

## KALEIDOSCOPE

The mirror showed an old man.

Vin splashed water on his face, and sighed. The day would be a difficult one, for many reasons, only the least of which was his health. Nearly a year ago he had slipped and fallen in the shower, resulting in severe back pain which continued to this day. He had not slipped a disc; his spine was intact. The continued persistence of the pain was simply, according to his doctor, his age.

"You're, uh, you're getting...older," Dr. Sagar Gupta had stated, very uncomfortably, as he flinched on his chair trying to get the words out in a way that wouldn't hurt Vin's feelings. Sagar had grown up with Vin – they had been in the same kindergarten class together, gone to school together, gotten drunk for the first time together, had gone out on double dates together. That had been decades ago. They were both the same age – sixty-three – yet Gupta sat in his clinic, as strong and fit as he had been when they'd run the Mumbai Marathon forty years ago, after which he had told Vin that he had decided to go through the Fountain Of Youth Treatment Program. As a result, Gupta was still a young, handsome doctor with the same athletic build, long hair and bulging biceps that he had been famous for in his college days. Vin, by contrast, had aged naturally – he was still a healthy man, but the years were catching up and taking their toll.

"Like all organisms, our bodies eventually break down," Gupta had explained, though quite unnecessarily – Vin knew all the arguments by heart, having heard them literally thousands of times over the years. "Cells die, and don't get replaced. Thirty years ago, you would have recovered from an injury like this in a week. But your back can't fix itself that easily, not anymore. This won't go away. You can manage the pain, but that's about it."

"All right," Vin replied, picking up his shirt and putting it on.

"Vineeth," Sagar said. He was one of the few people who called him by his real name; most had forgotten what 'Vin' was short for.

"What?"

Sagar opened his mouth, started to say something, then seemed to decide against it, and then seemed to change his mind again.

"Vineeeth," He said again, "If you just take the Fountain Of Youth Trea – "

"No."

"But – "

"No."

"You'll be withering away in a decade, you'll be dying slowl – "

"The answer's still no."

"Why?"

"You know why. My reasons haven't changed."

Sagar's shoulders had drooped. They had had this conversation many times before, and it always ended the same way.

A knock on the bathroom door pulled him out of the memory and back into the present. It would not do to dwell on the past today. Especially not today. Not when the Kaleidoscope was ready.

"What is it?" He called, picking up a towel and wiping his face.

"Mr. Roland and his team are ready, sir." His butler's voice said.

"I'll be out in a moment."

When he opened the door and stepped out, Jasper was waiting with his jacket. Vin turned and held out his arms for the sleeves. Jasper, like most people who worked for him, was only as old as he looked. He was also one of the very few people who knew the secret that Vin was working on.

"How are preparations for the convention, sir?" He asked as he smoothed out the jacket.

"Going fine. A little bit ahead of schedule, actually."

"So this is really going to happen, I assume? We are finally at the goal?"

"We are, Jasper. Why, have you changed your mind?"

"Not in the slightest. I am with you through and through, Master Vin."

"Two days. It'll all be over in two days."

"Of course."

Roland Michaels, his Chief of Security, was waiting in the hall. Vin walked briskly through and felt him follow. Two very expensive cars waited outside the large mansion. Vin picked up the small gift-wrapped parcel from the coffee table as he walked past – it would be his last gift for Earthkind.

The drive took about an hour. They reached a second mansion, this one considerably smaller than his own but no less luxurious, and were waved through by security. A team of caterers were laying out a buffet on the front yard, in preparation for the guests. They drove past them and came to a halt in front of the great front doors. Roland opened the door and Vin stepped out, his gift held close in his hand. A girl dressed like a maid smiled at him and said, "She's in the back garden, Vin!"

"Thank you, Aunt Seena." He said and gave her a hug as he went by. She was not related to him by blood, but she had helped raise him, and he had called her 'Aunt' all his life. Through the hall and the kitchen, he stepped out to the backyard – a word which did not do the sprawling garden justice – and closed his eyes as he breathed in the smell of flowers, carried by an evening breeze.

"Hello, Vin." A voice said, and he opened his eyes.

A young woman of breathtaking, stunning beauty was standing up from the ground, a small garden spade in one hand and a plucked flower in the other. She wore a simple, colourful sari, over which she had draped an apron, which had streaks of dirt where she had wiped her hands. Her face too, had dirt patches on it and she was glowing slightly from sweat, but all of this merely enhanced her beauty; surrounded by the exotic plants of the garden and the smell of flowers, she looked like a forest Goddess risen from the earth.

"Hello, mother." Vin said.

