she whispered back to Mike, but if he heard, he gave no indication.

Valerie held her phone up and stepped into the room beyond.

It was a small, cylindrical chamber, perhaps a dozen feet in diameter and with only about a foot of clearance above Valerie's head. The walls appeared to be formed out of a

rough concrete, windowless and unadorned; the floor felt gritty beneath her shoes, like dirt or fine gravel. In the center was a pedestal with something upon it, although the light from her phone was too weak to reveal its nature. She had no doubt, however, that it was the source of the vibrations.

Valerie began to take a second step, but stopped as Mike's hand fell on her shoulder. She turned her head and saw the look of concern on his face. Kelly stood beside him, rolling her eyes in disapproval of his timidness. Valerie couldn't tell if Mike's expression was worry for her, fear for himself, or something else entirely, but it didn't matter. She brushed his hand away and stepped forward to the center of the chamber.

As she approached the pedestal, her phone's flashlight revealed that there were actually two items upon it. A folded piece of yellowed paper lay beneath a hemispherical crystal. The latter was vibrating so intensely that its edges were a blur.

Abandoning Mike in the doorway, Kelly strode forward to stand beside Valerie. Her customary short red sundress, a solid pattern now that the white augments of childhood had been abandoned, was muted gray in the darkness, yet her blond hair somehow kept its golden color, as if it shone of its own illumination. Did it always do that? Now that Val thought about it, yes. It did. Funny how she had never noticed before.

"Well, that's interesting," observed her lifelong companion.

"Isn't it?" Valerie whispered back.

"What do you suppose it is?"

Val shook her head. She put her hand out, palm forward, trying to see if she could feel the vibrations emanating from it. She could. She looked at Kelly, who responded with a single raised eyebrow.

"What is it?" called Mike.

"If you don't want to be part of the action, you have to wait to hear about it on the weekend news, Mitch."

"Mike." The irritation in his voice was undisguised. That's fine. Anyone who couldn't handle this definitely couldn't handle her.

Val reached towards the stone, almost touching it; she turned to look at Kelly again.

"Hell, yeah, Val. We've gotta know."

She extended her finger, touched the crystal, and everything went utterly silent.

Praxis's eyes shot open as they sat bolt upright with a gasp.

"Of course she would do it when I'm sleeping." They shook their head and groaned, half to dispel that moment of transition between the worlds of dreams and wakefulness, and half in general disgust at the situation. "It would have been way too civilized to do it at a reasonable hour."

Praxis lit a slip of sethrey paper, stood up from their sleeping mat, and made their way to the Great Library of the Interstice. They could replay it later, of course, but it was never quite the same as watching while things were actually happening.

Chapter Two
Iceland Bound

The library on Montgomery Boulevard had once been a monastery, and it exuded a stately presence that was completely lost on Valerie. As she and Kelly walked through the glass doors that had replaced the original oak, a heavy silence fell over them. The custom of being quiet in libraries may have lost its luster over the years, but this building seemed a holdout to the old ways. It demanded hushed whispers, and so naturally Kelly spoke as loudly as possible. This meant nothing to the other patrons, but it made Valerie uncomfortable regardless.

“Oh, this is nice. We should have come here ages ago.” Kelly ran a hand over a painting on the wall.

Why, exactly? thought Val in response.

“Just to, you know, experience the ambience.”

By which you mean, to disturb the ambience.

“Naturally.”

They stopped, looked at each other, and then chuckled in unison.

Where do you suppose we'll find a librarian?

“One of the desks, I guess. Maybe over there?” Kelly pointed through an archway at an array of long tables. A lone man, perhaps in his late twenties, stood behind one, sorting a stack of books.

He's cute.

“I think the librarians are complimentary. You can probably take him home.”

I just might.

“If you wanted to do that, you probably should have showered before coming here.”

Funny.

“Or at least changed clothes.” Kelly flicked at Valerie's untucked shirt.

Guys like the disheveled look. Trust me.

Kelly looked down at her own clothes, which were as immaculately styled and pressed as always. “Is that why I never get a date?”

That, and maybe the whole 'I'm not actually real' thing, she thought back at her friend as they approached the table.

The man looked up with a smile. “Good morning. Can I help you?” He had a slight accent that Valerie couldn't place.

She flashed her own smile in return. “As a matter of fact, I believe you can.”

“Maybe you can help us both,” added Kelly very loudly.

You can go now. Then out loud, “I'm guessing you work here?”

“I do,” replied the librarian. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

“Yes, actually,” Valerie nearly purred as she leaned forward slightly.

“Ask if he has an imaginary friend.”

Seriously. You can go now. Any time.

“You never let me have any fun anymore.”

The man waited.

“Fine. I’m going,” Kelly yielded with mock resentment. Then added as an afterthought, “Don’t forget to ask him about the writing.”

I’m not an idiot.

“You get forgetful when your mind turns to—”

Bye bye, now. Valerie stole a quick glance around to make certain her friend had indeed vanished, then returned her attention to the man on the other side of the table.

“I don’t suppose...” She slid the folded paper from the pedestal toward him, “you might know anything about strange languages?”

The librarian’s name was Viktor, not that Valerie remembered that. There was no point in wasting gray matter on such things, she figured, since men seemed perfectly fine being called ‘babe’ or ‘handsome’. It’s not that she minded paying attention to the little details... Okay, actually she did, so when she undertook that kind of mental investment, she preferred to focus on things that mattered.

Like the crystal.

Once Vincent...? Vinnie? It was something starting with a V... Once he had stepped away to pull some reference books from the back, she took the stone out of her jacket pocket and studied it again. It was a hemisphere, perhaps three or four inches in diameter, and perfectly smooth on the rounded top. The bottom had a rough texture with some shallow edges as if the crafter had grown tired of polishing it and said ‘eh, no one will be looking at the base anyway’.

When she first saw it, blurry in its vibration, she had guessed the stone to be quartz. Now, however, she could see that it was shot through with veins of crystalline blue, green, and red, as if filaments of sapphire, emerald, and ruby had been injected through the bottom to permeate the silicon matrix. The veins refracted light into a scintillating pattern, a prismatic dance of colors as she turned the crystal to consider it from different angles.

Why would her grandparents have kept this so carefully hidden? It was certainly pretty, but it did not appear as if it would be exceptionally valuable as a gemstone. Perhaps it had to do with its vibrate-the-paint-off-the-walls property. And how did it relate to the map drawn on the piece of yellowed parchment?

The sexy librarian had recognized the outline almost instantly as that of Iceland. Val could not recall her grandparents ever mentioning a trip there, or really anything about the country at all. Hell, they didn’t even like traveling. Just getting them to take a weekend trip to the shore was a battle. Surely, she would remember something like—

The librarian returned, and it was clear from the look on his face that he had found nothing helpful. *Maybe that’s better*, she thought. *Now there’s no excuse for not going to Iceland.*

He handed Val the folded piece of parchment with an apologetic smile.

Oh, those eyes are so pretty. Would be a shame for my first trip to a library in the last ten years to be a total loss...

Valerie idly glanced down at her watch as she made her way along Saxon Avenue. It was nearly 10:45.

“Less than two hours late,” noted Kelly. “We’re definitely improving.”

They shared a smug smile.

