

Chapter 1

It was another magical moment of existence and nobody seemed to give a damn. They were too concerned with themselves, their survival and their own success. But I knew life was a phenomenon happening everywhere, all the time and on every scale. I looked down at my arm and imagined all the bacteria and microbes going about their business on my skin and beneath it too. I looked up and imagined all the planets, stars and galaxies exploding in and out of existence. And somehow, somewhere between them all, I was on the surface of a planet trapped inside a shitty office.

I worked for one of the biggest professional service networks in the world. I'd been here for two years but it's felt like a lifetime. The company provides audit, tax and advisory services to some of the richest people in the world. Not that I'd met any of them. I'm nothing more than a small cog in a large machine. All I did was write shitty audit reports for low-end clients. As far as I'm concerned, this was a place where hopes and dreams came to die. That probably explains why it looked a lot like a palliative care ward on the inside. It had dull white walls and ceilings and a badly stained blue carpet that always smelt a little too fresh and clean.

As a child, I never understood how people could do something they hated every day. Devoting all their time and energy to some bullshit corporation, business or government institution in exchange for money. And using it to try and buy happiness in the sad shadow of a life they were left with after work and on weekends. My parents did it. My grandparents did it. And I'm sure their parents did it too. And now, here I was, twenty-nine years old and caught in the same trap, following in their footsteps. But that was about to change. I handed in my letter of resignation two weeks ago. This was my last day, and the last time I'd never

need to step foot in this dump. I was moving on to bigger and better things. Although I hadn't quite figured out what that was yet.

I watched the hand on the clock strike four. There was only an hour left to go. I didn't want to spend it doing any actual work. I mean, it was a pretty slow day anyway and there wasn't a lot that needed to be done. Besides, it's not like anyone would notice. And if they did, I wouldn't give a rat's ass. The worst they could do is fire me. And I didn't need my seniors as references anyway. I pulled my phone and earplugs out of my pocket and put on some music. Nothing like a bit of lo-fi hip hop to get me in a good mood.

A couple of minutes had passed and I noticed I couldn't stop fidgeting my legs. I bounced them up and down like a drummer in a rock and roll band. Maybe it was nervousness or excitement, or a little a bit of both. Either way, I needed to stand up and stretch. I stood up and looked at all the other cubicles around me. I'm pretty sure they were too small to meet occupational health and safety regulations. I felt claustrophobic in mine. But I never mentioned it in any staff meetings. I was too afraid to ruffle any feathers. And it's not like they would listen anyway. I did another round of stretches and returned to my seat.

I wouldn't miss anyone here. Not the bosses, not the seniors and not even the other people in my team. Not all of them were bad. And some were worse than others. But for the most part, they were all too obsessed with 'making it' – whatever that means. It wasn't entirely their fault though. The company dangled the hope of a promotion like a carrot on a stick and everyone chased it like a mindless bunch of rabbits. But in reality, promotions rarely happened. And when they did, it wasn't based on merit. It was based on how well you played the game.

I felt different from everyone else at work. It might sound a little harsh, but nothing they said really interested me. I didn't want to talk about sports or upcoming concerts, or

about other schmucks in the office. I wanted to talk about space and life and how crazy it was that anything existed at all. I was more out of place than a fish in a tree. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken to anyone in my office. Not that I cared. I wasn't a very social person and small talk made my brain explode. I preferred my own company. After all, solitude is bliss, right?

Suddenly, I heard a weird hissing sound. I didn't want to take my earphones off in case it was someone trying to make conversation. Earphones were the perfect tool in these kinds of situations. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued. I lowered the volume to have a better listen.

'Psssst,' whispered a voice. It sounded like it came from the cubicle on my right. I had no idea who it was. They shuffled people around here so often it was hard to keep track. But I wasn't in the mood for chit chat. So, I pretended like I couldn't hear it.

'Psssssssst,' whispered the voice, louder and more assertive than before. Whoever it was, they were persistent. I ignored it again and mashed my keyboard to make it sound like I was working. That would give them a hint. And it seemed to have worked. I didn't hear anything else for a couple of seconds. Mission accomplished, I thought.

Then, I felt a soft thump on my head. And in the corner of my eye, I spotted a scrunched-up piece of paper fall to the ground. At that point, I had no choice but to respond. I looked up and saw a girl peering into my cubicle. She had two buckteeth, a pointy nose and a pair of big brown eyes. And they were nestled under a mop of long brown curly hair. It was the new girl, Zahara.

'Hey there,' said Zahara. 'Your name is Kal, right?'

'That's my name, don't wear it out,' I said, trying to play it cool. But it wasn't the nineties anymore and it probably sounded lame.

I met her a few weeks ago when she first started. I hadn't spoken to her much since then, but she seemed nice enough. The workplace hadn't corrupted her yet. She was a pure white rose in a sea of shit and piss. But it was only a matter of time before that changed.

'Are you doing much after work?' said Zahara. 'We're all heading to The Cornerstone to have some drinks. You should come.'

It was a nice sentiment. But it was the last thing I wanted to do. 'Sorry, I can't,' I said, scratching my head. 'I've already got plans.'

'Told you he'd say that,' said a voice from the cubicle on my left side. It sounded deep, kind of nasally and kind of smug. It belonged to the one person in the office who I hated. And his name was Rohan.

Rohan was the stereotypical 'finance bro' as I liked to call them. Tall, confident and driven to succeed. The seniors and managers all adored him. And he looked up to them, too. But he was the kind of asshole who had a different suit for every day of the week. And today, he was wearing a charcoal coloured one with a white shirt and a black tie. And he reeked of way too much cologne with a hint of cigarette-smoke and Brylcreem. I heard that he was a talented mixed-martial artist, which was bad news for me because I always wanted to punch him square in the face.

'Kal's a weird fella,' he said, with a shit-eating grin. 'He keeps to himself. And it's better that way if you ask me.'

'Nobody is asking you,' said Zahara, in a sharper tone. She pulled herself up to gain some extra height. 'Don't worry about him. Come. It'll be a blast.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'But this is my last day here anyway, so there's no point in me coming.'

Rohan squinted his eyes and leaned into my cubicle. ‘I heard you were moving to a different firm, you god damned traitor,’ he said, growling at me through his clenched teeth. The veins in his neck almost popped out of his skin. ‘If you tell them any insider information about here, I’ll kick your ass.’

‘Settle down, Rambo,’ I said, crossing my arms. ‘Not that it’s any of your business. But I’m not going to another firm. I’m ditching the field altogether.’

‘Good riddance,’ he said, condescendingly. ‘To be honest, you weren’t cut out for this line of work anyway. It’s a dog eat dog business. And you’re like a little chihuahua swimming with rottweilers.’

‘Sick analogy bro,’ I said, rolling my eyes. ‘Did you learn that one from a children’s book?’

Rohan didn’t respond. Instead, he ducked back into his own cubicle. And I wish he’d done that sooner.

‘That’s really cool,’ said Zahara, clapping her hands. ‘I don’t know you that well. But I can tell you hate working here. I think it’s good that you’re moving on – if that’s what you want to do.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘I’ve wanted to ditch this place for ages. It’s been a long time coming.’

‘What are you gonna do next?’ she asked.

‘Not sure,’ I said. ‘I’m just gonna go with the flow and see what happens.’

‘Fair enough,’ she said. ‘Well, since your leaving, you should definitely come. Think of it as a farewell celebration. I’ll even buy you a drink.’

I didn't want to let her down and seem like an asshole. But the thought of being around my workmates any longer than I needed to made me feel sick. 'Look, I appreciate the invite, I really do,' I said. 'But there's someplace I need to be.'

'All good,' she said, with a smile. 'If anything changes, you know where to find us. Anyway, we better get back to work. Otherwise one of the bosses will come here all grumpy and shit.'

'No doubt,' I said.

'Good luck with everything,' she said. 'I'll see you around.'

I bid her farewell and she disappeared behind the cubicle wall.

The final hour passed quickly. At five o'clock on the dot, I grabbed my backpack and headed for the door. My co-workers emerged from their cubicles like a bunch of skittering hermit crabs leaving their shells. Some looked exhausted, others looked relieved. But everyone was happy to be done with the week. And none were happier than me. Normally, it was a bittersweet feeling to leave a place behind. But not this time. There was nothing bitter about leaving this shithole. It was all sweetness. And it was sweeter than chocolate.

About fifteen minutes and one tram ride later, the business district was nothing more than a backdrop in the distance. I could barely see it through the grimy and dusty windows. I raised an arm above my head and pulled the cord, signalling for the tram to stop. I struggled to hold my balance as it slammed its breaks and came to a halt. I hopped off and stepped foot into the parklands, a botanical sanctuary in the heart of the city. But it felt like a completely different world.

I walked deeper and deeper towards its nucleus, passing more trees and hedges than I could count. Eventually, I made it to the place I wanted to be – a secret garden hidden deep within. I discovered it by accident one day. And I've been coming here ever since. It was the

perfect place to wind down and meditate after work and bask in my connection to the natural world. There was no doubt in my mind that it was private property since it was surrounded by a black fence. But I'd been climbing it ever since I discovered this place. And I've never seen another soul around, let alone been told off. Still, I only ever stayed on the outskirts. I didn't want to venture too far and lose my bearings. Although I often wondered how much deeper it went.

I approached the fence and climbed it, landing on my own two feet. And I could see nature in all its glory. It was a stark contrast to the artificial and lifeless office I spent most of my days in for the past two years.

In this place, I couldn't hear the sounds of keyboards, printers and bullshit conversations. Instead, I heard the sounds of birds, butterflies and bees singing, fluttering and buzzing in harmony. I couldn't see rows of cubicles with computers and desks inside of them. Instead, I saw a stunning display of plants and trees in all shapes and sizes and colours. Shades of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet – all the colours in the spectrum. I couldn't smell the sweat and desperation of people trying to make a good impression while they slaved away. Instead, I smelt all kinds of tantalizing aromas. Alyssum, gardenia, lavender, jasmine, rosemary – to name a few. And I couldn't feel the hopeless depression of being cooped up in an unnatural place. Instead, I felt the prickly grass caress my weary feet through the soles of my shoes.

I found a large oak tree and sat beneath it, leaning my back into its trunk. I threw my backpack onto the ground and crossed my legs and closed my eyes. I started to meditate, focusing on the sensation of breathing. I could feel the air flow in and out of my nostrils. And I quietly watched each breath as it made my abdomen rise and fall. It's pretty astounding that

breathing is an autonomous process, I thought. No different to a heartbeat or a bowel movement. And a wise man once told me the same can be said about our thoughts too.

Like all minds, mine had a tendency to wander. Of course, it was perfectly normal. In my early experiences with meditation, I tried to stop having thoughts at all and it pissed me off when I couldn't. But in time, I learned that it wasn't about that at all. It was about bringing our attention back to the sensation of breathing the moment we realized we'd been lost in thought. And the more we do it, the less our mind wanders and the more present it becomes. It was like a bicep curl for the brain.

But the noisy bastard inside my head was relentless. In fact, even though I'd been meditating for a few minutes now, my mind had already started to wander. It wandered to childhood memories. A time when my dysfunctional family was still intact and the world seemed to make sense. It wandered to adolescent memories. A time filled with ups and downs that lead me to a fateful meeting with my nemesis; anxiety and depression. They sank their teeth into my life and never let go. It wandered to anticipation about the future. Quitting my job felt amazing. But what would happen next? I should have probably taken some time to come up with a plan. I thought and thought until I realized I had been lost in thought. I didn't know if it had been two minutes or twenty minutes. But it didn't really matter. I brought my attention back to the breath and continued the cycle.

