

All eyes were on Jackie. As she was finally able to get up from the ground and collect herself, once that heavy man had gotten off her, she found herself surrounded. The whole squad that had been coming after her had now reached her, but where they would take their actions from here seemed to be beyond even their own imagination. They just stood around, as always, only now they appeared more intimidating than before, more focused on Jackie. They were boys and girls, all either in their late teens or early twenties. As Jackie looked across their faces, she wondered which one of these misled individuals she should try to reach out to, try to reason with. Could she possibly have an ally among them? She made eye contact with a few, but in no case did she get any sense of sympathy from them, instead just contemptuous stares that felt disheartening.

“You’re all a cloud,” Jackie said to a random young woman in front of her.

The student raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, as if to say, *is that the best insult you’ve got?*

But Jackie had merely been thinking out loud. She was taken aback by her own comment; it made her feel like she was losing her concentration, and that was worrying.

*Don’t pass out; don’t pass out,* she urged herself.

She needed to go on trying to reason with these students, but more effectively.

She turned to the heavy man behind her, the one who had tripped her. There was *pride* in his face—that unattractive mug

that seemed to have preserved the most unfortunate features from childhood into his adult years. He was *Baby-face Runner* to Jackie, running after girls and tripping them on the pavement. Judging from his shit-grin, looking back at her, he hadn't changed his mind about anything from lying on top of her.

"I was told this was still a university," Jackie said to him. "By Athina. She said she would *vouch* for me." Did that have any meaning at this point? Could it possibly save Jackie?

"Let's just get it over with," a girl called out, impatiently—possibly it was the same as the one who had made a face at Jackie.

"*No*," someone shouted from the top of the steps leading up to Square four.

Everyone turned.

Hawthorne was standing in the third step from the top, looking flustered, struggling to catch his breath. Had he been running after Jackie, himself?

"Bring her up here," Hawthorne shouted. "*Everyone* should witness this."

The comment pleased the crowd. All of them were smiling, as they turned to Jackie.

She averted her eyes from their gazes and then noticed the leather bag of Professor Gregory Waters, still lying on the ground, where she had dropped it, by the entrance to the building. Jackie ducked down and grabbed it. Her movement brought out reactions of alarm in the crowd around her; those who noticed it seemed to assume that Jackie was trying to escape. She heard a few yelps,

but then as Jackie stepped back and remained static, now with the leather bag in her arms, the crowd stayed in its place as well.

“Were you stealing this, little bird?” someone asked her.

Baby-face Runner turned to Hawthorne.

“*I’m the one who caught her,*” he shouted. “*Remember that.*”

“Then bring her up here now,” Hawthorne called back.

“With pleasure,” responded Jackie’s captor as he turned to her.

“What about the bag she’s holding?” asked a student standing next to him.

“Let’s see for how long she manages to hold on to it once we get to work on her,” Baby-face Runner responded with an ever-widening grin.

His comment was received with chuckles from the crowd.

Baby-face Runner pushed Jackie to move on. He stayed at her heels as she approached the steps leading up, as an indication that he would keep her close to him and not let her out of his sight. Jackie obediently climbed the steps. At the top she discovered that even more students had gathered in Square four than down in Square three. This would be a busy day on campus, even back in the days when the university still had classes. Everyone was there for her.

Jackie’s captor grabbed her by the shoulder and squeezed it until it hurt, so that she wouldn’t try to get away from him. This way he steered her to the right.

Instead of heading into the crowd, the two of them went along the building, into the corner of the square, up to a glass door

that led to a corridor on the other side, yet she wasn't meant to go in there; instead they stopped.

"We will stay together here," said Baby-face Runner. "Just the two of us."

"Almost as good as a date for you, isn't it?" Jackie retorted.

"Oh, much better, actually," he responded, throwing her a devious smile.

He turned away from Jackie, towards the crowd.

There were already more students in the square now than there had been a mere minute ago. This delay wouldn't buy Jackie much time. Even if she had heard Hawthorne announce that *everybody* should be there to witness her punishment, all of them might have showed up already. There was even Athina; Jackie noticed her now, on the other side of the square.

Jackie raised her hand to catch the blonde woman's attention, but her guard was quick to grab her arm and force it back down. Athina was Jackie's only remaining hope. The blonde woman had demonstrated earlier how she had the whole crowd under her command.

