

The Golden Birds



of Rapa

Nui.

Veda's manuscripts as
they were recovered
from Bird Island.



By

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Disclaimer

This book is partially a work of Science Fiction, whereas other parts are fact-based on experiential occurrences. The entire cast of characters is fictitious, but their misery and strife-ridden existence occurred.

The Golden birds and the extraterrestrials from the planet Arturo were physically present on Easter Island during the Monoliths' creation. No original indigenous people were on the island, so the aliens abducted fifty people from Paru to create the navigation beacon to guide the Artorien intergalactic trading vessels to the high plateaus on the Peruvian mainland.

The Artorien astronauts trained their slave laborers to use laser tools to excavate and sculpt great stone slabs from the quarries.

They were the beings who carved the monoliths with the likeness of what they came to believe was their God, both large and small. It is also true that the Artorien astronauts used their levitation ability to move the large sentinel stones into position. You will have to read the story to learn who, how, and why the smaller ones exist without baseplates and no remnants of copper headgear.

The planet Arturo is not fictitious; it exists within the Orion nebula and presently maintains a large fleet of trade vessels plus a mighty armada of intergalactic warcraft.

The basis of this book comes from the information I received while researching my past life as a stone mover while living on Easter Island in 4294 BC.

To hear the audio recording of that life, copy and paste this URL into any browser.

<https://www.ubecbyrani.com/pl-08-easter-ile-4294-bc.html>

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Chapter 1.

Meeting with Professor Walters

The year was 2263 when Robert Grayson decided to take advantage of his former archaeology professor's open-door policy and stopped in to see his old prof and mentor. He parked his VLT (Grayson Vertical Lift Transport) in Houston's Texas A&M visitor's parking lot.

Seeing the Professor in his office, Robert tapped lightly on the doorjamb. Anthony looked up in surprise and said, "Good morning, Robert; what brings you to Houston?"

Robert stood in the doorway of Professor Walters's office. He said, "Good morning, Dr. Walters," Without taking a breath, he excitedly continued, "I've come to you with information of monumental proportion, something that could rock the foundations of our civilization."

"Now, that's an astonishing statement, especially from you! Is that what brings you here from Austin?"

"Yes sir - I have something so astonishing I need your assistance."

"In that case, you had better come in and tell me what you're talking about."

Robert stepped into the office, took a slow deep breath, and began, "I've learned the whereabouts of some afore-unknown ancient writings."

Anthony anxiously stood and asked, "What are they? Tell me about them."

"The original scribings of these logbooks, manuscripts, and papers occurred centuries before recorded history by the half-breed daughter of an extraterrestrial."

Anthony settled back in his chair and said, "Robert, you're not making any sense. Come sit down and start over."

Robert went and sat beside Anthony's desk and continued, "I know it sounds crazy, but I assure you, professor, I'm not crazy."

"Robert, you were one of my best students, but extraterrestrials; you've got to be kidding."

“Not at all.

“In that case, you’d better start from the beginning and tell me the whole story.”

Robert began, “I’ve had a series of dreams or visions. They were so real and vivid; I can’t dismiss them as mere fantasy.”

Robert Grayson is 34 and has dark brown hair and eyes. He is six-foot-tall with long, lean swimmer muscles; he holds several Olympic-class swimming medals, a bachelor’s degree in archaeology, and a master’s in linguistics and computer science. He has spent years translating papers and manuscripts of ancient writings. He has also written several computer programs as an aid in deciphering various languages.

Robert began. “The visions were astonishingly real, and what I’d learned.... I just had to tell someone besides my brother James. That’s when I decided to contact you because you’re the only person I know who might listen without thinking I’d lost my mind.”

Professor Anthony Walters, Ph.D., with doctorates in archaeology and anthropology, sat back in his chair, stroked his gray beard, saying, “I’m not sure you haven’t.”

“I assure you, professor, I haven’t.”

“Then I suggest you tell me all about them and when they began.”

Robert stood and walked slowly around the office as he spoke, “It was about three months ago when I first heard someone call my name. It came as a faraway voice that woke me. The next time a face appeared, the voice told me all was well and that he had some vital information for me. I still believed I was merely dreaming until the third occurrence. A man appeared that night, and he called himself Gazlay Tupac. He told me about the manuscripts written by someone named Veda and that she was the daughter of an extraterrestrial.

Anthony stated, “I’ve never heard of anyone named Veda. There is, however, a Sanskrit word ‘Veda’ that means knowledge and wisdom.”

“I’m familiar with the Sanskrit reference, but this Veda was the female offspring between an earth woman and an extraterrestrial, and she lived for more than three hundred years.”

Robert, with your exceptional education, I'd expect more of you than this nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense, professor! It’s because of my knowledge of linguistics that makes me believe it to be fact.”

“And what makes you so sure?”

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He went to the professor's desk, picked up a book, and emphatically stated, "Because, during the visions, I was there. I handled the books and papers and saw the writing. They were as real to me as this book is right now. That's why I believe I was having – what could be possibly a past life experience."

"Now, I know you've lost it." Anthony said as he shifted uneasily in his chair, "You're delving into the occult. What do you know about reincarnation?"

"I had not considered it until after the visions began, but I've done extensive research since then. Did you know that many religions strongly believe that a soul may return to live again?"

Anthony thought, "I've always considered Robert one of the best scientific minds of our time. How can he possibly believe in such science fiction?" Then he stated, "Robert, that's the most bizarre story I've ever heard. Why have you come to me with this information?"

He placed the book back on the desk and looked Anthony straight in the eyes, "I've attended many of your lectures, and as you know, we've spoken many times on different subjects. That's why I'm certain a man with your archaeological experience could not pass up a chance to discover such documents."

Anthony then stood to face him; "You come to me with this bizarre story of an imaginary man with ancient writings and expect me to believe it without any concrete evidence."

"I'm sorry, professor, but the evidence must wait until it's recovered."

Anthony thought a moment and continued. "If I were to believe such a story, and mind you, Robert, I'm not saying I do, why did this Gazlay fellow come to you, and why now?"

"He told me he had to wait until our planet's technology made it possible to translate the writing. He selected me because of my linguistic ability."

"Assuming what he told you is true, how do you propose to get the books?"

"By going to the island, of course."

"What Island? You never mentioned an island."

"Rapa Nui,"

Anthony repeated Rapa Nui and stated, "That's Easter Island," He thoughtfully walked to the window and gazed out, saying, "However, I do know someone who might be interested..." but did not finish.

Robert went and stood beside him and further enticed, “My brother James is an aeronautical engineer and a member of the Planetary Alliance for Space Exploration. He has recently developed a small personal jet and will take us to the island. We can get there and back in less than a week.”

“And what does James think of your story?”

“He’s not quite as skeptical as you about extraterrestrials and reincarnation; however, he strongly believes we’re not alone in the universe and is intrigued with the idea of getting proof.”

Anthony considered a moment and said, “I can tell you’re truly serious about going and including me in your adventure. I need some time to think about it and check on something. I’ll let you know one way or the other of my decision.”

“Thanks, Professor; I’ll be staying with some friends for a few days before returning to Austin,” he handed Anthony a card, “and can be reached at this number.”

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Chapter 2.

David meets Joyce Armand,

The following afternoon, he received a call from Anthony, "Robert, can you get to the Museum of Natural Science by nine tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, of course, but why?"

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," but cut it short. "I'll explain everything in the morning."

"Ok, Professor, I'll see you then."

At nine, he arrived at the museum to find Anthony waiting.

Good morning Robert, "Before you ask many questions, let me explain why we're here."

Robert listened as he and the professor approached the front entrance, "I've given your story and proposed trip a lot of thought. However, you need to meet a former student of mine. I've known her for a considerable time and is now an assistant director of antiquities, and I admire her work.." then he asked, "Have you seen the Hall of the Americas?"

"Yes, on several occasions."

"Then perhaps you've seen her," and as they entered the building, "Please come with me."

Robert followed him past some first-floor exhibits to a door marked 'For Employees Only.' They descended into the basement and walked past many different-sized crates and piles of boxes and then along a corridor to another large room. When they entered, Robert saw a workbench in the center of the room with a young woman standing behind it. She was wearing a white smock and examining a strange-looking figurine.

As they approached, Anthony greeted her, "Good morning, Joyce; I've brought the gentleman I told you about."

When she turned to face them, Robert saw a slender and attractive young woman about his age with shoulder-length blond hair. He recalled seeing her before but had never spoken to her.

"Good morning, Anthony," she replied, glancing at Robert, "is this the guy you mentioned?"

"Yes," and then to Robert, "I'd like you to meet my friend, Joyce Armand."

Robert scowled at him and whispered, "Professor! I spoke to you in confidence. I did not intend for this to become public."

Anthony put his hand on Robert's shoulder and said, "It's okay, Robert! I've only told her what a brilliant student I think you are and that you're pursuing an idea she would most likely find interesting."

Robert briefly glared at Joyce and again whispered, "Why would she be interested in what I told you?"

"Because of her extensive travels in Peru, the Andes, and recently to one of the world's most mystical places, the Inca retreat of Machu Picchu. She's also written her first book on ancient cultures."

"But what makes you so sure she's the right person to—?"

Joyce impatiently rapped the table and interjected. "I wish everyone would stop talking about me as if I weren't here."

The two men turned to face her, "I'm sorry, Joyce," Anthony said.

"Me too," Robert added as they walked to the workbench, "It's just that I didn't know anyone other than the professor who would listen and possibly believe my story."

She glanced at Anthony, then looked at Robert inquisitively, "And what story's that?"

Robert hastily asked Anthony, "What have you told her?"

"Only that I knew an eager young man with a most ambitious archeological undertaking." Then, to Joyce, he suggested, "Why don't we go to your office."

She agreed, saying, "That would be a much better place for a private conversation."

Joyce Armand is a young-looking thirty-year-old woman with a supple five-foot-nine body. She competed in gymnastics throughout college and was a member of the intercollegiate diving team. When not traveling on expeditions for the museum, she plays tennis. Shortly after getting her master's degree in anthropology, she became assistant director of antiquities.

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They followed her to an employee's elevator that took them to the second-floor hallway. From there, they proceeded to a small but nicely furnished corner office. When she removed the smock and gracefully moved to sit behind her desk, Robert wondered why he had not noticed her. The two men went and sat in the comfortable chairs beside a picture window overlooking a garden displaying a Cockrell Sundial.

Robert studied her momentarily before asking, "I know the professor thinks you might be interested in what I told him, but since you don't even know what it is, why would you?"

She smiled at Anthony and then back at Robert, "I've known Dr. Walters for several years, and when he says he has something of interest for me, you can bet I'm ready to listen."

Robert looked straight at her and said, "Before I confide in you, please tell me what you believe about past lives and reincarnation."

Without a hint of shock or dismay at the abrupt change of subject, she stared straight back and replied, "I've traveled to many places and studied the cultures of the people who believe in it. I'm not convinced of its validity, but I try to keep an open mind."

Robert thought an unexpected mention of the occult to another scientific mind would dismay her and end the conversation. He was taken entirely by surprise and commented, "I didn't expect an answer like that."

Anthony chuckled as he said, "I've got a feeling she's going to surprise you in more ways than that, so why don't you just tell her what you told me."

Robert was beginning to realize there was more to this woman than a pretty face and shapely figure. He stood and walked around her office and retold his story. He also told her that she had disclosed the secrets behind the Moai monuments in one of Veda's manuscripts.

Joyce sat and listened without interruption. When he finished, her only comment was, "When do you plan to leave?"

Once again, amazed by her directness, he said in dismay, "That's it! You don't have any questions. All you want to know is when I plan to leave!"

"It was a fascinating story, and I believe that you believe it. All that remains is for you to prove it one way or the other. So, when do you plan to leave?"

He looked at her curiously and then at Anthony, "I'm planning on mid-January but was waiting for the professor's answer."

"I'm afraid I've gotten too old for such an adventure; besides, Joyce is better qualified than I for this particular enterprise."

"Are you sure, Professor?"

"Absolutely, the two of you would be less conspicuous as ordinary tourists than us mounting an expedition."

Robert briefly studied her with discernment and asked, "Would you be interested in going?"

Rather than answer, she got up and went to stand by Anthony, looked out the window, and said, "Robert, I'm curious as to why you chose January."

He began, "I must consider the ...," but stopped abruptly and did not continue.

"Consider what?" she asked as she turned from the window to look at him.

He still did not answer the question but changed the subject, "Have you been there?"

"Yes, As a matter of fact, I have."

"Why didn't you say so?" Tell us about it."

"Robert, I have a confession to make."

He looked at her curiously and then glanced at Anthony, who had remained quiet all the while merely enjoying the verbal fencing match but just gave him a knowing smile, and Robert thought, "You crafty old devil."

She began, "During my research of the voyage of Kon-Tiki, a colleague friend and I took a summer cruise that included a stop at Easter Island; it was mid-June, and it rained the entire time we were there. Our visit was interesting but too short to explore beyond – " when Anthony interjected, "beyond their hotel room, she was with her intended at the time."

Taken by surprise and somewhat embarrassed, she rebuked him as she returned to her desk, "Anthony, that's more than anyone needs to know. We don't need to rehash old history."

Robert smiled inwardly at her slightly flushed complexion.

Regaining her composure, Joyce continued, "I did see enough of the island, however, to know we don't need to be climbing around rocky shelves exploring in the rain."

Robert stated, "That's one of the reasons why I chose mid-January,"

"That's good because you'll also avoid the heavy holiday traffic. However, if I were invited to go, I must consider the cost; I'm a bit—"

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"Of course, I'm inviting you to go," Robert interjected without hesitation and added, "I believe you could be very helpful on such a quest, and there's no need to concern yourself about expenses. I will take care of everything!"

"I appreciate the invite, but I don't understand; a trip like that will cost a small fortune."

Anthony assured her, "If Robert says not to be concerned about expenses, he means just that. So if you can't find a better excuse than that!"

"What do you mean excuse," she stammered as she stood and came from behind the desk, "I only meant that I"

"Work too hard," Anthony stated, "It's time you got away from Houston and this museum for a week or two."

She slowly returned to her desk while reconsidering the offer. She sat down and remained silent for several minutes before finally conceding, saying, "You're quite right. I do need a break from this place, and I can't think of a better way to do it."

Anthony said as he stood and moved toward the door, "Come, Robert, it's time we leave before she changes her mind."

Robert walked to the door, stood beside Anthony, turned to Joyce, and said, "Now that that's settled, I'll take care of all the necessary preparations." Since she had accompanied them to the door, he reached out and took her hand, smiled, and continued, "That gives you ample time to schedule a two-week vacation around the beginning of January. Then we'll be off to Easter Island on the treasure hunt of the millennium."

Once outside and walking to the parking lot, Anthony stated, "Now that you've definitely decided to go on this treasure hunt, I suggest you inform the International Archaeological Society of your intent."

"I'll do it next week to ensure we make the necessary arrangements with the Chilean government to meet all reciprocal agreements."

"Robert, There's one more thing that may concern you. Have you heard of KORP?"

"No, what is it?"

"KORP is an acronym for Keep Our Religion Pure."

"And which one of the religions do they represent?"

"The leaders are a group of hardcore fanatics who claim to be the only true Christians left on earth. They believe that all other religions are bastardizations of human existence."

"Why should I be concerned about what they believe?"

"To get the answer, I suggest you look them up online."

"Thanks, professor; I'll do that as soon as I return home."

Chapter 3.

Their flight to Easter Island

Upon his return to Austin, he immediately researched Korp to find that Anthony was correct. He read the website's cover page stating, 'We must preserve and protect our Christian religion from contamination by any adverse propaganda.' The page also listed its five primary bylaws.

1. We will disavow all religious doctrines opposing those of our Christian faith.
2. We will disavow all material attempting to refute the authenticity of the Bible.
3. We will dispute all claims of reincarnation and extraterrestrial existence.
4. We will prevent the spread of disparaging material that attempts to subvert our beliefs.
5. We will take any action necessary to preserve and protect everything we believe.

After reading many of the comments submitted by their followers, he decided the people were religious fanatics who would actively object to anything he might find on the island. They could even become a dangerous threat, but he had more important things to attend to right now.

During the month before their departure, Robert coordinated all aspects of the trip, including the flight schedule with James, preparing food and supplies, and hotel reservations. Although he did not tell Joyce everything, he stayed in contact with her.

On Saturday morning, January 8, 2264, he flew to Houston in his VLT (Vertical Lift Transport) and met Joyce at her apartment. After their usual professional yet cordial greeting, he loaded her bags into the VLT, set the GPS controls, lifted the vehicle smoothly, and began their trip out of the city.

She looked down and then turned and asked, "Where are you going? Houston International is the other way."

"We're not going to Houston International."

Confused, she asked, "Why not? The best way to Easter Island is through Chile via Miami!"

He smiled at her, "That's not the only way."

Now she was even more confused, "What do you mean? It's the best way from here."

His smile broadened, "Not if a brother with a supersonic aircraft is willing to fly us directly there."

"Oh! Why didn't you tell me about a brother? "And since you didn't, asking why you never mentioned a supersonic aircraft would be redundant."

"If I had, it wouldn't have been a surprise."

She managed to contain her curiosity until the vehicle landed and rolled to a stop in the parking area. She looked around and asked, "How big is this aircraft?"

Just then, James opened the vehicle's door and said, "Big enough to get you to Easter Island and back,"

She turned and glanced up to see a younger version of Robert, and as she stepped out of the vehicle, she looked directly at James and said, "There's no denying it; you've got to be Robert's brother."

Then, sardonically added, "the brother he neglected to mention, much less a supersonic aircraft."

"Hi, I'm James, and you must be Joyce."

As Robert exited the vertical-lift car and opened the luggage compartment, she said, "Pleased to meet you, James," then turned to Robert, "You tell your brother about me, but not a word to me about him."

"As I told you, Joyce, I wanted it to be a surprise."

"That you did; it's almost as big a surprise as that other story you told."

She looked around and added, "Now, where's that aircraft?"

James glanced at his brother and said, "I see what you mean; she gets directly to the point," then gestured, "it's over there in the hanger."

She smiled at James and scowled at Robert as he picked up her two suitcases. When they got to the hanger, she saw a sleek silver aircraft parked inside and immediately noted the 'Grayson XG-71' painted on the fuselage."

"Does that 'X' mean what I think it means?"

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"It stands for experimental," James stated, "but don't let that scare you."

Joyce looked at James, then Robert, and while walking toward the aircraft, was thinking, "Anthony introduces me to this guy and talks me into going to Easter Island with him to find some ancient writings. Even though I spoke to him several times, I only met him once. Now I learn he's got a brother who flies supersonic-aircraft."

The two men stayed a short distance behind her when suddenly she stopped, turned, and exclaimed, "I don't even like flying on commercial flights with proven safety records, and you expect me to climb aboard a spacecraft with experimental painted on it. Then, fly 4,000 miles with two men, one I hadn't met until five minutes ago, and the other with a crazy scheme to find some mythical writings he learned about in a dream, and all you can say is, don't be scared. I'm terrified!"

Robert said, "I'm sorry, Joyce. I should have told you."

"Then, why didn't you? And don't give me that surprise stuff!"

"Since Professor Walters knows you so well, he told me to keep some things as a surprise; otherwise, you might change your mind about going."

She emphatically stated, "He also knows me well enough to know that if I agree to something, I'll stick to it."

"In that case," James interceded, "let's go to the office, and I'll explain everything. That should ease your mind."

"It's not my mind that needs easing; it's my stomach." That broke the tension, and everyone laughed.

As they entered a small office alongside the hanger bay, she asked, "What is this place?"

"The property is owned and operated by the Planetary Alliance for Space Exploration (P.A.S.E.), "but this facility is reserved for private enterprises to develop innovative ideas. I'm associated with a group of design engineers working on our advanced guidance and control systems. The XG-71 is mine, and I have equipped it with the latest engine, flight controls, and monitoring systems. It also has my latest fuel-injection system that uses a compressed mixture of Hydrogen and Oxygen. The craft is still classified as experimental only because we await patent approval before starting production."

Joyce thought, "I guess genius runs in the family," and said, "That eases some of the knots in my stomach. So tell me about your flight plan."

James spoke directly to Robert, "I told you, brother, not to surprise her like this, but she's – one hell of a good sport."

"I knew she would be. Professor Walters told me that once she knows all the facts and makes up her mind, nothing can stop her."

Joyce thought, "Anthony — just wait till I see you again," then wondered what else he had told him.

James went to his computer console, turned on the projector and a chart appeared on the wall screen. He used laser light to point out locations as he explained, "Here we are at Latitude 29 degrees 54.5 minutes north, and there is Easter Island at 27 degrees 09 minutes south; a distance of 4,055 miles South-South-West. We'll climb through the Stratosphere and into the Mesosphere to an altitude of 100 kilometers or 328,000 feet. We will then cruise at a speed of Mach three. Got any questions?"

"Just a couple," She replied, "How high is that in miles, and what's Mach? How fast is Mach three, and how long will it take to get there?"

James explained, "That's a little over 62 miles. Mach one is the speed of sound, about 768 mph at sea level, depending on the temperature. Rounding off the numbers, Mach three at that altitude will be about 2,200 mph, so our flight time should take less than 2 hours."

Joyce sat open-mouthed for a moment and then, with a sheepish grin, asked, "You've flown that thing like this before?"

"Of course, many times."

She turned to Robert and said, "Since he's still here to talk about it, I guess it's okay — so let's get started."

"There's just one more consideration," James said.

She glared at him and took a deep breath, "I knew it!" she said and exhaled, "What is it now?"

James spoke as he went to a bank of lockers, "It's just a matter of gravitational forces on takeoff and landing. I don't expect the G-forces to exceed three or four. However, unless properly prepared, they could cause problems." He returned and placed a package on the table, "So, for that reason, I've got a G-suit for you."

She opened the box, held the suit up at arm's length, commented, "Very stylish," and burst out laughing.

Robert asked, "Why are you laughing?"

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"I guess it's to keep from crying,"

James said, "It's not that bad, Joyce. You'll look great in it."

"Vanity must prevail," she said emphatically, "I'll not wear this contraption anywhere but inside the plane."

The brothers chuckled and agreed.

Robert had already securely stowed all the supplies in the cargo bay the previous day, so all that remained was Joyce's luggage. Robert instructed her to board the plane, strip her underwear, and put on the G-suit.

While changing, she questioned her sanity for even being there when suddenly she felt the plane moving. She caught her breath, rushed to look out a window, and saw a tug pulling the craft clear of the hanger. She returned to the aft compartment and finished dressing just as James and Robert came aboard. She admiringly watched as the brothers dressed in royal blue jumpsuits entered and strode to the cockpit.

She squinted from behind the door and said, "Don't you two look impressive. I guess macho men don't need these," and stepped into the passageway in her G-suit.

The men turned and looked at her. James nudged his brother and said, "Didn't I say she'd look great in it?"

"We're wearing ours under the jumpsuits," Robert said as he handed her another package, "and here's one for you. But first, let me help you adjust the suit for proper fit."

The craft could accommodate four: a pilot, a copilot, and two passengers. Robert strapped her into her seat behind the copilot, and after connecting the sensor wires to the G-suit, he said, "The cabin's entirely pressurized so that you won't need an oxygen mask, but if your ears begin to block up, swallow a couple of times. If that doesn't work, hold your nose and gently blow until they clear." Then he pointed to some instruments on the flight-control panel and added, "That's the navigator's computer screen, and if you watch the readouts, you'll know what's going on."

"Easy for you to say!" she said, "I suppose you've also done this before."

He smiled reassuringly and said, "A few times," while buckling himself into the copilot's seat.

She shuddered when the high pitch scream of the air starter brought the turbine engine to life. The plane vibrated slightly until the engine eased into idle. Then, as the turbine's sound increased and the aircraft began rolling forward, she could hear the two men

talking but not well enough to understand. When she heard the radio give them clearance, Robert turned and called out, "Here we go."

She saw James push a button on the flight console panel and became instantly thrust back into her seat with a force she had never felt before. She strained to look out the window and only saw a few seconds of blurring landscape before they were airborne. The craft tilted skyward and lunged practically straight up, and she felt the pressure in the G-suit increase about her legs and abdomen. She was immediately grateful for the well-padded seat as the gravitational force increased and wondered how long this would continue. She remembered what Robert had told her about the navigator's console. Even though she was lightheaded, she focused on the computer screen and watched the numbers increase. She saw the elapsed flight time was only two and a half minutes and thought, "Sure felt longer than that." She gasped when she saw the airspeed was 982 mph and an altitude of 65,041 feet, with both numbers increasing. She watched breathlessly for several more minutes, and the plane leveled off at 328,084 feet. She felt the aircraft accelerate with another burst of power. When the airspeed approached 2,240 mph, the acceleration slowed, and she felt as though they were standing still. The only indication of movement was the continuous change in latitude and longitude.

Robert came from the cockpit, sat in the other passenger's seat, and said, "How's that for a kick-in-the-pants?"

As the pressure in her G-suit subsided, she said, "Some years ago, I got a ride in a modified Terraplane that got up to 263 mph. I didn't think I'd ever go any faster than that, nor did I want to. She took a deep breath and, with a broad grin, added, "But this was terrifyingly exciting."

James turned and spoke over his shoulder, "If you think that was exciting, wait till we start down."

Robert reached across the aisle, smiled as he took her hand, and asked, "Are you all right?"

She squeezed his hand and said, "Yes, thanks, I'm fine — now."

She sat quietly thinking, then said, "Robert, you're full of surprises. First, you invite me on this trip, then this fantastic but terrifying flight; what other surprises haven't you told me about?"