Not long after, I heard a whisper in my ear. 'You're on the right track,' it said. I knew it was real because I felt a warm breath bounce against my skin. And it scared the shit out me.

I jolted back into existence and opened my eyes. A strange girl huddled next to me with her face an inch away from mine. She had long dark hair and bright-green eyes. And she smelt like sunflowers.

'Whoah, whoah, whoah,' I said, waving my hands in the air.

The girl took a step back and placed her hands on her hips. She looked short, about five feet tall. And she was wearing a baggy turquoise hoodie with black tights, white sneakers and a small brown satchel bag hanging near her hip.

‘Didn’t mean to scare you,’ she said, smiling.

‘Well, you kinda did,’ I said. My heart was racing a thousand miles an hour. ‘I almost had a heart attack.’

‘Doubt it,’ she said, laughing in the palm of her hand.

‘And who the hell are you?’ I asked.

‘No one in particular,’ she said. ‘But also, everyone – in a sense.’

‘Alrighty then,’ I said, cynically. ‘Well, let me rephrase – what’s your name?’

‘Allison,’ she said, reaching out for a handshake.

‘I’m Calvin,’ I said. ‘But everyone calls me Kal.’ I shook her hand. She had a gentle but firm grip. A sign that she was pretty strong.

‘Nice to meet you,’ she said. ‘Anyway, listen up. I’ve seen you meditate around here for a while now. And it seems like you’ve come a long way in your practice. But you should probably know that you’ve barely scratched the surface.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ I said.

‘Most people meditate to de-stress,’ she said. ‘But it goes a lot deeper than that. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your reason for doing it?’

I wasn’t sure. I had to stop and think about it for a moment. I mean, I started doing it to help manage my anxiety and depression. But I’d been feeling pretty good for a while now. And I still meditated every day. It helped me get out of my own head and stay out. And the more I did it, the less encumbered I felt by the hyper-critical whirlwind inside my head.

‘It makes me feel more like myself,’ I said, nodding my head. ‘I’ve always been pretty hard on myself. My inner voice is ruthless. Meditation makes me realize that a lot of the things it says are bullshit.’

‘Good answer,’ she said, smiling. ‘It definitely helps with that. But there is a deeper and more meaningful purpose behind it, ya know.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘Meditation is about finding a balance between concentration and equanimity in the present moment, always.’

‘Equanimity...’ I said, confused. ‘Is that like, acceptance, or something?’

‘Yup,’ she said, nodding. ‘And the method you’ve been doing is the oldest and most traditional one. Basically, there are two dimensions to meditation. There is changing phenomena, like thoughts, sensations and feelings. And there’s the dimension of consciousness. The one that is witnessing them. Mindfulness and mind-emptiness. One is effortful concentration and the other is an effortless letting go.’

‘Damn, that’s deep,’ I said. ‘But a pretty cool way to put it.’

‘You know what’s even cooler?’ she said, knocking on my head with her hand as if it were a door. ‘That brain in there isn’t yours.’

‘Come again?’ I said, with a dumbfounded expression.

‘It’s not your freakin’ brain, dude,’ she said. ‘It’s something that came about with a bit of time and evolution. It’s the brain of mankind and the brain of nature. Humans think they’re pretty damn cool for making things like buildings and art and stuff like that. But tell me, what made them. And what made their brains?’

‘Nature, or evolution, whatever you wanna call it,’ I said, like an obedient child in a class.

‘You got it,’ she said. ‘We’re one small branch in a tree of life that goes way, way back. A tree that somehow grew from a seed, which is our entire planet. And it’s adapted itself into all kinds of different stuff.’

‘I know that much,’ I said. ‘Reading about evolution and natural selection and stuff like that is a hobby of mine.’

‘That’s cool,’ she said. ‘But why read it when you can experience it? I mean, you’re literally a part of it, ya know?’

‘Are you, like, a scientist and a monk mixed in one, or something?’ I asked. ‘And what’s the deal with this place? Don’t tell me it’s the garden of a sacred temple or something?’

‘Umm, I guess you could say it’s something like that,’ she said.

‘Holy shit,’ I said. ‘Can you show me around? Can you become my master? Teach me everything you know.’ I knelt down on one knee and bowed my head like a foot soldier about to be knighted.

‘Chill, chill, chill,’ she said, frantically waving her hands around. ‘Look, uhm, I’d love to talk to you some more. But it’s getting late and I really need to go. Maybe some other time, yeah?’

‘Fine...’ I mumbled as I stood up with a disappointed look on my face.

‘But hey, keep practising your meditation and someday it’ll help you reach your full potential.’ she said.

‘My full potential?’ I asked.

‘Ever heard of the flow state?’ she said.

‘I think so,’ I said. ‘That’s like being in the zone, right? It happens sometimes when I’m playing video games and stuff.’

‘Right, yeah, you’ve probably had a small taste of it,’ she said. ‘It’s a state of extreme focus where all unnecessary thoughts disappear and you become completely absorbed in whatever you’re doing.’

‘But what does it have to do with meditation?’ I asked.

‘Everything,’ she said. ‘For most people, the flow state happens naturally and at random. But it can also be trained and developed and used at will.’

‘God damn,’ I said. ‘That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever heard.’

She made it sound like our minds were more capable I’d ever give them credit for. But it makes sense since life and nature are pretty badass. A cosmic phenomenon somehow growing and thriving in all this chaos. What makes us any different? Not that long ago, our kind were nothing more than a bunch of hunter-gatherers. And in some ways, we still are. But look how far we’ve come.

‘Allison, you’re the most extraordinary person I’ve ever met,’ I said. ‘And I really needed this. So, thank you.’

Suddenly, her demeanour changed and it looked like she was worried about something. I tried to ask her what was wrong. But she covered my mouth with her hand before I had a chance to say a word.

‘Shhh,’ she whispered, holding up a finger over her mouth. Her eyes darted around like a lioness in the wild. ‘I think someone is watching us. Follow me.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ I whispered, confused.

She wasn’t kidding. I heard a rustle in a bush. Naturally, I turned around to see what it was. And then I saw a thin-looking metallic object fly towards me. Before I had a chance to squint my eyes and see what it was, Allison stepped in front of me and caught it in the palm of her hand.

‘A poison dart,’ she said, tossing it onto the ground. ‘Stick with me and keep your eyes wide open.’

At that point, I started to freak the hell out. Had I stepped foot in the twilight zone and entered some kind of crazy lucid dream? One minute, I was chilling in the parklands. Then, a strange and unique girl came out of nowhere and laid some deep wisdom on me. And the next thing I knew, there was a fucking poison dart flying at my head. None of it seemed real. But I didn’t even have time to think. Allison grabbed my arm and started running. I had no choice but to follow as we ran deeper and deeper into the garden.

‘Don’t turn around,’ she yelled, panting as she ducked under a low branch. ‘And do not, I repeat, do not slow down.’

I heard a rustle again, followed by another and another. I really wanted to turn around. I couldn’t help myself. Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw three darts whizzing through the air. I felt a slight and startling tingle tiptoe down my spine as I realized there was no way I’d be able to dodge them in time.

Allison stopped in her tracks and pushed me out of the way. Then, she vaulted between two of them and ran halfway up a tree and backflipped as she dodged the third one. She landed perfectly on her own two feet and wiped some dust off her shoulder like it was nothing.

‘Holy shit,’ I yelled. ‘You’re incredible.’ I had no idea what was happening. But I could feel the adrenaline, excitement and fear coursing through my veins. It was the most alive I’d felt in years.

Allison looked at me and smiled. The wind blew some of her hair into her eyes and mouth and she awkwardly brushed it away with her hand. I noticed she was standing on an odd-looking pile of leaves. They looked redder and browner and denser than the other ones

around. I squinted my eyes and looked a little harder and spotted a hint of white rope beneath them. Allison must have noticed it too. Because at that moment, she immediately tried to move her feet. But it was too late. I heard a loud crack, followed by her scream. A second later, she was hanging upside down from a tree with a noose tied around her ankles. The brown satchel bag she had around her hip flew into the air and landed on the ground next to me.

I looked to my left and then to my right. Nobody was around. Then, a strange man emerged from behind me. He looked like a creepy jester with a pale angular face, black round glasses and long blonde hair. And he was so tall, he could have been mistaken for a tree. But his bright red shirt, tan-coloured chinos and black leather shoes were a dead giveaway.

‘Well, well, well,’ he said, in an ominous tone. ‘It seems like the rumours are true after all. The infamous Allison has lost her edge.’

Allison growled and squirmed in anger, trying to free herself. ‘Kal, you need to run,’ she yelled, hysterically. ‘This guy is dangerous.’

‘What about you?’ I yelled, trying to keep it together.

‘Listen to her, fool,’ said the pale man, as he started walking towards me. ‘This doesn’t concern you. Leave now, while you still can.’

It wasn’t only them telling me to run. Every instinct in my body was telling me to do the same. My knees were shaking and a million butterflies started fluttering around inside my stomach. But I wasn’t going to leave her behind. I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth, trying to build up the courage to make a move.

‘Oh?’ said the pale man, with an intrigued look on his face. ‘You’re not going to run? In that case...’

I didn't have time to think, let alone respond. He sprinted towards me faster than a speeding bullet to heaven. My body didn't want to move. But I had no choice. I charged forward with a fist raised above my shoulder like a knight holding a lance. A look of surprise appeared on his face as the distance between us shortened. But he didn't look concerned.

'Too slow,' he said, with a devilish grin. He reached into his pockets and sent a dart hurling towards me. I panicked and tried to duck out of the way, tripping over my own feet and falling face-first into the ground. And I didn't even have a chance to get up. He was already standing over me. He kicked me right in the stomach. It hurt like hell and sent me tumbling backwards, grazing my arms and legs on the ground. And when the momentum finally died down and I came to a stop, I was too busy dry reaching and trying to breathe to feel the pain.

I looked up and saw the pale man strutting towards me like a bowhunter coming to finish off its wounded prey. At that moment, I knew I needed a plan. And I needed it fast. Should I attack him again, trying to catch him off guard? No, that wouldn't work. The difference in our speed and power was too much. Should I try to distract him and buy time? Allison might be able to free herself and kick his ass. In fact, she probably would have already if it wasn't for me being incompetent and getting in the way. Damn it. I was short on time and running out of opportunities.

'My bag!' yelled Allison. 'Open my bag! There's something in there that can help you.'

'What... is... it?' I asked, coughing and wheezing between the words.

'A black vaporizer!' she yelled. 'It has a sacred herb inside. One toke and will clear your mind and you'll know what to do.'

‘You want me to vape some weed?’ I asked, slowly regaining my ability to speak. ‘In the middle of a god damned fight?’

‘It’s not cannabis, you idiot!’ she yelled, flailing about in anger.

‘I can’t let you do that,’ said the pale man, placing a hand inside his pocket. But before he managed to pull out another dart, a green whip lined with thorn-like spikes slapped his hand out of the way. I followed it with my eyes and watched it retract all the way back to a handle in Allison’s upside-down hand.

‘Bitch,’ said the pale man, licking a bit of blood from the wound.

‘Cmon, Kal!’ yelled Allison. ‘Take a hit of that herb.’