The street was busy with cars, and even busier with pedestrians. It was always this way on the weekend mornings when everyone and their dog felt compelled to strut about the sidewalks, asserting to the world that they were just as metropolitan as the next phony. Valerie marched in a straight, purposeful line towards the corner of Saxon and Eighth where an etched glass door would give entrance to Sally’s Café. She assumed people would get out of her way, and for the most part they did. One burly stranger was the exception. He apparently had the same strategy for navigating crowds, and they came to an abrupt halt in front of each other, mere inches from a collision. After several seconds of Valerie’s cold, unyielding stare, the man finally stepped aside. The irritated roll of her eyes was as close to a ‘thank you’ as he would receive.

Val and Amelia always ate breakfast at Sally’s on Saturday mornings, ostensibly together, and always at 9:00. Of course, Valerie rarely made it there before 11:00, so typically Amelia just had a quiet meal by herself, and then the two would chat while Val wolfed down something vaguely lunch-like.

“She’s at the usual table,” noted Kelly as they neared the street corner.

Valerie nodded in acknowledgement and pushed the door open. She stepped inside and was about to let the door swing shut when, at the last instant, she noticed someone coming in right behind her. She shot a foot out, catching the door before it slammed into a young... Val couldn’t quite tell if it was a man or a woman. Their hair was cropped short and dyed with an array of colored highlights that complimented their delicate features. An interesting tattoo on the left side of the person’s face caught Val’s attention. It was a pattern of interwoven curves and circles, and it suddenly came to her that it was an intricately stylized yin/yang symbol.

“Thanks,” the stranger nodded with a quick but genuine smile. Before Val could respond they had already walked past, targeting an empty table at the far end of the restaurant.

Valerie followed Kelly to a booth halfway along the café’s large front window. Amelia was readjusting her auburn ponytail as Valerie slid in across from her.

“Look at you,” Amelia said, checking her phone for the time. “Someone got out of bed early.” Then she noticed that Valerie was in the same clothes she had been wearing the night before. “Or should I say someone got out of someone’s bed early. So... how was he?”

“Who?”

“Didn’t you leave the club with—”

“Oh, right. Mitch.”

“I thought his name was Mike.”

“Whatever.” Valerie reached over and stole a piece of bacon from Amelia’s plate.

“Hey. I was going to eat that.”

“Really? You’re always finished by the time I get here.”

“I slept in today too.”

Valerie waved at a server who gave no indication of having seen the gesture. She immediately switched to a more direct approach. “Menu at table six!” she demanded in a loud voice, and was rewarded with an irritated nod from the aproned woman.

“So how was he?” Amelia tried again.

Valerie reached for the remaining slice of bacon, but Amelia slapped her hand away and picked it up herself to make sure there wouldn’t be a second attempt. She raised her eyebrows with a questioning look. “Well?”

“Let me ask you something,” began Valerie. “Have you ever had a guy tell you that he’s afraid of confined spaces?”

Amelia thought for a moment, then shook her head. “No. In fact, most of the men I’ve dated seem pretty fixated on getting into confined spaces.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“So Mike was more of a talker?”

“Who?”

“Mitch,” Amelia uncorrected herself in a bemused tone.

“Oh.” Then, “No, not really. More of a cling-to-your-waist-for-dear-life type.”

“Can’t fault him for that. I’ve ridden with you.”

Valerie grinned. “He actually sounded a little like you when he squealed in fear.”

“He didn’t!”

Val smiled impishly. “No, but I think he wanted to once or twice.”

The server arrived and extended a menu at Valerie. She waved it away.

“I’ll just have the Buffalo Bill burger, with a side of—”

“No,” the waitress interrupted.

“You know, the...” Valerie grabbed the menu out of the woman’s hand and glanced over it. “Where are the burgers?”

“That’s the breakfast menu. We don’t start serving lunch until 11:00.”

Valerie let out a heavy sigh. “Well, that’s only like twelve minutes away. Can you start early this once?”

The woman gave her a syrupy sweet smile and replied, “Let me check with the cook.” She shifted as if she was about to walk away, but then immediately turned her attention back to Valerie and said, “I’m sorry, hon. No can do.”

“State law or something?”

“No. It’s just that all our lunch ingredients are kept in a time-locked refrigerator.”

Valerie looked up at the woman, an iota of respect threatening to breach her expression. “I guess you don’t store the sarcasm in there with it, do you?”

The woman just stared at her.

“Fine. I’ll just have a couple of eggs over easy.”

The waitress nodded and turned to leave, but Valerie grabbed a fold of her blouse.

“With some hash browns. And a side of sausage.”

The woman nodded. “Okay.”

“Oh, and a side of bacon.” Val looked at Amelia’s plate. “Better make that two.”

“Right. Two eggs over, hash browns, sausage, and a double bacon.”

“You know what?” Valerie continued before the waitress could escape. “Let me also have an order of pancakes and some wheat toast.”

“Whatever.”

“The sausages are links, right?”

“What?” the woman asked in a tone of Herculean indifference.

“The sausages. Links. Not patties.”

“Right. Links.”

“Oh, and I want a large orange juice. And a glass of water.”

The waitress stared at her. Valerie stared back, daring her to say something. Finally the woman asked, “No tea or coffee? Maybe a vat of mimosas?”

“No, I think that’ll be good for now.”

The waitress smiled insincerely and began to leave.

Kelly nudged Valerie. “Get me an OJ too.”

“Actually make that two large orange juices!” Valerie called out.

The woman didn’t turn back, merely acknowledging the request with a curt wave of her hand as she disappeared into the kitchen.

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it,” noted Kelly.

“I’ll drink it,” replied Val with a quick glance at her imaginary friend. The look was not lost on Amelia.

“Hi, Kelly,” Amelia said in Kelly’s general direction.

“Hi, Mel,” the imaginary friend replied.

Amelia couldn’t actually see or hear Kelly, but she always made a point of including her, a gesture that meant all the world to Valerie.

“So,” Amelia mused. “Where were we?”

“I—”

“Oh, right. Mitch-Mike.”

Val waved her off. “Forget him. Something way more interesting happened last night.”

“Oh, this should be good.” Amelia put down the bacon, pushed her plate to the side, and settled in to listen. Valerie immediately snatched the slice, shoved it into her mouth, and then proceeded to share the whole story with only minor embellishments. When she reached the point of encountering the librarian, the server returned and unloaded an array of plates onto the table.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything else I can get you?” she asked acerbically.

Val smiled back sweetly. “I think this will do for now. But can you put that judgmental look in a to-go bag for me? I want to enjoy it all day long.”

With a withering scowl, the woman withdrew.

“Wait,” said Amelia. “So did you bring the stuff here with you?” She saw the twinkle in Val’s eyes. “Well, let me see!”

Valerie retrieved the crystal and parchment from her pocket, placed the pair on the table, and navigated them through the labyrinth of plates. Amelia first examined the stone, and then unfolded the map.

“And you’re sure this is Iceland?”

While shoveling a forkful of runny eggs into her mouth with one hand, Val unlocked her phone with the other. She already had a map pulled up in a browser tab.

“Yep,” agreed Mel. “No doubt about it. That’s a match. So was this Vincent guy able to tell you anything about the writing?”

Valerie mumbled a response around a mouthful of food.

“Chew, swallow, then talk, Val. We’ve been through this.”

After that process was complete, Valerie tried again.