"If I'd told you about this flight in advance, I'm not sure you'd have come with me. If there are any more surprises, I'll try to keep them to a minimum."

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"Fair enough!" she continued, "I greatly appreciate you including me in your expedition, but how can you finance such a venture? It must've cost you a small fortune."

"Money's been the least of our concerns. My father is an aeronautical design engineer and has worked for the P.A.S.E. for years. He left on a mission to the planet IO when I was 22. When he returns, he'll have 34 years with the company and be ready to retire. He ensured Mom, James, and I would have the best of everything before he left."

"What about your mother?"

"Mom still receives a monthly allotment and royalties from some of my dad's patents. She's also a very successful artist with some income."

She thought, "No wonder they can afford all these expensive toys," then asked, "With that kind of background, why aren't you an astronaut?"

"Being his oldest son, Dad naturally expected me to follow his interests in aeronautics, but I'd always had a compelling interest in anthropology, so after graduating high school, Mom encouraged James and me to follow our desires. And as you can see," pointing toward the cockpit, "James chose to fulfill and most likely surpass Dad's expectations." "Mom's interest in the arts and humanities got me interested in anthropology; then, at Texas A&M, I started researching ancient writings and their translations. I became fascinated by the diversity of languages and began to explore their origins."

"So, that's why you became a cryptologist?"

"Yes. And that's also why I expanded my computer skills to help develop my translation programs."

She thought, "Maybe he really is as brilliant as Anthony claims."

He looked at her and hesitantly said, "This may seem to come as a surprise, but it's not meant to be."

She scowled with squinted eyes and furrowed forehead he had seen several times before and said, "Ok, spit it out!"

"Even though I contacted the International Archaeological Society with our intent, I'm not sure they have completed negotiations with Chili. So, I've devised a backup cover story. "Your intrigue never seems to end," she said with raised eyebrows, "What kind of cover story?"

He grinned, "We're a couple of ornithologists from the Audubon Society checking on seabird migration patterns."

She huffed, "You've got to be kidding. As ingenious a plan as that sounds, I don't know anything about birds!"

"That's ok, Joyce; I've brought some books for you to study."

Somewhat exasperated, she sighed, "So much for no more surprises."

James turned and said, "Tighten your seatbelts; we'll head down as soon as we get clearance."

The aircraft went silent as it nosed over and started to dive. Suddenly, Joyce lifted off her seat and felt like her stomach rose to her throat. She swallowed hard, closed her eyes, and bit her lip to keep from screaming. Four minutes later, the craft leveled off, and again, she was thrust down and back into the seat. When she opened her eyes, she saw the airspeed was 610 mph at 2,000 feet.

When she looked at Robert, he grinned and said, "I'll bet you never got a thrill like that at any carnival."

A few minutes later, they were on the ground and rolling to a stop in a private parking area when she said, "That was the smoothest landing; I never even felt our touchdown."

She heard James say, "That's because my X-71 is the best."

She stated, "I don't know much about flying, but I do know you don't get clearance to land from 62 miles up."

As James exited the cockpit, he said, "You do if you're going to make a free-fall landing."

"What does that mean?"

"It means our navigation and control system took charge and automatically landed the craft -- much like the space vehicles of 2028."

She lost her usual pleasant demeanor and blurted, "Damn you two and your surprises!"

"That shouldn't have been any surprise," Robert said, "he told you the ride down would be more exciting than going up."

James said, "Brother, I think Joyce is a bit miffed with us."

She bit her bottom lip to prevent saying anymore.

After clearing customs, she and Robert went to the Taha Tai Hotel while James prepared for his return flight to Houston.

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Chapter 4.

Meeting Gazlay Tupac

By one o'clock, they had checked into their adjoining rooms. Joyce went to her room without a word and spent the afternoon studying the bird books while he returned to customs to pick up the supplies.

Shortly after dark, a knock came at the hotel room's door.

"Who could that be," Robert wondered as he walked toward the door, "no one knows we're here — and James has already left."

He opened the door and stood, staring speechlessly into the eyes of the dark-skinned native from his vision.

"Good evening, Mister Grayson," said the man with no noticeable accent.

Robert stepped back, looked at him, and said, "You're the man from my vision!" He immediately called Joyce, and as she came from the adjoining room, he excitedly explained, "This is the man, Joyce. He's the one I told you about — the one who showed me where to find the artifacts."

"Really!" she exclaimed, "If he's the person you say, he's more than an apparition from your dream."

Robert reached out his hand to the man and asked, "You are, aren't you?"

The native, ignoring Robert's outstretched hand, spoke softly. "I am Gazlay Tupac," then directed to Joyce, "I assure you, Miss Armand, I am more than an apparition,"

"Robert," Gazlay said, "I am happy you received my message and grateful you both came to the island."

As Robert stepped back to allow Gazlay to enter the room, he asked, "How did you know we were here?"

He said, "Just as my name Gazlay Tupac translates as a mystic messenger, so I am, and that is how."

Joyce offered him a chair at the small table and asked, "Who are you, and how ...?"

"Give the man a chance," Robert interrupted.

Gazlay settled on the chair, waited while Joyce and Robert sat across the table from him, and then spoke, "In answer to your first question, Miss Armand, I am Peruvian. I am also a direct descendant of a lineage of Inca soothsayers. As for your second question, I have perfected the ancient skill of dreamscape manipulation and projected the required images to Robert."

"How did you know I was going to...?" she began, "I hadn't asked you that yet. Do you read minds, too?"

Gazlay smiled at her and continued, "As a soothsayer, I have access to knowledge and many skills, such as astral projection."

What's that - She asked.

"Everyone is multi-dimensional -Gazlay explained, "The astral body is one of the seven body sheaths, including the physical, mental, causal, etheric, emotional, and spiritual. Astral projection occurs when the astral body departs the physical structure."

Joyce sat dumbfounded and said, "I didn't understand a word of that."

Gazlay smiled at her and said, "That is quite all right, Miss Armand; not many people do."

Robert said - I do, but how did you project those images?"

Gazlay explained, "Once I located you, I used my dreamscape skills to create a series of lucid dreams. Thus, you saw and perceived what I wanted you to see."

Joyce stood and declared, "That's illegal!" She sat back down, giving it a second thought, and muttered, "Or at least — it should be."

Gazlay calmly stated, "What I did was not illegal on any plane of existence, for you see, I had his permission."

"You what?" she exclaimed.

Robert said, "Mister Tupac, I followed most of what you said until the permission part."

The three of them remain quiescent as Gazlay contemplates before speaking, "I am about to tell you something that may be beyond your religious teachings. We all existed long before this mortal experience and will continue long after. Robert and I have shared many mortal existences, one being here on this island many millenniums ago. We agreed then and again, just before this life, we would disclose the truth of what we knew. Robert chose his lineage well, providing him with an education commensurate to the task. I chose a life affording me the means for us to accomplish that task."

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Joyce said, "By getting him to this island?"

"Yes,"

"Now, I suppose you'll tell me; you knew I'd be here."

"Of course."

"And you arranged that too!"

"Yes," he said again.

"How can you say that? I never had any dreams of this."

"I used other means to give you the opportunity of choice."

She scowled at Gazlay and demanded, "Did you manipulate Anthony too?"

"Only indirectly,"

She blurted, "Now I know that's got to be illegal," then added, "In any case, you weren't sure I'd be here."

"Not until after you chose to be."

She cocked her head slightly and asked, "Why me?"

Gazlay smiled and said, "You will come upon the answer in due time."

She stammered, "Mister Gazlay Tupac, I find you most disquieting."

He smiled at her and said, "You have told me that before."

"Now you're confusing me."

His smile broadened, "That too."

Robert stood and said, "I think we need to concentrate on the primary reason we're here."

"Precisely - Gazlay said - There will be transportation here to pick you up in the morning at seven o'clock. The guide will take you along an off-beaten trail to a point south of the airport runway. I will meet you there, and we will take a fishing boat to an offshore island." He rose from the chair, went and stood to wait by the door, and said, "I will leave you now."

Robert went and opened the door, and as Gazlay left, he said, "Until the morrow, I bid you a good day."

Robert closed the door, and Joyce snapped, "What Island is he talking about, or is that another one of your surprises?"

"Bird Island, it's — "I know where Bird Island is," she interrupted, "It's that small island off the southern tip of this one. Why there?"

"Because that's where the artifacts are."

She slowly admitted, "I should have surmised that from your Audubon cover story."

He said, grinning mischievously, "Precisely."

As she abruptly returned to the adjoining room, she said, "Good night, Robert!" and curtly closed the door.

The following morning, Robert and Joyce rose early. She appeared slightly calmer, but he sensed some of last evening's tension during breakfast in the hotel's open-air coffee shop.

Robert returned to the room for their backpacks and supplies while Joyce stood in front of the hotel awaiting transportation. When he returned, Joyce was now at the side of the hotel conversing with a young native boy holding four scruffy-looking horses.

"Who's your young friend?" Robert asked.

She glared at him and stated, "That Tupac fellow's gone too far this time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she exclaimed, pointing at the horses. "Is this the transportation that old man said would be here at seven?"

"So it would appear," he said, glancing at his watch, "and it's right on time."

"But when Tupac said transportation, I thought he meant a taxi or something."

"What's the matter – can't you ride?"

"Of course I can ride. That's not the point."

"Then I suggest we mount up and get started."

She scowled at the guide and asked, "Why the horses?"

While Robert strapped their packs of provisions onto the packhorse, the young guide smiled broadly at her and replied, "The path we must follow will not permit automobiles." The boy held the reins while Robert helped Joyce mount. He then climbed aboard his horse.

Joyce jolted with surprise when the young guide, in one smooth motion, suddenly sprang from the ground to astride his mount and said, "Please come with me."

Joyce rode beside Robert as they followed the boy and the packhorse along a narrow path behind the hotel when he asked, "Where are we going?"

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"My instructions were to guide you to a place by the shore."

She asked, "How far is it - The place is on the south side of the island, about fourteen kilometers from here."

"What's that in miles?"

Robert said, "About eight," then asked the boy, "How long do you—We should be there about nine-fifteen," the boy replied.

Joyce muttered, "Does everyone on this island answer questions before even being asked?"

The horses moved easily along a sparsely wooded narrow path of soft loam for several miles. The early morning southerly breeze brought the scent of seabirds and distant ocean sounds as they exited the wooded area onto a dirt path. A short way along the road, they could see the end of the airport runway in the distance to their right. A little further on, they reached the hill's crest and could see where the path went down to the ocean. They continued to within a hundred yards of the water when the boy halted his horse. He dismounted and stated, "This is as far as I am allowed to go,"

"What do you mean, Where do we..." she began.

"That is all I know, Miss. My instructions were to guide you to this place and show you where to go." He pointed and said, "Follow this path down to the water."

"Whose instructions?" she muttered, "as if I didn't know."

Robert thanked the boy, swung to the ground, helped Joyce dismount, and removed their supplies from the packhorse. After the boy led the horses back up the road and out of sight, she and Robert stood looking out over the rugged rocky coastline and the dark blue sea beyond.

He picked up his duffel bag and handed one of the packs to her, saying, "Well, let's go."

"Go," she stammered, "Go where?"

"To the end of the path, of course,"

"You've got to be kidding; there's nothing there."

"I'm sure we'll find something when we get there."

Joyce dropped her pack when they reached the water's edge and commented, "This is just great. I'm standing on the shoreline of an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and Gazlay Tupac is nowhere in sight."

"Why, Miss Armand, I am right here."

Startled, they both spun around to find Gazlay standing behind them.

"Where did you—" They began in unison.

"That is unimportant. Are you ready to begin?"

"Begin - she stammered, "What do you think we've been doing the past two hours?"

"I thought you would enjoy an early morning ride,"

She huffed as Robert helped her with her backpack, swung his pack over his left shoulder, and slung the duffel bag strap over his right. As Gazlay started to walk west along the shore, he said, "Now, if you will follow me, I will guide you to your destination."

"I swear," Joyce huffed, "that man's exasperating."

They followed close behind Gazlay as he made his way along the rocky shore. After twisting her ankle, Joyce asked, "How much farther is it?"

"Is what Miss Armand," Gazlay asked.

"To the place we're going, of course."

"The objective is to reach a point of rendezvous,"

"Rendezvous with whom?"

"With that," Gazlay pointed out to sea.

Robert and Joyce were so intent on watching their footing on the rock-strewn shore that they failed to notice the old, weathered fishing trawler approaching.

"What is that?"

"Why, Miss Armand, that is part of the transportation I promised.

"First horses, and now this!" she studied the craft and asked, "Is that thing even seaworthy?"

"I assure you, Miss Armand, that vessel will carry you to and from your destination."

Scowling at him, she said, "I know you mean Bird Island; Robert finally got around to telling me and," pointing offshore, "it's way out there."

Joyce sat on the box, looked at Robert, then at Gazlay, "I've just about had it with all your surprises. I'm here and need to know what's going on."

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Robert said, "Joyce, you're entirely right, and I apologize for the deception, but —" He did not finish his excuse; instead, he said, "From here on, I'll tell you everything before it happens — no more surprises."

"I've heard that promise before, and now I don't believe you,"

Robert tried to explain further, "I kept the island a surprise because the professor told me you were a champion diver."

"That's true, but I confine by diving into swimming pools, "not from off some island's cliffs."

"Even if you did, there won't be any time for that."

When the trawler reached some distance position offshore, a man tossed something from the vessel's bow.

"What was that?" she asked.

"An anchor," Gazlay said, "this is a beach, not a harbor, Miss Armand."

"Then how — oh no — I'm not going to swim out there."

"Relax, Joyce," Robert said, "Gazlay has everything under control."

"That's no assurance. Look what that man's done for us so far."

Gazlay calmly said, "If you would be patient for a moment, you will see all is well."

Joyce looked again at the fishing boat, saw a man rowing a dinghy toward them, and said, "Is that what you meant by all is well?"

"But of course, miss Armand.

Chapter 5.

Their first day on Bird Island

They stood on the rocky shore after the boat left when Joyce asked, "Now what?"

He mimicked, "Looks like it's just you and me, kid,"

"Don't you dare play Humphrey Bogart with me; this isn't Casablanca. I'm serious; what now?"

He swung the duffel bag over his shoulder, picked up the ice chest, and said, "Follow me." She picked up the remaining two bags and followed him up the hill to a sparsely grassed area.

Dropping the bags, he said, "This is it."

"Is what?"

"It's where we set up our base camp."

"And then what?"

"We have a little preparation before morning."

"I knew it! Another damn surprise; what is it now?"

"We have to locate something and clear some ground."

"I'm afraid to ask what or why – so let's just get to it."

"We will, right after we set up our campsite,"

As they completed the setup, he said, "I promised I'd tell you what to expect next. We have to find a sentinel stone because it marks the entrance to an underground room. We have to move it from the doorway."

"OK," she said, looking at him inquisitively, "How big is it?"

"The stone is about two feet tall, but after many eons, the soil has built up and shifted. Once we dig out around it, we should be able to move it."

"Then what?"

"First, let's see if we can find the marker," he added with a broad smile, "No more surprises, Joyce; from now on, just consider everything as interesting discoveries."

"Of course!" she replied mockingly.

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He got two collapsible shovels from the duffel bag, pointed, and said, "Veda's dwelling is under that knoll over there. But eons of storms have removed any trace of it. He paused, "Except for that!" as he pointed to a stone near their campsite.

She commented, "You said it was two feet tall. That rock is barely visible, so what makes you think it's a sentinel stone?"

"You keep forgetting my visions; that's why I brought these," and handed her a shovel, "We've got some digging to do."

After an hour of laborious digging, they had an eight-foot rectangular hole about a foot deep. The sentinel stone stood proudly close to the edge of the clearing. It was two feet tall, round at the top, and sloped down into a two-foot square base.

When Robert told her it was enough digging, she went to look at the stone more closely and said, "This thing must weigh a ton."

"About two hundred and fifty pounds," He confirmed.

"How are we going to move it?"

"Obviously, it's too heavy to lift, so we'll have to tilt and walk it out of the way."

When Robert returned to the campsite, Joyce walked to a pile of dirt and sat down. She wiped the sweat from her brow again and watched the birds fly overhead and flit among the bushes. She thought, "At least I'll have something to talk about if questioned about seeing birds."

When he returned with the duffel bag and more water, she jokingly said, "Now I know the real reason for your invitation."

He plopped down beside her, handed her a water bottle, and smiled as he said. "I guess you've figured out how unscrupulous I can be."

She nodded and smiled back, "Oh, I figured that out when I met James. However, all will be forgiven if we find what we came for."

Robert stood and said, "It's not much further. In fact, we're sitting right over it."

He got a small broom from the duffel and started sweeping the ground around the sentinel stone.

"What are you looking for?"

"This," he said as he squatted, "I found the trapdoor."

Joyce squatted beside him, examined the rock surface, and commented, "That doesn't look like anything but a big crack in the rock to me."

They stood, and Robert began sweeping the rock's surface and cleaning out along the crack. She soon saw where the groove extended into a six-foot square.

As he removed as much dirt from the grooves as possible, he explained, " This is the sentinel stone that marked the top of the trapdoor. That's how I knew where to look."

"How does the door open, "I don't see any handles on it."

He explained, "The door has a counterbalance mechanism built-in. When the door is closed, the counterweight keeps it shut; when it's open, the counterweight holds it open."

"And how are we supposed to open it?"

He tossed the broom to the other side of the dirt pile, and as he went to sit on it, he said, "Time to take a break. Come sit with me, and I'll tell you how we will open it."

She came and sat beside him as he stated, "We have to go through the cave to get into Veda's dwelling tomorrow. Then we'll open the door from the inside."

All she could say was, "Why am I not surprised!"

He stated, "This has been a good day's work, and you've been a great help. Now I'm hot, tired, and dirty, so I'm going for a swim to clean up and cool off, "Care to join me?"

"Don't mind if I do. I'll go to clean up, but I'll forgo the swim, thank you."

"Why? The professor told me you were a champion diver."

"I dive from boards into swimming pools; I don't swim in oceans. In fact, I don't even like to swim."

"Suit yourself," he said as he got a couple of towels from another pack and tossed one to her, "but I'm going swimming."

"I'll be along in a few minutes, and watch out for sharks."

After he left, she made another trip to the bushes and got a change of clothes before heading down the hill to the water.

He was swimming about a hundred yards offshore, so she stripped down and waded into about neck-deep, cleaned off the day's dirt, returned ashore, put on the clean clothes, and returned to the campsite.

When he got back to camp, she was relaxing on her sleeping bag.

"Come on, Joyce, Let's do a little exploring."

"OK, where to?"

"Just a short walk to the other side of the island; besides, we won't be able to do anything until tomorrow's low tide."

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"Why low tide?"

"We won't be able to enter the cave before then without getting wet."

"And then what?"

"Look around."

"Ok — I see I'm not going to get a straight answer from you."

He laughed, "I'll explain everything in due time."

As they walked to the other side of the island, Robert described a couple more of his visions he hadn't mentioned.

"Was I in any of them?"

"Not until the last vision I got from Gazlay."

"When was that?"

"It was right after my last talk with the professor."

"What was it about?"

"You know there were a lot of cave explorations back around 2000."

"You're as bad as that old man — you're not going to tell me, are you!"

"Maybe later," he said as they approached the other side of the island.

They stood on the edge of a steep rocky cliff overlooking the strong current breaking against an outcropping of rocks sixty feet below.

He explained, "You can't see it from here, but the entrance we're looking for is right down there."

She eased closer to the edge and looked down, "And how are we supposed to get down there?"

"How good are you at repelling?"

"I'll repel you in a minute," she declared, stopping her foot, "That's number three since you promised there wouldn't be any more surprises."

"This wasn't exactly a surprise because you don't have to go down there — unless you want to go."

"Of course, I have to go! What's your plan?"

"There are 12 hours and 19 minutes between tides. Today's high was at 12:04 — about the time we got here. That will put tomorrow's low tide at 6:54 in the morning, so

we will have about three hours of low water to enter the cave. From there, we have to find what we came for."

"What other surprises do you have planned between now and tomorrow's low tide?"

"Just one," he grinned and said, "Have a nice fresh fish dinner and get a good night's sleep; tomorrow will be a long day."

"Where did you get fresh fish?"

"Gazlay had the fisherman prepare the ice chest before we came ashore."

She commented, "You're right! I don't remember seeing it on the Packhorse. That old man comes up with almost as many surprises as you."

That evening, Robert prepared a fish dinner with all the trimmings to satisfy their hearty appetites. Since there was little wood available for a fire, they watched a beautiful sunset, and shortly after the moon began its ascent, they retired for the night. They sat on their sleeping bags, each in their personal thoughts. The vast Pacific Ocean surrounding them made the offshore breeze cool and comfortable. The sky was clear with a faint glimmer of stars overhead.

Joyce finally slid into her sleeping bag and lay quietly thinking for some time, then said, "Thanks for including me in your adventure, Robert. I know I've complained a bit, but don't take it personally. Ever since I met that Tupac fellow, I've felt — I can't explain it — just sort of — uneasy and unnerved."

"No apologies necessary," he said and turned on his side.

As the sky darkened and the stars began to shine brighter, she said, "There's no way to see a spectacular sky like this from downtown Houston."

When she did not get a response, she shifted to her side and saw him curled up atop his sleeping bag, already sound asleep.

She sighed, rolled back to gaze at the stars again, and mumbled, "Goodnight, Robert."

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Chapter 6.

Their second day on Bird Island

Before dawn the next day, Joyce woke to the sound of crackling spam and eggs from the portable butane stove.

"Good afternoon," Robert jested as he called to her from the cookstove, "about time you woke up."

"Go away," she called back, "it's too early to get up; it's still dark!"

"Come on, get up. Time and tide wait for no one; we'll soon be pushing that tide. The coffee's hot, and the eggs will be ready when you get here."

"I'm up," she said as she crawled out of her sleeping bag, stood, stretched, and made a quick trip to the bushes. As she approached the cook stove, she asked, "What time did you get up?"

"About an hour ago, and it should be a good day for spelunking."

By the time they ate, it was two hours before low tide, and he said, "Let's get started."

They returned to the crest of the rock shelf overlooking the cave entrance. He drove a pair of pitons deep into a tight rock crevice while Joyce stood reluctantly at the edge, looking down the sheer drop to the water sixty feet below when Robert asked, "You have done this before — haven't you, Joyce?"

"This is a fine time to ask, but I've had some occasions to do it before."

"I knew you had. I just thought I'd ask. After you get ready, we'll check each other's safety harness."

Robert descended first; Joyce lowered the duffel bag to him and cautiously made her way down.

The tide was low and falling as they edged along the rock face at the water line until they reached a tall, broad cave opening. Robert led the way inside, where the floor sloped upward but still under the high tide watermarks. Joyce followed close behind and looked around a cave that appeared to go nowhere.

"There's nothing here - she said with obvious disappointment.

"What'd you expect, a pirate's chest?"

"Of course not, but I did expect to find something other than baron walls."

"Maybe some hieroglyphics?"

"That would be nice — but no. What did your vision tell you to do next?"

"Follow me," he said as he went to the cave's rear, where the wall flattened, and he started feeling along its surface."

"What are you looking for?"

"You'll know just as soon as I find the right location — and here it is. Hand me the rock hammer."

She retrieved the hammer from the pack and gave it to him. He started tapping along the rock face until he found what sounded like a hollow space. He rapped harder with the pointed end of the hammer until small rock flakes began chipping away. She watched as the chips got larger and the hole went deeper when suddenly the pick broke through, making a small hole.

"What just happened?"

He did not answer but continued enlarging the hole until what looked like a stream of black sand began running out. Joyce stood in silent fascination as he continued to enlarge the hole as more and more black sand poured out. Then she heard a creaking sound that turned into a cracking as a split in the cave wall appeared several yards from them. They stood watching the sand run out as the crack grew larger.

She insisted, "What's happening?"

He took her hand, pulled her away from the cracking wall, and said, "Just stand clear and watch."

The cracking sound filled and echoed through the cave as large chunks of rock began falling from the newly forming hole. The rumbling and cracking continued for several minutes, and when the sound stopped, there was a gaping hole in the wall.

He smiled and said. "Time for the shovel and the flashlights,"

When he had dug the rubble away from the base of the hole to make enough room to walk through, he asked, "Now, isn't that better than a pirate's chest?"

Joyce was speechless and nodded in agreement as she handed him a flashlight.

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He switched it on and carefully stepped into the void. Joyce followed close behind, shined her light on the tunnel walls, stopped abruptly, and stated, "This is not a natural formation – just look at how smooth the walls are. I've never seen any rock hammer or chisel that could cut like that. How do you suppose it was done?"

"Actually," he replied, "Veda carved it with a laser cutting tool."

"Right – she scoffed, "Primitive man had laser tools."

They walked up the sloping floor, going deeper into the island until they entered a large cavernous room.

She shined her light around the walls and remarked, "Wow, look at the size of this place. What is it?"

"One of the natural caves of the island; Veda used it as an entrance to her sanctuary."

"You mean this huge room is just the entrance! I can't wait to see what she called home."

"Then follow me," he said as he picked up the duffel bag, shined his light to the cave's far end, and slowly walked across the black sand floor toward what appeared to be a crack in the wall. When they got there, she saw a gaping twelve-foot hole. He shined the light in and up along a sloping tunnel and said, "Here's where we start to climb."

She stayed several paces behind him as they made their way up the tunnel while shining her light along the walls when she suddenly stopped and declared, "This tunnel did not form naturally; some parts have been smoothly carved out.