I had no choice. I needed to trust her. I grabbed the bag and opened it up. There was a black vaporizer sitting inside next to a bundle of different herbs and ointments. It smelt a little funky, like a woody scent mixed with apple, lemon and plum. My hands trembled. But I had no time to waste. I picked up the vaporizer, moved it towards my mouth and pressed the button. I inhaled hard and fast and that funky smell filled my sinuses. Then, I exhaled and – boom.

My mind went completely silent. The mind chatter ceased to exist. Everything looked brighter, sharper and more detailed than before. Like my vision had been upgraded to high definition. And the boundaries between my body and the environment became blurred. I looked at my hands and my body. It felt like they were a part of everything around me rather than something within it. And somehow, it felt like time had slowed down. I looked up and saw the pale man charging towards me. But now, I didn’t feel like I had seconds to react. I felt like I had an eternity. And I knew exactly what to do and how to do it.

I watched the pale man throw another handful of darts. But this time, they were much, much slower. In fact, it seemed like they were moving in slow-motion. I pirouetted out of the

way with ease. Hell, I even managed to catch two of them – one in each hand. But I didn't have time to be impressed. I threw one right back at him as hard as I could, aiming for his stomach. I'd never been hunting before. But somehow, I instinctively knew the more central I aimed, the harder it was for him to dodge. He managed to side-step out of the way and dodge it with ease. But I knew he would. I pre-emptively sent the second dart towards where his foot was about to land. He narrowly avoided it, hopping and twirling like a trapeze artist. But he lost his footing – right on cue.

A concerned look swept across his face as I plummeted toward him like a freight train. I swept his left leg with my own, knocking him onto the ground. Then, I raised my leg in the air, almost as high as my shoulders and sent it crashing down towards his solar plexus like a guillotine.

But what happened next, I didn't anticipate. He grabbed my foot and twisted it, which forced me to turn into an awkward position. Then, he pushed me backwards with the strength of a wild ox. I backflipped and landed on my feet. I'd never been able to do it before, let alone attempt it. This herb really was something else, I thought. But at that moment, he struck me in the chest with an open palm and sent me crashing into a tree.

I lay on the ground, dazed and confused. My body wouldn't move. And my consciousness started to fade. Strangely, I heard the faint sound of a clap echoing behind me. It wasn't the pale man since he was standing in front of me. He looked a little impressed but also kind of concerned – which was a little strange.

I turned my head to make sure it wasn't an auditory hallucination. And it wasn't. It was Allision. She was safely untied and on her own two feet, clapping her hands as she walked towards me.

‘Nice work,’ she said, with a wry grin. ‘Not only did you have the morality to help someone in need when you were clearly out of your depth. But you also had the courage to stand up and fight – with a little help from a herb, of course.’

I tried to speak but the words wouldn’t come out. All I could do was watch and listen as my vision started to blur.

‘You did a pretty well for a first-timer, too,’ she said. ‘Looks like he surprised you a bit there, didn’t he?’

The pale man pressed his glasses against his face with his index finger. ‘It’s not easy when you need to hold back,’ he said, with a sharpened tone.

‘You call that holding back?’ she laughed. ‘You almost knocked him into a different dimension.’

The pale man didn’t respond.

Allison cradled over me and placed her hand on my forehead. ‘Sorry about the little act we put on here,’ she said, remorsefully, as she stroked my hair. ‘This man is actually a friend and colleague. His name is Oscar.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said, bowing his head like an aristocrat.

‘I needed to find out a little more about you,’ said Allison. ‘And you passed the test with flying colours. I’ll get you stitched up and explain everything over a nice cup of tea’.

And then I blacked out.

Chapter 2

I woke up in a rickety narrow bed, wrapped in a thick floral quilt and a woolly blanket that made my eyes itch. I looked around the room, trying to figure out where I was. It looked dark outside the rose-stained window on the other side of the room. A candle next to my bed was the only source of light. I could see cabinets everywhere. More than I could count on my hand. And they all looked the same – vintage brown with floral marquetry inlays and brass trimming. A single one was probably worth more than my car. Some were filled with plants and flowers. Others were filled with hard-cover books.

I ran my hand along the geometric patterns printed on the walls. The wallpaper was old and tattered. And it peeled upon my touch. It reminded me of a house in a horror movie. The thought put me into a bit of a panic. I wanted to get the hell out of there. I ripped the quilt and blanket off my body and sat on the side of the bed. I was still in the same clothes. Except for my shoes and socks, which were neatly stashed onto the ground next to my backpack, wallet and phone. I lifted my shirt to see if my kidneys were still intact. Everything looked okay. I'd heard stories about people who had been drugged and used as unwilling kidney donors. I needed to make sure I wasn't one of them.

I slipped my feet into my socks and shoes, gathered my stuff and crept towards the door. It was already half open and I could hear voices echo in the distance. It sounded like they were really far away.

'Hey, you,' said a voice, much closer to me. It made me jump out of my skin. 'You're finally awake.'

‘Who’s there?’ I yelled, karate-chopping my hands in the air as if it would somehow ward them off. I scanned the room and saw the silhouette of a man stealthily hidden in the shadows.

‘Settle down, I mean you no harm,’ said the voice. The silhouette stepped forward into the candlelight. It was Oscar.

‘No harm?’ I said, with my hands still guarded my face. ‘You knocked me out and kidnapped me, dude. What the hell was that all about?’

‘Sorry about that,’ said Oscar. ‘It was only a test.’

I had no idea what he meant. But he reached out for a handshake. And I cautiously accepted it. I shook his hand with the firmest grip I could muster. ‘A test for what?’ I said. ‘The least you could do is tell me what the hell is going on.’

‘Allison will fill you in later,’ he said. ‘It was all her idea. I was nothing more than a prop in her plan.’ He had a very prim and proper tone. A bit like a member of the royal family. ‘Sera is keen to meet you too. This is her place. And she’s cooked a scrumptious dinner. Care to join us?’

‘It’s not like I have a choice,’ I said, shrugging my shoulders.

‘Very well then,’ said Oscar. ‘Follow me.’

He put the candle out with the tips of his fingers and opened the door. I followed him into a long corridor that stretched all the way into the distance. Every step made the timber floorboards creak and squirm. Although the sound was muffled under an awesome-looking carpet runner with arabesque patterns.

The high ceilings were whiter than snow. They held up some of the finest chandeliers I’d ever seen. Each one had a brass frame covered in layers of shimmering crystals. And the walls were covered in paintings. Some were of people and others were of landscapes. But

they all had crazy psychedelic patterns on them. It seemed to be the running theme in this madhouse.

‘So, um, what’s your story?’ I asked, trying to strike up a conversation. The awkward silence was driving me mad.

‘I used to be a performance artist,’ he said. ‘Local theatre. Nothing special.’

A fitting response, I thought. It explained why he had elegance and properness about him.

‘That was a hell of a performance before,’ I said. ‘Pretending to fight me and all. Sure had me fooled.’ I placed my hand on the part of the stomach where he hit me. The pain had subsided. But it still felt a little raw and tender.

‘Thank you,’ he said, nodding his head gracefully.

The voices in the distance became louder as we drew nearer. Sera must have been rich as hell to own a mansion like this. I didn’t know who the hell she was. But she was probably someone worth knowing.

‘Everyone is a performer in their own way,’ said Oscar, interrupting my thoughts. ‘People are born into this world without self-awareness. If you look into a baby’s eyes, you won’t see a trace of self. Only luminous emptiness. Consciousness in its purest form. And the person they grow into is a mask worn over that consciousness.’

‘That’s some deep shit,’ I said. ‘But I know what you mean.’

‘You do?’ he said. ‘Enlighten me.’

‘Everyone is so caught up in their idea of themselves and how they come across to others,’ I said. ‘But who we are and who we think we are. They’re two different things.’

‘Precisely,’ he said, in a regal tone. ‘All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players.’

‘Did you come up with that?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said. ‘William Shakespeare did. It was a quote I learned back in high school. And it motivated me to become a performance artist.’

‘Fair enough,’ I said. ‘And how did you become a superhuman dart-throwing ninja?’

‘Long story,’ he laughed.

The corridor led into a large open room. It had blue-green walls and ceilings that glistened like an azurite gemstone. I stood underneath a grand chandelier that dangled from the ceiling, looking down an imperial staircase made from marble.

‘She’s waiting downstairs,’ said Oscar.

I followed him down. It led into a hallway with the same décor as the room above. Something caught my eye. It was a peculiar-looking sculpture in the middle of the room about twice my size and made from bronze. It featured a woman perched on top of a planet like a bird sitting on an egg in a nest. It had four faces, one on each side. And each one had a third eye in the middle of their forehead, right underneath a crown covered in dozens of tiny open eyes. It looked like something a pharaoh would wear. I couldn’t tell if it was more beautiful than it was frightening.

‘Ahh...’ said a divine voice from somewhere in the distance. ‘It seems like you were drawn to that piece.’

The voice belonged to an old woman standing in the archway behind me. She had olive-coloured skin and sapphire-blue eyes, which glowed underneath her black and slightly greying hair. She was wearing a long purple dress wrapped in a pink shawl. It matched the amethyst earrings in her ears and the purple sandals on her feet. I couldn’t put my finger on it. But there was something celestial about her. It revealed itself in the way she sounded, the

way she smiled and the way she looked. And it wasn't intimidating. If anything, it was comforting. Like she radiated love and compassion. And I could feel its embrace.

'What do you think it means?' said the old woman.

'Uhm, I'm not really sure,' I said. I pondered for a moment, looking at the sculpture up and down. 'It looks like a humanoid-alien thing protecting a planet or something.'

'Bravo,' she said, clapping her hands. 'I call this one the 'world soul'. It's a symbol of what mankind can become. Not the overlords of life on the planet. Not even the stewards of life on the planet. But apprentices of life on the planet. And it's protectors too.'

'Did you make it?' I asked.

'Sure did,' she said. 'My name is Sera. And this is my home. It's a pleasure to meet you, Kal.' She smiled in a way that only a goddess could.

I reached out my hand, expecting a handshake. But she pulled me in and hugged me like a grandmother. My nose buried into her shoulder and I could hardly breathe. She had a herbaceous, earthy and slightly floral scent. It made me feel calm and relaxed.

'I'm sure you have a lot of questions,' said Sera, placing a hand on my cheek. 'But you must be hungry. And dinner is ready. I'll tell you everything over a nice warm meal.'

Part of me wanted to leave. I was still a little creeped out and confused and I wanted to go home. But my stomach was in knots and I could feel it begging for food. I didn't even a chance to respond anyway. Sera grabbed my hand and walked with me down the hallway. Oscar followed close behind.

After passing some doors and archways, we entered a large room with a long rustic dining table in the middle. It had twelve matching chairs. And two of them were already taken.

Allison sat in one, apologetically staring into my soul. ‘Sorry,’ she whispered under her breath. I couldn’t hear the words. But I could read her lips.

An old oriental man sat in the other, nodding at me as if to say hello. He was wearing a navy straight-collared suit. And his head was completely bald, other than a horseshoe-shaped rim of grey hair on the back. And he had a matching grey beard that ran down to his chest.

‘Sit wherever you like,’ said Sera. She let go of my hand and sat down at the end of the table. It seemed like she was the matriarch of the group.

I pulled up a chair next to Allison and sat down, burrowing my legs beneath the table. Oscar sat opposite her, tucking a silk napkin into his shirt like a bib.