Athina had been looking in Jackie's direction, but now something was distracting the blonde woman—someone walking up to her, holding a chair over his head. There were more boys approaching Athina, carrying something else that Jackie couldn't see. Athina stepped aside to let the boys pass. They put down whatever they had been holding: a folded table that they now opened up. They put the chair on top of it, turning it into a throne. The boys then helped Athina up onto the platform they had created, where she sat down in the chair. This way she ended up

facing the center of the square, with the circular stone benches that had possibly served as a water-fountain originally.

There were still more students arriving. By now hardly any more of them would fit into the square. Jackie noticed the bare-chested kid who had confronted her when she arrived on campus. He was there with his friends. It looked like everyone was had showed up by now, the entire student body.

Yet Wesley was nowhere to be seen. He was probably back at the car already, where Jackie should have gone herself to begin with. Instead of risking her life for the notebooks of Professor Gregory Waters. In any case, Wesley would be just as helpless against this mob as Jackie was herself. If he made any attempts at saving her he would most likely end up dead in that ditch over in Square five.

Jackie's view of the crowd became blocked by a couple of tall boys who seemed to have purposefully taken a position in front of her. Now that most of the students were out of sight for Jackie, she wondered if she might be able to escape, through the entrance to the building behind her. She turned to check it out. The doorway was still closed, though that wouldn't necessarily mean that it would be locked.

"You think you'll manage to escape from us the second time?" asked the man guarding Jackie, Baby-face Runner. He had noticed her glancing at the door. "You're thinking about it. Admit it. I could tell them that you tried to escape. That will probably add something to your punishment."

It had already seemed like a certainty to Jackie that addition to her punishment was inevitable. There would be no mercy for

her. Everything would only escalate from here. There was still plenty of space at the bottom of that construction site in Square five. Would Baby-face Runner know anything more about that story?

“This isn’t the first time this has happened, is it?” she asked him, keeping a steady voice, for now.

“Yes, it is-“

It sounded as if he had meant to go on to elaborate, but then cut himself off and turned silent. He was back to ignoring Jackie. She felt reaffirmed in her conviction, as the comment had clearly gotten to him. He had realized that he couldn’t threaten her the way he had just tried. She already knew about the ones who had been *killed* on campus. It would never be just about giving her a spanking. From her captor’s reaction, Jackie seemed to have hit the nail on the head, yet that should be disheartening to her.

Someone was clapping—only a couple of people at first, but then more joined in, including Baby-face Runner himself. Eventually everyone in the square seemed to be cheering for Hawthorne, who was climbing onto the stone structure in the center of the square, where he ended up towering over the crowd.

Baby-face Runner turned to Jackie.

“Come on,” he said.

Jackie kept the professor’s leather bag pressed against her midsection as she stumbled on into the crowd. Baby-face Runner went before her. Somehow that bag felt increasingly important to Jackie. Couldn’t it serve as a piece of evidence in her favor, during her trial? Would Jackie even be given a chance to defend herself? In any case she should demand it. She could show them

inside the bag, revealing that there was nothing of any value in it. Just notebooks. Surely that didn't warrant any severe punishment. But her sentencing had been for challenging Hawthorne anyway. Now he awaited her, up on the stone structure, silently observing her approach with her captor.

She hesitated as she came up to the circular stone benches, but was then shoved so forcefully that she lost her hold on the leather bag, which fell to the ground. Jackie couldn't get herself to bend over to pick it up, not with all these hostile people behind her. Instead she went ahead and jumped up on the stone structure. Baby-face Runner followed here there.

Jackie was now face to face with Athina, who observed her from the throne, not saying anything to intervene. As Jackie had realized already, she had no allies among the students.

"A *punishment is a necessary evil*," Hawthorne shouted, theatrical as always.

"A punishment for what?" Jackie interjected.

"For upsetting the order," Hawthorne responded without hesitation. He turned back to the crowd. "She's been promised eighty lashes."

"Eighty-one," someone shouted from the crowd.

"Eighty-two," called another one.

"Eighty-five."

"A hundred."

There was an uproar of laughter.

"Is this the *order*, you're preserving?" Jackie asked Hawthorne.

She looked across the assembly. There was no sign of Wesley anywhere. Clearly he had gotten away already.

At the back of the crowd someone was holding up a long stick. It came down over the heads of those standing in front of the one carrying it, falling into their hands to then be passed on in the same fashion, crowd-surfing, all the way to the stage that Jackie was standing on. Hawthorne received the stick and handed it to Baby-face Runner.

“You will do the honor.”

The man accepted the stick and tested it on the air, whacking several times.

There was more cheering from the crowd.

Jackie turned to address the audience.