"That's right, "Veda had to widen some portions. Come on; we're almost there."

They continued up and onto a flattened area. He swung the backpack to the floor, got two battery-operated lanterns, and switched them on. Even though this cave was slightly smaller than the one below, the lanterns only partially illuminated the interior.

She stood looking in astonishment at the cave walls that were perfectly vertical and once again stated, "Neither is this a natural formation."

"No — nature got a little help in the construction of this room," he said as he carefully moved along the wall and suddenly exclaimed, "Here it is! It's exactly as I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"There's a shelf carved deep into the wall — and they are there!"

"What is?"

"The chests I told you about."

She caught up with him, "Are they really there?"

"Yes, come and help me move them."

He took hold of a handle on the end of a chest and pulled it to the edge of the rock shelf. Joyce grasped the handle on the other end and eased it to the floor together. They did the same with the second chest.

He placed his lantern on the shelf while she knelt beside the bronze-colored chest and said, "This is a strange-looking metal; do you know what it is?"

"No, and I'll bet it's not made of anything from this planet."

"Can you open it?"

"Give me a minute," He squatted beside the box, leaned over to examine the latch, and said, "It's just as I saw in my vision."

He placed his thumb on a symbol above the latch and pressed it, and they heard a metallic click, and the top lifted slightly. He carefully raised the lid to a fully upright position as Joyce stared in disbelief at the chest contents.

She saw lots of dust from decayed cloth and other unknown materials; however, there were three strangely bound books. He carefully lifted one out, and together, they examined the unrecognizable writing on its cover. "What language is that? I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither had I until after Gazlay told me that this book was most likely the ship's log and written in their language."

"Can you read it?"

"Not yet, but I will with Veda's help."

"What do you mean?"

He put the book back and picked up another, "According to Gazlay, this one has Veda's early writings where she's learning both the local language and her father's. He also gave me a few samples I've been using to develop a program to translate her work."

Then she asked, "What's in the other chest?"

He returned the book and opened the other chest as Joyce stood hovering, looking over his shoulder. This one contained what looked like a stack of thin silver-colored sheets of paper. He picked up a single sheet from the top, crumpled it into a small ball, and handed it to Joyce, who cried, "What have you done! You just destroyed whatever it was."

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As she took the crumpled material, he said, "Not at all; just open your hand flat and watch."

She became awestruck when she stretched her fingers wide as the sheet slowly straightened out. She asked. "What in the world is this?"

"Nothing from this world, I can assure you. It's made of a very thin but extremely strong metal. Now examine the writing."

"What is it?"

"According to Gazlay, some are written in the alien language, but most were written by Veda, somewhat a combination alien and local."

She looked closer and said, "A better question is, how was it written?"

"Most likely with one of these," he said as he reached into the chest. "I believe it's a laser implement, but since it no longer functions, I can't be sure."

"How do you know all this? You just opened the box."

"Because I've seen it all before – Gazlay explained most of it in my visions. That's why I was so positive about everything before my first meeting with Anthony."

Joyce handed the metal sheet to Robert, who returned it to the chest. She sat back on her haunches and gazed into the chest.

"What do we do now?"

"Take a few minutes to look around at this room because there's more than this cave to explore."

"How many more are there?"

"The island is riddled with caves, but this is the only one connected to the one below. That's why it's never been discovered."

He adjusted the flashlight beam, shined it across the cave to a crevice in the wall, and said, "Follow me."

She followed him, and together, they shined their flashlights through a large opening and saw stairs. She asked, "Do they lead to the outside?"

"Yes, but first, we must open the door."

The stairs consisted of twelve eighteen-inch steps with twelve treads and risers. He climbed the stairs while she stayed close behind, lighting the way. As they ascended, she

saw nothing but solid rock overhead, and when they got to the seventh step, it was twenty-four inches tall.

Robert stepped up and stood on the step, and when nothing happened, he said, "I guess it's going to take both of us," as he reached to assist her onto the step.

"To do what?" she asked, and just as soon as she had her total weight added to his, they heard a grinding sound as the step began to sink. He pointed up, and they saw a sliver of light when a small opening appeared overhead. Then, a ray of daylight came through a small opening while more dirt and gravel sprinkled down.

They climbed the remaining steps and pushed up hard on the capstone door together. It creaked and ground, but eventually, they managed to get it to a fully open position. They stepped outside and found themselves standing overlooking their campsite.

"Ok," she said, "will you tell me what just happened?"

"As I told you, the door used a counterbalance mechanism to open, and it took our combined weight to offset the balance weight enough to open it."

"That's ingenious," she mumbled while examining the perfectly carved and polished interior surface of the stone door, then asked, "What now?"

"Time to explore the rest of Veda's cave – Did you see half of the sixth step rise as the seventh went down?"

"No, I didn't — why?"

"The half of the sixth step that rose re-shifted the counterweight, so when it's stepped on, it will close the door, so watch your step on the way down and stay on the solid part."

She slowly began following him down. When he reached the bottom, he turned and saw her standing while looking at the sixth and seventh steps, reiterating, "Absolutely ingenious."

He turned off his flashlight and said, "Hold it right there -- don't move."

She froze and anxiously asked, "What's wrong?"

He continued staring at her silhouette in the light from above and said, "Do you remember when you asked me if I knew you would be here, and I told you, maybe later?"

"Yes, I remember."

"That's how I first saw you, merely as a silhouette without any identity. I wasn't sure it was you until after you agreed to fly with us."

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Without a word, she slowly continued down the stairs, put her arms around his neck, and said, "Robert, thanks for insisting I come with you."

He put one arm around her and pulled her closer. "You're welcome, Joyce – and I'm glad I did," he said as he switched on his flashlight, "Now let's continue."

They returned to the chest, picked up the lanterns, and she followed him across the room. There was a four-foot-wide, three-foot-high rock shelf protruding from the wall.

"What do you suppose it's for?" she asked.

"It's a bench."

"But it's so tall. You'd need another step to get up to sit on it."

He reminded her, "As I told you, Veda was nearly seven feet tall."

A large pile of dust was on the floor in front of the bench. Joyce squatted down, picked up a handful of the material, and said, "It looks and feels like sawdust, but how..."

"It's the remains of a table that dried out and disintegrated."

They continued further along the wall and found another three-foot-tall outcropping. This one was about nine feet long and made of neatly cut blocks of stone stacked to form a shallow cradle. As she sifted through the dust, Joyce said, "This must have been a bed of sorts, and this dust is the remains of whatever material she used as bedding."

Further along was a hearth; the fireplace walls were still carbon black from years of use. Robert shined his flashlight up the flue and said, "It's been completely blocked up."

Just then, they heard a rumbling sound that came from deep below.

"What's causing that noise?" she asked.

"It's probably the entrance hole closing."

"You mean the one we came through this morning?"

"That's right."

"But what do you mean, close the entrance?"

"The rising seawater is doing it."

"I don't understand!"

"During high tide, all traces of the black sand will wash away, and another rock will descend to fill the cavity."

"What!" She exclaimed, "The tide is already coming in. You mean we could get trapped in here?"

"That's why we'll use the roof exit."

"This is a fine time to spring that bit of news. What would we have done if we hadn't been able to get the door open, trapped in here for sure?"

"I knew we'd get it open."

"I know— because you saw it all before!"

"That's right."

"I wish you'd tell me about these things before they happen."

"All will become clear in due time."

"Now, you're beginning to sound like that Tupac fellow."

He laughed and said, "I'll explain everything during supper."

"Why don't you start right now and continue there, and don't you dare leave out a single detail."

He laughed and began, "Very well; Gazlay showed me some diagrams of mechanisms Veda had drawn. She must have learned engineering from reading books on the spacecraft because she became quite a genius. This whole place was her design. I'll explain what I can, but later, you'll have to see her drawings to appreciate the intricacies of how everything works."

OK, you convinced me. It's too complex to explain without using diagrams.

She walked to a far corner of the room to look at a large bowl-shaped object and called, "This sure is a big flowerpot."

He went to her, looked over the edge of the chest-high vessel twelve feet across and eight feet deep, and said, "This isn't a flower pot; it's a cistern."

"I knew that! I just wanted to see your reaction."

"Very funny," he said, pointing at the ceilings, "do you see the downspout? It used to go to an outside basin to collect rainwater. The overflow and drain went out a hole in the floor to the ocean."

She commented, "All the comforts of home," then asked, "Where's the chamber pot? She shuddered at the thought and added, "How gross is that?"

"Not gross at all, considering the time and the fact they used such waste material as fertilizer."

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"I know many cultures throughout the centuries that did, but that doesn't make it any less gross."

"How can you be such a great archeologist and still be such a prude?"

"Blame it on my mother; let's keep going."

"I think we've seen all there is to see, so it's time to take the chest outside."

They returned to the chests, repacked the duffel bag, and lugged it and the two chests up the stairs.

They brought the chests to the campsite, wrapped each in a tarp, and packed them securely in another duffel bag.

Robert stated, "I think we've put in another good day's work. I'm hot again, so I'm going for another swim. Care to join me this time?"

"OK, but only to clean up. I told you I don't swim."

He prepared a tasty beef stew to satisfy their hearty appetites that evening. After they finished cleaning up the utensils, he fulfilled his promise by explaining how the trapdoor worked and how the hole in the cave wall would close.

They walked along the island's western side rock shelf until she said, "Robert, I've got to tell you something. I must admit that after hearing your whacky story, I was dubious about making this trip."

"I'm not surprised. What made you decide to come?"

"My first thought was it would be nice to revisit the island in better weather, and if you were right, we found something marvelous! If not – what the hell – I would've had a nice trip I couldn't afford on my own."

"Thanks for being so candid, Joyce. I, too, must admit something. I wasn't sure I wanted to share my discovery with someone so engrossed in digging through moldy old shipwrecks.

"I'll have you know, I've got more diversified interests than shipwrecks."

"I'm beginning to realize that," he admitted, and then asked, "How do you feel now that you know you're not working with a whacked-out nut?"

"It's true. I sometimes considered your notions a bit wacky, but you're far from being a nut."

They continued walking and talking until the sun began to sink beneath the horizon of the Pacific Ocean. They returned to camp, where she made her nightly trip to the bushes and then returned to her sleeping bag. Like the night before, the sky was clear with a faint glimmer of stars overhead, and she wished all her nights could be this peaceful.

She relaxed on her sleeping bag, thinking quietly before commenting, "Robert, here's another spectacular sky you won't see from Houston."

Once again, when she got no response, she looked toward him, and as before, he was already asleep.

She sighed, slid into her sleeping bag, rolled onto her back to gaze at the stars, and muttered, "Goodnight again – Robert."

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Chapter 7

Returning to the USA

When she woke the following morning, the sun was already breaking the horizon, and Robert was nowhere in sight. She got up, and he was at the cookstove when she returned from her morning trip to the bushes.

"Where were you when I woke up?" she asked.

"I wanted to get some pictures of the chamber before we closed it up."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"So, I didn't have to hear you tell me to leave because it's still dark."

"Sorry about that. I still wish you had called me. I would have gone with you."

"That's OK; you'll see all the pictures eventually. Now, let's get some breakfast before we close up the entrance. The coffee's ready, and the rest is not far behind."

After they ate, they were finishing their second cup of coffee when he said, "It's time to close up Veda's room for the final time."

"How are we going to close the door?"

"The hatch door must be in a less than fully open position to offset the counter, and I think I'll need your help."

As they walked to the stone door, he stated, "Before we close it, we must ensure there is nothing around the edges of the opening that would keep the hatch from closing completely. I doubt we'd ever get it back open."

After carefully brushing all the debris from around the opening, they pushed back and forth on the massive stone. It took their combined weight before it moved. They heard a grating sound from below as the counterweight equalized, and the stone hatch ground to a stop in the closed position. It took considerably less time and effort to fill and smooth the ground than it did to dig it up.

He stated, "Now that we've replaced the dirt, the grass will grow back by the end of the summer, and there will be no trace of the ground being disturbed."

She commented, "I doubt anyone would suspect there's a chamber below."

"And after a couple of heavy rains, no one ever will."

She continued, "Having that hatch sure beats climbing back up that rope."

"Why? I thought you liked repelling."

"I do, but climbing up sixty feet is less fun than the repelling down part."

He chuckled, "You could always swim around the island and climb the hill."

"Very funny — but I don't think so. I would've made it up the rope, thank you."

As they returned to the campsite, he said, "Now that we've finished the main project, there are a couple more before the boat arrives. How are you with a camera?"

"I'm no Ansel Adams, but I do alright. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like you to take some pictures of island birds. You know, as part of our cover story, so we can get off the island without being detained."

"Ok, I've seen many different kinds of birds and several nests on my trips to the bushes."

"While you're doing that, he said I'll pack up everything and clean the campsite."

They carried everything down the hill to the small beach just in time to see the boat approaching. Joyce inwardly smiled as she recalled what Gazlay said about returning the same way they got there except in reverse.

After safely returning to the hotel room, Joyce commented, "Gazlay is quite the logistician; wouldn't it be great if everything worked that well."

"Don't I get any credit for getting us here?" he asked.

"I'll let you know after we get back to Houston."

"Fair enough," he said, "But right now, we've got another big job to do."

As he went to the closet, he said, "I've brought some special camera supplies," then placed a large leather case on the table. "I designed this system, especially for this project."

She stood and watched as he opened the leather case and began setting up the equipment. First, he placed a large white card on the table, mounted the camera on a tripod, and placed it on the card. Next, he attached a small dish antenna to a little black box.

She said, "I recognize the camera and the computer, but what's that?"

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"It's the power supply to run the camera and computer. It's also a small microwave transmitter."

"What's it for?"

"Give me a minute, and I'll explain."

He set up and turned on a small laptop computer, connected the camera and the transmitter to it, then adjusted the antenna until a picture appeared on the screen."

"Here's what we're doing. Now that I've established contact with my mainframe in Austin, the transmitter sends the information to three storage devices every time we take a picture. That way, no matter what happens here tomorrow, we have everything recorded and safely stored."

She was astonished and slowly said, "Anthony told me you were smart, but now I believe you're a genius."

He smiled at her and said, "OK, Joyce, we're ready to begin."

"What can I do to help?"

"I want to start with the metal sheets, so if you would hand me one at a time, I'll take pictures of them."

She handed him the top sheet. He placed it on the card, took a picture, carefully checked the computer for clarity, shifted the sheet slightly to prevent glare, and took another. They worked efficiently together without speaking until he had gotten three pictures of every sheet. Then he said, "Time to take a break and get something to eat."

After lunch, they resumed work, starting with the first book."

She handed him the artifact and admired him as he meticulously took pictures of each page. When he finally finished the last book, he said, "It's time to get everything back in the chest."

"What time is it?" she asked.

He checked his watch, "It's 4:15."

"Time flies when you're having fun," she said, "Are we finished?"

"I think I have everything we need for future translations."

After packing everything carefully for the return trip, they went to the restaurant again and took a leisurely stroll in the moonlight before retiring to their rooms.

They arose early, ate a small breakfast, put on their flight gear, and transported their belongings to the terminal. James was already there, chatting with the commerce commissioner, when Robert stopped to assure him everything they had done complied with the International Archaeological Society.

As Joyce and James walked to the Grayson XG-71, she said, "I'm curious as to how you're able to justify such trips using a corporate aircraft."

"I just log them as fuel test flights."

"I'm sure glad you didn't tell me that before we came."

While she and James stood by the side of the aircraft, she asked, "Speaking of fuel, you said the aircraft used oxygen and hydrogen. There's no place on this island to get it."

"Don't need to," James said, "because I use a special formula of hydrogen peroxide and carry more than enough. My system cracks the fluid and separates the gasses that combust immediately into power. And because we fly at such high altitudes, the range is ten times that of stratospheric flight."

Shortly after Robert joined them, they were quickly airborne.

She was more relaxed on the return flight just because it was the return flight, which made it more enjoyable.

After saying goodbye to James and thanking him for the experience, they loaded everything into Robert's VLT and carried Joyce back to her apartment in Houston. He then flew to the family estate eight miles outside the city limits of Austin. He went to his spacious cottage situated on a two-acre plot about a quarter-mile from the main house and immediately set to work.

Chapter 8

Inviting Joyce to join the Project

Three weeks passed, and Joyce had not received anything from Robert. By then, she had immersed herself in her work again and chalked up the entire experience to a lovely all-expense-paid trip to Easter Island. Even though Joyce found the guy physically attractive, educationally stimulating, and financially solvent, she felt the least he could have done was to let her know if he was still alive.

She had pretty much given up on hearing from him again when, late one evening, she unexpectedly received an encrypted message via the CMS (Cybernetic Message Service) from Robert:

Hi Joyce,

I apologize for not communicating sooner.

I had to make significant changes to the program and have finally made enough progress to share what I have learned.

I should have some preliminary findings organized by the weekend of the 23rd.

If that weekend is convenient for you, I look forward to seeing you again.

Please let me know if this is agreeable, and I will arrange your visit.

I hope you can make it,

Robert.

Joyce thought, “By all rights, I should ignore his damn cyber-gram as he’s ignored me this past couple of weeks.” Then, justifying her thinking, “Not that I want to see him again, it’s just that after everything we’ve been through together – it’d be nice to see what he’s learned.”

From her office the next morning, she answered his message:

Hi Robert,

Thanks for letting me know how you are progressing, and yes, I am interested in seeing what you have learned. The weekend of the 23rd should work out well with my other scheduled events.

Joyce"

An hour later, she received another from him:

Hi Joyce,

Glad to hear you can make it.

Can you take Friday off as well?

You won't believe how much I have to tell you.

The guest room will be ready on Friday, just in case.

The attached file has the GPS coordinates to the estate, but please ask if you have any more questions.

Robert

She reworked her schedule, and the next day, she responded.

Hi Robert,

I have arranged to leave here on Friday morning.

Your GPS directions are fine, and I should be there around noon.

Joyce.

On a cool, crisp Friday morning in February, Joyce rose before sunrise in Houston, input the GPS Coordinates, and drove the 165 miles to Austin and directly to his cottage on the Grayson estate.

As she stepped out of her vintage Mustang convertible, he greeted her, "Joyce, it's good to see you again. I hope you had a pleasant trip."

"It was an uneventful three-hour drive that gave me time to get my mind off museum affairs and wonder about what you've learned."

"I've learned a great deal, as you will see. Come on in, and I'll show you."

As Joyce followed Robert into the cottage and looked around the room filled with electronic equipment, she asked, "What is this place? It's better equipped than our museum's main office."

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It was not long before Joice exclaimed, “Robert! I had no idea....”

“That I’m such a computer nerd.”

“Not at all – these pictures are magnificent. Now tell me what you’ve done with the rest of them.”

On their way to the computer console, Robert excitedly said, “Come and see,” as he brought another chair for her.

Joyce sat beside him as he quickly displayed a picture of one of the metal sheets on a large monitor screen and said, “Some years ago, I modified an English language OCR program to....”

“Hold it!” She interrupted, “Don’t speak computerese without explaining the terms. What’s an OCR?”

“Sorry,” he said, “OCR stands for optical character reader. It’s a program that converts a digital image to a text file.”

That’s nice. What’s a digital image?”

“It’s an image derived from a scanner or a digital camera.”

“What’s a scanner?” But before he could answer, she broke out laughing, “Robert, I know what they are; it’s just that you’ve been so darn serious since I got here, I just had to lighten things up a bit.”

He laughed, sat back in his chair, took a deep breath, and sighed, “I guess you’re right, Joyce. I’ve been so concentrated on the work these past weeks I’ve forgotten my manners. I am happy to see you again. How’ve you been?”

Joyce shook her head slowly, saying, “We can discuss that later. You were saying about your OCR program.”

Immediately rebuilding his enthusiasm, he continued, “Oh yes, about a week ago, I completed my program modifier to recognize the ancient extraterrestrial hieroglyphics and begin translating some of them.”

Joyce smiled to herself and thought, "He's like a little kid in a toy store at Christmas," then asked, “Can you show me?”

“Of course,” he said, pressing a key on the keyboard. One of the other monitors flashed an image on the screen. He pressed another key, and text began to print across an adjacent monitor's display.

Giving a second thought to her little kid theory, she said, "Robert, you never cease to amaze me. Anthony told me you were a computer genius, but I didn't realize it until now. How did you accomplish that?"

"I guess I've gotten ahead of myself again," he said as he scrolled through his picture files. "Even before we went to the island, I managed to get the program to translate some of what Gazlay showed me, and with some additional modification, I got it to do this."

He pulled up another image. "Take a look at this," he said, "It's a picture of one page in Veda's early attempt at a dictionary of the extraterrestrial's written language. I have compiled an alphabet from it and others, and by interpolation, I have...."

"Enough," she cried, "I concede – you truly are a genius. Now, get to the bottom line. "What have you learned about the girl Veda?"

He took another deep breath and began. Veda's childhood writings disclose that her early education, though not forced on her, was highly encouraged by her father, Baramus. The priests only learned what the extraterrestrials taught them, and she learned the basics from the island priests.

Veda quickly mastered the primary native language, and as she got older, Baramus began teaching her what appeared to be his native or universal language. She calls them her star people.

You just saw a page from her crude dictionary of the universal language that made it possible to modify my program successfully. I've only just begun work on what appears to be her father's book. I've managed to translate several entries, and once I perfect the program further, I should be able to decipher the rest of the material more quickly."

"I've only had time to enter, catalog, and decipher some of the metal pages. I've learned so far from Veda's book that her father's name was Baramus. I believe the book was originally his."

"You mean the extraterrestrial himself."

"From the writing on its cover, I believe it was his personal, unofficial logbook."

"It was Baramus who named her Veda. Her mother, Shara, called her Kumani, which means destiny. I haven't found much on Baramus and Shara's relationship yet, but I'm sure I will."

Just then, a voice from an intercom said, "Master Robert, dinner will be served in twenty minutes."

"What was that?"

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He explained, "Miguel and his wife Teresa are our chefs and general house custodians. Lunch, or dinner as he calls it, will be ready in the main house. Are you hungry?"

"Of course, I've only had a small breakfast since leaving Houston."

"Good, let's go," then added, "I'll show you the guest quarters, and after we eat, the rest of the house."

They left the cottage, and Robert drove them to the main house, where he showed her to the guestroom. She freshened up and joined him in the dining room.

During dinner, Robert monopolized the conversation with stories of his growing up without a father, private schools, and summer camps. While the butler cleared the remnants of the meal, Joyce sat patiently, sipping her after-dinner coffee until she could contain herself no longer.

"OK, Robert," she said, "I've waited as long as I can; now, please tell me about the books."

"Very well," he chuckled and began, "It appears the first book originally belonged to Baramus. Even though he wrote it like a ship's logbook, I don't believe it was the official log, or he would not have left it behind. Also, it contained more personal information concerning the Easter Island project than would have been appropriate in an official record.

"What do you mean project?"

"Because that's all it was to Baramus. In today's vernacular, he was a science officer and project engineer aboard a spacecraft assigned to set up a series of navigational beacons for their fleet's trade route to Peru."

"Hold it right there, Robert! Who was this guy, and where did he come from?"

"Ok, Joyce, you're right; I need to give you what I've learned about his origins. He was a fleet officer aboard an Artorien spacecraft belonging to a fleet of vessels from the planet Arturo in the Constellation Taurus."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Not at all; the translations are quite specific about the fleet's point of origin. I have not been able to figure out a relative date to Earth. I found several references to dating, but they refer to some galactic time period irrelevant to us. However, I have derived a method to determine the time durations of Vegas events.

"How did you do that?"

“Even though I can’t determine how long ago all this occurred, the star people taught the priests to reckon time based on the two equinoxes and solstices. I could measure the relative elapsed time from Veda’s references to her life as it related to moon cycles. By converting her 28-day moon cycle into our time frame of years, she lived for 336 years.”

“No, that can’t be; you must have made a mistake.”

“There’s no mistake; she chronicles more than sixteen generations.”

“How is that possible?”

“Because she was a half-breed resulting from the union between a mortal of the planet and a mortal from another world whose life expectancy exceeds seven hundred earth years.”

“That’s extraordinary, to say the least. What else have you learned about her?”

“I learned from Veda’s early writings, not from Baramus’ logbook, that she grew to nearly seven feet tall.”

“Why so tall?”

“It appears the star-people were giants, and Baramus was nearly eight-foot-tall.”

“This is too incredulous to believe. And I have so many questions I don’t know where to start.”

Robert laughed, saying, “I knew you would find it as compelling as I have. Suppose I start with what I’ve determined from Baramus’ logbook. I learned from one of his early entries that twelve spacecraft were in their fleet. This fleet was one of many involved in trade between Earth and neighboring planets in distant galaxies and their homeworld of Arturo. He tells where the Intergalactic Trade Commission assigned them a twofold mission. The first was to gather a small group of natives from the mainland and develop an experimental colony on an offshore island. The second part of the mission was to build a series of navigational beacons to aid their arriving spacecraft.”

“How come no one has ever heard of this before?”

“Because it all happened before there were any scribes to record history. Where do you suppose all those Greek and Roman myths and mythology stories of the Gods mating with mortals originated? These stories were told and retold by the traveling bards who embellished most of them.

She stated, “I’ve read many of the old mythology stories as required reading in school. I’ve read about the Gods of Mount Olympus, Jason, the Argonauts, Homer’s Iliad,

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and the Odyssey. They're all entertaining stories, but surely you don't believe they're true, do you?"

"No, not all of them, but most of our oldest and greatest literature came from historical tales of ancient gods. Embellishment surely occurred with each telling, but their basic facts had to come from some ancient past."