The food looked delicious. And it smelt like it too. Sweet potatoes stuffed with some kind of mac and cheese, a creamy orange risotto that smelt like pumpkin and sage, a slab of meatloaf covered in gravy and a golden-brown pecan pie. My stomach growled in anticipation. I didn’t know where to start.

‘All the food here is plant-based,’ said Allison, proudly.

‘Even the meatloaf?’ I asked, leaning forward to get a closer look.

‘Yep,’ Allison said. ‘It’s made from tofu, sweet potato, carrots, onion, beans, celery and garlic. And the gravy is made from mushrooms. I came up with the recipe myself.’ She cut a slice and eased it onto my plate.

I poked and prodded it with my fork to try and feel the texture. Then, I cut a small piece and steered it into my mouth. It was rich and full of flavour. A perfect blend of tenderness and nuttiness mixed with the right amount of zest.

‘So good,’ I said, with my mouth still full.

Allison smiled and her eyes widened. She grabbed and sliced a piece of everything on the table and filled my plate.

‘Relax, relax,’ I said, raising my hands in the air.

A minute passed and nobody said a word. We were all too busy stuffing our faces with food. Not that I minded. I’d already emptied my plate. And I still had room in my stomach for seconds.

‘I’m going to tell you a story, Kal,’ said Sera, interrupting the silence. She had a serious look on her face. ‘It might sound a little crazy at first. But it will help you understand who we are and why you are here.’

I nodded and helped myself to another spoonful of pumpkin risotto.

‘This story began about four and a half billion years ago,’ she added. ‘And it’s the greatest story ever told.’

One sentence in and she was already going off into the deep end, I thought. Still, her poetic introduction piqued my interest. I had every reason to believe they were a weird cult. And I hadn’t ruled it out yet. But they didn’t seem malicious. Not yet anyway.

‘The main character is a small and inconspicuous planet,’ she said. ‘It orbits an average-sized star. And in the beginning, it was nothing more than a ball of molten rock. It remained a hot barren satellite for a thousand million years. But it held a secret potential.’

This started to feel less like indoctrination and more like a scientific lecture. And it was right down my alley. All those years in the office and not once did I have a deep and meaningful conversation about something cool like space.

‘Eventually, the planet cooled down,’ she continued. ‘Clouds formed. And the rain started to fall. Comets and asteroids bombarded the planet. They delivered more water and

other organic molecules too. And sooner or later, the surface was covered in chemically rich oceans. The planet became a blue paradise.'

Allision nudged me on the shoulder. 'This is my favourite part,' she whispered. 'Watch how animated and intense she gets.'

'Then, an interesting phenomenon happened!' yelled Sera. She stood up and threw her hands in the air, twirling them around like a mage casting a spell. 'And that phenomenon was life. An interconnected web of organisms that change and adapt to the environment in time. Sounds supernatural, right?'

'Evolution is pretty badass,' I said, with my mouth full.

'Life became more and more complex,' she said. 'It weaved itself into a rich tapestry of ecosystems and turned the planet into a vibrant living biosphere. Then, around 200,000 to 300,000 years ago, a peculiar species emerged. A small bipedal primate that didn't seem all that special. But like the planet, it had a secret potential.'

She was talking about humans. And for all her passion and craziness, she had the facts and figures memorized to a tee. The smartest people are often the kookiest, I thought. The two qualities go hand in hand. And she was the perfect example.

'This animal hunted, gathered, prospered, multiplied, learned how to communicate and use tools,' she said. 'Then it went on to create a civilization. And the rest is history – literally.'

'Cool story, gramps,' I said. 'But what does it have to do with me?'

'Everything,' she said, sitting back into her seat and taking a sip of wine. 'People have forgotten their connection to the story. They've become disconnected from themselves and others. And disconnected from nature and the planet.'

‘It’s kinda hard.’ I said. ‘Everyone is too busy trying to make ends meet in this crazy world.’

Sera nodded. ‘Social and cultural conditioning makes it harder,’ she said. ‘On one hand, civilization is in the best shape it’s ever been. But on the other, we’ve reached a point where our collective behaviour threatens our future. And the health and stability of the planet too. Ecological destruction, incessant pollution and excessive consumption. It all stems from a disconnection to the natural world.’

‘And where do you guys fit in?’ I asked. ‘Are you political activists or something?’

‘Not quite,’ said Sera. ‘We are The Awakeners. An ancient brotherhood that has been around since the dawn of civilization. Our goal is to help awaken every being on the planet.’

She pulled down her collars and revealed a silver sterling pendant attached to her necklace. All the others did the same too. Their pendants had weird symbols embedded into them. Four in a line and five lines in total. It looked like some kind of ancient language.

‘What do you mean by helping people awaken?’ I asked, a little mystified. ‘Sounds like some hocus pocus spiritual crap.’

‘To awaken means to re-attune our minds with nature and the greater web of life,’ she said. ‘Everyone is born awakened. But the human mind is shaped by both nature and nurture. And it becomes dulled. A child’s innocence turns into an adult’s ignorance because of social and cultural conditioning. People aren’t raised to live and grow in harmony with their connection to the planet. Not anymore. Now, they’re raised to become an obedient member of a society designed to make the rich richer.’

‘But awakening, or re-awakening, is a birthright,’ interrupted Allision. ‘And it’s our goal to help them get there.’

‘And how do you do that?’ I asked.

‘Not everyone is on the path to being awakened,’ said Sera. ‘But those who are have something in common. They become slightly odd and slightly different. And they are less prepared to fit into the norm. The machine-like nature of the modern world drives them crazy. And they start looking for answers, internally and externally. And we help them find those answers.’

It sounded a lot like me, I thought. And that’s because it was. I’d spent most of my twenties trying to learn more about myself and life and the universe. At some point, all the pieces that used to fit started to fall away. My parents divorced, my brother became an alcoholic, my mum had a cancer scare, my girlfriend left me, and my dog passed away. Nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone goes through similar hardships. And I had it pretty good compared to others. But there comes a time in everyone’s life where the sunshine and roses fade, and cracks begin to surface.

‘Is that why you came up to me in the park earlier today?’ I asked, turning my head towards Allison.

‘Yep,’ said Allison, nodding her head. ‘But in a way, you came to me. That fence you jumped is there for a reason, y’know. ‘It’s what separates the parklands from the garden outside the house.’

‘I see...’ I said, scratching my chin.

‘Technically, you’ve been trespassing,’ said Allison. ‘And the first time you jumped, you trampled on some roses. Old Man Zhao was pretty pissed. He’s the groundskeeper around here.’

The old man nodded. I figured it was him. He was the only person in the room whose name I didn’t know. And the only who looked like he’d be called Zhao. I didn’t even realize I had trampled on some roses. I guess they meant a lot to him.

‘Uhm, sorry about that,’ I said, nervously. Zhao didn’t respond. He crossed his arms and turned away.

‘I’ve seen you meditating for a while,’ said Allison. ‘And today felt like the right time to help you out.’

‘Helping me out is one thing,’ I said, raising an eyebrow. ‘But pretending to be under attack and getting trapped is something else.’

‘I needed to know what kind of person you were, ya know,’ she said. ‘Becoming an awakener is more than waking up to the bullshit of the world. It’s about helping others. And to do that, we need to be selfless and courageous.’

‘And what about your crazy abilities?’ I asked. ‘Are you guys like superhuman ninjas or something?’

‘Remember what I was saying in the park before about the flow state?’ she said. ‘An awakener learns to maintain that state all the time. Our minds are clearer and sharper than the edge of a samurai sword. And it lets us train our bodies to become strong and fast enough to keep up.’

‘Does that mean the herb you made me vape turned me into one of you guys?’ I asked.

‘For a moment, yeah,’ said Allison. ‘It’s a special type of mild psychedelic. It makes the brain’s default mode network chill out. And it enhances cognition and focus. Think of it as a way to instantly tap into a flow state. But it’s nothing compared to what we can learn with a bit of training and practice.’

‘Right, so it’s more like a tool to help you get there,’ I said, nodding my head.

‘I can’t believe you managed to sweep my leg,’ said Oscar. ‘Some trained awakeners can’t even do that. Not yet anyway.’

‘Guess I’m a bit of a natural,’ I laughed. I paused for a moment and imagined an army of people with abilities similar to theirs. ‘By the way, how many of you are there?’

‘More than you’d think,’ said Sera. ‘My house is the hub for all the awakeners in the city. People come and go as they please. But the doors are always open. And there are other houses like mine scattered across the world.’

‘But how come nobody knows about you guys?’ I asked. ‘Hell, I didn’t even know this place existed. And I was right in your backyard this whole time.’

‘We need to stay in the shadows,’ she said, in a deep and sombre tone. ‘There’s another brotherhood like ours called The Illuminated. A hierarchy of awakened people who see the world a little differently. They believe only the worthy become awakened. And those who aren’t are no different to mindless sheep in a herd.’

‘Holy shit,’ I said. Learning about an ancient brotherhood whose members had heightened abilities and wanted to help others was hard enough. But to think there was another one with malevolent intentions. It was downright scary.

‘They’re purists and extremists,’ said Sera. ‘They see themselves as the next step in evolution. A species of human superior to the unawakened. They want to seize power and control of the world and make it their own. And manipulate and exploit unawakened people until they destroy themselves.’

‘And what’s their beef with you guys?’ I asked.

‘They see us as shepherds,’ said Sera. ‘Tending to the sheep and guiding them onto the right path. They believe our compassion makes us weak and that we are an obstacle to their goal. We’ve had many battles with them throughout the ages. Most have been small. But some have been colossal – with casualties on both sides.’

‘They have the modern world in the palm of their hands,’ said Allision. ‘An illuminated person is behind every corporation, government and political party. They control the masses and the economy.’

To be honest, it wasn’t that surprising. Everyone knew the rich and powerful had been pulling the strings and running the show for years. It’s the reason we’ve had two worlds wars. And it’s the reason the economy and the environment are in decline. But to think an ancient brotherhood was behind it all. It sounded like a conspiracy-theorists wet-dream.

‘This has been a lot to take in,’ I said, with a brooding expression. ‘And now that you’ve told me, what happens next?’

‘The choice is yours...’ said Sera. She clapped her hands and a man in a tuxedo walked in the room holding a silver tray. He moved my plate to the side and placed it in front of me and opened the lid. There were two vaporizers inside. A white one on the left. And a black one on the right.

‘The one on the left is the most powerful psychedelic known to man,’ said Sera. ‘It’s completely safe and has been used for thousands of years. The effects only last ten minutes. But your life will never be the same. It will show you the true nature of reality. And depending on how it goes, we’ll know if you are ready to start training.’

‘Sounds intense. And a little terrifying,’ I said, nervously. ‘And what about the one on the right?’

‘A herb that will make you forget about this place and ever meeting us,’ said Sera. ‘It will let you return to a life of luxurious security, tranquil happiness and blissful ignorance. And none of us would hold it against you.’

‘Great. More spooky herbs,’ I said, sarcastically. ‘C’mon, is the memory loss one really necessary?’

‘It’s not often we bring someone here so early in their journey and tell them everything,’ said Allison.

‘Then why did you?’ I asked.

‘Because I sensed something in you, ya know,’ said Allison. ‘Like you were capable of great things. And that you could help bring peace and balance to the world.’

‘Me?’ I said, laughing. ‘I’m literally the most ordinary dude in all of existence. There’s nothing special about me at all.’

‘My intuition is never wrong,’ said Allison, crossing her arms.

‘Time is of the essence,’ said Sera. ‘Which herb will you choose, Kal? The one on the left, or the one on the right?’