“No. He said it looks very old, older than anything he’s ever seen. He thought the best chance might be to talk to a bunch of researchers at some institute associated with the university there.”

Amelia nodded. “Makes sense. So did you call them?”

“Nah.”

“Are you *going to* call them?”

Valerie considered for a moment, then, “Nah.”

“You’re kidding, right? You can’t just ignore this.”

“Of course I can’t.”

“Then...?”

Valerie picked up her phone, switched apps, and showed Mel a plane ticket booked for the following Tuesday.

“Oh my god, Val! This is so cool! You’re going to Iceland! I’ve heard it’s really—”

“Nooo.”

“No? No what?”

“Not me. We.”

“We?”

“We...” she paused dramatically, “...are going to Iceland.”

Amelia blinked. “What?”

Val tapped a few times on her phone. “There. I just forwarded you your ticket.”

Amelia took out her own phone, unlocked it, and read the email.

“Val,” she began.

“Yes?”

“I can’t just fly off to Iceland. I’ve got work, and—”

“Get someone to cover!”

“I’ve got stuff going on, Val. I can’t just disappear on a whim!”

Valerie smiled devilishly. “You always have stuff going on. So do I. Blow it off.”

“Val!” she pleaded.

“Come on, Mel. How often does someone hand you a ticket to Iceland?”

“Never, but that doesn’t change—”

“You know you’re going to go, so why not just accept it and finish the rest of your bacon?”

“Because you already ate it.”

Valerie transferred a couple of slices onto the empty plate.

“Don’t worry, Mel. It’ll be fine. Tuesday gives you plenty of time to get someone to cover your classes.”

“I have a new routine that I just started, and no one knows it but me.” It was a weak excuse. Amelia chuckled softly at her own words, realizing that deep down she had already given in.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Valerie assured her. “Stretch, hold, twist yourself into a knot. They’ll figure it out.”

Amelia shook her head slowly, a smile growing on her lips. “I suppose I should be thankful you didn’t book a flight for tonight, huh?” Then the realization struck her. “Wait a minute. Why *didn’t* you book it for tonight?”

Valerie looked up mid-chew. Kelly leaned in and whispered, “Don’t tell her about Viktor.”

“You have a date, don’t you?” Amelia accused.

“Maybe.”

“You picked up that librarian, didn’t you.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Maybe.”

“How the hell…” she began, but then thought better of it. “You really are something. How do you get all these guys to go out with you? You don’t even remember their names.”

“They don’t know that.”

“They find out, though.”

“Yeah,” Val smiled. “But by then, who cares?”

Amelia had that look, the squint followed by a shake of her head that simultaneously conveyed both amazement and disapproval. The gesture was all too familiar, and they both laughed. Two tables away, the stranger with the yin/yang tattoo was focused intently on their own meal, overtly oblivious to everything going on around them.

Chapter Three
Traversing Aerth

Annaphora, City of Visions. It is said that her white and gray spires stand tall over every horizon, that her citizens course along shining streets like blood through the world's heart, ebbing and swelling with the Callings of the Great Circle. It is that Great Circle, numbering nearly a billion souls, that dwells across the continents of Aerth—hunting, farming, teaching, playing... and ever listening to what the future whispers to them through the Beacons.

Gabriel, son of Marissa and child of the Circle Massaea, stood upon the deck of a sturdy trading galleon and stared eastward.

"I don't see them," he said quietly to the ship's captain. His voice was a gentle tenor.

"Who were you expecting?"

"Not who. What."

The captain considered Gabriel, her eyes taking in his slender frame clothed in a simple blue tunic of fine, homespun cloth and thick brown leggings. His eyes were a misty gray, sometimes partially obscured—as they were now—when his dark curly hair escaped the leather band that held it in place. He spoke with the accent of someone hailing from the southern continent of Jasseth, which meant he had been traveling for many months to reach this far north.

She also considered him with her *nythlen*, that inner sense by which one listens to the Beacons, and smiled at his warmth. This boy was like an ocean in still winds: beautiful, calm, yet with a depth and purpose almost frightening in its magnitude. She imagined what his mother must be like. Had Gabriel been her son, she would be very proud indeed.

"Alright, then *what* were you expecting?"

Gabriel continued to scan the horizon as he answered. "The spires."

It took a moment for the captain to piece it together, and then she gave a gentle laugh. "That's a description meant to be taken metaphorically. Annaphora is on the opposite coast, about two hundred miles to the east. With the forests you'll be traveling through, you probably won't see her spires until you're a day's travel from the city. Maybe two, if you have clear weather and a disposition for climbing trees."

Gabriel nodded thoughtfully at this. He had appreciated the captain's friendship and company over the past week's sailing, and would be sad for its ending. But he knew there wasn't time to delay, and so quieted his mind as he looked out towards the nearby shoreline. A small cove a few hundred yards to the north presented itself as the best place to land, and he pointed to it.

"There."

The captain nodded her approval. She put a friendly hand on his shoulder, and Gabriel could feel the sentiments within the gesture. *It's been a pleasure, safe journeys, success in what draws you forward.* It carried a greater sincerity than spoken words could have expressed. And then she was off, directing her crew to make the necessary adjustments.

Gabriel went below deck to gather his things.

The downy birch and juniper that lined the coast gave way to the much taller, stately—almost stoic—trees of the primordial forest through which Gabriel now traveled. He was a quiet man by nature, but even if that had not been so, Gabriel doubted he would speak much in their presence. This was a place of solemnity and reflection; even the animals seemed reverent in their scampering. He was surprised, therefore, when the Beacons indicated that it would not be unreasonable to hunt for food here.

On the second afternoon, Gabriel made an early camp and followed his nythlen north along a small deer trail. His inner sense, probing the immediate future, soon warned him to pause. Two more steps would alert a rabbit secreted in the bushes ahead.

Slowly, silently, he crouched low and picked up a small rock near his feet. As he set his intention to throw the stone, he sensed the imminent response of the rabbit—how it would jump, where it would try to run. He shifted his intention until he identified the optimal target, a spot approximately eight feet in front and slightly to the right of him.

He threw the rock.

The rabbit came bounding directly at him and Gabriel dove, not for where the creature was at that instant, but toward where it would dart once it became aware of his presence. With his arms extended he began to bring his hands together, shifting his focus from the future to the present. The rabbit's pre-shadow, the premonition from his nythlen that manifested as a sort of visual overlay, coalesced with what his eyes were actually observing as prediction became the present. When the alignment completed, his hands had closed on either side of the rabbit's body and Gabriel quickly brought the terrified creature under him, pinning it to the ground.

"Sorry, my friend," he muttered with sincere regret as he slid his hands up to the rabbit's neck. With a sharp twist it was over. He rose to his knees and looked down at his dinner. "I know. Someday I'll be in your position. I hope I can accept it as well as you did."

As he returned to his campsite, Gabriel wondered, as he so often did when hunting, if the animals heard their own form of Beacons, and if so, why he was able to catch them at all. If the spirit of this ancient forest held the answer, however, it was not inclined to share it with him this evening. Perhaps it was a question for the Chakrava, the Council of Elders who governed all of Aerth.

This thought brought to mind the conversation he had with his family when this journey began. His father had been fussing to straighten out the fabric of his tunic under the strap of his shoulder pack when his mother had laughingly nudged her husband aside, rolling her eyes at his pampering, and then gently laid her hands on Gabriel's shoulders.