"Then why hasn't some of this extraterrestrial stuff appeared in mythological writings?"

"It has. Erich von Daniken's book, *Chariots of the Gods*, delved into that subject."

"Yes, but von Daniken was a modern-day writer of science fiction. Where else will you find a reference to such?"

"In Genesis."

"I don't recall seeing any extraterrestrials mentioned in the Bible."

"How about Genesis 6:1, and I quote, 'And it came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them.' Genesis 6:2 says, 'That the sons of God saw the daughters of men and that they were fair; They took whomever they chose as wives,' and in Genesis 6:4, 'The offspring from these unlawful unions were physical giants.'"

She said sarcastically, "Now that you proved you're also a biblical scholar, it doesn't make your Baramus a Son of God."

"I didn't intend to imply he was. You simply asked where else to find references to God's mating with humans, and I gave you one. But you must remember, the written Bible came well after the beginning of recorded history, and we are looking at documents that come from a few million years before then."

"Ok, Robert, I concede to the fact of their antiquity, but that doesn't mean I have to believe everything."

"I don't expect you to, and I'd be disappointed if you did. You were with me when we found the material, so you know it does exist. I think it's time to go back to the lab so you can see some of my findings."

Chapter 9.

Her first look at translations

Once back in the cottage, Robert got Baramus' book from a concealed safe and handed it to her. Once again, she held it in fascination as they went and sat on the oversized couch in front of a picture window.

Robert explained, "As I told you, even though Baramus' wrote it like a ship's log, I don't believe it was the official logbook. It contained more personal information about the family than the project.

"Right, you started to tell me about the project?"

"Yes. Baramus was a science officer and project engineer aboard a spacecraft sent there to accomplish a task. That is until he found a mate and had a child.

"Yes, but what was the project?"

"He and his two-man crew had a twofold mission: to set up and develop a colony of workers and train them to build a series of navigational beacons for their intergalactic trading fleet's flightpath to Peru."

"You've got to be kidding. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, the translations are quite specific about the fleet's point of origin and its mission. What I have not been able to determine is a relative date. So far, I've found several references to dating, but they refer to some galactic time period, which is presently meaningless to us. However, I have determined periods of the elapsed time of their visitation of the planet and occupational duration of the island."

"How did you do that?"

"OK, Joyce, I think it would be easier to show you on the computer than try to explain."

They returned to his computer console; he pulled up another chair for her and said, "I want you to see this," as he typed a series of numbers that appeared on the screen.

She asked, "What are they?"

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“Baramus’ first logbook entry was 7595.223.62.894, representing his Intergalactic time. As you can see – the basic time structure has four increments of four, three, two, and three digits, respectively. It has no significance to present earth time because I have no benchmark.”

“Then what good is it?”

“From entries in Veda’s dictionary, I determined that she reckoned time by using the four seasonal periods between solstices and equinox as derived from the lunar cycles. After I figured out the time ratio between the intergalactic time increments and her moon cycles, I wrote a program to convert the relative time sequences.”

“What does it all mean,” she asked.

“Nothing by itself,” he said, “Except there is an 18.34-time differential between Earth time and Spacetime, and now that I know the sequence, I can correlate it to the moon cycles and determine the elapsed time between events.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Sure, let’s take the entry of Veda’s birth.” He typed while explaining. By subtracting it from the first entry, he said, “The computer will compare it with the equinox cycle and — when the monitor displayed 51-06-10, he continued, “As you can see, Veda was born 51 years, six months and ten days after the spacemen arrived on the island.”

“Easy for you to say; I don’t understand what or how you did that.”

He laughed and said, “You don’t have to, Joyce. I’ve calculated the intergalactic entries into relevant times, so you shouldn’t have any trouble following the time sequence.”

She asked, “What relevance does the first universal number represent.”

“As I told you, there’s no way to correlate any of this to Earth’s present time because we are looking at a time-lapse of many thousands of millennia before recorded history.”

“Watch this!” he said as he pressed more keys, “And by interpellation, I estimate the Artoroian Calendar began about 2,500 earth years before their arrival. That is unless those numbers represent the spaceship’s chronometer. In which case, are only relevant to Baramus’ homeworld.”

She stared at the screen, and all she could say was, “That’s a lot of supposition but no less incredible.”

He pointed to a star-dated folder and said, “I thought you might like to start with this one,”

“What is it?”

“You said you wanted to see what I found in Baramus’ logbook. Here’s what I’ve translated from the first entries so far. There’s much more to do, but I think you’ll find this part interesting.” They exchanged seats, and she opened the folder as he continued, “I programmed the computer to automatically add the Universal date and elapsed time as measured from the ship's arrival on the planet.”

She began reading the first entry.

Universal date: 7595.223.62.894

Elapsed time, 000 years, 00 months, 01 day

Fleet Admiral Moai is responsible for the Artoroian trading fleet vessels for this planet, and Commander Mutt is our pilot. We are now one of three vessels that just joined the trading fleet of twelve, and as part of our mission, we arrived today on one of this planet’s mainland continents. Tomorrow, we begin our trade commission’s task of selecting qualified people from this primitive race. We will transport them to an isolated island located on our trade route to the mainland. Then, oversee and develop a community of workers to construct our navigational beacons. From what I have seen of these people, we have much work ahead.

Joyce turned and looked at him in amazement and stated, “Robert, I don’t know what to say!” She thought briefly and continued, “I don’t know how you did this. Secondly, if it’s true, you were right when you said we could make the archeological find of a lifetime.” She paused, “Thirdly, we have no idea of the ramifications this knowledge will create, and finally, Robert, I believe you’re a genius, and I thank you for including me in this discovery.”

“Wow!” He said laughingly, “For someone who didn’t know what to say, you sure said a lot,” then continued, “I estimate there are thousands of hours of translations ahead. I selected those that best illustrated their arrival from the few translated records. I believe you’ll think of much more to say as you read the rest of the folder.”

He continued, "I was in the middle of some calculations I need to work on."

He picked up his laptop and went to sit on the couch while she began reading.

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Universal date: 7595.225.20.717

Elapsed time, 06 months, 04 days

Commander Mutt has made the final selection of twenty-five men and twenty-five women. Fleet Officers Gregor, Atos, and I will begin supervising the gathering and loading of local seeds, farming tools, and animals, along with preparing the fifty selected natives for an early spring departure.

Next entry: 7595.225.29.173

Elapsed time, 06 months, 14 days

We have made a smooth transition from the mainland to the island. The new colonists appear to be happy with the looks of their new homeland. The air is warm and clear; fertile land is abundant with fresh water and many palm and fruit trees and bushes laden with berries. The island is alive with many different species of birds and small animals. We brought several fishermen and a couple of boats, and we will soon learn if the surrounding sea is as bountiful as it appears.

Next entry: 7595.225.45.611

Elapsed time, 07 months, 03 days

Commander Mutt has begun instituting a five-point cast system of Stone-cutters, Stone-masons, Fishermen, Farmers, and Priests. The only exception for anyone to work outside their respective cast would be pregnant women, the few that tend to them, and the children too young to work. He has successfully used his cast system in many other situations, and I see no reason it will not work well here. He chose three men to train as Priests. The best one will receive the title Jelani and become the colony's head Priest.

Next entry: 7595.226.38.898

Elapsed time, 10 months, 22 days

It has been an excellent growing season; the farmers have established many vegetable plots. The women collect fruits and berries while tending egg-laying birds. The fishermen have built two boats, and the daily catch is more than adequate for this population. Ten of the women have already begun the second generation of islanders, and there is evidence there will soon be more children to come. Now that the growing season is ending, Commander Mutt will establish the cast of Stone-cutters from the farmers, and as we move the cut stones from the quarry, he will develop the cast of Stonemasons.

Next entry: 7595.228.34.670

Elapsed time, 1 year, 06 months, 10 days

Today, Commander Mutt selected one of the three Priest trainees to become Jelani I. Second Officer Gregor and Third Officer Atos. I have already found the best location for cutting the rock to make the navigational monoliths. We cut and removed a small sample that Atos will use to train the first stonemason on how to use the laser cutting tools to carve the statues. Now that the cold and rainy season is upon us, I must show the men of the stone-cutter clan where the first rock quarry will be and start teaching them how to use the laser tools to cut the bedrock.

Next entry: 7595.229.82.345

Elapsed time, 1 year, 12 months, 02 days

Another warm season is about over, and all is working well. The Stonecutters have cut one large rock from the quarry. Gregor and Atos are highly skilled in levitation and use their skills to transport it to where the stonemasons will begin carving. We will train more masons as needed to match the carving workload. Gardening and fishing have been excellent, and many more children have been born. Even though I do not entirely approve, the Jelani Priest has convinced the villagers that we are Gods. Commander Mutt does not appear to object.

Next entry: 7595.247.70.241

Elapsed time, 7 years, 09 months, 16 days

The Islanders are doing as well as expected, except there are far too few to complete the task quickly. The population has about doubled, but it will be several seasons before the young ones become productive. Two monuments are complete and on location, with only 142 to go. The work should progress faster as the population grows.

Next entry: 7595.268.07.080

Elapsed time, 14 years, 04 months, 20 days

Jelani-I died unexpectedly. The Commander did not realize the lifespan of these creatures was so short. I believe the priest was only 42 years old, so the commander decided that a Jelani Priest's reign would become 92 seasons. (23 years) One of the other Jelani trainees will become Jelani II on the next spring equinox.

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When Joyce finished reading, she quietly joined him on the couch and waited until he finished whatever he was doing before stating, “Robert, you’ve done a magnificent job of decoding in such a short time. I don’t know what else you've done, but what I read is unbelievable. What else do you have?”

“I thought you might ask that,” He said, “Veda’s early writing had more to do with learning the language and her attempt at a dictionary. I’ve used it extensively in developing my OCR program. After working with her dictionary, I realized Veda was a brilliant young girl. By age nine, she was far more intelligent than her mother, Shara, would ever be. Veda had a quick grasp of most situations and had a phenomenal memory. However, she was not very proficient in grammar. Robert handed her a scrap of paper, “Here’s where you can find an account where Veda wrote about a conversation between Shara and Baramus.”

Chapter 10.

Vada's saga continues.

Joyce returned to the console, located the folder, and began reading.

Elapsed time: 60 years, 11 months, and 8 days

Veda was 9 years 4 months and 26 days old.

When dark, mother think me (Veda) sleep, me hear father (Baramus) talk Mother (Shara) Me go out of bed. Go outside mother room listen. I hear mother want know something. Me not hear all father say. Baramus say words me not know what mean. Me go write what me hear.

Joyce abruptly stopped reading and muttered, "What the hell is this? It's nearly impossible to understand." Then she saw Robert's notation.

(Editor's Note: After reading the first translation of Veda's words, I readjusted the OCR program to interpret and add some appropriate grammar, hopefully without distorting her meaning. Further adjustments will most likely be required.)

Joyce continued reading the document. My mother thought I was asleep, but I heard them talking, so I went and sat outside the hatch and listened. I could tell my mother wanted to know something but missed part of what my father was saying. Baramus said something I did not understand, so I returned to my room to write it down.

My mother wanted to know why he chose her from all the women on the island. He told her he never needed to, but since she asked, he told her that when he first saw her as a young child, he knew they had lived and loved before. That is why he allowed her and her mother to work for them in the Golden Bird rather than on the farms or in the quarries. He told her he knew that when she (Veada's mother) was old enough to mate, she would be the one he would take as his own.

My mother asked him why he treated us differently from the other island people who worked so hard. You know the people do not like us because of that.

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Baramus told her, as I have heard him say before, the people of this island are here to do a job, and as long as they work hard, they are well treated. When they can no longer do their work, we give them lesser gardening tasks for the rest of their lives.

She told him she knew all that but still wanted to know why she was not like the other women. He told her he had not tried to tell her before because he knew she would not know his words. He then told her he knew her as someone he had loved three thousand years ago. They once shared a mortal life together on a planet in a far distant place, and he owed her a karmic debt. I, too am like my mother because I do not understand his word meaning. I will have to ask him about mortal beings and karma later.

When she told him she did not understand his words, he told her he knew she would not, but she must know that life is forever, and everyone lives forever somewhere. He told her he knew it to be true so she must believe they lived somewhere before, and he loved her now as much as he loved her then. He wanted to take care of her. That is why after my mother's mother died, he asked Fleet Admiral Mutt to let her stay in the Golden Bird and live the rest of her life with him.

Mother told him she was not worthy of such love.

I had never heard Baramus raise his voice, but he did when he ranted about her still listening to the priests. Their teachings are for the island women but not meant for you.

My mother said she knew what he had told her about the priests, but her few female friends believed the priests, Baramus, and the others on the Golden Bird were Gods from beyond the lights in the sky.

He told her again that the priest's teachings were for the Islanders to believe but not for her because she was his mate. Then I heard him say something I will never forget, "I tell you, Shara, I am a mortal man like all other men."

When my mother told him he would always be a God to her, I saw him pick her up in his strong arms and hold her gently.

That is when I came here to write. I must learn more about what Baramus has said about being a mortal man. I have many questions I will have to ask him on another moon.

Elapsed time: 61 years, 9 months, and 14 days.

Veda was ten years, 3 months and 4 days old.

As the sun crested the hilltop, Baramus took me to the quarries for the first time. Even though I am larger than the other island children my age, I cannot keep up with Baramus

when he walks the countryside. Whenever we go out together, I have to run to stay beside him. This time, he must have been in a hurry and could not wait for me to keep up, so he picked me up and carried me on his shoulders. There I was, the daughter of a God, sitting on his shoulders, looking out over the heads of all the workers; what a sight we must have been to them.

After crossing the many fields of gardens and passing through orchards of fruit trees, we climbed the tall hill to the quarry. That is when I saw the light tool at work for the first time and how it cut the rock as easily as I would cut a turnip with my knife.

Watching the stonecutters, I saw giant blocks cut from the bedrock and moving through the air. When I asked Baramus how the blocks floated through the air, he explained levitation. He told me that Gregor and Aetos would move the blocks from the quarry to the mesa, where the stonemasons used their light tools to fashion the likeness of what the islanders call the Great God Moai. From there, Aetos would levitate the finished statues into their final positions and install the golden head cover. Baramus showed me a cover and told me something about guiding the Golden Bird, but I do not understand.

NOTE: Now that Veda is 13, her writing has improved and is much easier to translate.

Elapsed time: 65 years, 1 month, and 24 days.

Veda was 13 years 8 months and 14 days old.

I often read my old writings and think about what I heard my father say. I have no one to talk to besides my mother, but I do not believe she wants to know the answers to the many questions that bother me. Baramus and I play and joke about many things, but I have to ask him about those things I do not know.

When the sun was low in the sky, I found him sitting quietly under his favorite tree on the hilltop overlooking the quarry. When he saw me climbing the hill, he held out his arms to me, and as I settled in his lap, I asked him what he meant when he told Mother he was a man like any other.

He was surprised and asked me when I heard that.

I told him it was 36 seasons ago when I heard him tell Mother some strange things that I have been meaning to ask him about ever since. Your books talk about mortal and immortal men, but I do not know what they mean. Gods are not mortal; they do not die.

He told me that what I heard was right. He was not a God. Just a mortal man that would eventually die the same as the villagers.

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I told him all the villagers believed he was a God because the priests said so.

He told me Admiral Moai created the cast of Jelani priests (meaning the Mighty One) and that the first-born son of Jelani priests would be named Junior Jelani with the next higher number. He would succeed his father and rule for 299 moons. (92 seasons or 23 years) Jelani 1 was the name given to the first priest. Jelani III was the young man who became the third generation priest in the sequential lineage of priests.

He told me that when he ordered Jelani III to educate me about the language, he also warned him about discussing religious matters. He then told me it was time for me to learn the truth. That is when I understood why Junior Jelani 3 would never talk about religion with me, and whenever I ask him about the Gods, he always told me to ask my father.

Since Baramus forbade Jelani 3 from teaching religion within the Golden Bird, he wanted to know where I learned so much about the island's religion.

That is when I told him about my friend Jestia and how she was the only one who dared to talk to me. She did not fear me as the others my age that feared the Gods.

I felt his concern when he asked if I feared him. I also felt his relief when I told him I did not fear him because he was my father, but I did not know who he was.

He lifted me from his lap and put me on the soft green grass beside him; he smiled and told me he had been waiting for me to ask. And now that I was old enough to learn, it was time for me to hear the truth, and he could begin to teach me about my world and the universe beyond.

I tingled with delight because I was finally going to get the answers to some of my questions. I told him I was ready to learn and asked my first question. What did you mean when you told Mother you were a man like any other?

He told me he had a mother and father and was born just like all mortals. He would live this life, and someday, his body would die.

I said, but you are so old and wise, and then asked him where and when he was born.

I sat beside him and could not believe what he told me. He was born a great number of star units ago on his homeworld of Arturo.

When he saw that I did not understand, he told me it was about 3,056 of our moon cycles ago. (235 earth years)

I stood and looked into his eyes and told him he had to be a God. No man has lived longer than Jelani II. He lived for 275 seasons (68 years and 9 months) and was the oldest living man in the world.

He took my hand in his and had me sit down beside him. I did, but not as close to him as before. He told me that if I wished to believe that living more than 9000 moons make a man a god, I could. But he assured me that even the gods live and die, as do the Islanders.

Then I asked him what he meant when he told Mother about everyone living forever. If we die, how can that be?

He looked at me, laughed, and told me I have a memory like some (unidentifiable animal.) Then he told me that he had knowledge far beyond any mortal on my planet and that the people from his world beyond the stars have knowledge of many different lives. I should believe him when he tells me that only mortal life begins and ends, but spirit life is forever.

When I asked him what the difference was, he said that spirit life began at the beginning of time itself and will continue forever. Mortal life is what we are living now. We live awhile, some longer than others, and when we die, we leave the body behind and return to the spirit world.

I asked him if we hear, see, breathe, and think in the spirit world, and he told me we have a spirit body and active thoughts, and we can go anywhere we want.

I asked him if spirit bodies could see, touch, smell, or taste. He told me that as spirits, we have great vision, far beyond what the eye can see, but there is no sensation of hot or cold, pain, or hunger. We need a mortal body to feel these things.

I shivered and told him I did not think I would like spirit life, and he told me I would because I always have.

When I asked him how he knew that, he said it was because we had been there together many times.

When I told him I could not remember anything like that and did not believe him, he told me to believe him or not, but he spoke true.

I told him I would think about it. Then I asked him to tell me about karma and why he owed his mother something.

He was again surprised and wanted to know where I was getting my questions. I told him it was from some moons past when I heard him tell Mother. He then told me Karma was an active, ongoing happening between all souls, some positive, and some negative,

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based on the actions of those involved. Then he explained that during a previous but brief life with my mother, Shara, he did not protect her from danger, and she died a painful death. When he met her in the spirit world, he promised her that he would fix that karma by loving and protecting her from all harm the next time they met in a mortal world.

I was beginning to understand why Mother and I live as we do. I thanked him for giving me much to think about, and then I called him Kiril for the first time. He wanted to know what I called him. I told him that since he was not a God, I would not use his god's name, Baramus, and would forever call him Kiril, meaning the lordly one.

He laughed, hugged me, and told me he liked the name, but I was the only one who could call him Kiril.

When he asked me if I had any more questions, I told him not right then, but I would later. He laughed again, stood, picked me up, put me on his shoulder, and told me he knew I would. He told me he was happy that I had come to him with many questions and to return when I had more. I sat high on his shoulders as he carried me home to the Golden Bird.

Elapsed time, 65 years 03 months, and 1 day

Veda was 13 years 9 months and 19 days old

Editor's Note: During her next question session with Baramus, I learn that after the extraterrestrials' arrival on the island, they had set up a form of cast labor system:

1. The stonecutters were the men who carved the rocks from the quarries.
2. The stonemasons were the men who carved the monoliths for the Gods.
3. The Fishermen were the men and women who went to sea to fish for the colony.
4. The farmers were the women who tended the crops and animals for the colony.
Also, those too old to fish work the quarries or carve the stone.
5. The pregnant women tended themselves and the children too young to work.
6. The Priests were the men who the Gods taught to govern and control the other five classes.

Vada's dialog continues:

I climbed the hillside to where Kiril sat under his tree. He again reached out his arms, and I settled on his lap. He smiled at me and said he knew I would be back when I had more questions.

I told him I wanted to know about the Golden Birds, where they came from, and why they came to the island. The priests tell us the Golden Birds carry the Gods here, and they created all of us. If not, where did we come from?

Kiril laughed at me and told me he knew I would have more questions, but he did not expect those. He told me that long ago, his homeworld leader of the house of Arturo ordered many of his fleet leaders to explore the stars and build trade routes between livable worlds.

I asked him what a livable world was, and he told me they are worlds with people like mine living on them. I then asked if there were many such worlds. I do not know the large number he used, but many of them exist.

He told me his Artorien people had been doing this for a very long time. I did not know the next large number he used, but I know it was a very long time ago, and they did it for a long time before they ever came to my island. He told me that he would get men and women from a faraway land after discovering our world and putting them on our island. Then, build a lot of statues to guide the Golden Birds. Since I live in a Golden Bird with Kiril and the other two gods, I know that it is not a living bird — it is a boat that carries the Gods about the sky.

He told me he went in the Golden Bird to a distant land, where Admiral Moai carefully chose some strong young men and women with many skills and brought them here to the island.

That meant there were more people like my people elsewhere, so when I asked, he explained that my world was a very small island on a very large planet, and there were millions of people like the villagers all over the distant lands.

Then I asked him if he could take me to see these other people. He promised that someday in the future, he would take me with him if he could get permission for me to go. I am looking forward to that day.

Kiril told me about life on the island before I was born. Life was primitive for these people because there was nothing here except the land with its lush vegetation. Moai assigned men and women to farm the land, and they set to work planting. He sent fishermen to build their boats, go to the sea, and provide plenty of fish and shell food. Moai also selected Jelani as the first priest, giving him the power and knowledge to control the people. He taught him how to teach the people that they (the extraterrestrials) were the Gods that created the people of the planet. At first, Jelani learned his lessons

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well, and it did not take him long before he had the power from the Gods to control the Islanders. I remember many things from when Jelani 3 started teaching me.

Of course, the priests consider themselves and their families privileged because they were the God's chosen few.

Elapsed time, 68 years 1 month, 4 days

Veda was 16 years, 7 months, and 22 days old

One-hundred-seventy-seven moons had passed, and ten monoliths completed when Fleet Admiral Moai returned to the island. When the second Golden Bird landed, all work stopped. The people gathered to watch the giant silver man walk from one Golden Bird to the other. Kiril sent Mother and me out of our Golden Bird, so I did not hear anything they said. Jelani 4 and his sub-priests were afraid the Gods would be angry with them for letting the work stop. They danced and fell on the ground as they tried to get the people back to work, but only a few left the crowd. It was not until after the second Golden Bird was gone could the priests get the people to do anything.

Since I am much taller than any islander, I could get close enough to see Admiral Moai without the big eggshell on his head. That is when I saw how much the statues looked just like him.

After he was gone, Kiril told me Admiral Moai would be going back to Arturo soon, leaving Commander Mutt, Second Officer Gregor, Third Officer Aetos, and himself to finish the assigned work. That is when I learned that when they finished the navigational beacons, he would also leave the island and most likely never return.

Elapsed time: 76 years, 5 months, and 1 day.

Veda was 24 years, 11 months, and 19 days old

Veda's mother, Shara, died at ages 42, 3, 21

My mother died on the first sun of the fifth moon of my one-hundredth season. Kiril became very quiet and left home. No one saw him for three suns.

I have had many pet birds, rabbits, and other small rodents throughout my life, and whenever any of them died, Kiril comforted me with the knowledge that they were not dead; they merely changed places to live. That is why I could not understand his reactions to my mother's changing her place of residence. It was not until after he returned that I could talk with him about her death. He told me that he was not sad about her going, for he knew it would happen long before him. He was not sad because he had kept his

promise to love and protect her during her mortal life. He was sad for himself because he no longer had her physical presence. I told him that I was still here, and he tried to explain that even though he loved me, it was not the same. When I told him I did not understand, he told me that after I found a mate and outlived him, I would."

Perhaps he is right, but I do not believe I will ever find any man to mate with me because of the few girlfriends I used to have already mated and had children. No boy or man has spoken to me since I grew taller than his parents.

Robert had completed his latest project, so he went to sit next to Joyce as she finished reading. When she turned and looked at him, he asked, "Well, Joyce, What do you think? Do you like what we've discovered?"

She declared, "This is incredible, and if I hadn't been with you when we found it, I'd be the first to say it's impossible to believe. I know there's so much more that needs translating – it's going to take time before we can grasp all its implications.

Joyce, you are fantastic; you've only read a few pages and already anticipate the havoc it will cause among the religious clan."

I'm sure there will be some, but that does not deter me from looking forward to reading more. But it's been a long day, and I've got to start back to Houston in the morning."

As they walked to the main house, he said, "I'm sorry you've got to go so soon." And asked, "Would it be possible for you to take some time off from the Museum and return to work with me?"

She looked at him and questioned, "Why would you want me to come and help you? You've got everything so well organized and —"

"It's not at all organized," he cut her off. "I can travel, take pictures, and operate computers, and I've got the beginnings of the translations, but not comprehensively. This project is a massive undertaking; I can write computer programs, but I am no literary writer, and since you've already published a book, I know I could certainly use your help."

"I don't know what to say, but I'm flattered by the offer and think it would be challenging. I'll have to sleep on it."