A myriad of thoughts ran across my mind. But only one stood out like a needle in a haystack. This was a chance to leave my ordinary life behind and become something great. And I had nothing to lose. I reached onto the tray and grabbed the one on the left.

Chapter 3

I lay cocooned in a white and beige hammock in an empty room, underneath a mandala painted on the ceiling. It had shapes within shapes and patterns within patterns. A bit like a lotus flower spreading its petals. The pit in my stomach grew into a canyon of nerves. It was a normal symptom for anyone about to embark on a psychedelic voyage. And I’d been on two of them.

The first happened a couple of years ago. I ground two grams of magic mushrooms and sprinkled them into a glass of orange juice. After thirty minutes, I started feeling the effects. I noticed the patterns on my lounge and carpet looked sharper and clearer. Music

sounded a lot better. Almost like it had layers that I'd never noticed before. And my mind loosened a little. Everything seemed to move and swirl in a subtle way.

A beam of sunlight in the window lured me outside. And after a while, I looked at a plant and thought about how strange it was that anything existed. I panicked a little as my sense of reality seemed to dissolve. I sat on the ground and meditated to try and calm myself. It looked like black and blue checkers were crisscrossing in the darkness behind my eyelids. Then, a loud chirp snapped me back into reality. I opened my eyes and saw a magpie next to me. It wasn't a hallucination. It was really there. It turned its head and looked into my eyes and then flew off into the distance. Strangely, it made me feel like something was watching over me. And from that point, I knew everything would be okay. After that, I had a revelation that I was nothing more than a bare-footed ape sitting on the grass. And I was as much a part of nature as any other animal you'd see in the wild. I rolled and laughed in as waves of euphoria washed over me. And I thought about how crazy it was to take life too seriously.

The second trip happened months later, and it was a lot milder. I slipped a tab of LSD under my tongue and left it there until the paper dissolved. An hour later, my friend and I went for a walk around the block. I heard birds singing in the trees. Their voices were louder and more beautiful than ever before. Everything looked brighter, more vibrant and even a little stretched. It felt like the trees were alive and aware of our presence. And they seemed to have their own personalities. I hugged one and thanked it for making the world a habitable place. After all, they were the lungs of the planet. Then, my friend and I chatted about our lives until the effects subsided.

But I didn't know what to expect this time. The herb I was about to vape was the most powerful psychedelic known to man. It didn't matter how many times I'd tripped before. And it didn't matter much I meditated. Nothing could prepare me for what was about to happen.

The chemical substance in the herb responsible for its psychedelic properties occurred naturally in many plants and animals. Sera called it the spirit molecule. She said that scientists are finding evidence that our brains might release it shortly before birth and death. And even during dreams.

‘This will be the craziest experience of your life,’ said Sera, holding my hand and stroking it with her fingers. ‘But in ten minutes, you’ll be right back here. Safe and sound. Just remember that it’s easier on the body than a glass of wine. It’s a very safe substance.’

I nodded. I was nervous as hell.

‘All the awakeners have done it,’ said Allison. ‘It’s been used as an initiation ritual for thousands of years.’

I’d already made it this far. There was no turning back. ‘I’m ready,’ I said. ‘Let’s get this show on the road.’

I fired up the vape and inhaled before I had a chance to reconsider. The herb tasted like something in-between burning rubber and mothballs. I held it in my lungs for a couple of seconds and then exhaled. Immediately, the room turned into something that looked like a futuristic cartoon. And all the flat surfaces were covered in kaleidoscopic eyes. A hum started buzzing inside my head. And it grew louder and louder.

‘One more hit,’ said Sera, although I could barely hear her. She held the vaporizer up to my mouth and gestured for me to inhale.

I closed my eyes and took another hit. It felt like my mind started being massaged. And my thinking brain started to shut down. But I felt very present and very aware. Other than that, I felt completely sober. Then, I closed my eyes. And two entities made of light floated into the darkness behind my eyelids. They covered me in warm blankets of light that

radiated love and carried me away into a spectacular museum of geometric art. It looked like it existed in some kind of extra-dimensional hyperspace.

In this place, I didn't have a body. I floated around as an immaterial observer. It had caretakers who greeted me and guided me through the most beautiful art I had ever seen. Then, a caretaker who looked like a circus performer came up to me and showed me a hoop. I looked inside and saw a hyper-dimensional geometrical object. It moved and vibrated on its own. Then, he called out to the other entities and told them he was going to pass it on to me. Some of them looked concerned. Others looked angry. But he told them not to worry and assured them I would be able to handle it. He handed me the hoop and it teleported me into a beautiful train station made of light. It had a huge circular door that opened up. I floated inside and boarded a train-like machine that led me down a crazy rollercoaster-like ride. It was filled with shapes and colours that radiated love and compassion.

At the end of the ride, I felt some type of cosmic gland open in my head. I seemed to remember that it was mine and it was always there. But now it had been re-opened and unclogged after being dormant for many years. I thought about all the terrible things happening on the planet and wondered how it fit into this world of light hidden somewhere within my consciousness. I was immediately thrown into a hellscape of death and sadness. Something that looked like bones and blood flowed over me and through me. It wasn't scary. If anything, it made me feel sad. But I let it all pass through me and eventually it flowed away.

After that, these weird jellyfish-insect creatures approached me. They started to eat and digest all the pain and sorrow inside me. It lasted a while. And afterwards, I found myself sitting in a waterfall made of light and love. It poured over me and through me and felt like

pure ecstasy. At that moment, I had a feeling that love and consciousness were a fundamental part of the universe. And it was something I had always known.

Then, my body turned into a matrix of fractals, which vibrated faster and faster until it shattered and snapped into ripples. A glowing orb of light told me that I had been living like an isolated ray of light. But I had forgotten I was the source of all light. And it was the same for every human and every other lifeform in the universe too. After that, everything turned to black. I sensed I was in the presence of some kind of divine creator. A multidimensional entity who made the universe. Whatever it was, it told me the universe was nothing more than a way for consciousness to become aware of itself.

Soon enough, the effects started to wear off and I became aware of my physical body again. I opened my eyes and saw the psychedelic hyperspace overlaid on top of this world. It seemed like it was always there, but I couldn't access it. Not unless I died or ingested the spirit molecule again. And then the effects completely faded.

'Welcome back,' said Sera, patting my head and ruffling my hair. She made me feel like a child again.

'Holy shit,' I said, still a bit shell-shocked. 'We are all one. Everything is connected. And love is all you need'.

'Sounds like you got the memo,' said Allison, smiling brighter than a thousand suns. 'I knew you had it in you.'

'Anything else?' asked Sera.

'It's beyond words,' I said. 'But it felt like I died and crossed over to the other side. And now I'm sure some type of awareness continues after we die. Does that mean I'm awakened?'

‘Not quite,’ said Sera. ‘You’ve been reconnected to the source of life. But it’s only the first step. In time, your memory of that experience will fade. And you’ll only remember it in the same way you remember a crazy dream. But the message behind it will remain. And that seed needed to be planted in order for you to grow.’

Allison pulled me out of the hammock and helped me onto my feet. I staggered back to the dining room with her arm around my shoulder. Oscar cleared the table and pulled out a chair for me. I slumped into the seat and saw a plain black mug sitting in front of me.

‘No more drugs, please’ I said, pushing it away with my hands. ‘That shit was crazy.’

‘It’s ordinary green tea,’ laughed Oscar. ‘Old Man Zhao made it himself.’

Zhao nodded and smiled. It was the first time I’d seen him express any kind of emotion. ‘Dragon well tea,’ he said, in a heavy accent. ‘Best tea in the world.’ He picked up the mug and brought it towards my mouth. It smelt like chestnuts and butter. And it tasted sweet, mellow and rounded.

‘How did you go on the trip?’ asked Oscar.

I was too busy sipping tea to respond.

Sera answered instead. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘Kal was a true warrior. He remained calm and composed. And he received the message.’

‘I feel pretty awesome,’ I said. ‘Like the power of the universe is coursing through my veins.’

‘It’s probably the afterglow,’ said Sera. ‘This was only the first step. The seed has been planted for you to grow. But there’s still hours and hours of practice and repetition. A permanent flow state needs to be cultivated and learned. Don’t worry, though. Allison will help you take care of that.’

‘I will?’ said Allison, with a confused look on her face. ‘Old Man Zhao was supposed to be the one who trains him.’

‘I think it should be you,’ said Sera. ‘Something tells me you’ll be the one to help him reach his full potential.’

‘But I haven’t trained anyone before,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to fail and let him down.’

‘I want to learn from you, Allison’ I said. I stood up and pointed towards the ceiling like a man possessed. ‘I’ll give it my best and won’t let you down. It’s the least I can do. I’m pretty sure you’re the most badass awakener around here. No offence to anyone else.’

Oscar rolled his eyes. ‘You couldn’t be more cringe-worthy if you tried,’ he said. ‘But it’s still early days. Maybe you should settle down and learn your place.’

‘Chill out, dude,’ I said. ‘Otherwise, I’ll sweep your leg again. I’m pretty sure I could kick your ass with a bit of training and practice.’

‘I’d like to see you try,’ said Oscar, with a cynical smile. He leaned back, crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

I didn’t mind him. But he seemed a little condescending at times. I felt like he saw me as a cocky brat that needed to be put into his place. And I probably was. Even though I was introverted, I was confident and competitive. And I didn’t mind a bit of banter. It’s a misconception that we are timid and quiet because we lack self-esteem. And I can attest to that.

‘Settle down, children,’ said Allison, with a frown. ‘No need for primitive male aggression. We are awakened. Not illuminated. Remember?’

‘Nothing wrong with a bit of banter,’ I said, cracking my knuckles. ‘Besides, what’s the deal with The Illuminated? Do they have the same powers as you guys?’

‘Yes,’ said Sera. ‘And some of them are frighteningly powerful. They rank themselves in a hierarchical order based on their abilities. And they’re always training and fighting. Their skills are always sharp. And their claws are always out.’

‘I mean, that sounds pretty cool,’ I said. ‘Nothing wrong with a bit of competition, right? It’s a part of being a human.’

‘A bit of competition is fine,’ said Sera. ‘But not when it’s used to harm others. The Illuminated are hellbent on killing their superiors to take their spot. They all want to ascend to the top. Not only do they prey on the weak. But they prey on each other too. In fact, their whole brotherhood is a survival of the fittest.’

Allison nodded. ‘Trust me. It’s not a good culture,’ she said. ‘And besides, we have something they don’t.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘Compassion,’ said Allison. ‘For ourselves. And for others too. It’s the source of our strength. And it’s what makes us stronger than them too.’

‘You mean, like, being sympathetic?’ I asked.

‘Not quite,’ said Allison. ‘Compassion is a feeling that happens when we’re confronted with another’s suffering. And we feel motivated to relieve it.’

‘Cool, cool, cool,’ I said. ‘I’m pretty sure I understand. And I feel like I’m ready to start training. When can we start?’

‘The sooner the better,’ said Allison. ‘But I think you should head on home and get some rest. After a day like today, I reckon you’re in need of a good night’s rest.’

She wasn’t wrong. It had been a long day. My whole world had been turned upside down. I didn’t want to leave. But I was exhausted. It was already pretty late, and I needed my own bed.

‘Let me walk you home,’ said Allison. ‘At least, through the parklands and back into the city. It’s a maze out there, ya know.’

‘Sure thing,’ I said.