"When you are granted an audience with the Chakrava, you should keep your head bowed," she had said.

"I am certain the Beacons will guide me in the proper respect, Mother."

"If you remember to listen for them," she chided.

"He will, Mari," his father insisted. "He's a sensible, level-headed young man, aren't you, Gabby?"

Gabriel did not have a chance to respond.

"Except when he isn't," his sister injected playfully. Sendra was five years his elder, and already married with a child on the way. Her husband Kenth was a good man. A little

too timid and much too fixated on the irrelevant details of life, in Gabriel's opinion, but a good man nonetheless.

"Maybe," Gabriel offered, "I am being called to the High Temple to tell the story of how Sendra, the unboundingly responsible, used to sneak into Pritchard's orchards in the middle of—"

"Alright," she cut him off. "That's enough of that."

"What is this?" his father asked. Reimas was not a man quick to mete out punishments, but he was an incurable gossip.

"Nothing," Sendra retorted quickly. "Nothing at all."

He turned to look at Gabriel.

"Nothing," Gabriel said. But when Sendra turned away a moment later he whispered, "I'll tell you when I get back."

Reimas' eyes glittered. There was a bond between father and son that arose from deep similarity and was profoundly cherished by both. They were not at all like Marissa, who was a dynamo of activity from the moment she woke up until her head touched her pillow. Gabriel and his father had the utmost respect and appreciation for who and what she was, but that was not them. The men of the family were truly kindred spirits—quiet, patient, and modest about their keen intelligence. Marissa described them as outwardly serious yet privately playful.

Gabriel was finally ready to begin the journey.

"Are you certain you have everything you need?" his mother asked for the third time.

He responded as he had twice before. "As far as I know."

Thousands of years of focus on following one's purpose had not diminished basic human curiosity, but Gabriel was better than most at accepting an unknown future. The Beacons communicated what one *needed* to know, not what one *wanted* to know. He had no idea why he needed to visit the High Temple and speak with the First Mother, but recognized that it was a great Necessity, and not just for him as an individual. He was part of something much larger, and although he had no idea what it was, he would follow this path, content to be what the world needed. Even if it was simply to be the one thousandth person waiting in a line somewhere to ensure that the one thousandth and first person didn't get to the front too early, he would do what the future called him to do, and do it to the best of his ability.

He turned to finally leave, and there was Sendra again.

"Don't make me come rescue you, little brother," she chided, and this made Gabriel smile. Suddenly she was embracing him with a strength of concern that his aloof older sister did not normally allow herself. She whispered in his ear. "Be careful, okay? All I can hear are the Winds of Change around you, and that's..."

"I know," he whispered back. "I know. I hear them too." He shrugged. "We'll just have to wait and find out what those changes hold."

Sendra backed up and took Gabriel's hands in her own for one last consideration. She was pressing something into his hand, and he gave her a questioning look. She nodded, released his hands, and he opened his fingers to see that she had given him a small disk of wood carved with a delicately etched web of interconnected curves. A thin length of silk was threaded through a hole in the center.

“A Winder’s Knot?” His quiet voice conveyed amusement. The giving of a Winder’s Knot was a tradition with thousands of years of history. Originally they were simply a special kind of knot tied in a loop of string or woven into some thatch, a manifestation of gifted good fortune—a way of saying, ‘may some of the goodness that lays in my future find its way into yours instead’. As the centuries passed, the nature of the symbol evolved, originally into more complex knots and eventually to become little stone or wood carvings such as this. Regardless of whether one believed it was possible to pass one’s own future good fortune to another, they were symbols of luck, devotion, and affection, and Gabriel was touched.

“I thought you didn’t believe in such things,” he said.

Sendra shrugged, then took the Knot from him and gently placed the silk cord around his neck. Once it was straight, she tucked the disk under his shirt so it could lay against his skin as was proper.

“There. Now wipe that stupid smile off your face and get moving. Daylight doesn’t outlive the day, you know.”

“Thank you,” Gabriel replied. “I—”

“Go, you stupid toad.”

He laughed. “I don’t think you’ve called me that in fifteen years.”

“You’re my little brother. I can call you whatever I like.”

“I’m twenty-five, Sen.”

“Little brothers never stop being little brothers.”

He nodded. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Sendra turned to leave, but then looked back to say, “And stay out of trouble for once.”

He nodded again, slowly, as he regarded the sister who would never outwardly admit how deeply she cared for him. His smile broadened in appreciation of her concern. Then Sendra winked, turned back around to take her husband’s hand, and led Kenth away without looking back again.

Gabriel buried the remains of the rabbit the following morning. He placed no marker on the grave, but played a short, soft melody on his burnished travel flute as a tribute of appreciation. By the time the sun was casting green-tinted spotlights through the canopy onto the underbrush, he was already making his way towards Annaphora.

Even in the middle of summer it was cold this far north. Gabriel wore two layers now and built nightly campfires large enough to keep him warm until sunrise. Brushing frost off himself and his belongings had become an unwelcome morning ritual, and he regularly wondered what would possess anyone to settle down in this climate.

After three more days of hiking, now five dawns from the western shore, he came upon a broad, well-worn path running north and south. His nythlen called him to turn right, and so he did, although the road turned east within the hour. Travel became easier then; he covered more miles each day, and spent nights at village inns. There wasn’t as much need for establishments like these in the forests of Jasseth where the Circle Massaea made their homes, but Annaphora was one of the largest cities on the planet and capital of the world.

Between the city itself and the surrounding towns within a few days' ride, nearly half a million people lived in this chilly region, and it was said the population grew every year.

It certainly wasn't a bad place, but for a young man who had grown up in a quiet countryside where the people numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands, there was a certain ineffable *pressure* that Gabriel found uncomfortable. Long before reaching the city itself, where those numbers would grow to hundreds of thousands, Gabriel had soundly concluded that he would not care to live here.

The surrounding villages and small towns did not at all prepare Gabriel for his first sight of Annaphora. He had caught glimpses of the legendary spires of gray and white through the ancient trees, and those alone were impressive enough, but when he crested a rise in the road to find the full city shining upon the horizon, he stumbled to a halt.

Annaphora, a circular expanse of stone and glass, was over a mile across and built upon a wide, low hill at the center of a depression in the landscape that itself must have been nearly five miles from side to side. The surrounding lowlands were covered in rich green grasses dotted with grazing sheep and apportioned by a seemingly haphazard maze of low stone walls. Nearly a dozen large manor houses—each complemented by its own myriad of cottages, barns, and stables—were scattered throughout the grasslands and connected by a network of cobbled roads that radiated out from the main city.

Even from miles away Gabriel could see that the city had its own complex structure. At the very center, where Annaphora rose to its highest, was the religious and cultural district. Upon the very apex of that was an immense hemispherical building that could be nothing other than the famed Syntrodome, the millennia-old complex from which the First Mother and the rest of the Chakrava saw to the order and stability of the entire planet. At the cardinal extremes of that dome were four tall towers with sacred temples at their tops. The north, west, and south towers were identical, but the eastern one rose a third again above the others and housed the High Temple, the holiest of spaces in all the world. It was there that the most sacred ceremonies were held. Even miles away, Gabriel shuddered at its sight. That tower was a piece of his future, and he could feel it calling to him.