She hugged him, careful not to stain his expensive suit with dirt, and ruffled his hair – or at least, rubbed his increasingly balding head. There had been a time when no one would have doubted the fact that he was

her son – "You're prettier than *I* am," She had told him once when he was sixteen, ruffling his wavy hair, "Girls are going to be crazy about you. Mind that you treat them nice, you hear me?" Today, however, the world had made them strangers, in more ways than one.

"Happy birthday," He said, handing her the gift.

"Hmmm, it's *tiny*," She said, examining the small parcel. "Something special?"

"That's for you to decide."

"Ooh, I'm intrigued. Come on in, I'll ask Seena to fix you some iced tea."

Once inside she called for the drink, and opened her present.

It was a small, old brooch, made of cheap plastic, but with a pretty (yet fake) pink flower on top. She stared at it for a moment before she looked up at him, smiling.

"Where did you find it?"

"In storage, a few months ago. I was waiting for the right moment to give it to you."

He had bought it for her, decades ago, with the paycheck from his first job as a teenager. They had thought it lost in transit when they'd moved houses. She stared at it, and seemed to be holding back tears.

"Vineeth," she said, a note of concern in her voice, "How are you?"

"I'm doing fine." He said. He knew she wouldn't believe him – none of the Enhanced Young could ever accept the fact that the Naturals were perfectly happy to be Naturals.

"I saw the news about your convention." It was a guarded remark, as if to see how he would respond.

"It starts tomorrow," He explained casually, as though it wasn't a big deal. Aunt Seena arrived with the iced tea, and they sipped in silence. They had long gone past the point where they had anything to share with each other; there was nothing in common in their lives.

"Will you stay for the party?" She asked, knowing the answer.

"Too many stares. Too many awkward questions. You'll enjoy yourself more if I'm not here."

"I know you don't approve – "

"That's not important, as long as you're happy. Are you happy?"

"I am."

"There you go, then." He drained his tea and stood up. As he hugged her goodbye, he hesitated.

"After the convention," He said, choosing his words with great care, "It's possible that you will... hear some things, about me. There's going to be a lot of talk."

"What do you mean? What kind of talk?"

"The bad kind. Most of it will be true, I'm afraid."

She stepped back, hands still on his shoulders from the hug, surveying him with her electric-blue eyes. "What do you mean?" She repeated.

"That's all I can say right now. You told me something once, a long time ago. After I reported Professor Chandra for helping her son cheat in the exams, and all my friends turned on me – do you remember?"

"Yes. You were crying, big as you were."

"And you said, 'All we can do in this world – ' "

" – is follow the voice of reason within us and hope it leads us through a decent life."

"That's all I've ever done. You taught me that, and I've never forgotten."

Her hands grasped the front of his shirt, and he saw her eyes widen with unmistakable fear. "Vineeth," Her voice shook, "What is happening tomorrow at the convention? *What is the Kaleidoscope?*"

He smiled. "An illusion, mother. A children's toy with mirrors inside. When you look through, one thing appears reflected many times, that's all."

"Don't lie to me. I've heard rumors..."

"You and everyone else."

"People are saying that you and the rest of the Natural Age Movement –"

"I know what they are saying about us."

" – are organizing terrorism..."

"I have been called many things in life, mother. Fool. Dreamer. Naïve Optimist. CEO. Richest Man in The World... "Terrorist" has never been one of my titles, and it never will be. Such a thing is too far removed from reason."

She seemed to relax a little. "Then what –"

"I can't say. I have to go, Ma. Enjoy your birthday." Vin lowered his head and kissed her on the forehead. He wanted to say many things, but found that he had no words to express them without betraying his plans, so he said nothing.

As the cars pulled out of the driveway he looked back, and saw her staring after him, the brooch clutched to her chest, a look of worry on her face. He knew he would not see her again.

\*

They came from all over the world.

A mix of young and old, they had been arriving for nearly a week, but only when they had all walked into his company's convention did even they realize how many they numbered.

Many had opposed the idea of Eternal Youth for everyone since the beginning, but the movement had not become organized for decades. There had been smaller gatherings, but those that aged naturally were continually discriminated against; employers paid them less, insurance companies did not accept their applications, taxes got more complicated, and governments no longer provided pension – why bother? Out of choices, most of the earliest opponents had given in and accepted the treatment.

All that changed with Vineeth Gupta.