I grabbed my backpack and double-checked to make sure everything was in there.

‘Alright, let’s go,’ said Allison.

I thanked everyone for their dinner and hospitality. And then I bid them farewell.

Allison grabbed my arm and we headed for the door. The house looked even bigger on the outside. The bottom half was made from brick and the top half was made from a wooden frame filled in with stucco. The windows and doors were tall and narrow. And there was an open field in front of the house. It was about half the size of a soccer pitch and very well maintained. Beyond that, the house and land were hidden in a labyrinth of foliage and shrubbery.

Allison and I walked along a long and winding path. It eventually led to a different side of the fence. But this time, I didn’t need to jump. A large gate opened in halves. And we stepped through the middle.

‘Sorry about the deception and stuff,’ said Allison. She placed her hands behind her back. And she rocked her body rocked from side to side. ‘But I hope it was worth it. I think you’ll fit right in. And you’ll do great things.’

‘It’s all good,’ I said. I paused for a moment and defragmented my thoughts. ‘You know, deep down, I always knew there was more to life than the bullshit pattern people follow.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Allison. ‘I felt like that too once. It was like I had been forced to become a player in a game I didn’t even want to play.’

‘Exactly,’ I said ‘But somehow, all the decisions I made led me here. And I feel like it was supposed to happen.’

‘Ditto,’ said Allison. ‘As I said, my intuition is always right. And I sensed a great potential deep within you.’

‘I’m glad someone believes in me,’ I said. ‘I stopped believing in myself a long time ago.’

‘Maybe you should start believing in yourself again,’ she said. ‘If we are all one and everything is connected. Then it makes no sense to not believe in yourself. Because you are the universe. Right?’

‘Good point,’ I said. ‘Something tells me you’re gonna be an awesome trainer.’

She smiled. Then, she reached over and put a little bag in my pocket. ‘Take this,’ she said. ‘It’s a vaporizer with a little bit of herb leftover.’

‘Not that ultra-potent psychedelic one?’ I asked. ‘I don’t think I could handle that gin.’

‘No, of course not,’ she laughed. ‘It’s the mild one you used in the parklands today. The one that put you into a flow state.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘But how come you’re giving it to me?’

‘Something tells me you might need,’ she said. ‘There’s only enough for one hit. Promise me you’ll use it wisely.’

‘I promise,’ I said, nodding obediently.

‘One last thing,’ she said. ‘Pass me your phone number. I’ll call you sometime next week. And we can start training.’

She handed me her phone and I typed in my number. Then, she added it and rang my number. It was the easiest way to swap. Then, we said our goodbyes. And we went our

separate ways. I'm glad she was going to be the one to train me. I felt like we had more in common than the others. Although I wondered who she was outside of being an awakener. And what her life was like.

I was so tired, I almost passed out on the car ride home. Nothing made me happier than a driver who didn't talk much. Some people think a good conversation is an important part of the experience. But I definitely wasn't one of them. I squinted my eyes and looked at all the people out and about in the streets. To them, it was an ordinary night and at the end of the working week. They had no idea there was anything deeper beyond themselves and their lives. And they didn't seem to mind.

Life was a psychedelic trip in its own way, I thought. From the moment we come into existence, we're thrown into the roller coaster ride of life. It might not have been as crazy as the one I went on earlier. But it was still a strange experience. And for all its trials and tribulations, it was a precious gift. And I had taken it for granted – until now.

The car pulled up in front of my apartment building. I gathered my stuff and bid the driver farewell. I opened the front door with my key card and dragged my feet all the way up the stairs and into my room. My bed had never looked so good. I threw myself onto the mattress and crashed out face-first into the pillow.

Chapter 4

It was the beginning of a new week and a new chapter in life. I planned on sleeping in. But I woke up to the sounds of hammers and drills and the screams of electric saws. They were louder than a plane taking off in a thunderstorm. The construction workers in the street didn't seem to mind. But I sure as hell did. I buried my head in the pillows and tried to return to my dreams. But whenever I started to drift off, a different sound would snap me back into waking life. I had no choice but to start the day.

I climbed out of bed and strolled into the kitchen. It looked like a barren wasteland. There were pots and pans and dirty dishes everywhere. They were spread across the island bench and dining table. It was nice to have no responsibilities other than yourself. Most of my friends already had kids. But I wasn't ready for that. I stacked the dishes into the dishwasher and turned on the coffee machine to make myself a morning brew. The nutty and fruity aroma woke me up a little. And I hadn't even taken the first sip. I placed it on the coffee table and took a seat on the floor in front of the heater. It was the middle of spring. But I always felt cold in the morning.

I opened an application on my phone and read all the headlines. It was one bad thing after another. A political corruption scandal, an oil spill somewhere in the ocean, a rainforest on fire and a battle between protestors and police in a less fortunate country. And the people's comments beneath each headline were toxic. It seemed like the world was falling apart. And it was happening more and more each day. Chaos was inevitable, I thought. After all, we live on a planet with eight billion talking apes trying to co-exist with one another. And even though we're more civilized than the chimpanzee, our animal tendencies still drive us. I often wondered how we even made it here at all.

I spent an hour or two reading random articles, looking at memes and watching public freak-out videos. And I was in the middle of a hilarious one. But then my phone started to ring. It was Allison.

‘Hey, hey, how’s it going?’ she asked.

‘Good,’ I said.

‘Come meet me in the city for lunch,’ she said. ‘Think of it as your last supper. And then we can start training.’

‘Sounds good,’ I said. ‘Name a time and place. And I’ll be there.’

‘There’s an awesome plant-based café called A Mother’s Milk,’ she said. ‘I’ll be there in about thirty minutes. See you then.’

I hung up the phone and changed into something more comfortable. A black athletic hoodie, skinny track pants and a pair of hi-top sneakers. I opened the door and headed into the lobby. But I realized I had forgotten my wallet. I turned around and went back inside. And I rummaged through a pile of pants and clothes on my bedroom floor. I found it stashed inside the pocket my work pants from the other day. It was bundled with the little bag that had the vaporizer and the sacred herb inside. Something told me I should take it.

About fifteen minutes later, I walked down a shady narrow alley somewhere in the city. The maps application on my phone said it was the fastest route. But it didn’t look like the safest. There wasn’t another person in sight. Only piles of rubbish and used needles. They were scattered on the cracked pavement. And the two parallel walls on either side were covered in graffiti and gang tags.

Suddenly, a cold tingle swept over my skin and my heart skipped a beat. I felt like I was being followed. I tried to brush the eerie sensation and kept my hands close to my body and walked a little faster.

Then, I heard a crackling sound above me. I looked up and saw a slim man standing on top of the wall. He was wearing a navy business suit with a skinny tie and a white shirt. And he had sunken brown eyes that looked wide and maniacal. I noticed visible scars on his right eye and under his lip. And he had messy greyish-blue hair that reached to his shoulders.

‘You seem weak,’ he said, with a disgusted expression on his face. ‘A mindless fool. And someone who is completely unaware of his surroundings.’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘Another surprise test. Just like I thought.’

‘A surprise test?’ said the blue-haired man, unwittingly.

‘Alright listen, you can drop the act,’ I said. ‘Allison told me there were no more surprised. I’d better give her a call.’ I reached for my pocket. And tried to pull out my phone.

In the split of a second, the man on the wall front-flipped down and landed in front of me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me forward, throwing me off my balance. And then he round-house kicked me in the back of the head. I flew face-first into the ground. But I used my hands to protect my face, badly grazing them in the process. My phone flew into the air and landed directly into his hand. A perfect catch.

‘Oh, look, it’s ringing,’ he said. He held up the screen and showed me.

‘Hey, are you nearly here?’ said Allison, on the other end of the line.

‘I’m afraid he’s run into some trouble, little sister,’ said the blue-haired man.

‘Deven...’ she said, in a concerned voice. ‘If you lay a finger on him, I swear, I’ll-’

‘Too late,’ said the blue-haired man. He placed his right foot on my back. And he stomped me into the ground. ‘I don’t know why you took an interest in this guy. He’s hopeless, you know. He has no potential.’

‘Kal, you need to get out of there,’ she yelled, hysterically. ‘This isn’t a test. Deven is one of The Illuminated. He’s bad news. And he’ll kill you.’

Deven looked at me and shrugged his shoulders with a sly smile. ‘You know he can’t outrun me,’ he said to her on the phone. ‘I’ll give you one minute to get here. Then you can fight me yourself. And if you win, then you can save him. Otherwise, I’ll snap his spine.’

‘Where the hell are you?’ she yelled.

‘In-between Arlington St and Witter St,’ said Deven. ‘Better step on it.’ He hung up the phone.

‘Allison... didn’t tell me... she had a brother....’ I said, barely able to muster the words. ‘Let alone... one... who was an asshole...’ I was baiting him into a conversation. It seemed like the only thing I could do.

Deven lifted his foot and stomped on me a few times. ‘There’s a reason why you’re under my shoe, you know,’ he said. ‘It’s because you’re nothing more than an insect compared to me.’

‘No... shit...’ I said, coughing and wheezing. ‘I haven’t...been... trained.’

‘All the training in the world wouldn’t make you a third as strong as me,’ he said, angrily. ‘Not everyone is born equal.’ He kicked me in the stomach. It had enough force to send me rolling on the ground.

I opened my eyes. And I saw the little bag with the vaporizer and herb scattered onto the ground. It must have fallen out of my pocket. I reached my arm out and tried to grab it. But he stepped on my hand and pinned it to the ground.

‘You make me sick,’ he said, straightening his tie. He spat on the ground next to me. ‘That herb won’t do shit. I’d still kill you in an instant. Nothing will bridge the gap between us. Your fangs are too small. And they will never reach me.’

‘Maybe not...’ I said, spitting a bit of blood onto the ground. ‘But... I reckon... hers will.’

Allison was behind him. And her green whip with thorn-like spikes launched out of the handle in her hand. It almost struck him on the back of the neck. But he managed to roll out of the way. The whip retracted all the way back into the handle. Allison looked battle-ready with her hair tied into a bun. I could tell by the expression on her face that she meant business. And I was happy to see her.

‘Ah, little sister,’ said Deven. ‘There’s nothing honourable about weapons. You awakeners sure are a wretched bunch.’

Allison didn’t say a word. Instead, she released her whip again. The thorny vine moved faster than the speed of sound. It made a loud cracking sound as it hurled towards Deven’s ribcage. But he effortlessly caught it in the palm of his hand. And blood started gushing out like a waterfall, reminding me that he was somehow still a human. But he cackled maniacally as he squeezed the whip as if he was embracing the pain.

‘Child prodigy my ass,’ he said, grinning like a clown. ‘Deep down, you were always the weaker sibling. And that’s why you were banished. Mother sensed that you were a sheep among wolves.’

‘What’s.... he... talking... about?’ I asked, confused as hell.

Allison didn’t respond. A look of anger swept across her shimmering green eyes. But somehow, she remained calm and composed. She yanked the whip and pulled him forward. And then she raised her knee and slammed it square into his face.

‘You bitch,’ he yelled, as he wiped away a spot of blood that came out of his nose. He let out a beastly roar. And he dashed towards her. She tucked the whip into a holster on the side of her hip and readied her hands.

A full-blown fistfight broke out between them. Their moves were so fast, my eyes could hardly keep up. They punched and kicked and blocked and dodged at the speed of light.