The surrounding metropolis of Annaphora was divided into eight distinct districts by broad, shining avenues that ran like spokes to connect the Syntrodome to a grand park that encircled the entire city. From miles away Gabriel could not determine what was happening on that encompassing boulevard, but it was clearly busy with crowds of people.

“First time to the city, then?”

The voice shook Gabriel out of his awe. He had not even realized that he had stopped walking, much less that someone had come to stand beside him. It was a young woman, staring in her own appreciation of the city.

“It is,” he replied quietly. “You too?”

“Oh, no,” she responded warmly. “I’ve been here many times. But seeing it always has the same effect on me, and I like to... well, I like to do just what you’re doing.” They shared a smile. “I feel that if I ever get so busy, or so jaded, that I become used to its beauty, then I know I’ve lost my way.”

Gabriel turned to look at the stranger more carefully, took in the shine of her blond hair and the misty look of appreciation in her eyes. Not too far away a group of half a dozen others were patiently waiting for her as she took these moments to appreciate the capitol. The moment hung still in the morning air, and then she finally turned her head and nodded to the group. They resumed their journey, and she joined their numbers as they began making their way to the city. The woman looked back at Gabriel and inclined her head. An invitation.

Gabriel nodded back, and fell into step.

It took over an hour to reach the edge of the Hespertaen, that broad paved park that defined the edge of the city proper. During that time they spoke of Annaphora. Apparently, the Hespertaen was a ring of celebration, and events were regularly scheduled at various points around the circumference. The grandest were mobile fêtes, circling around as the hours went by, and it was not uncommon to confer awards and recognition for participants that traversed the entire twenty-four-hour circle.

The group had also told him of the Eight Primaries, the wedge-shaped districts within the city. They would arrive where the Hespertaen intersected Brightwater Avenue, a wide thoroughfare that separated the District of Artisans from the District of Crafters. “Both are art,” one of them had explained. “The difference is whether something is being made as a tool or a form of expression.” Other districts, Gabriel learned, were focused on health, education, food and warehousing, finance, and various other essential drivers of society.

As they reached the Hespertaen, the blond woman asked, “So, Gabriel, what purpose brings *you* to the city?”

He explained that he did not know, only that he was being called to speak with the First Mother. She nodded thoughtfully, appreciatively, and then pointed toward the Syntrodome just visible at the far end of Brightwater.

“Simply walk straight up this avenue. Although, if you have a mind to explore, your *wyrd* has gifted you with an hour or two to discover some of the city. The Chakrava are usually in council until at least two on most days, and it is only noon now. Brightwater will have you there in twenty minutes at most, fifteen if you hurry.”

Then the woman and her companions wished him well and made their way clockwise along the park, leaving him on his own.

What immediately caught Gabriel’s attention about Annaphora was the sharp delineations in styles. The Hespertaen was lavishly decorated with works of art—statues ranging in age from months to millennia, intricately carved trellises that lined the boulevard, and grand fountains with tiled mosaics amid plentiful gardens. In contrast, the streets and buildings within Annaphora’s functional districts were downright stark. Walls were unadorned but for the occasional building designation engraved in small precise lettering, and the streets were completely free of obstacles. People appeared to have a slight preference for staying to the left and passing on the right, although that was far from a guarantee. More consistent were the rules for who had the right of way, which were clearly based on size and agility. Children gave way to adults, who themselves stepped aside for horses. Riders

steered their mounts to give passage to carts and wagons, and on the larger streets the biggest wagons turned for no one at all.

What sparse signage Gabriel saw was subtle and unassuming. Street names were most often carved on the sides of corner buildings or into the stones of the street itself when no structures were near an intersection. Stores relied on window displays to announce their wares. Gabriel noticed that some doorways bore small, tasteful plaques of brass or silver with what appeared to be family names, and that most entrances were slightly recessed from the street itself. It was uncommon to see anyone stopping to converse, but when they did, it invariably happened in these nooks. Perhaps from prescient awareness of the consequences, or possibly just as a courtesy ingrained in the culture after hundreds of generations, it was clear that one did not obstruct traffic in Annaphora.

During his explorations, Gabriel entered several shops and there he came upon another interesting facet of the city's nature. As if to compensate for the blandness of the streets, interiors were decorated with reckless abandon. Colors and other augmentations were profuse and vibrant, and any sliver of wall not vying to catch one's attention was clearly an insult to Annaphoran sensibilities. Paintings and masks were common, as were sculptures, both freestanding and mounted on walls. Where nothing else would fit, talismans—or even simple strands of beads—were hung about and between the larger objects.

When stepping inside, the behaviors of the people also changed. The 'keep moving' expectation of the outdoors clearly did not apply here. Shops were crowded with people milling about in conversation, far more focused on talking than transacting. Their preoccupation was so strong that hardly anyone even seemed to hear their own Beacons; more than once Gabriel had to push his way past vivacious customers crowding the narrow aisles, an unexpected occurrence in a society attuned to the future.

What most surprised Gabriel as he explored was the character of the art. A trend had become apparent as he wandered the shops, but it didn't fully register until he entered an enormous outdoor market, easily two hundred feet across, where vendors had laid out their goods upon carpets and tables. Despite the vast differences in lifestyle between his own rural Circle and this big city thousands of miles away, the artwork followed surprisingly similar themes and designs. Statuettes, necklaces, carvings... paintings, stylized drinking vessels... hair clips, rings, illustrated scrolls... they all spoke of the same basic techniques used by the artisans in his own village. Some were better, some worse, and all had little variations that made them unique, but Gabriel realized that the cultural consistency he thought unique to his own Circle was far more pervasive. There was no explanation save that the entirety of Aearth shared a world-wide connection, a form of resonance. Inspirations in one corner of the globe seeded themselves in a species-scale subconsciousness to manifest... well, everywhere.

Gabriel sensed there was something important in that realization, but before he could consider it further, some internal sense demanded his attention. Standing at the front of a stall that offered the odd pairing of stonework jewelry and strips of chicken marinated in spices and fried in lard, Gabriel suddenly had the feeling that he was being watched. He spun about quickly, but the only people paying him any attention seemed to be merely responding to his sudden movement, and they quickly returned to their own affairs.

He quieted his mind and closed his eyes as focused on his nythlen. It whispered that his future lay in the Syntrodome. *Yes. I know that*, he thought to himself. *What should I do about this watcher?* He sent the question. Such questions rarely found answers from the

Beacons, and this instance was no exception. He heard only the call of the Syntrodome, the Chakrava, and the need to speak with the First Mother.

The figure at the edge of the market watched as Gabriel returned to Brightwater Avenue and headed off toward the center of the City of Visions. It was clear that he had sensed something, and surprising that he had so easily—willingly—let it go. Few people were able to put aside their curiosity like that, even when the Beacons told them to.

Definitely a unique one, this Gabriel. It was a comforting realization. Aerth needed someone like that. In fact, both worlds did.

Chapter Four

Champion Revealed

Just as the Hespertaen circumscribed Annaphora, so did the Raespertaen encircle the Syntrodome. This inner park was decorated more sparsely than its broader, more expansive counterpart. The statues were fewer and smaller, and there were no fountains at all. The only gardens that Gabriel could see were two manicured flower beds planted along either side of the tree-lined walkway by which visitors could approach the large south entrance of the Syntrodome.