"Fair enough," he said as they entered the house, "You know the way to the guest room, and I'll be in the kitchen if you're hungry."

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While climbing the stairs, she said, "I'm more tired than hungry; I'll see you in the morning."

"Sleep well, and please consider my proposal."

Chapter 11.

Joyce leaves and returns.

The next morning, Robert was sitting in the spacious breakfast nook off the kitchen when she came in and sat across the table from him.

“Good morning, Joyce. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thanks, I did. I took a long soak in that marvelous tub, and when I climbed into that comfortable bed, I fell asleep thinking about your proposal.”

He grinned at her, “Did I propose to you last night?”

“No, silly, about coming here and working on a book with you.”

“And what have you decided?”

“I seriously considered it, but I can’t afford to take time off from the museum.”

“Don’t worry about that. I plan to match whatever you’re getting plus all additional expenses.”

“It’s not a matter of money, Robert – and I thank you for the offer. It’s just that I’ve recently started organizing and setting up a new exhibit. I have to complete it before I can even begin to....”

“How long do you think it will take to complete?”

She said thoughtfully, “I should have it finished in two and a half to three months.”

“That’s great!” he exclaimed with a broad smile, “That will give me time to get well into the translations; then we can collaborate on the manuscript.”

Joyce frowned, “But I haven’t agreed to anything yet.”

“Oh – but you will,” he said gleefully, “Now, what would you like for breakfast?”

Robert called to the kitchen, “Miguel, will you please prepare two of your famous Texas-style frontier breakfasts?”

“See, señor Robert,” Miguel replied.

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Robert returned to the kitchen with a coffee pot, poured her a cup, and refilled his own. Several minutes later, Miguel brought two large platters containing fresh farm eggs fried to a turn, hash-brown potatoes diced with onions, and golden biscuits.

She tasted the eggs and hash browns and asked, “Do you always eat like this?”

He smiled and said, “See what you’ve got to look forward to when you return?”

She grinned at him and said, “That’s bribery,” while continuing to eat.

It was nearly nine-thirty when she finished her fourth cup of coffee, rose from the table, and said, “Robert, I’ve enjoyed being here, and thanks for sharing what you’ve learned. I don’t know what else to say. Or how to begin thanking you for including me in this enterprise.”

She paused, but before she could continue, Robert interjected, “The only thanks I need is for you to come back in about three months.”

“If that’s all it takes,” she began, “I’ll —”

Robert stood and came from the table, placed his arm around her waist, and interrupted her. “That will do for now,” They walked outside to his car.

Robert drove back to the cottage, where Joyce had left her car. She was about to open the door when Robert took her in his arms and gently kissed her. When he let her go, she looked at him in surprise. He opened the car door and said, “It was good seeing you again, Joyce. Have a safe drive home. I’ll be looking forward to your return.”

She slid in behind the wheel, her face flushed as she looked up and returned his smile, “I’ll let you know when I have a completion date,” started the engine and slowly drove away.

Even though she was out of sight for some time, he stood looking toward the main entrance. He returned to the cottage and slowly returned to work when he suddenly realized he had already felt her absence.

Joyce drove from the Grayson estate, concentrating on the road until she got to the freeway to Houston when she began thinking about Robert. She did not often talk to herself aloud, but this was different, “I don’t understand that man; most of the time, he’s so quiet and absorbed in his work, I don’t think he even knows I’m in the room. But today when he —” she recalled the feel of his lips on hers, “he can be so damned sweet – and persuasive. How will I keep my job if I work with him? He said he’d pay me, but I have my career to consider. What will I do after we finish his work?”

She turned on the radio, but it did not prevent her from continuing her self-dialog, “He’s undoubtedly the smartest man I’ve ever met, but he’s also the least romantic. Except when...” she shook off her disturbing feelings. “I can’t get serious with this guy because the last thing I need is another Jeffery. Besides, I have no idea how he feels about me – if anything at all. He values my knowledge and ability enough to assist in his work, but that’s because he’s so dedicated and goal-driven. Does he consider me more than just a colleague scientist?”

She shouted, “Damn you, Robert, why did you have to kiss me like that?” Reaching over to retune the radio, she thought, “You idiot!” and finally said aloud, “The only thing I’ve got in common with this guy is our mutual interest in archaeology and Veda’s writings.” When the music blared, she forced Robert out of her mind, stepped on the gas, and turned her thoughts to the museum project.

Robert tried to get his mind back on the project but found it difficult to concentrate because he could not forget Joyce’s parting image as she drove away. Neither could he dismiss her comment that night on the island about not wanting nor needing any rebound romances. But then he thought, “Something about her attracts me more than it should. She’s not the prettiest girl I’ve known, but by far the most intelligent. She certainly helped me on the trip. Even if she complained a lot, I don’t think I could’ve managed with —. Of course I could’ve managed, but it sure was nice having her there.”

Remembering her enthusiasm for the past two days, he thought, “I believe she’s truly interested in the project, and I know I can use—I mean, need her help organizing the material.”

He sat staring at the computer screen, unable to focus his thoughts, and said aloud, “I can’t do this today.”

He left the cottage and drove to the Texas A&M campus, where he swam three miles worth of laps in their Olympic-sized pool and spent some time in the sauna. That afternoon, he drove aimlessly around Austin and took in a movie.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast and forcing Joyce to the back of his mind, he felt more like himself and ready for the work ahead. The hours turned into days, days into weeks as Robert translated page after page of the material. He found that as Veda wrote with more detail, she began to incorporate Artorien words such as the universe, extraterrestrial, and aristocracy that were not in her native language. He soon found it

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necessary to modify his program to include a combined database of the two different languages while consolidating their vocabularies.

Two and a half months passed, and Joyce was about to finish her exhibit. During this time, she had not contacted Robert. However, she had spoken to Professor Anthony Walters several times and told him of her work at the museum, Robert's progress with the material, and that he wanted her to go to Austin to collaborate on a book with him. She told him of her mixed and uncertain emotions over her career, Robert, and the future. Anthony told her he had heard from Robert, who agreed the work was going nicely. However, he would not advise her other than to contact him and see what the future had to offer before making any decisions.

Three days after her conversation with Anthony, she sent Robert a CMS message.

Hi Robert,

I hope you are doing well with your project.

I have about completed my work here.

If you still want me to help you with the book, I will see what I can do about arranging a temporary leave of absence from the museum.

Please let me know how long we will need to complete your project.

Joyce

Joyce received Robert's answer almost immediately.

Dear Joyce,

I am happy to hear you are about to complete your work and considering coming to Austin.

Yes, I most definitely want and need your help.

I have translated about 30 percent of the papers, so I have your work cut out for you.

The time to complete the project will depend on how fast you are at organizing. – LOL. Let me know when you can travel, and I will prepare your accommodations for your arrival.

Hoping to see you soon, Robert

Two weeks later, on a Monday afternoon, Joyce entered the Grayson estate and drove to the cottage. Robert came out, and when she got out of the car, he said, “Joyce, it’s good to see you, and thanks for coming.” He wanted to say he missed her but did not. Instead, he hugged her and asked, “How was your trip? How did your new exhibit turn out? How....” He stopped when he saw the expression on her face, “I’m sorry, Joyce; it’s just that I— guess I’ve missed you, and I’m happy to see you again.”

She smiled and admitted, “I guess I’ve missed you too,” then added, “A little.”

“Come,” he said, opening the car door for her, “let’s go to the house. I had my old room prepared for you. I’m sure you’ll find it more comfortable than the guest room because it has a full private bath. There is also an entrance to the outside. That way, you’ll be free to come and go without tramping through the house.”

He walked around the car and got in the passenger side. He directed her to park by a side entrance as she drove toward the main house. When they entered the elegant room, she said, “Robert, I didn’t expect anything like this – it’s beautiful. But if this is your room, where will you sleep?”

“I said it was my old room. Because of my work habits, I moved to the cottage. It’s easier to go upstairs at two in the morning than return here.”

Changing the subject, she asked, “Where is your mother?”

“She and her sister have been planning a European trip for many years. They wanted to visit the continent and tour as many famous art galleries and museums as possible, so I don’t expect them back for several months.”

“Do you mean I’m all alone in this massive home?”

“No,” he laughed and said, “Miguel is here. He and his wife have their quarters behind the kitchen. Other than that, you’ve got the place to yourself.”

He held out his hand, saying, “Come on – let’s get your bags from the car and get settled in, take a bath, or whatever.”

She took his hand, thinking, “Whatever indeed,” when they got to the car, she opened the trunk and took out one large and one small suitcase as Robert said, “Is that all you brought? Most women pack more than that for a weekend trip.”

“Some, maybe,” she replied modestly, “but I’ve brought everything I need.”

“OK,” he said sheepishly, “I’ll take the big one.”

She smiled at him but thought, “Chivalry is indeed dead; the big lug took the one with wheels.”

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When they entered the room, he placed the bag on the bed and started toward the door but stopped and said, “Joyce, I am happy to see you. I have missed you more than I care to admit.”

She approached him and put her arms around his neck, saying, “I, too, have to admit I’ve missed you.” Then, he added, “Although I don’t know why you never seem to know I’m alive most of the time.”

“That’s not true. I know you’re alive – all too alive. What I don’t know is—are you over your ordeal with Jeffery?”

She laughed, “Is that what’s been bothering you?”

“Yes, because when we were on the island, you told me you were not ready for any rebound romances.”

She laughed again, turned, walked a few steps, and asked, “Is that what you’re proposing?”

“Not at all,” he sputtered, “The truth is, Joyce, I like you. I like you a lot and think you are...” He paused, took a deep breath, and continued, “It’s just that I didn’t want to force or encourage any romantic entanglements.”

“That’s OK, Robert. I guess I disagreed too strongly about Jeffery and my feelings. I was hurt and angry with him, but I suppose I was angrier with myself for allowing —. Anyway, that’s all in the past. I like you too, Robert, and where we go from here—well, let’s get on with your project,” she grinned at him with that knowing smile of hers, “and see what else develops.”

“Fair enough,” he said with relief, “I was afraid you were still...”

“I’m not, Robert,” she assured. “Now get out of here and let me get on with – what you said before – take a bath or whatever.”

“Right you are,” he said, heading for the door, “Miguel will be preparing supper for us, so I’ll see you in the dining room at about six.”

After dinner, they went back to the cottage, and she followed him to another room, where he said, “I’ve set up this office for your private work area. I connected your computer complex to the primary server so you can access the latest information.”

He moved another chair to the console and said, “Let me show you how the system works.”

She sat beside him as he turned on the computer, and three monitors lit up. The center monitor displayed the opening screen with four large folders labeled Originals, Work in progress, Finalized, Projected Publication, and Other.

Printed on the Originals folder were three smaller folders labeled Sheets, Books, Pictures, and he said, “These are self-explanatory, and naturally, there is nothing in the Finalized folder.”

She watched in amazement and then commented, “This system’s as impressive as yours.”

He stated, “It’s not exactly the same, but it will do nearly as much.”

He selected and opened the Work in Progress folder, and an extensive list of strange alphanumeric folders appeared on the left monitor.

She studied the list briefly and said, “You better explain this one.”

He laughed and said, “This portion took considerable thought because, as its name implies. All work that’s being deciphered, decoded, or in the process of being edited is here. Naturally, the list will grow as we add material. There is one more thing I need to explain. You can edit any material from right here. You don’t have to worry about losing anything because every time you save your work, there is a modified copy of the latest changes; not only that, you’re the only one that can delete or modify your files,” then asked, “Have any questions?”

She asked, “Do you have a book of instructions to explain what you just said?” then grinned and added, “Just kidding – I get the idea. Where do you want me to start?”

“Take some time to find your way around and learn the system. There’s plenty of time before you start work.”

She spent several hours perusing the files, and around nine, she told him she had some thinking to do and went back to the main house.

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Chapter 12.

Joyce's second day on the job

When Robert entered the office the following morning, he was surprised to find Joyce asleep on the couch. He shook her gently by the shoulder, saying, "What are you doing here so early?"

"It's not early for me; I've been here most of the night."

"But why?"

"It all started yesterday when I was learning your system. After returning to my room, I began thinking about the papers I'd read. I felt something was wrong, so I returned at about midnight. You had already retired, so I realized something after reviewing what I suspected."

"What's that?"

"You've got everything documented in chronological order by Artorien dates."

"That's right, I do."

"I liked your presentation of the material, but I thought a few changes could improve its readability."

"Such as?"

Joyce explained, "You told me you hoped to publish the material eventually, so I edited and rearranged a few papers to make them more episodic. And for brevity's sake, I maintained the continuity of events by using Veda's chronological age instead of the cumbersome universal dating. Besides, most readers wouldn't understand it any more than I do."

This time, she gave him a slip of paper and said, "Here, start with these and let me know what you think."

He went to his computer, brought up the folder, and began reading.

Veda was 26 years, 2 months, and 2 days old

Kiril tells Veda she can go with him to the mainland

Kiril did not keep his promise to me until after my mother's death. I was 169 moons old when Kiril told me he would take me to the land of other people.

Two suns ago he told me that he had to go to what he called the mainland and I could go with him. I just got back and had to write down my feelings. Kiril took me with him to a part of the golden bird I had not seen before. It was a large room with strange shelves on the wall, all covered with colored lights that twinkled. There were three great chairs where Kiril and the other two gods sat while we made the golden bird fly. In front of the chairs were two large round windows. As I gazed out over the village, I realized I was looking through the eyes of the golden bird. They were the great shiny eyes that glistened in the sunlight and glowed red at night — I had only seen the eyes from the outside.

There was nowhere for me to sit, so I stood by Kiril's chair and watched the village suddenly disappear as the golden bird took flight into the world of the gods. I felt little movement as I watched the blue sea below and bits of white as we flew through clouds. When I saw land again, Kiril told me it was the mainland from where the people of my island had come.

When we stepped out of the bird's belly, I was surprised to see many people like those on my island, but I was more surprised to see that no one seemed to notice us. I remember when another golden bird landed on our island, and everyone gathered to watch. It was not until I walked beside Kiril along the paths through the village that people began to stop and look at me.

This village was much different from mine. Smooth rocks covered the paths, making the buildings of sticks and stone. The people have fish, fruits, and vegetables I have never seen before. Others had bright-colored cloth for making clothes very different from ours; these, too, I had never seen before.

Kiril told me that he and the others had to go somewhere I could not go, so I stood outside the building and waited for them to come out. As I waited, many people began to look at me. They talked among themselves and pointed, but no one answered when I spoke. When I knelt down to speak to a young boy who came closer than any of the others, a woman dressed in yellow took him back into the crowd. Even though these people did not dress like me, they looked and spoke like my villagers but acted strangely. They must have never seen anyone like me because I was half as tall as anyone there; they must have thought I was a godling.

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When my father and the others came out of the building and saw the crowd around me, Kiril picked me up and shouted, “Be gone with you,” and they ran away. As I rode high on his shoulders during the walk back to the golden bird, I watched as the crowd gathered again and followed behind us.

The return trip was the same, except I saw the island through the golden bird’s eyes this time. It looked like a pebble in the blue sea, and as we got closer, it grew larger. Just before we landed, I could see some of the god sculptures. I liked the ride in the golden bird, but I am glad to be home and never want to leave again.

Veda was 91 years, 13 months, and 20 days old

Kiril tells Veda of his impending departure.

It was 1,866 moons (143 years, 7 months) after my father arrived in my world that he told me that their work on the island was nearly finished and that he and the other star men would be leaving. I have known for many seasons that the time would come but was never ready to face it. When I asked him when they would leave, he told me it would be about seven moons. I was excited and asked him if we were going back to the mainland. That is when he told me that Commander Yyros could not get permission for me to leave the island. When I asked him what I was supposed to do, he told me that I must stay here. He said I would have to leave the Golden Bird, but he would arrange to build me a dwelling anywhere on the island. I told him I did not want to stay and did not understand why I could not go with him. He said it was because I was part of the island people, was not educated in the universe's ways, and the ArtorienCommander would not allow it. I told him he had taught me well and I had a good education. I know your language. I have studied math, science, engineering, and medicine from the many books on the Golden Bird. He told me he knew that, but it was not enough. The Great God Mutt himself said I could never leave the island. Then I told Kiril I would think about where to build my dwelling and let him know after I decided.

On the evening of that sun, Veda wrote.

I have thought about staying here, and I am still very angry about it, but since I have no choice in the matter, I decided to have my dwelling built on the hillside by our favorite tree. When I told Kiril, he thought it was a good place because it was next to my mother’s grave. I told him I remembered.

Veda was 92 years, 2 months, and 28 days old

Her new dwelling becomes prepared.

Kiril was true to his promise, as always. He designed a dwelling like no other on the island and ordered the stonecutters and masons to build it. Kiril called the structure my palace on the hill. It looked like it and was nearly as large as some buildings I remember seeing on the mainland. The inside has everything I need to live as comfortably as I had in the Golden Bird. That is except for body waste. However, I will not have to dispose of it by burying it or going to the sea like the natives. Kiril explained how I could heat treat and dry the waste for later use to grow a better garden.

Veda was 92 years, 7 months, and 22 days old

The Gods leave the island.

The priests have known for generations that the Golden Bird would leave the island occasionally but always return within the moon's cycle. On the 22nd sun of the 7th moon of my 370th season, the Golden Bird left and never returned to the island. I do not believe Kiril told anyone but me of the Gods' plan to leave. If anyone told Jelani VII, he never told anyone else because all labor on the island continued as usual after the Golden Bird had gone. I will eventually have to tell Jelani VII what I know of their leaving. I am not looking forward to that time.

Veda was 92 years, 9 months, and 26 days old

Veda tells Jelani VII the Gods are not coming back.

It has been two moons since the Golden Bird left, and the villagers are getting restless. I have overheard conversations while walking through the fields and orchards. The people feared the Gods' presence but were more fearful of their absence. No one knows where they went or why. Everyone is full of questions – will the Gods come back, and what happens to them if they do not?

To my surprise, Jelani VII came to my dwelling while I was working in the garden and asked me where my father was. I told him that Baramus and the other Gods had left and would not be back. I have never seen a man so shaken with fear. He trembled all over and stuttered; he would not allow himself to believe me. He asked me what to do; he did not know what he would tell the villagers. I told him to tell the people the truth. The spacemen finished the job they came to do and have left. The people finished the Gods' project, and it was time for them to start building their lives. He did not believe that

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either. He ranted on, so I told him to do what the priests have always done, the thing they do best: lie to the people and keep them in bondage to the Gods and make their monuments. Jelani VII seemed to understand my words and left; however, I do not think he understood my sarcasm. I hope I did not make a mistake.

Many second and third sons of Jelani families and their sons become minor priests, and it is now Jelani VII who must continue to teach, guide, and control them.

Veda was 92 years, 10 months, and 18 days old

Jelani VII comes back to talk to Veda.

Jelani VII again came to me in the morning after the next full moon. It appears he did hear and somewhat understand my words because he said he had just come from a meeting with his staff of minor priests. He had told them what I told him about the Gods leaving with no intention of returning. It appears they did not take the news well and blamed the people for angering the Gods and driving them away. It was the consensus of the minor priests that the only way to appease the Gods and have them return was to force the people to work harder and make more and better monuments.

I tried to convince Jelani VII that making more statues would not bring the Gods back. It would only slow down the progress of easing the stressful island life. I think he is beginning to see the validity in what I am saying, but I am afraid he will not be able to convince his underlings.

Veda was 93 years, 2 months, and 28 days old

Jelani VII creates the stone movers cast

Six moons have passed, and I was correct in my assumption. The priests have gone through the village, ranting their rage at the people and chanting to the Gods, promising them that the people will repent, and if they come back, the people will pay homage.

The work is continuing; only now, the priests drive the workers mercilessly. They even put the stronger young boys, whose chore was to carry water to the stonecutters, to work cutting the great slabs.

Since the Gods with levitation ability never taught the priests or anyone else the art, there was no one to move the stone blocks. The priests selected the strongest men from all the clans and established another cast of stone-movers. It is now their task to move the great stones. The priests have conscripted the children of 22 seasons (5½ years) and older to deliver the water.

Veda was 93 years, 4 months, and 18 days old

Jelani VII allows the monuments to be made smaller

The priests did not relent until after many crushed arms, legs, hands, and feet, plus several deaths. Not by discontinuing the useless carving of more statues; they allowed the monuments to be made smaller and no longer have to sit on base plates; they could stand on the ground.

Veda was 101 years, 13 months, and 12 days old

One year after Jelani VIII took office

Despite my continued objections, Jelani VII and now Jelani VIII drive the workers relentlessly through the scorching heat of the season's long suns and the cold season's short suns. Rather than allow the older men to retire to the farms after their 96 seasons (24 years) as the Gods permitted, the priests forced them to continue working, many until they died in the quarries. This type of monument building continues, and I do not know how to convince these Jelani priests of the futility of their actions.

When Robert finished reading, he went and sat beside Joice on the couch and declared, "Joyce, you've done a marvelous job of capturing the essence of Vada's materials. You have done far better than I would've ever done." Then, he added, "I don't know how you accomplished all that last night."

"I'm glad you like it, Robert, and thank you for saying so. I'll return to bed, make up for some missed sleep, and see you about lunchtime."

"All right, Joyce, you deserve a break. I'll see you later."

After she left, he went back to his work.

She joined him for lunch, after which they returned to their respective projects for the rest of the day.

Chapter 13.

Day of Swimming

It was Wednesday morning, and Robert was at the computer console when Joyce entered the cottage.

“I didn’t hear you drive up,” Robert said.

“No,” she replied with a broad smile, “it was such a beautiful morning I decided to walk. That’s why I’m a little late – sorry.”

He grinned back at her; “I’ll have to dock your salary for that.”

She returned to the kitchen with a cup of coffee, sat at her computer, and went to work. They both concentrated on their own tasks without a word until about ten-thirty when Robert said, “Since you were late to work this morning, I think we’ll have to quit early to make up for it.”

“What?” Joyce said, startled at the break in silence and her concentration.

“I said...” he began.

“I heard what you said – but what did you mean?”

“After graduation, I arranged for continued use of the University’s pool facility. I got special permission to use the pool on Wednesdays before it opens for faculty and family members at two o’clock. I usually swim for a few hours before noon and then go somewhere for dinner. I would sometimes take in a show if I found something interesting at a local theater. Are you interested?”

She thought, “So you’re not all work and no play,” then said, “Sure, but....”

“But what,” he interrupted, “Don’t tell me you didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

She looked back at the computer screen, quickly saved her work, and stood up, saying, “Of course, I’ve got a swimsuit. I told you I brought everything I needed.”

After driving her back to her room for what she called her attire, Robert thought as he put the top down on his vintage BMW, “Maybe we do have something more in common than just this project.”

When she returned with the small suitcase, they left the estate. Once on the highway, Robert said, “Since you told me you’re a swimmer, I was surprised you brought a bathing suit.”

“Oh, I can swim, but if you recall, I told you I don’t like to.

“Why not?”

She looked at him curiously, realized he was talking about SCUBA diving, and said, “I’m certified with the WWA.”

He briefly looked at her, “I haven’t heard of the WWA.”

“It stands for Wide World of Aquatics.”

He nodded and asked, “How deep have you been?”

She thought she would continue the charade and replied, “Ten meters, but I prefer to work at the three-meter level.”

He looked at her again and said, “Ten meters – that’s only a little over thirty-two feet.”

She smiled inwardly and said, “And I suppose you can do better.”

“I’ve gone to over two hundred feet on several dives, but I must admit, I prefer depths of less than sixty feet.”

“Of course,” she commented, “that way, there’s less chance of nitrogen narcosis.”

Impressed, he glanced at her, “Exactly, and you don’t have to waste time on decompression on the ascent.”

She paused, then laughingly said, “I think I’d need a parachute if I dove from 200 feet.”

“What do you mean, dove from 200 feet?” Then it hit him, “We’re not talking about the same kind of diving, are we?”

No,” she laughed, “I’m talking about diving from springboards and platforms where you try to enter the water with little or no splash. You know, like in the Olympics.”

“Oh,” he sheepishly said as he rolled to a stop in the parking lot of the university’s swimming pool complex, “That kind of diving I don’t do because I always make a big splash.”

She laughed as she pictured him doing a belly flop.”

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When she came out of the women's locker room, she was impressed with the size and beauty of the edifice with its high domed ceiling, Olympic-sized pool with roped lanes, and observation gallery complete with TV cameras.

However, her first interest was the separate and spacious diving area. She walked around, checking out the continuous spray of water that broke the reflective surface. Without the spray, a diver would only see the bottom of the pool and have no idea where the surface of the water began. She stood and looked up at the multilevel diving platforms, and since she had not dived since college, she wondered if she could still do it.

When she returned to the pool area, she saw Robert perched on the small racing platform of the center lane. She watched as he leaned forward, knees bent, arms thrust backward, and with a sudden explosive burst of energy, he lunged out over the water, arched slightly before hitting the water with a loud crack and tremendous splash. She expected to see a flying butterfly or racing breaststroke. Instead, he began a smooth, leisurely American crawl toward the pool's far end. Before she got there, he had turned and started back. She sat on the pool's edge with her feet dangling in the water, watching his seemingly effortless strokes and thinking, "He wasn't kidding when he said he always made a big splash, but that was no belly flop."

Robert was about to hit the wall with a flip-turn when he suddenly stopped, broke the surface, raised his swim goggles, and looked up at her, "I'm not used to finding feet hanging in the water at the end of the lane. What are you doing there?"

"I was just watching, and you make it look so easy."