It was the first time I'd seen a fight between an awakener and an illuminated. And it was supernatural. Like an unstoppable force against an immovable object. They ran along walls and flipped between them like a pair of parkour runners. And their faces became more battered and bruised after each blow. I had no idea who was winning. When it looked like one had the upper hand, the other one would lift a gear. And the momentum went back and forth.

I noticed the little bag with the vaporizer and sacred herb was still on the floor next to me. I needed to get my hands on it. Maybe then I could do something to help. I knew I was out of my depth. But doing something was better than nothing. I dragged my body toward it and opened it up. I hesitated for a moment. And I tried to convince myself this wasn't a bad idea. My hands trembled at the thought of fighting again. But I steadied them. And I managed to press the button and inhale. That familiar nutty taste swirled filled my lungs. I held it in my lungs for about ten seconds. Then, I exhaled and – boom. I felt like a superhuman again. And it was good to be back.

Their movements looked slower. My eyes could finally keep up. I watched them throw one attack after another. And I kept an eye out for an opening. For a moment, the momentum turned in Allison's favour. She launched a flurry of punches. Not all of them hit. But she used them to pin him against the wall. Then, in one motion, she backflipped off the wall. And she drew her whip in mid-air and slashed it towards his shoulders. But he raised an arm and caught it in his hand. Losing quite a bit of blood in the process.

This was my opening, I thought. I chucked the vaporizer as hard as I could. And I watched it hurl through the air and towards his forehead. I knew it was a perfect throw the moment it left my hand. There was no doubt in my mind that it was going to hit. So, I pre-emptively charged toward him. He sensed an object coming toward him. And he caught it

in his other hand. But now both his hands were occupied. And he wasn't able to block my kick. I slammed my foot into his solar plexus. It hit him so hard, his body cracked a bit of the wall behind him.

'Sorry about that, asshole,' I said, mocking him. 'Remember when you said my fangs couldn't reach you? Turns out my kicks can.'

He didn't say a word. Instead, he roared like a demon. And he launched himself towards me. Allison stepped in the way to try and block him. But he knocked her aside. And he pummelled toward me like a cannonball. I couldn't react in time. He speared me into the ground and pinned me down with his knee. And he punched me again and again. I felt blood ooze from my mouth and nose as he beat me into a pulp. But he was too strong. I couldn't shake him off.

Suddenly, Allison's thorny whip came out of nowhere. She coiled it around his neck. And she strangled him until he passed out. Quick and efficient like an assassin. I didn't expect a sudden ending like that. But I wasn't complaining.

'I didn't need your help,' she said, trying to catch her breath. 'I was holding back on purpose.'

'Are you serious?' I said as she helped me up off the ground.

'He's an illuminated. And he's a nasty piece of work,' she said, with a sorrowful look in her eyes. 'But he's still my little brother.'

'Fair enough,' I said. 'But if that's what you're like when you're holding back. I'm scared to think about what you're like when you're serious.'

Allison smiled. She wiped a bit of sweat and blood from her brow. 'That was a hell of a kick,' she said.

‘Eh, it was no big deal,’ I said. ‘I vaped the herb. Then I saw an opening. And I took it.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ she said. ‘It’s kind of a big deal. You haven’t even started training yet. And you already helped me take out an illuminated.’

‘I guess so,’ I said, dusting the dirt off my clothes.

‘Anyway, come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s get cleaned up and grab some lunch.’

‘What about your bro?’ I asked. ‘After all that talk about being his big sister. You can’t really leave him here.’

‘His medico will take care of him,’ said Allison.

‘What the hell is a medico?’ I asked.

Suddenly, a small and petite woman walked out from behind a large rubbish bin in the alley. ‘It’s about time someone won,’ said the woman, holding her nose. ‘That smell was driving me insane.’ She was wearing a blue shirt, a red skirt, long black stockings and a white coat with a stethoscope around her neck.

‘What the hell,’ I said, confused. ‘How long have you been there?’

‘The whole time,’ said the petite woman, smiling. ‘My name is Jane. Nice to meet ya.’

‘Illuminated are always hunting and being hunted,’ said Allison. ‘So, they’re all assigned a medico. A personal assistant. Someone skilled in both combat and medical health care.’

I looked at the petite woman up and down. ‘But if she’s one of them. Why isn’t she attacking us?’ I asked.

‘I only fight to defend myself,’ said Jane, giggling. She walked towards Deven and checked his pulse.

‘Allison, tell me something,’ I said, scratching my head. ‘Not only are you related to an illuminated. But you seem to know a lot about them too. What’s the deal?’

Allison looked at me and shook her head. ‘Now’s not the best time, Kal,’ she said. ‘Let’s get out of here. Otherwise, Deven will wake up. And it will be round two.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that,’ said Jane, slapping his face. ‘He’s gonna be out for a while. Looks like you did a number on him. But he’ll be fine.’

Allison nodded. ‘Let’s bounce, Kal’ she said. ‘We should probably find a public restroom and get ourselves cleaned up.’

She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away. I didn’t even have a chance to say goodbye to Jane. She seemed kind of nice. Maybe not all illuminated people were all bad, I thought.

People stopped and stared as we walked across the streets. And I couldn’t blame them. It’s not often you see two people casually walking around battered and bruised. I lifted my hood over my head. About two minutes later, we found a public restroom. I walked into the male one. And the smell was so bad, I felt nauseous. I stood in front of the mirror and lifted up my top, trying to get a better look at all the damage. I had purple and blue bruises all over my chest. But they didn’t hurt as much as the grazed skin on my arms and shoulders. I pulled a bunch of paper towels off the roll. And I used them to dab the wounds, wincing in pain with each touch.

After a while, someone walked in. I discarded all the bloodied paper towels into the bin and headed outside. Allison was already done. She still had scratches and bruises on her face. But they looked a lot more subtle. It seemed like she masked them in some kind of make-up.

‘Alright, how do I look?’ she asked.

Behind the temporary scars, she still had a pretty face. For a moment, I looked into her eyes and thought about how awesome she was. The kind of girl you'd only ever meet in your dreams.

'Good,' I said, blushing. I looked down at the ground in embarrassment.

'Uhh, alrighty then,' she laughed. 'Alright, let's go.'

After walking for a couple of minutes, we made it to the café. It looked small and dingey on the outside. But on the inside, it had exotic wooden tables and chairs under an open sunroof. And it had plants and succulents everywhere.

'Hey there, welcome,' said the waitress in the front, as she scribbled something into a piece of paper in her hand. Then, she looked up and saw our faces. And she didn't look thrilled. 'Oh, umm, sorry. But I can't let you in like that.'

'But we've been in a terrible accident,' said Allison, in a hysterical tone. 'Somebody knocked us off our bikes. Please, it's been a rough day. And we're starving.'

I stood there like a stunned mullet and nodded my head. I was a terrible liar. And even worse at pretending. The waitress looked at me and scrunched her lip on one side.

'No can do,' said the waitress, shaking her head. 'It's unhygienic. And it's against company policy. I'm sure you understand.'

'No, I don't understand,' said Allison, scowling. 'You can say goodbye to a long-term customer.' She stormed off down the footpath. I followed closely behind.

Allison led me into a small empty playground. It had a set of swings, a slippery dip, a seesaw and a row of monkey bars. They were all painted bright red. A contrast to the brown bark beneath them that smelt a bit like eucalyptus. It reminded me of better times. She sat down on the swing on the left. And I took the one on the right.

‘Alright, look,’ I said. ‘If you’re gonna train me. I feel like I need to know your backstory.’

Allison slumped her head down, which made some of her hair slip out of the bun and fall down the sides of her face. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘My family comes from a long line of illuminated members. I had a strict training program at an early age. Other little girls were playing with dolls and skipping on ropes. But I was meditating and being taught how to fight.’

‘Sounds rough,’ I said.

‘It was,’ she said. ‘By the time I was twelve, I was considered a child prodigy. It was a lot of pressure. All the other kids were out to get me. Their parents wanted them to prove they were better than me.’

‘Then what happened?’ I asked.

‘I made it to the final round of an entrance exam to one of the most prestigious illuminated academies,’ she said. ‘It’s like a private school. But it’s exclusive to illuminated members. And I needed to fight another child prodigy. A girl named Amare, who also happened to be my best friend. It was a close fight. But I had the upper hand. And then, something happened...’

A look of sadness and sorrow crossed her face. I even noticed a tear slide down her cheek. But she quickly turned away to hide it. Memories can be painful. And they can strain our hearts for the rest of our lives.

‘She was running out of steam. And she overcommitted to an ambitious attack,’ she said. ‘I blocked it. And I had a clean shot to land a final blow on her chest. But my intuition kicked in. It told me it the shot would kill her.’

‘Oh my god,’ I said, jumping off the swing. ‘You didn’t do it, right?’

Allison shook her head. ‘At that moment, I looked into her eyes and saw all the memories we had together,’ she said. ‘Even after all the training and emotional numbness that had been drilled into me, I cared more about her than passing some stupid exam.’

‘And you forfeited?’ I asked, tilting my head to the side.

‘Something like that,’ she said. ‘She noticed I hesitated. And she seized the opportunity. She slashed me in the leg and on the cheek with her dagger. And I’m sure she was aiming for the arteries in my thigh and throat. They would have been fatal if I moved even a fraction of a second later.’

‘Damn, so she didn’t hold back,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘Not only that,’ said Allison. ‘But she went all out too. She swept my leg. And then she stomped me into the ground like a dirty cigarette, yelling and screaming like a woman possessed.’

‘Sounds like a bitch,’ I said. ‘What was she saying?’

‘You bitch. You coward. You’ve always thought you were better than me,’ she said. ‘Stuff like that. I guess she got offended. And then her primal rage took over. I ended up in the hospital. And nobody came to visit me. Not even my own mother. I had been disowned.’

‘That’s rough,’ I said, putting my arm on her shoulder.

Allison nodded. ‘I left my past behind and became a florist. It wasn’t much. But it made me happy. And in time, Sera opened my eyes to the light. She showed me that compassion as a strength, not a weakness. And I’ve been an awakener ever since.’

‘Everything happens for a reason,’ I said. ‘All the decisions I made led me here. It’s the same for you. And for everyone else too. Life is like a game of poker. Not everyone is dealt a good hand. But we need to roll with the punches and work with what. And if with hard work and a bit of luck, a better hand might come along.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Allison, with a hint of a smile.

‘That’s what happened to me,’ I said. ‘I quit my job without a plan. Then, you approached me in the parklands. And my life has never been the same. I feel more alive and more like myself than ever before.’

Allison climbed off the swing and onto her own two feet. ‘Let’s see if you still feel that way after your first training session,’ she said, smiling.

I didn’t know what she had planned. But I was readier than ever.

Chapter 5

A month had passed, and I was already knee-deep in training. I moved into a room at the manor. Allison said it was for the best. The training happened all-day, every-day. And it followed the same strict routine.

I'd wake up at five in the morning. Then, I'd meditate for half an hour and do some physical training. Sometimes it was things like reaction time drills, obstacle courses and coordination exercises. Other times it was strength training, martial arts techniques and weapons drills. At seven-forty-five, I'd eat breakfast with everyone in the dining room. Then, I'd spend two and a half hours doing errands around the manor. Things like sweeping, gardening, chopping wood. And whatever else was needed. I didn't need to pay rent. But I needed to make myself useful. It was their way of letting me earn my place. It was hard work and it doubled up as exercise and weight training. At eleven-thirty, I'd eat lunch with everyone. Then, I'd spend all afternoon doing one-on-one combat training. Allison always kicked my ass. But I learned a lot along the way. After that, I'd eat dinner with the others and train with her again until eleven o'clock. Then I'd have a shower and pass out on my bed. And do it all again the next day.