A steady stream of humanity was passing into and out of the enormous structure and as he approached, Gabriel had to stay far to the left to avoid being caught up in that river of commerce. Drawing closer, Gabriel studied the intricate carvings that outlined the fourteen-foot-tall doors of the complex. Initially they seemed merely decorative, but once he was within a dozen paces he recognized letters worked into the relief. At a glance they appeared to be written in an entirely different alphabet, but he soon realized that they were merely stylized in a way he had not previously encountered. He shifted further to the left side of the walkway and stopped to read them, and was again overcome with the feeling of being scrutinized.

He pivoted quickly, scanning the surroundings, but it was hopeless. The Raespertaen coursed with the flow of humanity, people rushing about as if the world would cease turning should they not reach their destination in time. And then, with a careless step, he was caught up and the rushing crowd carried him into the Syntrodome.

Passing through the entrance corridor, the crowd quickly dissipated within an enormous entry chamber. Dozens of doors and passages lined the walls of this brightly lit space, and the few people who did not navigate their way into one of them instead approached the rows of tables filling the center of the room. Overhead, a crystal chandelier effused a bright, flameless light that Gabriel suspected was sunlight channeled through the black metal shaft by which the fixture was suspended from the ceiling.

He came to a halt, unsure where to go. There were so many options, so many official-looking women either standing stoically or engaged in lively conversation. He took a deep breath to collect his wits, calming his mind so that he could listen to the call of the Beacons. Even as he began, a tall, sapling-slender woman in her late forties broke away from a conversation with two colleagues and approached. Her stride was authoritative, although her eyes and smile sung of compassion. For no reason he understood, Gabriel's attention fixated upon a strand of hair that had escaped from a tight bun to wave rebelliously around her right ear.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"My name is Gabriel, and I have been Called here to speak with the First Mother."

"I see," the woman responded with a hint of surprise. "Well, if you would be so kind as to come with me, you are welcome to meditate in one of the waiting chambers while your message is delivered."

She immediately began walking, and Gabriel had to trot to catch up with her.

"Miss?"

"Karelana," she introduced herself.

“Karelana. Yes. Hello. A pleasure to meet you.” He put his nervousness aside. “How long does it usually take to arrange an audience with—”

“In most cases it requires only a week or two to find an opening in Her Holiness’s schedule,” Karelana responded. Then, seeing that Gabriel had clearly been hoping for a different answer, she added, “But sometimes it happens faster. Don’t worry. Everything happens in its time, right?”

“There is some urgency to this. I... I have a feeling that today is the right day for us to meet.”

The woman stopped unexpectedly, and Gabriel stumbled to avoid bumping into her. That he had not seen the pre-shadow of her halting made him realize just how nervous he truly was.

“I see,” the woman said, and then studied him in silence for so long that Gabriel thought she was waiting for him to speak. Just as he opened his mouth, however, Karelana continued. “May I inquire as to the nature of the matter that has Called you here?”

“Honestly, I wish I knew, ma’am, but the Beacons only shared that I was to come and speak with her. Not why.”

The woman’s gaze grew slightly distant, as if she were looking through him, then she said, “Wait here a moment, please.”

Karelana turned on her heel and strode back to the two women with whom she had been speaking when Gabriel arrived. They briefly conferred in hushed tones, and then they all looked over at him. Gabriel suddenly felt like a specimen under scrutiny in a school science class. Without another word, the trio marched over to him. They stared at him in silence for several more seconds before Karelana finally spoke.

“Gabriel, this is Ute and Linara. They are religious scholars.”

“I see,” he replied, somewhat baffled. Was this supposed to hold a particular significance to him? Why had Karelana made a point of mentioning it? Then remembering his manners, he added, “It is an honor to meet you.”

The woman named Ute, who was surely in her sixties if not older, reached out and took Karelana’s elbow in her hand. “I think you should bring his message to the Chakrava at once. Do not wait for a recess.”

“Then you think—”

“Go, child. We will show the young man to a chamber.”

Karelana paused, then nodded twice and rushed off into the maze of corridors.

Ute and Linara stepped to either side of Gabriel and, taking his arms in theirs, began leading him away. Linara was smiling kindly, although Gabriel sensed some discomfort in her. Ute made no attempt to disguise her discomfort and continued to stare at him intently even as she politely asked about his journey to Annaphora.

The deliberation chamber of the Chakrava was a statement centuries in the making. Light, tasteful decorations balanced a foundation of ancient, serious furniture. The walls were of the darkest oak, with dozens of small shelves supporting ornate candles that illuminated the room. Beneath every shelf was some form of hanging, each a gift from prior

First Mothers. In their own unique way, the hangings each told one chapter of an extended story that stretched back through the ages.

What most demanded one's attention, however, was the broad table crafted from a single piece of petrified wood, so polished that it practically shone on its own. It was so immense that the chamber's walls had been taken down temporarily to bring in the massive surface, and there was a popular rumor regarding its mass: that it was originally positioned slightly off-center, and the Chakrava of that era had elected to shift the north wall out by two feet rather than try to reposition the table.

Nine ornate chairs surrounded the semi-oval surface. At the peak of the table's curve was the official chair of the First Mother, slightly taller than the other eight that were distributed to either side. The flat end of the table was nearest the door, and it was from there that visitors would address the Chakrava. No seat was kept at that end, although from time to time one or more might be brought in when guests were expected to remain for a significantly long session.

In these nine chairs sat the Chakrava, the nine women who oversaw the functioning of the single civilization-culture of Aerth. The youngest of them, Edeiri, was only thirty-seven and already promoted to Seventh Mother. She had not been the youngest woman to ever become a member of the council, but she was the only one selected before the age of fifty for the last four hundred years. Most of the current council were considerably older, and oldest of them all was the First Mother.

No one knew Khalfani's exact age, although it was presumed that she had to be at least eighty-five. The First Mother herself claimed to not remember, but no one really believed that. Her intellect had only sharpened as the years passed and she was unexpectedly spry in her movements. And as was expected of any member of the Chakrava—but most importantly for the First Mother—her nythlen was as sensitive to the Beacons as anyone's, and far more than most. Thus, when she raised a hand for the council to be silent moments before a knock was heard upon the chamber door, it surprised no one.

"Come," Khalfani called in a firm voice.

The door opened silently and Karelana entered, head bowed in respect.

"Blessings to the Chakrava," she intoned.

The gathered Mothers responded with a single voice. "Blessings upon you, child."

Karelana raised her head, and the First Mother nodded for her to speak.

"Your Holiness, someone has arrived and requested an audience with you."

Soft murmurs erupted around the table.

The arrival of the Champion in this year had been foretold by the histories for millennia, and the Champion's absence had become an ever-increasing focus of the Mothers' deliberations for many months now. Some days it felt like they spoke of nothing else. Khalfani listened to the whispered commentary from around the table for a few moments, noting how the Chakrava's initial excitement quickly ebbed into cautious denial of the possibility, then finally settled into guarded curiosity. The whole process took perhaps four or five seconds.

The First Mother lightly rapped her knuckles on the table, and the room immediately fell silent.

"Has this visitor given a reason for the audience?" she asked.

"No, Your Holiness, but I believe—"

“You believe this may be the Champion.”