He reached up, and when she took his hand, he pulled her into the water. She came up sputtering while trying to brush her hair out of her eyes, but before she could ask why he did that, he said, "Come swim with me," and started slowly toward the far end. When he got to the fifth float on the lane divider rope, he stopped and looked around; Joyce was nowhere in sight. Then he heard her call out, "Catch me if you can."

He spun around to see Joyce about a third of the pool length away. As he began to swim toward her, she made a surface dive, and that was the last he saw her until she popped up at poolside three lengths ahead of him."

When he got to where she waited, he said, "Most of us have to swim like people, not dolphins."

She laughed, "I don't do well on the surface. I never learned to breathe properly, and I splash too much. For me, it's easier and faster underwater."

"Undoubtedly, there aren't many people who can beat me in freestyle."

“Right,” she said, grinning, submerged, and swam half the width of the pool underwater before coming up at the ladder. Robert, ducking under each lane divider rope, also went to the ladder and climbed out.

She was standing by the ladder with her feet apart and hands on her hips in mock anger, but before she could laugh at him, Robert said, “I’m sorry Joyce; I shouldn’t have pulled you into the water like that.”

“That’s alright, Robert,” she laughed and shrugged, “I needed to get wet anyway.”

“Ok, then. I’ve had my swim; now it’s your turn.”

As Joyce walked to the three-meter tower, she tucked her long blond hair under an aquamarine green swim cap that matched her one-piece Olympic-style suit and climbed the ladder. Robert noticed her slim, agile figure for the first time and wondered why she always wore those loose-fitting and often baggy clothes.

He watched Joyce as she approached the end of the springboard and carefully bounced a few times. Then she took three long strides back along the board and turned facing forward, raised her arms to shoulder level and then back to her sides, then suddenly took two bounding steps toward the end of the board, and on the third one, she lifted into the air and came down hard on the end. As the board catapulted her upward, she thrust her arms straight overhead, and at the peak of the rise, she jack-knifed, then opened and, on the downward flight, performed a half twist before entering with a splash that hardly rippled the water.

Robert watched as she broke the surface, turned toward the ladder, and surface-dived. He did not see her again until she surfaced by the ladder and climbed out. She returned to the three-meter board three times, and each dive was different but just as well executed.

Robert started to approach her, but she held up her hand and said, “Just one more; I’m beginning to remember how.”

They had arrived shortly after noon; it was approaching two o’clock, and other people began to arrive. This time, she did not stop at the three-meter level but continued up to the ten-meter platform. He did not see her again until she stood on the platform's edge, looking down from thirty-three feet. She held for several seconds, collecting her thoughts and picturing the details of the dive in her mind, then launched up and out, arched in a beautiful swan dive, held it for three-quarters of the flight, snapped her arms forward and down, and speared into the water. When she climbed out of the pool, Robert was standing there and wrapped a large towel around her shoulders while several onlookers gathered

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and applauded. A man stepped forward from the group and said, “Nicely done, Miss. Do you dive professionally?”

Joyce removed her swim cap, shook her hair loose, and smiled at the man, saying, “Thanks for the compliment, but no. I was a college member of the Texas A&M diving team, but that was a while ago.”

“Really,” the man said, “You must practice often because...”

“Not at all,” she interjected, “this is the first time I’ve been on a platform in nearly eight years. I guess there are some skills one doesn’t forget, sort of like riding a bicycle.”

The man’s voice reflected his astonishment and replied, “That was more than...” He reached out, took hold of both her hands, stepped back, looked her over, and stated, “Miss, you have an amazing talent. Would you be interested in diving professionally?”

She looked at him in stunned silence, and before she spoke, she looked at Robert, who smiled and shrugged, “I thank you for the offer, but – no – I think not. I have too many other activities going on right now.”

He released her hands and stepped back, saying, “Sorry to hear that, Miss, But if you change your mind,” he smiled at her and nodded his head toward Robert, “Your friend knows how to reach me.”

“Thank you,” she said and then to Robert, “I don’t know about you, but I’ve had enough exercise for this week.”

He smiled at her as they walked toward the locker rooms, “That’s good because it’ll be another week before you can do it again.”

She looked at him and huffed, “Maybe.” She grinned and added, “I’ll see you outside.”

Robert was waiting for her when she came out of the dressing room and asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good right now, but because of that last dive, I’m beginning to feel muscles and joints I’d forgotten I had – and are beginning to complain. By morning, I’ll be lucky to be able to get out of bed.”

“In that case, it’s your choice; where to from here?”

“As much as I’d like to go to dinner and a show, I know my body, and it’s telling me to go home, get in a tub of hot water, and relax.”

Having had those feelings many times, he smiled sympathetically, took her arm under his, and started for the car, “So it’s that bad, is it?”

“I think it could be. Only time will tell.”

On the drive back to the Grayson Estate, Robert commented, “You’re amazing; I had no idea you could dive like that. With your obvious talent, why didn’t you continue? Try out for the Olympics or something.”

“It’s true, I liked diving, and I guess I got pretty good, but as I mentioned to your friend, I was only a college diving team member. I perfected several dives for my own pleasure but never got enthralled in the competition. By the way, who is he?”

“You just met Miles Jorgensen, originally from Sweden. He’s the diving coach at the University, and I must say it takes a lot to impress him.”

Joyce gave Robert a slow, satisfied smile, slid down in the seat, closed her eyes, and let the warm Texas air finish drying her hair.

Chapter 14.

Day after swimming

When Joyce entered the cottage the next morning, Robert came out of the kitchen with a cup of coffee.

“Good morning, Joyce,” he greeted her with a smile. “Had your coffee yet?”

“Yes, thanks; I just finished some at breakfast. Don’t you ever eat?”

“Sure, I had mine about four this morning.” asked, “How do you feel after yesterday’s exercise?”

“After a long soak in that marvelous tub, I got a good night's sleep. I believe I'll make it through the day.”

“And be ready for next Wednesday?”

“Don’t push it!”

He laughed and said, “I have to work hard to stay ahead of your editing, but I’m about caught up. Have you anything for me to see?”

“Yes,” she said, “I’ve reviewed the sixty-five years between Veda’s mainland flight and when Kiril told her he was leaving; I’ve gone through them several times. It’s evident from Veda’s writing that the island people never accepted her as one of their own, neither did they accept her as a god, so she remained withdrawn for most of her life. Besides that, the information presented between the time Jelani V and VIII took office is mere repetition: monotonous ramblings of how the priests blamed the people for the Gods’ departure and the priest’s merciless actions toward the people in their frantic efforts to coax them back.

So, I think the papers are dull, boring, and make for some very dreary reading.”

He laughed again, saying, “I have to agree – historically important but not very interesting.”

“However,” she continued, “I’ve read several accounts where Veda mentioned that only the firstborn son of a Jelani priest could ever become the next ruling priest. It was not until after the Gods left during the reign of Jelani VII that his firstborn was a girl.

Since it had never happened before, Jelani VII had no idea what to do. She could never become Jelani VIII, so what would they do with her? In their warped beliefs, the gaggle of sub-priests conceived that it was the child’s fault for being born. Jelani VII decreed all first-born Jelani girl children be sacrificed immediately after birth to appease the Gods. This barbaric atrocity continued up until the reign of Jelani IX. When Veda was about 120, I found several references to Jelani IX’s mate Olian and Veda’s relationship with Redie. I listed several relevant dates before Veda’s account of her unusual friendship with Olian and her daughter. I hope you approve of the way I’ve presented it.”

Robert went to the kitchen to refill his coffee cup before returning to his console, opened the folder labeled V-103, settled back, and began reading.

Note: Veda made a chronological record of the complete Jelani family tree from Jelani III through Jelani XVII. I selected Veda's relevant ages taken out of context but retained a consistent chronology when she referenced specific occurrences.

When Jelani IX was born, Veda was 103 years, 7 months, and 20 days old.

Veda was 105 years, 4 months, and 28 days old when Jr. Jelani IX’s future wife, Olian, was born.

Veda was 122 years, two months, and 18 days old when Jr. Jelani IX and Olian first mated, 12 months, four days later, Jelani IX and Olive's daughter Redie were born.

Veda was 135 years, 9 months, and 10 days old

Veda tells about her friendship with Redie -Jelani IX’s daughter

I have seen the firstborn sons from the past five Jelani families become the ruling priests of the island. I have also seen many second and third sons of Jelani families and their sons become minor priests. Not all men become priests; however, some choose to learn the healing arts, as do some of the Jelani women. It was not until Jelani IX’s mate had a daughter that I met someone who was not afraid of me.

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I was picking peaches in the orchard when a young girl of about 34 seasons (8½ years) came and stood beside me. When I looked down at her, she did not run and hide like most children her age. Instead, she just stood staring up at me with eyes wide. I kneeled on one knee and asked her name and where she came from. She told me it was Redie, and her father was Jelani IX. When I asked if she knew who I was, she said her father had told her I was a child of the Gods and that they left me here when they went away.

Just then, I heard the girl's name called; Redie said it was her mother, and she called back. I recognized Jelani IX's mate, Olian; she is one of the great healers known by all who have ever been ill. As she came scurrying through the orchard, she immediately began scolding the child for disturbing me, but I told her that the girl was not bothering me and that I enjoyed talking with her. It took some time to convince the woman that I was not a God, even though she believed my father was. We talked a while, and when she became more at ease, I invited her and Redie to come visit me at the Palace on the Hill.

Veda was 132 years, 5 months, and 27 days old.

Redie and Olian come to visit Veda

The sun was nearly overhead when I saw Redie and her mother, Olian, climbing the hill toward my dwelling. When they arrived, I invited them in, but Olian said she could not enter a temple of the Gods. I did not argue with her but instead brought out cups of herb tea and cakes I made from the dark nuts. (Coconut) We sat in the shade of the great tree and talked.

I have not lived 530 seasons (132 years) without knowing the story, but I was interested in hearing Olian's version. She told me how, in the beginning, the gods decreed that the first-born son in the line of the Jelani priest would inherit their father's position and rule for 299 moons. (8,970 Earth days)

She told me the Gods had decreed that each succeeding Junior Jelani priest would take his position as the island's ruling authority on the Spring Equinox of every 93 seasons (23 years).

After speaking with her further, I realized she, or anyone on the island, had any idea that there were other people like them elsewhere.

The Gods had convinced the islanders that they had created her and the entire known world. Coming from a family of Jelani priests who believed it, I did not try to tell her otherwise.

Before they left, I showed Olian my herb and vegetable gardens. She was amazed at how much larger and healthier my plants were than their farmer's crops. She asked if it was because I needed to grow larger vegetables because I was a God's child. I told her that was not the reason and offered to teach her my father's way of using fertilizer. She told me that she used herbs for healing, and when Redie reached 14 seasons (3½ years old), she would begin teaching her the healing arts. She wanted to learn more about my herbs and if I could show her how to grow them.

Veda was 132 years, 7 months, and 25 days old

Olian and Redie visit often

Olian and her daughter have returned many times, and I have taught them several gardening techniques. I am teaching Olian about the physical body, as I learned from my father's books, and she teaches me about how to make native herb healing potions.

Redie watches us closely, but I know she is eager to learn even though she says very little. She is still young and smart enough to learn much more of life. If given the opportunity and she asks, I will teach her. I feel it is just a matter of time before she begins asking questions.

Veda was 134 years, 2 months, and 24 days old

Redie is about 11 when she starts coming with her questions

Redie is older now and comes to visit me, often by herself. She is not afraid to enter my dwelling. The first time she came in, she stared in wide-eyed amazement at the size of everything. I still have to lift her to put her on the bench.

She has come to me with many questions, many about the Gods. Knowing that she is the daughter of a Jelani Priest, I am hesitant to answer all of them. She has learned much during her 40 seasons of studying the healing arts but wants to learn about boys. Even though we start talking about boys, the talk seems to end up about the priest's teachings and the Gods. I keep telling her we will talk about such matters when she is older.

Veda was 136 years, 5 months, and 11 days old

Redie now (13, 05, 07 years old) often visits Veda.

I have grown quite fond of her, and even though we talk about womanly things, she continually asks about my father and the Gods. I presume it is because all past Jelani Priests have forbidden the islanders from talking about Kiril and the other space people. I

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remember how Junior Jelani III would not answer any of my questions about the island religion. I talked to Jelani IX about Kiril even before he became the head priest. I told him about Redie's questions concerning my father, and he told me she also asked him many questions he could not answer. He told me to answer her questions only if I thought I could do so without defying his religious teachings. I will do what I can to honor his request and still quench her thirst for answers.

Veda was 138 years, 9 months, and 21 days old

Redie tells Veda about meeting Toapa

Last season, Redie met a young fisherman called Toapa and has talked about him ever since. On this visit, she was atwitter with excitement. She told me that Toapa had left home, built himself a shelter near the beach, and asked her to become his mate. Her father has since become Jelani IX, and she has not told him about wanting to leave home.

The sons and daughters of the Jelani clan have mostly mated within the caste system. Those who have not become disgraced and forced to live outside the Jelani clan, she does not know what to do. I asked her if she wanted to mate with the fisherman, Toapa, and she said she did. When I asked her if he wanted to mate with her, she said she thought so. Then I told her to tell him to come to see me. She said she did not think he would do that because he would be too afraid. Then I told her he would go if he wanted to mate with her bad enough. If he did not, she would have her answer.

I waited and watched as a strong, sun-browned young man came cautiously up the hill just before sunset. I could tell it took courage for him to come to my dwelling because he trembled with fear as he kneeled before me. When I told him Redie was my special friend, I thought he would break and run, but he remained. When I asked him if he loved Redie and wished her to be his mate, he threw himself flat with arms outstretched upright; I placed my hands on his shoulders and told him to find the girl and tell her she had my blessing. As he stumbled to his feet and dashed away, I called after him, "Come again – soon," and chuckled when he tripped and tumbled halfway down the hill.

Robert closed the folder and went to see Joyce in her office, where he praised her for her fantastic ingenuity. Just wait until you see what I have to show you when we get back from lunch. They left the cottage and leisurely walked to the main house for lunch.

Chapter 15.

Later that afternoon.

After they returned from lunch and back to her office, she went to her keyboard, pressed a couple of keys, and said with a grin, “If I did it right, the latest changes should appear on your console.”

“Well now, aren’t you the clever one? I never showed you how to do that.”

She put her hands on her hips and said with a broad smile, “That’s because I’m smarter than you think. Now go check it out and let me get back to work; you’re too distracting.”

As he went to the kitchen for his after-lunch coffee, he smiled and thought, “How right you are, Joyce.”

He returned to his console and saw the new material on the screen. He settled in his comfortable chair and began reading.

Vada was 138 years 11 months and 12 days old.

Redie was concerned about Toapa.

Vada wrote: The morning sun was breaking the horizon when I came out and found Redie sitting beside the entrance. She had been crying, and I asked her why. She did not know if it was because of her ex-communication from the Jelani clan— or was so happy about her decision to mate with Toapa.

I told her I liked her young man; he genuinely cared for her and believed they would be happy. Then she told me how scared he had been about coming and talking to me, but she would try to change that.

I like and admire this strong young man with a proud fishermen’s heritage.

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Veda was 139 years 12 months and 17 days old.

She went with Redie to watch the fishing fleet return.

Vada wrote: The next time I saw Toapa was when Redie came and asked me to go to see his new fishing boat. He had built a lobster boat for himself and his younger brother; they could now dive for shellfish. The sun was low on the horizon as we stood on the beach watching the boats as they began returning. While we waited for them, a small crowd of onlookers gathered around Redie and me. Toapa did not see us until after he tied up the boat and unloaded their catch into the carts. He and his brother walked up the beach proudly carrying a sea turtle, and when he saw us, he did not know what to do. When Redie ran to him, he gave the turtle to his brother and took her in his arms. I walked to them, and as the crowd formed around us, he said, "This is my mate, Redie." He looked at me and said, "And you all know the Goddess Veda; she is our friend." Since then, they have come often, and I enjoy their visits. I have also gone to their dwelling but dare not enter, for the roof is too low.

Veda was 140 years 3 months and 11 days old.

Redie gave birth to a boy child whom they named Coral.

Vada wrote: It was a cold rainy morning when Toapa came to see me and talked so fast I could not understand him. After I got him to slow down, I learned that Redie had just had a baby boy. He told me he wanted me to be the first to know. I told him I was first after Redie and a couple of midwives, but he was too excited to get the humor of my remark. I thanked him for coming all the way here to tell me. As he began to leave, I asked him what she named the boy. Toapa stopped, turned, faced me with a great smile, said I would call him Coral, and dashed off down the slippery, rain-soaked hill.

Editor's Note: Many events have occurred between Coral's birth and this next entry, but they would break the continuity of Veda's relationships with her closest friends. These other events appear in subsequent journals.

Veda was 153 years 1 month, and 15 days old

Coral took a mate.

Vada wrote: I have watched over Redie and Toapa and shared their joy as their son Coral grew to manhood. Before Toapa's father began working with

the farmers, he taught his sons well, and they provided their share of seafood to the community stores.

The air has become frigid and came early for this season, and I was surprised when Redie came to the palace on the hill on such a cold day. She told me that Coral had taken a pretty young girl from within his clan as a mate two seasons past. But she did not seem as happy about it as most mothers would be. When I asked her why, she told me she liked the girl but was not sure how Coral felt about her.

Vada was 153 years 7 months, and 12 days old

Coral made a declaration

Vada wrote: Six months have passed since Coral took a mate, and suddenly he came to me and declared his feelings and desire for me to be his mate. But what about his present mate? I know that sometimes the men and women of the island would separate and re-mate with another.

When I told him that I had outlived many generations of his ancestors and would most likely outlive him, he told me he knew all that, and it made no difference. He could not see where I looked but a few seasons older than he did and would work hard to be a good mate and companion. I told him I would think about it and let him know.

I went to see Redie and told her what her son had asked of me. She told me that it was no surprise to her. Coral had loved me for many seasons; he talked about me even before he took a mate. He had told Redie that things were not good between him and his mate, that he could not stop thinking about me. I asked her why she had not come to me with this news, and she told me as she had told Coral that affairs of the heart belong to those involved. I asked her how, as his mother, she could not get involved. She told me it was Coral's wish that he be the one to ask me.

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When I spoke to Toapa, he told me he and the whole family considered me a very large older sister, and since many men mate with their sisters, he had no objections to Coral's decision.

I have often wondered what I would have to do to get a mate. Is it befriending a boy's mother and father and assisting in teaching them what I know? I will have to think long on this matter.

Three days after that, Vada wrote:

I thought much of Coral these past suns but had to talk with Redie again. I have known her all her life, and we often spoke of womanly matters. It was not until I told her I never had a mate that she was surprised at my apparent wisdom on the subject without any personal experience. I told her I read a lot. Redie understands my reading even though she cannot. She believes that a girl is not a woman until after she has a mate.

She also told me her son comes to her often, confides his affection toward me, and wants to know what to do if I reject him. Redie reminded me that Coral was not a child without experience; he had mated with another, but it did not last because of his feelings for me. I do not understand such feelings, but maybe it is time I try.

Vada was 153 years, 10 months, and 20 days old

She accepts Coral as her mate.

Vada wrote: Coral came to me with great joy and told me I had to allow him to be my mate because he had nowhere to live. His brother had just taken a mate, and Coral gave his dwelling to them. I believe he planned to do this to make me agree. I must do this now and find out how it feels to have a mate.

**Veda was 154 years, 4 months, and 24 days old
She has lived with Coral for six months.**

Vada wrote: Coral returns to me from the sea at the end of each sun, and now that I am a woman, I am beginning to understand the meaning of a warm companion. I wonder what took me 634 seasons to become a woman when other island girls do it in just 64. Then I remembered it was because I had to raise his mother and him from childhood.

Six months passed when Veda realized they would never have children.’

Vada wrote: Two seasons have passed, and I am still without child, and since Coral’s first mate had a boy, he is asking me why. It is not for his lack of trying, but rather, as I read in one of Kiril’s books, half-breed children sometimes cannot have babies. It is most likely just as well; as much as I would like one of ours, I do not want to subject another child to a life like mine, even if it might only be half as long.

**Veda was 157 years, 8 months, and 23 days old when
Jelani IX died at age 58**

Vada wrote: The air was cold, and I was outside gathering wood for the hearth when I saw Olian struggling to climb the hill. I went to help her, and she began to cry. I picked her up and carried her into the palace. I put her on the bench by the table and gave her a cup of hot clam soup. After she stopped crying and drank the soup, she told me that Jelani 9 died during the night. She came to ask me to go with Coral when taking Jelani’s body to the burial ceremony. These ceremonies have always been for Jelani family members only. I have heard villagers talk about believing the priests are the Gods’ chosen cast because they have a large burning ritual instead of carrying the body to the sea.

When Robert finished reading the material, he added it to the completed files and translated new material for her to work her magic. After several hours, he realized he was getting hungry, so he called Joyce, “Are you ready for supper?”

“I was wondering when you would ask; I’m more than ready.”

“Would you like to eat here? You can fix it, or I can call Miguel and have him fix us something. Then there is the other alternative: go out to eat.”

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“If those are my choices, naturally, I prefer the latter.”

“The latter it is – your car or mine?”

“If I drive, you pay; if you drive, I’ll buy. Now it’s your decision!”

He huffed, “It sure is difficult to get a straight answer from you.”

“Who started the questioning in the first place?”

They both laughed as they left the cottage. She followed him to her car, saying, “You drive, and I’ll buy.”

“Great, where would you like to go?”

“Since supper is on me, the choice is yours.”

“I always thought it worked the other way around.”

“Not in this relationship, it doesn’t.”

“I’m beginning to like this relationship.”

He smiled at her, “Me too,” and drove to her favorite restaurant, where they had a modest meal and lots of conversation. Much to her surprise, he did not talk about work or the project; instead, he wanted to know what she liked to do for recreation and entertainment.

She said, “I don’t know what Austin has to offer, but in Houston, there are many educational and entertainment attractions.”

“I do not doubt that, but what do you like to do?”

She thought a moment then said, “There are always great shows at Houston Symphony and the Miller Outdoor Theatre or the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. Then there are the Major League sports at the New Minute Maid Park.

“I know; I’ve been to most of them myself. But you didn’t answer my question – what do you like to do?”

She looked at him and grinned, “I never miss Houston’s annual Livestock Show and Rodeo.”

He laughed and asked, “Did you know it begins tomorrow?”

Her grin broadened, “Yes, I knew that.”

“We’ve both pushed pretty hard this week. Those papers have been missing for eons – what do you say we take some time off and go to the rodeo?”

“I have no objections to that proposal.”

“Then it’s a date. What do you think about leaving for Houston in the morning?”

“I think it’s a great idea, but it’s one activity I didn’t plan on, and I have nothing appropriate to wear.”

“Now you sound like my mother before attending an art show.”

She huffed, “Sound like your mother indeed!” and they burst out laughing.

Then he said, “When we get back, I’ll take you to your room, and you’ll have all night to decide what to take.”

It was nearly dark when they finished supper and returned to the estate. He drove to her private entrance, and just before she got out, he said, “Sure am glad I asked you to go to Easter Island, kissed her gently, and said, “See you in the morning at breakfast.

The following morning, he rose early and took several minutes, shutting down all the equipment and locking up the cottage before driving the VLT to the main house.

When Joyce entered the kitchen, Miguel had prepared his usual sumptuous breakfast and asked, “Have you seen Robert this morning?”

Robert slowly crept up behind her and said, “Why, Miss Armand, I’m right here.”

She spun around to find him behind her and grinning broadly. “Damn Robert– you scared me; I thought that pesky old man was back.”

He embraced her, “Are you ready for a week off?”

“But of course, Masure Robert, “mimicking Gazlay Tupac and hugged him back.

After breakfast, he loaded her bag into his VLT (Vertical Lift Transport), and they took off for Houston.

Chapter 16.

The Break-in after the Houston Rodeo

They spent the remainder of the week enjoying the rodeo, returned home late Sunday night, and retired to the main house.

Robert rose early, showered, and when he returned to the bedroom, Robert awoke early, got up, showered, dressed, and found Joyce standing in her closet.

“Good morning, Joyce,” he greeted, “Are you ready to get back to work?”

“Good morning to you, too; I will be as soon as I decide what to wear.”

He grinned and said, “Okay Mom, see you at breakfast.”

She huffed, “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Miguel was already busy in the kitchen when Robert walked in.”

“Good morning, Master Robert,” Miguel said as he prepared him a cup of coffee, “will Miss Joyce be joining you?”

“She should be here shortly.”

Miguel began preparing breakfast as Joyce arrived, poured herself a cup of coffee, and joined Robert at the table.

After breakfast, they walked to the cottage, and upon entering, they both knew something was wrong.

While Robert stood stunned in the doorway, Joyce stowed around the room, looking for missing items. She stopped before the wall that once displayed the island pictures and declared, "They're gone. All those wonderful pictures are gone!"

She then went to her computer console, and moments later, she called, “Robert, I’ve got a problem.”

He went and stood behind her as she gazed at a blank screen, exclaiming, “I can’t get it to work; there’s nothing here!”

That confirmed Robert's suspicions that the system had been compromised, and he stated, “Someone hacked us.”

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know yet; let me check the system.”

He went to his console and attempted to power it up. When nothing happened, he knew someone had erased the hard drive.

When he told her, she cried, “Is it all gone – is everything we’ve done these past months gone?”

He declared, “So it would seem.”

“How can you be so damn calm?” she asked with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Because I have everything backed up.”

“Of course you do,” she sighed, “I should have known.”

Then she asked, “How could anyone hack the system and erase the hard drives when they’re completely independent of any outside source?”