“It’s not just *him*,” she called out. “It’s not just him doing this. It’s *all* of you.”

“I’ll ask you to repeat that back to them after the first twenty licks,” said Baby-face Runner.

Jackie turned to him.

“You are a sadist,” she said.

That accusation didn’t seem to bother him in the least, as he nodded in agreement and smiled, showing his teeth.

The crowd turned silent, waiting in awe for the show to begin.

And then it finally came, the sign of Wesley.

Jackie wouldn’t have known about the explosives from the construction site that were kept in Square three, hadn’t Wesley told her about them earlier. He had mentioned *tubes of dynamite in an arsenal* to her. Now they had gone off, as there was a

powerful explosion, producing a wave of rumbling throughout the entire campus ground. It caused the buildings to tremble, as well as the stone structure that Jackie was standing on. Yet she was able to keep herself from falling off it. No one seemed to have gotten hurt, as everyone had gathered in this square already, safely away from the explosion. Maybe an admirable attempt to save Jackie, however futile—or so it seemed, in the split second that Jackie realized what was going on.

But at that point it hadn't yet come out that the reactions of the people around her would be quite different. There were screams, ongoing even after the rumbling of the explosion had died out. The students had started pushing each other. More and more of them started screaming hysterically, including Hawthorne himself, who was getting up from the ground, having fallen off the stone structure. Baby-face Runner was still standing, yet he had dropped his stick, and now there was a dark stain visible around the crotch of his trousers. He had wet himself.

*The meteor*, Jackie thought to herself. *They all think it's the meteor.*

She jumped down from the stone construction and landed right next to Gregory Waters' bag. She reached for it and pulled the bag up from the ground, and then sprinted on, through the crowd of panic-struck students. None of them made any attempts at stopping her.

She took the steps down to Square three in leaps of three steps at a time, to the get smoke into her nose on her way. The damage caused by the explosion was much more evident down

there, as there were cracks in the buildings, though Jackie merely caught a glimpse of the sight as she ran onwards.

And there appeared Wesley, running towards her.

“*To the car,*” she called to him.

He turned and sprinted alongside her.

They went through the entrance where they had come originally. Beyond the door, they retraced their steps, running back the same way, through the corridor, down the stairs and out of the building. Outside they went on running, towards the parking lot, up to the car. They hurried inside it. Wesley started the engine.

Jackie turned for one last look at the university, however the campus was now out of sight for them. All they could see was the top of the tallest buildings.

Wesley reversed out of the space and drove the car back onto the road. He went on in the same direction as before, further away from the city and Wesley’s home. Jackie didn’t feel like asking him where he was taking her this time, as she was content as long as it would be *far* away from that university.

“That was effective,” she said instead, having only just caught her breath.

“Dynamite,” Wesley said, short of breath himself.

“I know,” Jackie said. “I remember.”

He slowed down and turned the car off the road, and then stopped it. No one was coming after them.

“They thought the explosion was the meteor,” Jackie said. “Did you know?”

“I thought of it, but I wasn’t counting on it,” he responded. “I figured it would at least be a distraction.”

“It sure was. Thank you.”

“I suppose the professor really wasn’t there,” Wesley said.

“No, but I got to his office.” Jackie held up the leather bag. “I can hardly believe I was able to bring this along.”

“What’s in it?”

“I think it has to be something important,” Jackie said, but left it at that.

She pulled a notebook out of the bag.

“We shouldn’t have left my apartment,” Wesley said.

“You were going to leave it anyway. To go to the mall, remember?”

Jackie was feeling pleased with what she had managed to collect from the professor’s office, now that she had avoided being beaten and possibly killed by the mob of students.

“If we just go on driving, we’ll run out of gasoline, eventually,” Wesley said.

Jackie looked around.

“I don’t think this is a safe enough location to stay,” she observed. “Not this close to the road.”

“Right,” said Wesley.

He started the car and quickly drove back onto the road.

Jackie looked at the pages in the notebook, but the professor’s scribbblings were mostly illegible, especially while the car shaking.

*Whatever he was writing in here was meant to be private,* Jackie thought to herself. This hadn't been intended for anyone else to read it.

There weren't just words on the pages, but drawings as well, though they were just as unclear as the writing. There was almost a whole page of scribbles, with stick figures and even more obscure symbols; some had 'X' crossed over them, others had circles drawn around them.

"Does this look like a safe enough location for you?" Wesley asked her.

Jackie looked up from the notebook.