He had founded Gupta Industries at the age of twenty, at the time a tiny office which had one door and no windows. As he had risen through the business world, conquering everything from the restaurant business to the casinos, he had steadfastly opposed the Fountain Of Youth Treatment. Gupta industries became the one global company which gave employees any and all benefits regardless of whether they were Naturals or Enhanced Young. And as the company had grown, so had the Natural Age Movement. Today, nearly half a century later, they were gathering for the first time, from all over the planet. From the lowliest workers to the richest businessmen, from tweens to the old and elderly, they came. In many cases Gupta Industries sponsored their tickets, spending billions in the endeavour to bring decades-old online members face to face with each other. And so, they arrived. Even counting out those who could not make time out of their schedules, there were half a million of them. The Gupta Industries Headquarters was a *city* – the most modern city in the world, built with a dome covering it from the sun; it had been an experiment in the creation of a self-sustaining ecosystem. The company had declared the day off, so only volunteers – Naturals – stayed behind, and half a million easily fitted into the largest man-made structure in the world. And they all had the same question, which they asked each other in hushed whispers.

What was the Kaleidoscope?

Only the name was known. No one seemed to have any idea what it was. At 10:50 AM, they were ushered into halls and theatres around the domed city, where giant screens had been put up. Vin Gupta's face would appear there in ten minutes, where he would address the largest gathering of people who had refused the Fountain Of Youth Treatment. They took their seats. They asked the question amongst each other again. They speculated on what its answer would be. And they waited.

By 10:58, Vin was standing inside a studio-like room deep inside the city, several cameras pointed at his face. They would be broadcasting live to the half a million people inside the Dome. The press had been denied access to the room, and were watching the feed from a secluded in a theatre hall which had been setup exclusively for them.

At exactly eleven, the silver screens lit up. Five hundred thousand people applauded as the balding old man with his kind face appeared before them.

"Good morning," He began with a simple courtesy. "Today, for the first time in history, at long last, we've come together in solidarity. Well, it's about time, eh?" Even from inside the studio, he heard the rumble of laughter that rang across the city.

"I remember," He went on, raising a hand to quell the noise, "I remember the day Dr. Ivanov announced the Fountain of Youth. I remember seeing his numerous interviews on television. I remember watching, astounded, as he told us how affordable and easy it would be." The screens in front of the crowds suddenly became void of Vin's face, replaced by a graying scientist that everyone was now familiar with.

"This is a great and powerful thing, and it should not only be available to the richest of the richest." Said the man in a clipped accent. "That is why I am making my patent available to all pharmaceutical companies for production. All of humanity deserves to be young. I have discovered The Fountain of Youth, and it is for all."

Vin's face appeared again and now he looked more serious. "Dr. Ivanov kept his word. He made his creation available to one and all. He genuinely believed that we as a species were not just deserving, but *worthy* of his gift. He was wrong. A lot of people forget – or conveniently ignore – how much he regretted his decision. So much so that, in less than twenty years, having seen what he had done to this world, he took his own life."

A newspaper clipping announcing Ivanov's death came on the screen, and a hushed silence reigned. Vin let it linger for a moment before speaking again.

"Of course, many predicted that this would be a bad thing – after all, at the turn of the twenty-first century, we were already facing strained conditions around the globe as resources became scarce. The world saw an upsurge in terrorism and extremism. It is easy, when faced with starvation and poverty, to brainwash people to turn to other sources for comfort – be it faith, xenophobia, bigotry, what have you. This had already begun, even before Dr. Ivanov ever came into the spotlight. And then, suddenly," – He paused for effect – "everyone had the ability to live forever."

In the press room, every eye was focused on to the face they could see on the screen before them, every ear strained to catch his words.

"The ability," Vin went on, "*not* the resources. Our population, already at the brink of tipping beyond what could be supported by this world, exploded further. The rich stayed rich, and the poor became poorer. Death by starvation increased two thousand per cent. Many made excuses, gave justifications. When the World Treaty was signed banning all nuclear weapons so as to preserve our natural resources, everyone was quick to claim that we were on the right path. And yet, in five years, we were at war across every major continent – wars that are continuing to this day. Wars on which economies have become dependent upon. Wars whose end would likely cause more damage to our society than they ever did while they were being waged. Wars whose images of death we have ignored, from the safety of our homes, so that we may continue with our youth and our extravagance. Irrespective of Dr. Ivanov's actions, only the rich have enjoyed their youth. I watched all of this in silence, having refused the treatment again and again, even as my whole family accepted eternal youth. And then – twenty years ago, my company made a world changing breakthrough – one which I chose to hide from everyone. And in my mind, an idea was born. Kaleidoscope."

Half a million people held their breath.

"I will show you what it is. Stay seated. You are about to feel a bit of an earthquake, but it is nothing to worry about. Do not run or you will hurt yourself. Kindly stay in your seats."