“Because whoever it was, had to be here in the lab and must be damn good to break my encrypted passwords.”

He crossed the room and removed a panel from the wall, “Let’s see what has happened to the mainframe.” Seconds later, he stated, “They pulled the hard drive.”

“But how!” she exclaimed, “I didn’t even know that computer was there!”

“No matter, I have a couple more hard drives.”

“Tell me that one of them has all our work stored on it.”

“Not yet, but it will. First, I want to find out who was here and did this.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I suspect I already know, but we won’t be sure until after reviewing the surveillance tapes.”

She went and flopped down on the couch and said, “Once again, you never cease to amaze me, so I’m not surprised that you have surveillance tapes. Where’s the camera?”

“There are four of them in this room: one in your office, four outside, and one upstairs.”

“Really, I’ve never seen them.”

“That’s because they’re built into inconspicuous objects and shielded from surveillance detection equipment.”

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She looked at him suspiciously for the first time and asked, "Do you record everything that happens in the cottage?"

He smiled reassuringly, "The only time the inside cameras are activated is when I shut down my computer and leave the cottage. Then they're remotely controlled by motion detectors."

She grinned back at him and said, "Now that's a relief," then asked, "Where are the tapes?"

"They're in a sub-basement of the main house; let's go see who's responsible for this."

As he went and opened a cabinet, he said, "First, I have to get a new disc drive." He opened a small wall safe and took out a leather case.

On their walk to the main house, She said, "When I asked if you knew who did this, you said you thought so. Who would do such a thing?"

"Have you heard of KORP, that fanatical group who espouses keeping their religion pure?"

"Yes, Anthony has mentioned them several times."

"There's a possibility they've heard something about what we're doing. You can imagine what it will do to their beliefs if we publish any of what we've learned."

"I don't see how KORP could have heard anything — I believe we've been very cautious, and as far as I know, Anthony is the only other person who knows, and surely he wouldn't have anything to do with this."

"It's not important who or how right now. Let's check the recordings."

She followed him to the back of the main house, and as they pushed through a dense patch of bushes to a small door, she said, "I've passed by here many times, and I've never noticed this door."

He smiled his little boy grin while entering numbers into his cell phone, and the door slid open.

"Watch your head," he said as he crouched and passed through the small opening. She followed him through the door and down several steps. When she straightened up, they were in a dimly lit passageway. They went a short distance to a full-sized door with no sign of knobs. Robert said, 'Rasha Omar Rasha,' and the door slid into the right side of the wall.

Joyce commented, "Open Sesame – Nice going, Ali Baba."

He smiled again and led the way into the next room.

She stood watching him and laughingly said, "I didn't know you were so paranoid, but I guess it pays off when there are people out there intending to interfere with us."

As they entered the room, an overhead light came on. He smiled and said, "There's a difference between paranoia and simply being prepared for different contingencies."

He pointed to the rack of computers on the rear wall and asked, "Do you remember when we sent the information back here from the island?"

She nodded affirmatively while still looking around.

"Well, this is where it was sent, along with a copy of everything else we've worked on so far."

He went to a small table beside the rack and turned on a monitor. As he took the new hard drive from the case and connected it to a computer, he said, "Even though this hard drive is solid-state, it will take a couple of hours to install my operating system and all the files." He grinned and added, "Unless you have more questions, it's time to see who hacked us."

"How can we see that.?"

"This is where I store the surveillance information and should have everything recorded. But first— let's see the tapes."

He went to another computer, removed an external hard drive, and said, "Everything should be here so we can watch it on your laptop back in the office."

They left the computer room and returned to the comfort of the cottage.

Robert closed the picture window drapes while Joyce got the laptop from her office, put it on the table in front of the couch, and turned it on. With the room sufficiently darkened, he handed her the hard drive and joined her on the couch. She attached the drive to the laptop, and the surveillance video's menu displayed a series of dates.

"What's all this?" she asked.

As he scrolled through the list, he explained, "The files date back before you arrived." He stopped scrolling, started the playback, and asked, "Do you remember this?"

As she watched her car drive up, she heard Robert greet her as she got out and saw the two of them enter the cottage. A few seconds later, the screen went dark, and he said, "Now that you've seen how the system works, let's scroll ahead to the time in question."

"Robert," she said, "that's amazing; I had no idea that was happening."

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"That's the whole point of surveillance; you're not supposed to know. It would spoil the entire concept if I posted a sign, 'Smile – you're on camera,'"

As he scrolled to a recording date just after they left for the rodeo, she laughed and agreed that would definitely be counterproductive.

Once again, the pictures were from an outside camera. It displayed a large gray van stopping in front of the cottage. A few seconds later, they saw and heard the side door slide open, and three men dressed in dark green jumpsuits cautiously stepped out and looked around. When they were sure they were unobserved, one of them called out, "Looks like they're still gone!" at which time a woman driver, also dressed in a green jumpsuit, joined them. After finding the front door locked, two of the men went around the left side of the cottage while the man and woman went to the right; as they dropped out of view of the first camera, the image on the screen split and displayed two pictures, one from each side-view camera, as their motion detectors sensed movement. Each pair of interlopers slowly made their way along the sides of the building, looking for a way in. The image changed again as the four approached the back kitchen door. One of the men said, "I think we can make it through here," as he forced the door open, splintering the doorjamb.

The inside camera captured a clear image of each person entering the kitchen. Robert stopped the video and said, "I should be able to identify them from these pictures."

"How will you do that?"

"Let's just say I have a source that will allow me access to a facial recognition system. And just as soon as my system is up and running again, we'll see what we can find."

Joyce just smiled and thought, "Of course you do! Why am I not surprised?"

He started the video again, and they watched as different cameras caught the intruders engaged in their rummaging activities.

When the woman started taking down the pictures, Joyce watched how she removed them and commented, "Now that's interesting! She's not tearing them up, as one would expect from such religious fanatics. Instead, she is studying each before putting it in one of our folders."

Robert added, "And speaking of folders when they emptied our filing cabinet, they put everything in one of my old shipping containers. I don't know if they intend to return it to their headquarters or burn everything later."

They continued to watch as one of the men became increasingly frustrated as he tried to hack the system. He was about to smash the console when another man found the

mainframe computer and removed the hard drive. Shortly after, they loaded what they had found into their van and drove away, leaving a perfect picture of their license plate.

Robert and Joyce sat together on the couch, discussing what they had learned, when Teresa called them over the intercom, "Miguel's fixing lunch for you; it will be ready in half an hour."

Robert answered, "Thanks - Teresa," We'll be there in a few minutes." He told Joyce. "There's nothing left for us to do here; let's go to lunch; the new drive should be ready by then.

By two o'clock that afternoon, Robert had reset the surveillance system, secured the underground room, installed the new hard drive, and had his entire system up and running.

Joyce was at her console, marveling how fast he had accomplished everything. After checking through her latest material, she went and sat by Robert and said, "I have to congratulate you on your amazing system. Through all the turmoil of the past events, not a word was lost, not even the last page I had started before we left."

He merely smiled and said, "I've identified the intruders, and they are, as I suspected, members of KORP."

"What have you learned about them?"

He logged into the KORP website and said, "Now, this is very accommodating of them. Their entire membership is here, complete with pictures and contact information."

"How considerate of them. Is there any indication of how they knew about what we are doing?"

"No, nor is that important. However, I am going to send KORP a message." He located their 'Contact Us,' page. Robert composed and sent—:

We hope you enjoyed the pictures and understand the material you stole. We want you to know that your actions were unnecessary; all you had to do was ask, and we would have gladly shared our findings with you. I am also happy to inform you that your attempt to destroy the truth failed because we restored everything. We are sending you this message to inform you that we have identified the four individuals who trespassed and burglarized our property. We also know what your organization represents and that any further attempt to interfere with us will result in legal action.

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Chapter 17.

Tropical Storm Strikes Island.

After Robert completed restoring the computer system, he devised a completely new work schedule. They would only work every other weekend. On one of the off weekends, they could take sightseeing trips together and use the fourth weekend for personal activities. Joyce sometimes used the VLT to return to Houston, while Robert would fly somewhere with James.

The hours ran into days, weeks, and months. Time passed quickly as the work progressed smoothly. They each worked at their own pace in the cottage laboratory. As their personal relationship grew, they took Wednesday afternoons off to swim in the University pool and then dine out before taking in a show.

On a Monday morning after an independent weekend, Robert came down from his bedroom to the lab and found Joyce asleep on the couch. Since it was still dark outside, he quietly went to the kitchen and started the coffee maker. He was standing by the counter, putting some bread in the toaster, when she eased up behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest.

He slowly turned and held her close, saying, “Good morning, Joyce. I tried not to wake you – but why were you sleeping on the couch?”

“Before I left on Friday, I was in the middle of rearranging some manuscripts. The material was especially moving, and I thought about it all weekend, so when I got back last night, I decided to finish what I started.”

“Sounds intriguing – It’s been a while since I took the time to read any of your compilations. What’s it about?”

“Do you remember translating the material about the hurricane?”

“Sure, it was pure devastation.”

“I rearranged your translations into chronological order based on Veda’s age, so if you’ve got the time, I’m sure you’ll find her account as interesting as mine.”

“I’ll read it right after we eat. What do you want on your toast – marmalade or strawberry preserve?”

As she poured some coffee for themselves, she replied, “Strawberry.”

They sat at the small corner table, finishing their coffee, when he asked, “Have you spoken to Professor Walters lately?”

“Yes, I have. The Professor called me late Saturday night. When I began to bring him up to date on our progress – he stopped me because he wanted to warn us about an increased KОРP activity. He has heard rumors from among some philosophy students; nothing specific, but KОРP is involved.”

Robert said, “It’s been nearly a year since they stole our material, so it’s no surprise that some of that information has spread. We’ll have to be more careful with our external communications.”

“I didn’t know we had any external communications!”

He admitted, “Only when I activate our remote backup server.”

She shook her head and commented, “I guess I should have known there’d be more than one storage device.”

When the sun began streaming through the kitchen window, he said, “Looks like it’s time to get back to work.”

She gathered the dishes while jokingly saying, “Slave driver,” and carried them to the sink.

They entered her computer room; she picked up a folder, handed it to him, and said, “I’m going back to my room and catching up on the sleep I missed last night. I hope you approve of my latest arrangement. I’ll be back later.”

“You’d better. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He went to the couch, opened the folder, and began reading.

Veda was 166 years, 8 months, and 22 days old

Veda’s accounts of the hurricane

A very bad storm came to our island about two moons ago, and I have worked with the people to help them recover.

It came on the 8th sun of the 10th moon of my 664th season. The blue sky slowly darkened, and the wind began to blow. No one thought much of it because we have had many storms before, but this one was different from any I had ever seen. The wind began

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slowly but got stronger and stronger as the sky darkened. It became so dark I thought the sun had set, but it was not yet that time. Coral returned home after he and his brother beached their boat, as had the other fisherman. He told me the waves were getting bigger and coming farther up the land. Some of the smaller boats were smashed or missing even before the rain started. Coral and I could do nothing except wait and listen as the sound of the wind and rain grew louder. A strong wind gust moved the heavy stone Coral placed behind the door, and then I heard the great tree crack and crash to the ground. The wind continued to blow for some time, and suddenly it was gone.

I could barely see the stars through the dark gray-green sky when we cautiously ventured outside. Everything was quiet until we heard the priest scurrying everywhere, saying the Gods were angry, and asked, What have you done to make them do this to us? That is when I heard the sobbing and wailing begin. No one knew what was happening, nor did we know the storm was not over. The eerie sky remained for some time, and then, as suddenly as the wind stopped, it began again. Coral and I fought our way back into the dwelling but did not have to brace the door closed because the wind came from the opposite direction.

We held each other close and talked over the howling wind. I have taught Coral much of what I know about the Gods, but he has heard his friend's talk and the ranting of the priests, so he was beginning to wonder. I did not know what was happening, but I knew my father had nothing to do with it. Eventually, we fell asleep, and the winds must have stopped because the sun was shining when we woke.

When I went outside, I first looked toward where my beautiful tree stood so tall and strong even before I was born. It was gone. When I climbed the hill, I found a gigantic hole and my tree's massive roots pointing upward grotesquely. I walked along its long trunk, climbed high into its boughs, and cried for the first time since my mother died.

I did not go into the village until after Coral came back home and told me what he had seen. He returned with news that his mother and several of his friends died in the storm. He told me everything along the shoreline was gone, including the fishing boats, nets, traps, and the inland hatcheries where the fisherwomen gathered eggs.

I went to the beach with him and saw only fragments of the birdhouses remained and, if any of the birds survived, were missing. All beach dwellings as far inland as where the land stopped the pounding waves were gone. Also, many homes within the village itself were beyond repair. I do not know how many people died, but nearly every family lost someone close to them. Of course, in the middle of it all, the priest ranted about God's

wrath and vengeance. I am sure that once the dead are sent to the open waters, the priests will double their efforts to appease the Gods. Will it ever end?

Veda was 167 years, 13 months, and 12 days old

Veda replants the great tree

When the sun was high overhead, I went to sit in the shadow of my fallen tree. To my great surprise and happiness, I saw a green shoot sprouting from a broken root. My great tree had fallen but was not dead. I knew this one would never stand tall again, but there was no reason why its child should not. I chose a place higher on the hill and prepared the ground with water and fertilizer. I then cut out a large portion of the root and planted it in its new home. Someday, I will sit high in its branches just as I did with its mother.

Veda was 168 years, 3 months, and 7 days old

Kiril returns to the island

Five moons had passed since the storm, and a Golden Bird landed just when life was about to return to its chaotic normal. It faced inland with its shiny red eyes peering out over the partially reconstructed village. I knew whoever was in the bird was sitting in their great chairs watching us like the young children watching the anthills.

The priests were the first to arrive, led by Jelani XI, but stayed far from the bird before bowing and chanting about how grateful they were to have the Gods return. Not until after what remained of the villagers came and kneeled behind the priests did the star men appear.

I will never call them gods; they are just giant men from beyond the stars. Coral and his brother had built a new boat. They were out fishing and returned home when they saw the Golden Bird circling high above. Coral and I went and stood on the slight rise behind the villagers.

The three stare-men arrived dressed in glistening silver-colored clothes that appeared to be all one piece from head to foot. As they slowly strode toward the crowd, Jelani XI shouted, "Make way for the Gods." The priest jumped back, and a path opened between us as they approached. Coral, only hearing stories of the giant men half again his height but never having seen them, took my arm trembling. As the three of them came toward us, the villagers threw themselves on the ground, and I told Coral to remain to stand because there was nothing to fear.

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I will never forget the sight of the four men as they made their way toward us, as we stood almost defiantly while the rest of the islanders lay face down, whimpering with fear. When we did not move from their path, they stopped. Standing on the hillock as we were, we were nearly as tall as the giant who spoke in his language that only I understood. It is good to see you are well, Veda Kumani. I knew it was Kiril, for he and my mother were the only ones who called me Kumani. When he raised his arms and removed what appeared to the priests as his head, Jelani XI screamed, The Gods have returned to kill us.

I looked into Kiril's dark but familiar eyes as he smiled at me. I greeted him curtly and asked what brought him back to the island after so many seasons. He said he would tell me later, then asked about the brave young man standing straight at my side. I told him it was my mate, Coral. At that, he threw his helmet to one of the other men, picked me up, and swung me around to sit on his shoulders as he had so many seasons ago. He boasted that I was his daughter and then reached down and picked up Coral, placed him in the crook of his arm, and told me he was happy that I had found a companion.

Of course, the villagers did not know what was happening because no one understood the strange language. A few men remained cowering behind the priests after they cried the Gods were there to kill them, but when Kiril threw his head away and picked me up, everyone scattered, and we were alone.

Kiril looked around and began laughing. He sounded the same as I remembered him when I was a child. He told the other men to inspect the navigational beacons to evaluate and repair any damage. He then carried Coral and me toward our Palace on the Hill. As we approached, he looked around, and I saw the sadness in his eyes as he put us down. Speaking in the island tongue, he said I see our tree is gone; it is as I told you, my daughter, everything that lives will eventually die.

By the time we got to my dwelling, Coral was still in awe of Kiril but was able to begin talking. As I prepared tea and cake, he told Kiril about his mother, Redie, and how it was that we were together.

We all sat and talked a while, and when Kiril reverted to his native tongue, Coral left, saying he was going to check on the boat. Kiril told me he liked my mate and that I had done well. When I asked what he had been doing since he left, he told me that his old Fleet Admiral had fallen ill and wanted to return home to Arturo before he died. When I asked him if he meant the one I knew as the Great God Moai, he told me yes.

Kiril then told me that they returned to the island by order of Admiral Moai to inspect and repair any damage to the beacons. Kiril also reminded me that one of Admiral Moai's

original projects was establishing a community on my island, and he ordered Kiril to report on the villager's progress. Kiril had just returned to his planet in the golden bird when he learned about the storm. He said he wanted to come to see me sooner but could not get permission before now.

So the great monoliths that permeate my world with that man's likeness embossed on them is dead or dying. I wonder how the priest would take to that news.

I told Kiril how Redie and I had talked with her father, Jelani IX, and how life on the island had improved. Statues were still being created but with less urgency. Jelani X reverted to some of the old ways and would not listen to anything I told him. When Jelani XI came into power, everything returned to the old ways, and when the storm came, he was now a man possessed. Kiril commented that it might be too much interbreeding and told me he would talk to the entire clan of Jelani priests.

I went with Kiril to meet with Jelani XI and his companions during the next sun. He told them that the Gods were not angry with them or the people and that he had not come to kill anyone. Jelani XI wanted to know why the Gods did not prevent the storm and the deaths of so many people if they were not angry. Kiril tried to tell him that storms were a natural occurrence, and the Gods did not cause them, nor could they prevent them. He talked to the priests about an eye of the storm moving over the island, but I do not believe they heard him because all they kept asking was, but you are the Gods, why did you not close the eye? Kiril did, however, convince them to have a celebration.

Just before sundown, the villagers gathered in the community circle, where they brought food and drink. The four star-men wore seamless green clothes rather than their silvery ones. Coral and I sat with them at the edge of the circle and ate the festive foods. Some of the more curious children ventured close to us, and when one of the star men raised his arm, they would cry out and run. It started to become a game until a sub-priest came and sent the children scurrying to their mothers. After the sun went down, the people sang and danced around a large fire for the first time since Jelani XI became their leader.

At the next mid-sun, the entire village gathered as close to the Golden Bird as they dared. Kiril had told me they were leaving and would likely not return unless there was another disaster.

After the Golden Bird was out of sight, Jelani XI declared that it was time to go back to work because he did not want the God's terrible red eyes to look down on them again.

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That is when I knew he still understood nothing. I once had a little furry creature that was smarter than he was.

Veda was 189 years, 5 months, and 19 days old

Coral dies at age 49, 02, 08

Vada wrote: Seven suns ago was the saddest day of my 757 seasons. I woke early and went to our birdhouse to get some eggs for the morning meal. I then went to our bed to wake Coral. I have seen many dead people, and instantly, I knew he was gone. I cannot describe the feelings I was having. I remember no one could find Kiril for three suns after my mother died. He told me that if I ever lost anyone I loved, I would understand sorrow; I now understand what he meant. Even though ceremonial fires are only for members of the Jelani clan, no one questioned me when Coral's brother, his mate, and three children came to my ritual fire. We spread his ashes, whereas Kiril spread my mother's.

Robert then closed the folder, put it back in Joyce's storage cabinet, returned to his computer console, and resumed his work.

Chapter 18.

Veda's second mate

It was around 1:30 when a call came over the intercom from Joyce, "Robert, I'm here with Miguel and have asked him to make us one of his special lunches, and I insist you come and get a proper noonday meal for a change."

He went and pushed the call button on the intercom and answered, "Give a girl a little sleep, and look how bossy she gets."

"You better believe it," came her reply.

"Actually, Joyce, you're the greatest. I love what you've done with the editing. I'll be there in a few minutes, and thank Miguel for me."

"Already have; we're in the kitchen, and lunch is beginning to smell great, so hurry."

He went upstairs, washed up, walked to the main house, and joined her in the kitchen, where they often ate instead of in the formal dining room.

By the time they finished eating and started walking back to the cottage, the big white thunderheads had darkened dramatically, and the smell of rain hung heavy in the still air.

She took his hand and tugged, "If you don't want to get wet, you better hurry."

They broke into a slow jog and reached the door just as the first raindrops began pelting the ground.

"For an anthropologist," he said, "you make a pretty good weather prognosticator."

She grinned and replied, "Coming from Texas, you should know thunderclouds when you see them."

As they entered the cottage, he jested, "I do, but I'm not afraid of a little rain?"

"I'm not either unless it's laced with mothball-sized hail," and burst out laughing when the sound of rain and hail on the roof rose to a crescendo.

As they stood in the doorway watching the hail bounce and roll, there was a loud clap of thunder; the rain stopped as quickly as it began.

"Now that that's over," he asked, "What else have you finished reorganizing?"

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“Since you already agreed with me about some of this material being monotonous and utterly boring, I skipped about ninety repetitious years of priest’s relentless tyranny and picked up where Veda talks about meeting Aetos.”

“Aetos,” Robert repeated, “wasn’t Aetos her second mate.”

“He’s the one,” she said, handing him another folder.

Joyce went to her computer console, and he returned to the couch and began reading.

Veda was 280 years, 1 month, and 6 days old

Veda tells about meeting her second mate,

Aetos (age 014, 08, 10)

There is a young stonemason called Aetos – meaning Eagle. I have seen and talked with this young man for several moons, and it appears my heritage or size does not intimidate him. Since I did not raise his mother as I had with Coral, it came much to my dismay when he told me he would like to become my mate. When I told him I had done this once before and outlived the man thrice over, he said it made no difference. After my mother’s death, Kiril told me that I would not understand the loss of someone you outlive, and he was right, for I still think about Coral. Am I prepared to do it again? I will have to think about this.

Veda was 283 years, 8 months, and 4 days old

Veda records the birth of her adopted daughter, Neesha.

I have seen generation after generation of Jelani priests come and go. I have argued with every succeeding generation since Kiril assigned Jelani III to teach me to read and write the village language, something the Islanders never learn. Of course, that was after I knew my father was not a god, and no one would believe otherwise. Now that the Golden birds have left, the Jelani priests have thrived and become the ruling caste. They control everything and have driven the people mercilessly with one purpose: to build more odious tributes to the gods. Ever since Kiril left, I have tried vainly to explain to each successive Jelani priest why the gods left, but none have accepted it. Even after all this time, the priests still blame the people for the Gods' leaving, and they steadfastly believe the only way to get them to return is to build more of those damn statues.

The first-born son was always the next in the priestly succession. Many Jelani priests’ families had daughters, but only a few had been the firstborn. Everyone knew the Gods

would not allow a woman priest, so in those cases, all the lower priests assembled in a ritual sacrifice to the gods while praying for the next child to be a boy.

Three suns ago, much to Jelani XVI's dismay, his mate Rubella gave birth to a daughter. What was he going to do? He sent for me and wanted to know why the Gods made his firstborn a girl. Were they punishing him because of our friendship? He told me he must allow the lower priests to sacrifice the child to the Gods for his transgressions and pray for a son. I tried to tell him that our friendship had nothing to do with his firstborn being a girl. Rather than kill her, I told him that if he allowed me to take the child, I would convince the other priests it was the will of the Gods that I care for her. I called her Neesha, and that is how she became my adopted daughter.

Veda was 283 years, 10 months, and 27 days old

Veda accepts Aetos (age 18) as her second mate.

It has been a long time since Coral died, and I lost the companionship of someone who did not fear me or cringe at my sight. I have thought about Aetos and what it could mean to have another mate. I do not understand why he wishes to share his life with such an old woman. He knows that I, as a half-breed, am barren and cannot bear him children. Neesha has been with me for 13 moons, and Aetos tells me we should become a family. I have known Aetos for more than 52 moons, and since he still wishes to live with me and help raise Neesha, I have decided to accept him as a mate in spite of his short lifespan.

Veda was 284 years, 13 months, and 28 days old

Rubella gave birth to a Son. (Junior Jelani XVII)

Eighteen moons after Neesha's birth, Rubella's next child was a boy who would become Jelani XVII, the seventeenth generation of island priests. Neesha lives with me, and Rubella's trust and friendship continue to grow as she grows.

I must confess I am a slow learner when it comes to arguing faith with blind men, but since wisdom comes with age, I should be very wise, for I have outlived thirteen generations of Jelani priests. It was not until I saw the boy child that I knew how to proceed. I have decided not to anger Jelani XVI by insisting on changing things as I have with the past priests, for that is futile, but instead, I must remain friends with him and eventually gain his son's confidence.

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Veda was 290 years, 12 months, and 13 days old.

Neesha is about 7 when Vada tells her that Junior Jelani XVII is her brother.

Ninety-one moons have passed since Jelani XVI denounced Neesha, and she came to live with Aetos and me. Because she is growing up as a normal island child, everyone believes she is Aetos' daughter, and we have not told anyone differently. Neesha lives with us apart from the village. Even though most everyone believes she is Aetos' daughter, Jelani XVI, his wife Rubella, the now-deceased old midwife at the birthing, and the lesser priest that I swore to secrecy are the only ones who know the truth. I do not know if it is because of Neesha's heritage or that she lives with me that she is not required to slave in the quarries, as are all other children old enough to walk. Even though she has little or no contact with other children, I cannot protect her from the villager's prejudice and gossip.

I am teaching her how to plant, harvest, hunt, prepare meat, and become self-sufficient.