He had stopped the car next to a tall and wide building. In front of it there was a sign that read *Canyon Club Hotel*.

"Let's hope it's abandoned," Wesley said. "With no university students."

"If there's *anyone* in there at all, we shouldn't take our chances," Jackie said.

"Maybe we'll be able to wash up, at least," said Wesley. "Let's bring our rations along with us."

Earlier that day Paul had been lying on his back on the ground and next to him the coolest chick ever to be the daughter of a minister—someone who had initiated an intercourse with Paul, out there in the open, even while her whole family was nearby. Now Paul was back in the same position, lying on the ground and again she was there with him, but this time she was standing over him and her whole family was there with her, including her brother. He was the real problem, him and that foot of his that now came bursting into Paul's side, terminating Paul's reflection of the situation.

Paul gaped into the air and felt raindrops entering his mouth. He clutched around his waist and rolled onto his stomach. With that Paul became properly soaked. Keeping that same position, he now heard the agitated voices of the bystanders through the pouring rain, the residents of the campsite who had come out of their tents to see what the disturbance was all about. But Paul couldn't catch what they were saying, yet from the tone of their voices he gathered that they were berating the reverend's son. And that wasn't surprising to Paul. These friendly, peaceful people, who had gathered in the campsite after meeting up at church, would obviously have issues with seeing one of their own kicking a defenseless man who was lying down.

Even if his position gave Paul the advantage of gaining sympathy from the onlookers, he now tried to get up, however the ache in his stomach and the slippery wet grass turned out to be

enough of an obstacle to deter him in his attempt. Instead he merely sat up.

What became instantly clear to him, as he looked upon the people around him, was that the voices he had thought he heard had been a complete misperception, caused by the clattering of the rain. They were all just standing by, silently, without intervening, and Helen's brother seemed ready to strike Paul the third time.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded, through the pouring rain.

*Why had Paul come there?* The question threw him off. Paul had been ready to beg his attacker for mercy, would have confessed to what he had done with Helen and even apologized for it, sincerely. But now, with this question, Paul wasn't even given the chance. Why had he come there—originally? What did it matter? Was the brother alluding to some malicious intentions of Paul's from before he had even set foot on the campsite?

"I was invited," Paul tried.

"You freaking stalker," Helen's brother growled back at him. "How dare you make a pass at my sister?"

*A pass?* That was rich. More like Paul had obliged her, when she had spread her legs out for him.

He searched for Helen among the onlookers and caught her, there in the back, yet now she was looking away from him, pretending not to have heard the false allegations of her brother. The others stood by, watching as if this were something on television—rather than an act of violence that was being carried out right before their eyes.

Paul was finally able to stand up and face his attacker, though this appeared only to embolden the latter, the way he now raised his clenched fists.

“*Wait*,” Paul tried, raising his hands to show his open palms. “This is a misunderstanding.”

“Yeah, right. You see these people?” His assailant pointed at the crowd. “They wouldn’t let you take this beating if you didn’t deserve it. They’re not helping you, are they?”

“They trust you, you homicidal maniac. They assume you must be in the right, but you’re not.”

Helen’s brother had to have practiced it before, the skillful way in which he first struck Paul’s hands out of the way and then immediately followed with a calculated punch to Paul’s ribcage, which sent him sprawling back.

*Homicidal* hadn’t even been an overstatement. Paul’s attacker could easily end up finishing him off by carrying on this way. Paul felt for the spot where he had just been hit, but then he was immediately struck again, this time in the face.

He turned away from his attacker. Paul needed to run, but couldn’t; he couldn’t find the co-ordination of his limbs necessary to make an effective escape. He would only manage to *walk* away, at most.

Helen would maybe have helped him if he had put up a better, less pathetic, show for her; Alfred and Eliza, if he hadn’t annoyed them so much when they let him stay in their tent. At this point it would only be a matter of allowing Paul to leave for them, however slowly, at his own pace.

Yet the fight wasn't over; Paul turned to see Helen's brother, still coming in after him. Was it necessary for this to become a fight to the death? In that case Paul would have to fight dirty, were he to have any chance—smashing his opponent's head in with a rock, even. But there were no rocks on the ground. These people hadn't brought rocks with them from the city. There were only the tents and whatever was inside them.

Paul moved as fast as he could to one of the tents, with his attacker staying close behind him.

Paul tripped, pathetically—it had probably seemed to the others like a part of a pattern for him at this point, however this time it had been purposeful. Paul had reached the ground where the string of the tent was pegged down. He put his hands before him, giving off the impression that it was merely to push himself back up, yet at the same time he slid a finger into the circular shape of the peg and then, as he got up, he forcefully tore the peg out of the ground, with the connected string coming loose.