“Yes, First Mother.”

“Well,” Khalfani began with a tired smile. “She certainly took her own sweet time appearing, didn’t she?” This statement brought a round of relieved smiles from the rest of the women. “I will meet with her in my personal audience chamber once we have concluded our session.”

Karelana held her voice for a moment, unsure whether the First Mother had finished. In the silence, the leader continued.

“Thank you for bringing us this news, Karelana. Please see to the comfort of the Champion until I can meet with her.”

“Of course, Your Holiness. But...” she trailed off.

“Is something the matter, child?” asked Inthima, the Second Mother.

“It’s just...” Karelana hesitated, suddenly wondering if perhaps she should simply withdraw and let the leaders discover this piece of information on their own. The First Mother, however, was now intently focused upon her with those bright, disarming eyes.

“Go on, Kara,” urged Khalfani. “What is weighing upon you?”

“The Champion is...” Why was this so difficult to say? “The Champion is not what we were expecting.”

The First Mother smiled at this. “No one knows what she will be like, or where her greatest strengths will lie. But fear not, for—”

“What I mean, Your Holiness, is that the Champion is not a woman.”

A sudden tension gripped the room, broken only by the rustling of gowns and the minute sounds of idle fidgeting. Finally, the Third Mother spoke.

“A girl?” she asked. “Are you saying the Champion is a g—”

“Not a girl, Your Grace,” replied Karelana. “This person... the one who requests the audience... is a *man*.”

Now there were no sounds of rustled clothing or muted whispers. The entirety of the Chakrava was stunned into absolute stillness.

Chapter Five

Champion Tested

Valerie threw her keys onto the kitchenette table of her tiny apartment. They slid off, landing on the floor somewhere near the refrigerator, and she made a mental note of the location. She would forget it within seconds, but Kelly would remember. She then gently placed her motorcycle helmet on the counter next to a plant that had somehow learned to survive on an alternating regimen of droughts and monsoons. Taking a stack of mail from under her arm, she flipped her way through it. “Junk. Junk. Later. Junk...” The envelopes followed deliberate if not accurate trajectories towards different corners of the kitchen.

When the ‘sorting’ was done Valerie grabbed a beer from the fridge, walked into the living room, and launched herself onto the couch in her usual style: feet pointed at the apartment door, back to the corner.

“Ow,” she moaned. Something hard in her jacket pocket was pressing into her ribs. She shifted, reached in, withdrew the hemispherical crystal.

“Ah,” she murmured. “I remember you.”

She hadn’t thought about the stone for over a day, a testament to the distracting nature of that slightly-Icelandic librarian and his intriguing accent. As well as... other features. She had not intended to stay so late at his place, but one thing led to several others and suddenly the sun was setting again. Val was vaguely aware that there was something she was supposed to be doing this evening, but it was clearly not that important or she would remember, right?

“Maybe,” offered Kelly, “you were supposed to clean this place up so I’d have somewhere to sit.” With no uncluttered surfaces in sight, Kelly settled herself on the floor near a steel-framed end table covered in small, exotic weapons. That stash was, without question, Valerie’s favorite shrine. There was an ivory-handled butterfly knife given to her three years ago by Lea Moshe—her all-time Krav Maga heroine—after a competition in which they had both participated. Lea had technically won, but they both knew that it was just that: a technicality. Valerie was better, and this was Lea’s way of saying it without saying it. At least, that was Valerie’s interpretation, and she was perfectly content with it.

Next to the knife was a custom-made miniature flash-bang grenade, less than two inches long and an inch in diameter, given to her by the one and only Jason Parsons. She had met Jason while consulting for a French task force investigating how to improve the training provided for women joining FORFUSCO, France’s Naval Special Forces, and the two had become immediate friends. She even remembered his real name, although Kelly insisted that was because the munitions genius was clearly and enthusiastically gay.

What was most dear to Valerie, however, was a piece of spy gadgetry. It looked like a lipstick canister, but was actually a tiny gun that fired 6 mm caliber bullets. She found the irony of the device thoroughly endearing. She could never take it anywhere, not so much because it was illegal but because anyone who knew her even a little would instantly realize that it must be a weapon. It was very well understood that Valerie would sooner dip uranium-laced chewing tobacco than wear makeup. Besides, she only had four bullets left from the original six after testing it at the range with...

“Amelia!” Val and Kelly exploded simultaneously. That’s what she had forgotten.

As if on cue, her cell phone rang an instant later. She dug it out of her jeans pocket and didn’t even bother to check who was calling before tapping to accept.

“Right. I know. I’m already on my way.”

“No you aren’t,” Mel accused impatiently.

“Fine. I’m not. But I still have plenty of time.”

“No you don’t.”

Valerie checked her watch and grimaced. She really didn’t.

Mel continued. “If you don’t ride slower than eighty, maybe you can get here only a few minutes late.”

Valerie smiled at this. “Aw, Mel, since when do I ever ride slower than eighty?”

“Just get your butt here, Val. I get paid based on—”

“Yeah, yeah. See you soon!” She hung up, slipped the phone and the crystal back into a pocket, then made a bee-line for the door.

“Hey!” called Kelly from the floor.

Val turned to see her imaginary friend pointing at a pile of Lycra.

“Oh. Right.”

She grabbed the workout clothes, stuffed them in a backpack, and headed for the door again.

“Hey!”

“What?!”

Kelly was standing in the kitchen now, pointing at the keys on the floor.

“Right. Thanks.”

Valerie came to a screeching halt in front of the studio where Amelia offered her yoga classes.

“Shit.” There was almost never a free parking spot, but she could usually find some place to illegally squeeze her bike between vehicles. Not tonight. Everything was bumper to bumper. With a squeal of tires, she spun the bike around and returned to claim an almost-spot she had passed a block and a half back.

She had to dismount first and pull the cycle into place from in front of the handlebars.

“Plenty of space,” observed Kelly from the curb.

Shut up. It fits.

“Uh huh. Right.”

She tied her helmet to the back of the seat, and took off towards the studio at a jog. At the corner along the way she glanced down a narrow side street and came to a sudden stop.

About thirty or forty feet away, a gang of four men had cornered someone against the wall of an auto body shop. The situation was undeniable: a mugging was underway. As she turned to face them, the man obstructing her view of the victim shifted, and Val saw a flash of soft purple fabric. Likely a woman, and so possibly not just a mugging.

Valerie instantly broke into a run, shouting, “Back off, assholes!”

The attacker furthest from her grabbed the victim by the arms, holding her in place while the other three turned to face Valerie. At about ten feet from the nearest, she slowed to a walk.

“This ain’t none of your business, bitch,” the closest one snarled. He was heavy-set, with dark eyes, dark hair, and a pocked face.

“I’m making it my business,” Val hissed. “Get lost before someone gets very, very hurt.”

The second closest was bald, and covered in tattoos and attitude. “Too late for that, pussy—”

Back at the street corner, Kelly grimaced. There was a fair chance that man was going to say ‘pussycat’, but he never got the chance.

With blinding speed, Valerie launched forward, her arm shooting out like a viper. The heel of her palm connected with the bald man’s nose, and his head snapped back as blood erupted into the sky. Faster than the other assailants could react, Valerie delivered a snap kick to the groin of the first man, followed by a knee thrust upwards into his descending face. Something crunched as the mugger slid to the ground.