Although not affected by the harsh caste system, Neesha is well aware of its dominant ruling priests. Now that she has reached the age of reason, I decided to tell her the truth about her heritage. I told her that Jelani XVI was her real father and explained the circumstances of her birth and living with Aetos and me. She sat quietly for some time before asking me if that meant Junior Jelani XVII was her brother. When I told her he was her brother, she said nothing more.

Veda was 291 years, four months, and 10 days old

When Neesha was 8, she wanted Veda to take her to a religious ceremony

I have watched Neesha grow into a strong-minded girl, but I had no idea how stubborn she could be. Several moons have passed since I told her about her heritage, and now, against all my protests, she insists I take her to a village religious ceremony because she wants to see her brother.

Junior Jelani XVII is still too young to understand about family, and I am unsure if Rubella or his father will ever tell him about Neesha. I told Neesha that sometime in the future, I would arrange a way for her to see him without attending a religious ceremony. I made her promise to say nothing about her lineage to anyone, and she agreed to wait.

Veda was 291 years, 6 months, and 23 days old

Veda's relationship with Rubella

Rubella often comes to the palace on the hill to visit me, but I know it is to see how Neesha is growing. I have deliberately avoided meeting Jelani XVI these past seasons, but I, too, go to Rubella's dwelling to visit her and Junior Jelani XVII when I know he is elsewhere. He has grown into a nice-looking boy. He speaks intelligently for his age and has started his priesthood training, so I must soon talk with him about community affairs. Rubella is always present when we visit, but there will come a time when he will want to talk to me alone.

Despite Rubella's many objections, I explained to Neesha some island policies, her family heritage, and why she is my daughter. She is asking questions about her brother, and I tell her what I know. I have also informed Rubella that Neesha knows the truth and agrees to keep the secret. I have also told Neesha that Junior Jelani XVII knows I have a daughter but has no idea who she really is, and she must not tell him.

Veda was 295 years, 10 months, and 12 days old

Neesha is about 12 when she meets Junior Jelani XVII for the first time.

Neesha and I were working in the garden when I heard Rubella call. The sun was about one-quarter high as she and Junior Jelani appeared on an unexpected visit. She said the boy was curious and wanted to see Neesha.

Rubella and I sat in the shaded area under the great tree. Junior Jelani stood beside Rubella, and when Neesha arrived from the dwelling with a tray of tea and cake, he said to her, "I was told you were the granddaughter of a god – but I do not see anything special about you! You look like any other village girl to me."

Neesha stopped and looked at Rubella and me questioningly. I will never forget the expression on her face or the fire in her eyes as she slowly looked him up and down before she stunned everyone by replying, "And I was told that you are supposed to become the next ruling Jelani priest." She put the tea tray on the table, walked up and stood eye to eye with him and continued, "I do not see anything but a skinny little boy, pampered by indulgence, and unless you are lucky enough to become enlightened. You are destined to blindly follow those unreasonable dictates of the gods."

Rubella sat in disbelief, listened, and watched as her son glared at this defiant young girl he had no idea was his sister. I remember discussing Jelani priest and village conditions in general terms. Sometimes, we even talked at length about her father and brother. Since I did not know a meeting like this would happen, I had no idea Neesha

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could speak so freely and directly to him. I smiled inwardly at her insight as Junior Jelani looked at his mother and stammered, “What does she mean by that?” When he looked at Neesha, she glared into his eyes again, saying nothing until he looked away. She then turned, returned to the table, picked up the tray, and calmly asked if we were ready for tea and cake.

I could tell Rubella did not know what to say, so I suggested we have tea another time. After they left Neesha, she agreed that she did not like that skinny little boy with weak eyes and that when she chose a mate, he would be the best and strongest man on the island. I laughed at her and asked if she had anyone in mind, and to my surprise, she told me she did.

She said she met a boy two moons ago named Ubal while walking among the new monuments. The boy is the eldest son of Tufa, and she has seen and talked with him many times. I know Tufa, the leader of the stone-cutter clan. I know him as I know all the leaders of the clans and have listened to their complaints about the priests’ abusive power. And now I understand why Neesha acted and spoke as she had toward Junior Jelani XVII. Not because of what she learned from me but rather what she has learned from her friends. I think I just witnessed a clash between brother and sister that may shake our island.

Veda was 297 years, 4 months, and 10 days old

Neesha is 13 when she confronts Junior Jelani XVII.

I have observed Neesha’s restlessness for several suns, and when I asked what was bothering her, she told me it was her brother. She has often seen him with his mother in the village and says he ignores her as if she is not there. They have not spoken since he and his mother, Rubella, were here twelve seasons ago, and she wants me to arrange what she calls another tea party.

Aetos told Junior Jelani XVII that Neesha wanted to talk to him again.

At the end of the next sun, the cold wind blew from the sea while Neesha and I stood in front of our dwelling and watched Junior Jelani XVI scurry up the hill. As he approached, Neesha blurted. Where is your mother’s, little man? He glared at her and said he was beyond the 48 seasons and no longer needed guardianship. I touched Neesha’s arm, and when she looked at me, I shook my head and told her to try to be a little more tactful.

When I invited him into the Palace, he went directly to the hearth to warm himself before the fire. He looked around in amazement and said he had never seen a room with such a high roof. Not even the largest place ever constructed for worship could compare.

Neesha had set the table and prepared tea and pumpkin bread for the occasion. Neesha looked at me and said to him, “Dear brother, when you have warmed yourself sufficiently, come and have tea with us.” He replied, “I may be your brother by birth, but you are not my sister in culture.”

Neesha said, “When it comes to culture – brother, at least we agree on one thing: I am smarter than you.” He responded with, “I did not come here to be insulted by inferiors.”

That is when I suddenly realized that their birthright and the differences in their cultural education were the problem issue. I had heard enough, and when I stomped my foot, they looked at me in surprise. I told both of them that they were brother and sister because he was born into a Jelani family as a male, and she was a female, which made no difference – like it or not – they were brother and sister. As to cultural education and personality differences, the future Jelani leader of this island needed to learn humility and Neesha, some forbearance. They looked at me in dismay, then at each other, shrugged, and reluctantly conceded.

He came to the table and politely complimented Neesha on her pumpkin bread, and she graciously accepted; however, I fear their congeniality will end with this encounter.

Veda was 298 years, 11 months, and 10 days old

Neesha is now 15 years old and continues seeing Ubal

Neesha has grown into a strong, healthy young woman, and we have spoken many times about boys and mating. Ubal comes to our palace on the hill to see Neesha. They laugh and play without a harsh word between them. She has been spending much time with him now that she is in her 61st season. It will not be long before they want to mate and start their own family.

Veda was 299 years, 6 months, and 22 days old.

Veda speaks with Junior Jelani XVII

Neesha has spoken with her brother on different occasions over these past seasons but is reluctant to discuss the particulars. She has admitted she likes their discussions but is consistent with her comments about how stubborn, closed-minded, and exasperating he can be.

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On one occasion, when I spoke to her brother in the village, I asked him how he and Neesha were getting along. He looked at me questioningly and asked if she had said something. I told him she had said little or nothing, but I was curious about why he provokes her at every opportunity. He smiled and told me they have come to a mutual understanding, that she knows who he is and what lies before him. He said he likes and admires her idealistic spirit, but she is a master at goading him into responsive arguments. It appears to be a game between them because he says he cannot resist the temptation to respond in kind. I hope they will eventually reconcile their differences.

Neesha also told me that on several occasions, they discuss the Gods. I reminded her again we should not get involved in the island's religion, but she said he was the one asking the questions. I can only imagine why! She told him that if he sincerely wanted to learn the truth about the gods, he must come to our dwelling and ask me.

Veda was 299 years, 8 months, and 2 days old

Neesha mates with Ubal on her 16th birthday

As the sun broke over the hill behind my great tree, Ubal came to see Neesha. Together, they climbed the hill and did not return until the sun was high in the sky. During the midday meal, my daughter told me that she became a woman on the 12th sun of her 208th moon. She and Ubal told me they wanted to build a dwelling in the village. Since Neesha had never lived anywhere but with me on the hill, it would be better for them if he also built their dwelling on the hilltop. Neesha agreed and insisted he build it where he made her a woman.

Veda was 300 years, 4 months, and 4 days old

Neesha and Ubal have a son, Lancho

The sun had long set when Ubal went to get two women who helped in childbirth. After the two women chased him from the dwelling, he came and woke me.

Veda was 300 years, 6 months, and 3 days old

Junior Jelani comes to talk with Veda

It is the beginning of the warm season. Neesha and I were preparing the garden plots for planting when I saw Junior Jelani XVII approaching.

Neesha has grown into strong-minded but has difficulty curbing her sharp tongue.

She stood with feet apart, hands on her hips, and said, “Well, brother dear, I see you finally accepted my challenge to learn the truth.”

He laughed and mockingly replied, “That was no challenge. I welcome the opportunity to talk to your mother about the Gods.”

This is the first time I have seen them together since his last visit here, and I am beginning to wonder who provokes and aggravates the other the most.

I learned long ago that talking to a Jelani priest about the Gods was futile and have since left the subject alone, but now that Junior Jelani XVII has come to me, I will have to tell him all that I know.

Veda was 301 years, 3 months, and 13 days old

Junior Jelani returns to talk with Veda

Junior Jelani XVII has returned many times since our first talks of the Gods being men. He found the story of Kiril returning the Great God Moai to his homeworld most fascinating. After he learned about the monuments, the islanders slaved to make are only paying tribute to a man-god that will never return. We talk about the future and how he can make island life easier and more progressive.

Even though his father, Jelani XVI, gave his daughter Neesha away, he believes she is still within the Jelani cast. On this visit, he came to talk to me about her son, Lancho. He will begin his training to learn the Jelani healing next year.

Veda was 307 years, 8 months, and 2 days old

It is months before Junior Jelani XVII takes office.

Only three moons remain before Junior Jelani XVII becomes the next head priest. Through our many discussions, I have watched him grow into a strong, intelligent young man. We have not dwelled on religious doctrines because he will have to handle that problem with his fellow priests, but rather on matters concerning the villagers' quality of life, and I believe he understands. Only time will tell.

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Veda was 307 years, 5 months, and 4 days old

Veda makes a gift for the future Jelani XVII

For many seasons, I have been considering giving Jelani XVII a gift at the time he becomes the head priest. One of the many skills Kiril taught me was how to use the small light tool to create intricate carvings, and I have decided on a gift to make for him. I asked Aetos to catch one of those giant horseshoe crabs and save some large shark teeth for me. I used the light tool to cut a chest ornament from the crab shell. I cleaned and polished the shell until its natural deep gray color gleamed. I drilled a hole in the center of the largest tooth, where I seated a white purl, then fastened the tooth to the upper center of the shell. I mounted six more teeth on each side of the center tooth, one for each moon between the two equinoxes. I fashioned a broad neck strap from some soft rabbit skin so that the chest ornament could be easily slipped over the head and hang properly.



Veda was 307 years, 11 months, and 10 days old

Jelani XVII takes office at age 21, 10, 10

On the warm season's equinox, Neesha and I stood as always on the outskirts of the villagers who were present for the ceremony. As the sun approached its zenith, the entire village population kneeled before Jelani XVI. He stood over them and began his usual ritual of jabber. Then, with his final act as monarch, he blessed the scepter of power, passed it to Jelani XVII, and, within traditional fashion, stepped aside.

Jelani XVII stood before his village congregation and commanded them to rise and stand. The lesser priests were horrified at such a command because no villager could ever stand in the presence of a ruling Jelani priest. The people slowly lifted their heads and looked at Jelani XVII as he raised his arms and slipped my gift around his neck. The ornament rested in the center of his chest and glistened in the sunlight. He repeated the command to rise and waited until all but a few were standing before he spoke, "I am Jelani XVII, your new administrative leader." There came another gasp from the lesser priest and the crowd because all the preceding Jelani priests proclaimed themselves absolute authoritative rulers. Then Jelani XVII continued to tell the people there would soon be some changes in the laws that would benefit all. I smiled inwardly and told Neesha I thought this could be a promising beginning.

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Chapter 19.

The last journal entry

Joyce had about finished reading the last page from the stack of folders when Robert exclaimed, “Joyce, come and see what I’ve just finished!”

“What is it?”

“I found the last entry in Veda’s journal, and it appears to have been written by Jelani XVII himself.”

“Really,” she said, “as she went to Robert’s console and looked over his shoulder at the computer screen.

“I just finished translating and converting it to our relative time. I haven’t even printed it yet and thought you should see it immediately.”

She pulled up a chair, sat beside him, and began reading.

Universal date: 7596.374.62.313

Elapsed time, 372 years, 07 months, 19 days

Veda was 321 years, 1 month, and 9 days old

I must add my words to her words because my cherished friend Veda died on a moonless night two suns ago. She was my friend and protector from when I was born to when she died. I loved her as I did my mother. No one on the island knows how old she was because she outlived fourteen Jelani priests. From her words, I think 1,284 seasons. With the help of my daughter Neesha and her mate Ubal, I had Veda’s body burned in our traditional Jelani ceremony and then put her ashes in the ground close to her mother, Shara. They are both under the tree Veda planted from the cuttings she took from her favorite tree destroyed in a storm 614 seasons past.

During so many of our long talks, Veda tried to tell me about forever living somewhere. Three moons ago, she told me she would soon die. She made me put my hand on chest and say that after she died, I would make sure that all the people learned the

truth about the Gods so that her life had meaning. I told her I did not understand about forever living, but I promised I would if there was a way. On the rise of the next sun, we will take her writings to her cave-dwelling and seal them there until sometime future.

There is little to add except that if what she told me is possible, I will, in some distant time, try to honor my friend and tell the truth about the Gods and the Golden Birds that come and go high over our island.

My last work will be to get my sister Neesha and her mate Ubal to help me put Veda's words in her metal box, take it to her private cave dwelling on the small island, and seal it until a time future.

Joyce asked, "Did you say that was the last entry, and Jelani XVII wrote it?"

"That I did, Joice, and it was definitely written by Jelani XVII!"

"That means you have finished the translation part."

"Right, now I can take a vacation while you complete your work."

She playfully slapped his arm, saying, "Guess again, mister, there are no vacations for either of us until after we finish the manuscript and have the book published."

"Slavedriver, the least we can do is take the rest of the day off."

She threw her arms around his neck, "Now that sounds more like it, and I agree. But I was right in the middle of something and would like to finish. It shouldn't take too long."

He hugged her back, "You are indeed a slave driver."

Chapter 20.

Gazlay Finally Discloses All

They worked another two hours on the preliminary drafts of the manuscript. They were relaxing in the cottage around seven o'clock when there came a knock at the door.

Joyce asked, "Are you expecting anyone?"

"No," he said as he went to the door, "I was hoping for another quiet evening with you."

Robert opened the door and stepped back in amazement as Gazlay Tupac entered the room. Joyce jumped up and started toward him but stopped and asked, "Is that you, Gazlay, or just another of your apparitions?"

"Now that's a fine way to greet an old friend after such a long time," Gazlay said and added, "It shouldn't make any difference as long as I am here in spirit."

"I thought so," she huffed and returned to sit on the couch as Robert asked, "It's good to see you again, Gazlay; what brings you here now?"

"As I told you at your last departure, I would drop in for a visit. I have been following your progress, and now that you have completed the necessary translations, it is time."

Joyce exclaimed, "Have you been spying on us?"

"Not spying, Miss Armand, mealy observing," and to Robert, he said, "I see she has not mellowed much despite all that she has learned these past months."

Robert did not comment. Instead, he said, "I don't know how you do it, but from what you said, I assume you know as much as we about what we have discovered."

"On the contrary. I have been waiting until you learned as much as I know about what happened on the island."

Joyce interjected, "Are you telling us you've known everything all along?"

"Of course," Gazlay confirmed.

"Then why didn't you tell us when we were on the island?"

"If I told you anything as preposterous as you have learned, I am sure you would have thought me demented."

Joyce stated, "I already thought you were demented long before we returned to the States."

Gazlay smiled and continued, "Now that you have studied Veda's writings, do you not believe them?"

Robert nodded affirmatively, but Joyce said, "With everything I saw on the island and all the translated material we've worked on here, I still find it hard to believe it's true."

"But why – you have all the proof before you."

"It's just that I've based my studies on scientifically sound principles all my life. Although I've seen and held the documents, I find the information bizarre," she added, "but I'm trying to keep an open mind."

Robert asked, "Gazlay, how could you possibly know? We just finished the translation ourselves."

With his unmistakable knowing smile, Gazlay said, "By now, you know I have my ways," to Joyce, he added, "It is best always to keep an open mind, Miss Armand."

Gazlay walked to a chair, sat, and continued, "I have much I would like to explain; however, it may take some time if you are interested."

"Of course we're interested!" they said in unison.

Gazlay began, "I needed to wait many eons for your planet's technology to advance sufficiently before taking on this mortality. Without the use of today's advanced computer systems, the arduous task of translation would have tried the patience of any scholar. Besides, I also had to wait until you two were here."

"Really," Joyce huffed.

"Yes, Miss Armand, we could not have done it without you."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Not at all; if you allow me to continue, I am sure you will understand. When the time was right, I selected parents with innate psychic abilities to give me the necessary genetic capability to advance into what I needed to become.

"Needed for what?" Robert asked, "And how do you know all this now?"

"Without going into family genealogy, suffice it to say, I come from a long line of Peruvian soothsayers. My mother was a gifted clairvoyant who taught and guided me until I could travel and learn independently."

Joyce said, "You mean you're a world traveler and have seen it all."

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“Not so, Miss Armand; I have barely left the mid-eastern continent.”

“Then how come you’re so damn smart?”

“Now, you are mocking me, Miss Armand.”

Joyce got up from the couch, and as she walked around the room, she said, “I don’t know what makes me say things like that. I’m sorry, Gazlay. It’s just that I....”

“Joyce,” Gazlay spoke softly, “please come and sit down. By the end of the evening, you may understand why.”

She returned to the couch and sat beside Robert as Gazlay continued, “The travels of which I speak are astral travels that have taken me far beyond this world. I have visited the archives of the ancients and studied the Akashic Records.”

“I’m sorry, Gazlay,” Joyce interrupted, “but the Akashic Records – really!”

Robert said, “That’s enough sarcasm, Joyce. Do you know what they are?”

“Of course, Edgar Cayce referred to the Akashic Records as the Book of Life. I liken it to the mystical book in heaven where God keeps track of every hair on your head.”

Robert laughed, “I learned that in Sunday school, but I later discovered it was simply a means of putting the fear of God into fractious little boys.”

Gazlay continued, “Miss Armand, I assure you the Akashic Records exist. Countless books remain in many different storage locations throughout the known universes. However, the one I am telling you about is within archives in our systems capital of Edentia.”

Joyce stammered, “The more you say, the more bizarre you become.”

“Joyce,” Robert said, “What he is saying is no more bizarre than what we’ve recently learned. Let him explain.”

Both men patiently sat while her agitation subsided, and she said, “You’re right, Robert, but the information you’ve gathered from Veda’s writings is far beyond anything I learned in Sunday school.”

Gazlay said, “It would appear you have taken your religious teachings literally once again.”

“What’s that supposed to mean –?”

“If you allow me to continue, you will understand everything before I leave.”

Joyce thought, “That would be a switch.”

“Using clairvoyance,” Gazlay said, “along with my abilities to travel, I have gone many places, seen much, and garnered information. I used this knowledge to contact Robert and ultimately make it possible for the two of you to accomplish what you have done.”

She chided, “Now you’re taking the credit for it?”

Robert responded, “Joyce, why are you being so antagonistic? That’s not what Gazlay said. He’s not demeaning anything we’ve done. It’s just that, and I agree with him that without his intervention, we would not have been able to recover any of the material.”

Joyce sighed and said, “I don’t know. It’s not like me to feel or act this way. Gazlay has affected me since the first time we met.”

Gazlay smiled and said, “That is not surprising— Miss Armand, we have taken turns being a thorn in one another’s side for eons.”

Astonished by that statement, she blurted, “What! What do you mean for eons?”

“I believe it is a karmic thing, and suppose it is because we enjoy the attention.”

“What,” she stammered, “I don’t understand – a karmic thing?”

“It began many eons ago during a mortal existence we once shared.”

“Gazlay, why are you always so damn vague. Why don’t you just come out and say what you mean?”

“Because I was hoping that you would begin to remember.”

“I give up.” She declared, “I’ll never get a straight answer from you.”

Robert returned the conversation to the subject, saying, “Please continue, Gazlay; you were going to tell us something.”

“Yes,” he said, “I spoke with each of you within the spirit realm before you entered this mortal life, and you both agreed it was time to keep our promise to Veda.”

Robert asked. “What promise was that?”

“The promise made by Jelani XVII as written in the final entry in Veda’s journal.”

“You mean...” Robert began.

“Yes, Robert,” Gazlay said.

“I’ve been wondering about that ever since I first translated it, but I’ve been so intent on some of the other translations I haven’t had time to absorb its full implication.”

Robert paused, “How and why did Jelani XVII! take her journals, and why would he write in the last one as he did? —I understand what happened there, and I’m beginning to

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fill in some gaps with what you've said tonight, but I feel there's more to the story than we've learned."

Gazlay said, "Excellent, Robert," then asked, "What about you, Joyce? Is there anything that arouses your memories that could be causing your anger and hostility?"

"Not really. Why should they?"

"Not even the slightest déjà vu?"

Joyce sat quietly on the couch beside Robert for the first time that evening. She momentarily thought and slowly said, "Now that you mention it, there was a time on the island when I felt — I don't know how to explain."

Gazlay said, "Think carefully." Then, he asked, "Where — and when?"

"There was that one time when I remember — we were carrying the chests up and out of Veda's cave — I felt sad. I should have been happy because we had just made the discovery of the century or felt tired from the strenuous work, but instead, I felt — almost melancholy. "

"With good reason," Gazlay chuckled.

"Why should that have caused such feelings?"

"It was three days after Veda's death that we placed her to rest and put the chests on that shelf before sealing the cave entrance."

"You keep saying we; who is -- we?"

Robert said, "Joyce, I believe he's telling you that he was Jelani XVII, and we are the three that sealed up Veda's tomb."

She looked at Gazlay in dismay as he smiled and said, "Robert is correct."

"How is that possible?"

"Have you learned nothing these past months? Life is continuous and...."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said reluctantly, "Even though it's hard to believe, I've learned that much. But what does that have to do with me and how we were together centuries ago on Easter Island."

Robert said, "Gazlay, perhaps it's time to give her that straight answer."

Gazlay looked at Joyce and said, "You have read everything about your past life. The only thing you have not fathomed is that you were Neesha, my older sister."

Gazlay looked at Robert and, seeing the amazed expression on his face, stated, "But you have, haven't you, Ubal?"

Robert said, “Yes, I thought so. All I needed was confirmation.”

As Joyce recovered from the realization, she stammered, “Robert - you never said a word to me about suspecting anything so absurd,” She stopped speaking and glared at them.

“That’s exactly why I didn’t say anything; you would have thought I was crazier than usual,” Then he asked Gazlay, “Why hasn’t there been any record of a stone structure such as Veda’s dwelling?”

“It is recorded in the Akashic records that there was another devastating storm approximately 2,000 years later that nearly demolished the island. The waters rose to the height of the hilltop. And as the water receded, the ground around the structure eroded, and it collapsed. After the storm, a disastrous sickness fell upon the island. The results of this reduced the island population to less than one hundred. However, they were strong, resilient people whose original inhabitants began with a tenth of that number, and they rebuilt. Sometime during the intervening years, the stones of Veda’s dwelling were moved and reused, thus erasing all traces of its existence. The Moai structures were too heavy for the storm to damage, but it destroyed their copper navigational headgear.”

Joyce, quickly gathering her thoughts and accepting Gazlay’s explanation, asked, “Did you ever succeed in convincing the islanders of the futility of continuing to build the monoliths?”

“Only to some extent; after Veda’s death, I told the people she had returned to her father. I did not try to change their belief in the gods because it was too deep-seated in the culture. I eventually convinced them that Veda had told me it was her wish that the people get on with their lives and build homes instead of monuments. It took some doing to convince the lesser priests that Veda’s return to her father and the gods would be sufficient. My son, Jelani XVIII, finally began to turn the religion by dissolving the harsh caste system.

I witnessed some significant changes before my death. I saw the fear of the gods easing, abolishing the practice of sacrifice, and ex-communication of the firstborn child if it was a daughter. Also, the free exchange of relationships between the clans.”

Everyone sat in brief silence. Then Robert said, “This has been a very enlightening evening that more than usurps an extraordinary adventure.”

Joyce stated, “Robert, you are a master of understatement!”

Gazlay rose from his chair, glided toward the door, and slowly turned. His body began to shimmer in pastel colors as he said, “I trust this adventure was as thrilling and

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satisfying to you as it has been for me. For you see, we have fulfilled a sacred promise to a dear friend. She is eternally grateful.”

Joyce stood up and asked, “Does that mean you talk to her too?”

Before she completed her question, Gazlay’s shimmering faded, and he was gone.

She flopped back onto the couch and said, “He is and has always been infuriating,” They both burst out laughing.

After Gazlay left, they sat facing one another on the couch when he said, “It appears we did a pretty good job together in that past life, and I’ve been thinking.”

She eyed him suspiciously, “What are you getting at?”

“I thought maybe we might, “try it again?”

“You mean...” she began.

“Yes,” Robert said, leaning over and gently kissing her.

“Robert,” she sighed, “You’re such a romantic.” After catching her breath, she smiled and said, “I’ll think about it and get back to you.”

THE END