I didn't feel any different. Not yet anyway. A little stronger and faster perhaps. But nothing like the sacred herb made me feel. I knew it wouldn't happen overnight. But it was hard to stay motivated sometimes. Still, I had no choice but to keep going. I didn't want to go back to my old life. I was the happiest I'd been in a long time. But I had to keep it a secret, though. My family and friends assumed I'd moved into a guesthouse because the rent was cheap. And I rolled with that story.

I couldn't remember what day it was. The whole week seemed like a blur. I was in the middle of a meditation session in the morning, sitting inside a small square gazebo. The wooden floor wasn't very comfortable to sit on. But a flat cushion made it a lot better. I had my eyes closed and I was listening to the sounds of the critters singing and chirping in the garden. But I was so tired, I fell asleep for a second or two.

'You're drifting off again,' said Allison, slapping me on the head. 'Too much equanimity. Not enough concentration.'

'How the hell do you know what's going on inside my head?' I said, with one eye open. 'For all you know, I could be in a deep state of meditation. And you're interrupting me.'

Allison shrugged. 'I'll be back in thirty,' she said, as she walked into the garden.

I closed my eyes and focused on my breath. After a while, the mind chatter faded away. For a moment, my awareness unified with my breath. But I got too excited. And I thought about all the cool things I could do in the flow state. And then it was gone, like a slippery eel in the ocean.

A training drill came next. And it was an obstacle course that required me to run, jump and climb at all the right times. It was hell on earth. And the hardest part was tiptoeing on top of some floating tiles in a long pond of water. It's not that it was impossible. But light-footedness wasn't my speciality. I failed again and again and wound up drenched. But I made it to the third tile – a new personal best. Allison clapped her hands in excitement as she watched on the side. But I wasn't as enthusiastic. I wanted to make it the whole way.

'Dry yourself,' said Allison, throwing me a towel. 'You've earned yourself a break. And you're gonna need it.'

'Great,' I said, rolling my eyes. 'What are you gonna do to me next?'

‘Something special,’ she said, smiling.

‘A date?’ I said, jokingly.

‘In your dreams,’ she said, punching me on the arm. ‘It’s a cool combat training exercise. And a chance to prove yourself.’

I wasn’t looking forward to it. In fact, I was dreading it. Allision was the nicest person I’d ever met. But she was ruthless. I guess it was a remnant of her time as a prodigy for the bad guys.

A few hours and many chores later, she summoned me to the training room. It was a square room painted white with red padded floors. And it had a buddha shrine with three candles on the wall opposite the entrance. Allision was sitting in the middle with her face buried into a phone.

‘Alright,’ I said, scratching my head nervously. ‘What’s this cool combat exercise for today?’

She looked up with a beaming smile. And she pointed to a red ribbon tied onto the side of her belt, near her left hip. ‘You’re gonna try to snatch this ribbon off me,’ she said.

‘Oh, come on,’ I said, hopelessly. ‘I probably couldn’t even do that with the sacred herb. There’s no way I’d be able to snatch it in an even contest.’

‘Well, duh,’ she said, poking her tongue. ‘But I’m gonna be playing a game on my phone. That’ll make things a little easier for you.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ I said, laughing.

‘Try me,’ she said, with a menacing grin. ‘Oh and there’s another thing...’

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘You’ll need to snatch it within five minutes,’ she said. ‘Otherwise, you’ll do nothing but chores for a couple of weeks.’

‘Bullshit,’ I said, wincing at the thought. ‘I couldn’t think of anything worse.’

‘Then find a way to snatch it,’ she said. ‘It’s not rocket science. And I believe in you. I’m sure you’ll find a way.’

‘Fine,’ I said, unconvincingly. ‘What game are you playing anyway?’

‘Tetris,’ she said. ‘An oldie but a goodie.’

‘Alrighty then,’ I said. ‘Well, I’m ready when you are.’

‘Okay,’ she said, looking at her phone. ‘Three, two, one... and, go!’

I dashed towards her as fast as I could. It was the most obvious choice. But she cartwheeled out of the way with one hand, never taking an eye off the screen as she mashed the buttons on her phone with the other. I tumbled and crashed into the wall. But I protected my face with my hands. I made the same move again. But this time with more aggression. It didn’t make a difference. I tried again and again. But the more I tried, the worse I did. It reminded me of a childhood game called piggy in the middle. Two kids would pass a ball between them. And a third kid squirmed and struggled in the middle trying to get it. I was that kid once upon a time. And I felt like that kid again. But I was a different person now. And I needed to find a way to snatch that ribbon.

‘Too much concentration. Not enough equanimity,’ said Allision, with her eyes fixed on the phone.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, huffing and puffing as I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

‘You’re too focused on the snatching the ribbon. And not equanimous about the situation,’ she said. ‘You keep charging in like a stubborn bull chasing a red flag. But it’s not working. Stop wasting time. And do something else.’

I took a deep breath and focused on the situation rather than the ribbon. If I rushed at her again, she'd cartwheel out of the way. And she probably expected me to do it again. Maybe I could use that to my advantage, I thought. I rushed towards her again. But this time, I didn't over-commit. I went a little slower. And I anticipated the moment she'd cartwheel. Then, I turned my feet and dove in that direction. And I stretched out my arms to try and snatch the ribbon. But she pirouetted upside down on her fingertips. And then she flipped back onto her feet.

'I'm close a new high score,' she said, excitedly.

Damn it. There was no point trying to think a couple of steps ahead. She reacted too fast anyway. A chess master had no place in a battle of speed and reaction. The strategy is important. But I couldn't win by foresight alone. I needed to move and react fast enough to keep up with it. And I needed to make it happen quickly.

'Two minutes are gone,' she giggled. 'Better get on with it.'

For some reason, I thought about my past. And all the times I'd failed. From soccer trials to school tests, to messing up dates with girls. Looking back, my life had been nothing but failure. To some people, completing a finance degree was a success. And landing a high-salaried job was even better. But it never felt like success to me. If anything, it felt like an easy way out. Like I had listened to my mind rather than my heart. And the same pattern happened in my practice too. I had been thinking too much and feeling too little. It withered my intuition. And it separated me from the moment. But the flow state was the antidote. It was the only way I'd even come close to snatching that ribbon. And I needed to tap into it, right here and now.

Thoughts circled around my mind like a hurricane. Some came up with strategies to try and snatch the ribbon. Others tried to convince me they would never work. And told me

that I simply wasn't good enough. But I didn't listen. Instead, I watched them swirl and spiral around like a whirlwind inside my head. Then, it happened. Somewhere in the eye of the hurricane, I noticed a silent witness. That one aspect of my experience that had been with me since childhood. My beliefs had changed, my body had changed and my friends had changed. But there was a silent witness deep within me. And it was responsible for the continuity throughout my life. A state of pure awareness. The part of my consciousness that went on that crazy psychedelic trip a few weeks ago. And at that moment, I tapped into the flow state.

Allison looked at me in the corner of her eye. She stared at me for a moment with an odd expression. 'You gonna stand there all day?' she said. 'Or are you gonna come and get this ribbon.'

I didn't even listen. I started moving towards her, tiptoeing like I was treading on the floating tiles in the pond. My body and mind felt open. They were fluid and nimble. And ready to react to anything that happened. I was in the moment. Not as much as the sacred herb made me feel. But it was a step closer than I had ever been. I closed the distance between us. She cartwheeled three times across the room. But I managed to stay close enough to keep up the pressure. And then an opportunity presented itself.

Something bad must have happened up in her game. Because for a moment, she looked a little irritated. And she lost her bearings. She wound up pincered in a corner. Still, I knew she'd find a way out. I figured she'd either slide under my legs, flip over me, or run along the wall. The best option was to have her flip over me. It created the best opening to swipe the ribbon. I picked up some momentum. And I slid towards her on the soles of my shoes, squatting my legs to stay low. As I expected, she front-flipped over me. It was the logical move to make. Then, I reached up and swiped at the ribbon while she was upside-down in mid-air. She slapped my arm out of the way with her hand. But it presented

another opportunity to strike. I reached for her arm with my other hand. And I pulled her towards me, trying to snatch the ribbon with my other hand. But she pressed both of her legs into my chest and pinned me to the ground.

‘Three and a half minutes have passed,’ she said, looking down at me with a smile. ‘And that’s the best you can do?’

I kept my eye on the ribbon. It dangled within an arm’s length. I tried to snatch it. And I felt its edge swipe against my fingertips. But she flipped into the air and landed square on her feet.

‘Cmon, dude,’ she said, mockingly. ‘You’re really getting desperate now.’

I lifted myself off the ground. And I stood behind her, looking at her back. She was incredible. A seasoned warrior with the mind of a supercomputer. I wondered whether she was a human at all. Nothing seemed to work. I needed to do something outside of the square. And I had an idea.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. This was my last chance. I had to make it work. And for the first time in my life, I believed that I could. But I didn’t believe in Kal. The person who was nothing more than my idea of myself. A culmination of all the memories and experiences I’d had. I believed in the silent witness behind my ego. The one who had been there from the start.

I opened my eyes and launched my final attack. Everything looked brighter and more vibrant. And her moves looked slower. It was no different from the effects of the sacred herb. But I didn’t have time to notice, let alone dwell in it. I was focused on one thing and one thing only. That god damned ribbon on the side of the hip.

I raced towards her like a bat out of hell, flipping and somersaulting to match her movements. I threw punch after punch and kick after kick faster, trying to land an attack to

discombobulate her and stop her from playing the game on her phone. Until now, I had been blindly going for the ribbon. But if I went for her instead and more specifically, her phone, she'd be torn between protecting her game and protecting the ribbon. And it would give me an opening.

Allison blocked and dodged everything I threw. But she had to focus more on me than the game. And it was taking a toll. I caught a glimpse of her screen. And I noticed it was half-covered in blocks. A sign she wasn't doing too well. She ran across the walls and vaulted between them. Still, I kept up with her. Although I struggled to land a blow.

'Nice moves,' she said, huffing and puffing. 'But there are only thirty seconds left, ya know.'

I picked up the pace and backed her against the wall. Then, I threw a flurry of punches. She blocked most of them. But her grip on her phone loosened for a moment. And it nearly wobbled out of her hand. I grabbed her wrist with one arm. And I reached for the ribbon with the other. But she twisted her body and shielded it with her knee. And she managed to unshackle her arm. But I wasn't actually going for the ribbon at all. I stopped halfway and reached for her phone, knocking it out of her hand and into the air.

'Nooooooo!' she yelled, throwing her hands in the air to try and catch it. At the same time, I swiped the ribbon as fast as I could. I was almost certain I got it. But I didn't have a chance to check. She dropkicked me in the chest and knocked me across the room. I hit the wall and fell onto the ground.

'Oh shit,' she said, with her hands over her mouth. 'Sorry about that. But you were gonna mess up my score.'

'It's.... alright....' I said, grimacing in pain.

‘Times up anyway,’ she said. ‘Solid effort, though. I’m impressed you managed to touch my phone. But it wasn’t the point of the test. You shoulda done something about the ribbon.’

‘You mean this one?’ I said, holding it up in my hand.

Allision’s mouth dropped to the ground in horror. A warm and soothing feeling of euphoric satisfaction washed over me. It was something I hadn’t felt in a long time. And I missed it.