By this time the third man had begun to react, reaching for something tucked into the back of his belt. Before he could get it, Valerie hooked her left heel out and back to pull the man’s right knee forward. He fell onto it, his other leg now extended to the left. Suddenly Val was airborne, then landed with a crushing stomp on the outside of his left knee. The man screamed as it shattered and was unconscious before his head hit the pavement.

The entire clash took less than five seconds, and now Valerie stood only a few feet from the last assailant as he pulled the victim between them as a shield.

She met his eyes and bored into them. Fire behind ice.

The mugger knew he was in trouble. Valerie had seen the look a hundred times. She also knew that he wasn’t thinking straight. The conflict between fear and ego flashed behind darting eyes. Or was it something else? The way the man kept glancing at his hostage, Val wondered if there was more going on in his thoughts than just fight or flight. Had he been pressured into the whole thing? Was that regret in his expression? Regardless, his nerves were building, and any second would become too much to contain. He might simply turn and run, but many times when the adrenaline kicks in there’s no stopping it. If he starts to swear at her, that would be the sign.

“You fucking bitch!” he screamed as his grip tightened on the blouse of his human shield.

And then Valerie was a blur. She seemed to leap to her right, and the man began pushing his hostage in that direction, but suddenly she had slid past him on the left. In a blink of an eye she was behind him, his right wrist in her right hand. A twist, a snap. Her left heel was kicking out his left knee. He fell sidewise, and tried to break his fall by reaching out with his left hand. She kicked it out of the way, and he landed hard on his back. His head struck the pavement, and everything was suddenly stillness and silence.

All four men lay unconscious in the street.

The intended victim had turned and was staring at her. To her great surprise, Valerie recognized the stylized yin/yang tattoo, the short-cropped hair with rainbow highlights. This was the person she had seen several days before at the diner.

“I know you. I saw you at Sally’s.” They blinked at her. *Probably in shock*, Val assessed. After an instant, they found their voice.

“What? I’m sorry, I don’t...”

“At Sally’s Café. You came in behind me. I held the door for you.”

“I hope I said thank you.”

Valerie laughed. “I don’t remember.”

“Well I certainly owe you a load of thanks now. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t—”

“Forget it,” Val interrupted.

“I can’t imagine doing that.”

“Really,” continued Valerie. “It actually gives me a good excuse for being late for something, so in a way I should kind of be thanking you.” The androgynous person just stared at her, clearly at a loss for words. “You gonna be okay?”

“What? Uh, yeah. Yeah. I’m... I’m fine.” They looked at the men lying on the ground. “What... what should we do about...”

“You want my opinion? Just go home. They got what they deserved. It’s not your fault, and definitely not your obligation to do anything for them.”

The stranger nodded, but seemed unconvinced.

“Anyway,” continued Valerie, “I have to get going. You sure you’re going to be alright?”

They nodded. “Yeah. I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

Valerie gave them a last smile, then took off toward the studio.

When she reached the corner, Valerie stole a quick look back to see the stranger still standing amid the unconscious bodies, a clear expression of compassion, even concern, on their face. A twinge of pity briefly touched Val’s thoughts. Not for the men, certainly not, but for the stranger. *Some people just can’t accept that it’s okay not to be a victim.*

The night’s yoga session was only modestly attended, Valerie noted as she emerged from the changing room and grabbed a mat from the pile near the door. About a dozen *yoggers*, as Val liked to call them, were in the middle of some kind of static stretch, maybe Reach-For-The-Cheese or Sidewise-Facing-Existential-Monkey or some such, as she strode toward the group centered on the hardwood exercise floor. Then she stopped. The woman leading the class was not Amelia.

I couldn’t be that late, Val thought with a quick glance at her watch. She wasn’t wearing it. *Right*, she thought, remembering that she had taken it off when she changed. She grabbed for her phone instead. It wasn’t in her pocket. She didn’t have any pockets. *Who the hell designs these workout clothes?*

“In your jacket,” Kelly reminded her. “In the locker.”

Just as she was turning to go back for it, Val noticed that one of the Sidewise-Existing Monkeys was shooting furtive, irritated glances at her from the back of the crowd. She changed plans and walked over, obtrusively flopping her mat down next to Amelia’s.

“What are you doing *here?*” asked Valerie. Then she laughed aloud, appreciating the play on words with her fictitious pose name. Sure, no one else understood it—and the whole

class was now casting disparaging glances her way—but Valerie found it endlessly amusing. The yoggers soon returned to their somber Existential Monkeying.

Mel shook it off. “I *work* here, remember?” she whispered.

Valerie adopted some semblance of the stretch. “I meant, why aren’t you teaching the class?”

“I’m hoping Natalie will fill in for me while we’re in Iceland, so I’m seeing how she does.”

The seconds sped past like eons.

“So this is it? Just this one pose for the rest of eternity?” asked Valerie.

Amelia’s only response was a dirty look. Kelly didn’t react at all, occupied as she was playing a rather inappropriate variant of ‘duck duck goose’ with the unwitting members of the yoga class. There were only two men in the group, yet somehow they were always the ones receiving the goose. Valerie snorted a laugh, then covered it with a fake sneeze.

Eventually Natalie had them shift into a new posture. “Now reach towards the Heavens with your right hand, and place your left palm flat on the floor. Spread your feet and your toes wide, and let Mother Earth fill your womb with Her energy.”

Valerie looked over at Amelia, who was already staring back at her with threatening eyes. Val opened her mouth, eager to ask the two men if their wombs were full yet, but Amelia hissed at her. “Shut it, Val.”

“I just—”

“Shut it.”

Valerie made a ‘zipping my lips’ gesture with her right hand. Amelia’s eyes grew wide.

“Why do you have blood on your hand?”

Valerie looked down at her fist. “Huh. Well, look at that.”

“Why...” Amelia started to repeat.

“I’ll be right back,” interjected Valerie, and then she slipped back to the changing room.

When she returned, her hands were immaculate and the class was just finishing with a final Sun Salutation.

“I thought we were supposed to do these at the beginning,” observed Valerie in a clinical voice.

“You’re such an ass,” Mel whispered back.

“Well,” announced Natalie, “I hope you enjoyed today’s class. We will be having...”

Valerie had already phased her voice out.

“Sorry about being late.”

“Did you sign the sheet?”

“There was something going down on Monroe,” Valerie continued. “I had to—”

“Go sign the sheet. I get paid—”

“Yeah, yeah. Paid by the dozen or whatever.”

Valerie had apparently not been the only one to forget to sign in, and by the time she returned Amelia had just finished talking to Natalie. The new instructor gave Valerie a disingenuous smile before departing.

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry for being late.”

Amelia sighed. “I know. You can make it up to me with some coffee.”

“Is that a flavor of beer?”

“Close enough. So what was with the blood?”

Valerie told her about the encounter.

“Right here? I can’t believe it! This neighborhood has always been so safe.”

“I keep telling you, Mel, there’s no such thing as safe. That’s why you need to learn to defend yourself.” Valerie gave her thin smile. “And *that’s* why I agreed to our little exchange of exercise. So if all that Sun Saluting and Downward-Flushing Dog has you warmed up...” She shifted into a fighting stance. “Let’s see if you remember any of the blocks I showed you last week.”