People exchanged looks as Vin's face disappeared again after this strange announcement. Silence reigned for a while. Then slowly, they all felt a slight trembling under their feet. It grew bigger, more powerful. And then the ground began to shake in earnest. They held on to their seats, horrified. Their fear, however, was nothing compared to that of those who were watching the city from outside, jaws dropped open.

The Dome was not a Dome. It was a Sphere.

And it was rising up into the sky. The whole city, with its five hundred thousand visitors, was airborne. The screens cut to a feed from outside, which showed the Naturals what was happening. Panic ensued.

"Please stay calm." Vin's voice, steady and soft, slowly restored order.

"We called it Direct Matter Energy." He explained to them, "A way to create engines so powerful, so fuel efficient, that humanity could reach the stars. Instead of gathering up patents and Nobel prizes, we hid this invention from the world, and that's when we began working on the city that you are in. As you may have guessed, it is not a city. What you may not have guessed – *it is a spaceship*. One with a self-sustaining ecosystem."

He gave it a minute to let it sink in.

"This world will not support us for long. And its inhabitants have not cared enough to stop the depletion of its resources. So I looked elsewhere – for a new world. And I found one."

The screens showed an earth-like planet, silhouetted against the darkness of space. "CRS-88," Vin's voice informed them, "it is about 1.8 times the mass of the Earth, has a denser atmosphere, and is about 100 million years younger. It is green, and supports life. It is the Earth as it existed in the Age of the Dinosaurs. Untouched." The feed cut to show a laboratory, where scientists were working. "Secreted within my city," Vin continued, "is the DNA of every plant and creature that we will need to make a new home. Plus every piece of technology, and its plans, that we will need to continue our progress, with the sole exception of the Fountain Of Youth Treatment. I refused to accept it for the same reason I refused to give my space drive tech to our fellow human beings – because it would have made our species a virus – we would have depleted planet after planet, as a wave of locusts that traversed the stars without care. Life is precious because of its finite nature. I will not twist that. And I began preparing."

The screen changed again. The swirling vastness of space.

"The journey from here to there," Vin explained, "will take one hundred and seventeen years."

He gave it a moment to let that sink in, too.

"You are here," He explained, "because you have respected yourselves and our planet enough not to allow yourself to be twisted into something that would harm our world. I salute you for that. And here is my invitation, for those who have gathered here – join me, and leave this world behind."

The screen changed again, and this time showed a swarm of beautiful butterflies flying through the sky.

"Lepidoptera," Vin explained, "otherwise known as butterflies and moths, migrate from one corner of our world to another for many reasons – to avoid unfavourable weather, food shortage and overpopulation. However, as some of you may know, the butterflies that begin the migration don't see it end. Their life-spans being too short, the individuals who started the migration die, and it takes generations to reach their goal. Some of you may also know that a group of butterflies is also known – as a *Kaleidoscope*. The name of this ship. This city."

He smiled.

"*You* are the butterflies of Earth. Accept my invitation, and you will not live to see the world that we set forth for. Your children and grandchildren will reach it. This journey is of course voluntary, you will not be forced. Over the next six hours the members of the press, those among you who are Enhanced Young, as well as those of you who choose to remain behind, will be escorted off the Kaleidoscope. And then, at twilight today, we go into the breach. I await your decision."

The screen went blank.

He kept his word. The nations of the world threw their fighter planes at the Kaleidoscope, but for all the damage they did they might as well have thrown pebbles into the sky. The world's leaders had the fleeting impression that Gupta was laughing at them. By five, auto-pilot helicopters detached off the giant ship and set down on the ground for the Enhanced Young, the Press, and the unwilling. And then, without ceremony, the Sphere began growing smaller as it moved further away.

The world watched. Vin himself, who could still catch signals from the surface, was surprised to see that millions had turned out to the streets to see them off; signs wishing them well and Godspeed were everywhere. It would have given him hope for Earth, had he not already known that it was past the point of salvation. Without looking back, he gave the order, and they rose above the atmosphere.

Far away, on the grounds of a luxurious mansion, a beautiful woman stood and watched, tears in her eyes.

She had her phone with him, but she knew he would not call. There were no words to be said – the Enhanced Young had no place in the voyage, and he would not make an exception out of nepotism. He would follow the voice of reason. He would do as she had taught him to do.

He was the man she had raised him to be.

She smiled through her tears.

"I'm proud of you, son." She said, to no one in particular.

High above her, The Kaleidoscope became a tiny dot in the sky, and vanished into the vastness beyond.