Paul turned around. Helen's brother was advancing on him yet again, but this time Paul landed his first punch on his assailant's face, the pointy end of the peg going into the temple by his left eye.

Helen's brother drew back, screaming, clutching for the side of his face. Now, finally, there were shouts of alarm coming from the crowd as well. They had seen how Paul had gotten him, or at least they sensed that something had gone wrong for their side. Now they all rushed in to intervene, attending to Paul's attacker—Helen in the front. She got her brother and removed his hand from his wound, so that she could see it.

Paul kept his fighting stance. Whoever else was coming for him, he would be ready to face them. He wouldn't hesitate to puncture Helen's head the same way at this point. Or old Alfred's. Or even Alfred's wife.

Yet none of them had moved in to take over the fight with Paul, but were instead set on assisting Helen's brother to retreat.

"*You murderer,*" Helen shouted at Paul, just before she led her brother away, along with the rest of the people.

Paul suddenly had a realization that Helen had just spared him a great deal—that he should be thankful that he hadn't ended up in a situation where he would beat Helen up and then after that even the old couple.

He turned around, and this time he found himself capable of running away. He ran towards the area where he had gotten it on with Helen. Then he went on, beyond that point, into the forest, where neither of them had dared go before.

There, Paul would get to be by himself, at last. He would get to die alone, either from his wounds or the meteor hitting the earth—or pneumonia.

Paul slid in the grass and fell, adding one more injury to his already fractured body, this time to the back of his right thigh. He crawled up to a tree, and looked back. Yes, he was alone now.

Would this rain ever stop?

Paul heard something through the rain: a voice, and this time it wasn't merely an impression from the commotion of the rainfall, as before. He could even make out the words.

"Well, they were right about one thing, Paul."

He quickly turned around, and what he saw instantly took his mind away from any concerns about the people who could be coming after him. The fright of having anyone standing this close to him alone would have been enough to stun him. It could even have given him a heart attack.

Yet this was a hallucination. However real it looked, it was a scene he had been imagining, the whole day.

It was Richie Benton, holding his gun. This time he seemed to be there physically.

This had to be the end of the world.

“You *are* a murderer, Paul,” he said, with a psychotic grin.

Rich raised the hand holding the gun. Just like before, he put it up to his temple, ready to blow his own brains out, once more. And yet, Richie hesitated. He didn’t go through with it, didn’t follow the script. He just stayed there, stuck in time, grinning at Paul, with the barrel of the gun resting against his head. He quickly moved the hand to point the gun instead straight at Paul.

“*Fucking murderer!*” Rich shouted, and then he burst out laughing, maniacally.

Paul was paralyzed. The only thing he could think about was how he wished that the meteor would hurry up and arrive already.

The entrance hall of the Canyon Club Hotel appeared abandoned. Much like so many other businesses in the area, the story of the meteor had ended it. Yet Jackie's concern hadn't merely been over the hotel staff that could still be around, but other people as well—guests of the hotel, who might even have arrived there more recently, much like Jackie and Wesley now. And in that case it was a matter of making a quick assessment of just how far gone those individuals would be. Jackie didn't feel like taking her chances with another mob.

The two of them had been able to push their way in through the rotating door of the main entrance. Normally, it would run automatically, but at least it hadn't been locked. The reception area was mostly a big empty space, with tiled floors and wide columns to make up for the absence of walls to support the ceiling. There were only subtle signs of something being off, such as a computer screen that was on top of the reception counter instead of behind it, facing the guests rather than the clerk who would have been sitting behind the desk. And then only half the lights were on in the reception area, making the illumination feel insufficient. But nothing had visibly been smashed, or damaged.

"No one here to give us our room," Wesley commented lightheartedly.

"It's self-service today," Jackie joined in.

"We should go straight to a room. If we're lucky we'll find a master key—though it would be a master *keycard*, I guess. They don't have physical keys in hotels anymore."

That sounded obvious, though Jackie had already found herself skimming around for keys on keychains hanging on hooks in the wall, though without any luck. How long had it been, anyway, since she had been in such an establishment? Jackie now wondered.

“And then the keycards might not even work,” Wesley added. “Since they get demagnetized over time.”

“Which means that we should forget about the keycards, or master keys?” Jackie suggested. “And just try to break into the rooms, if they’re locked.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Wesley. “I guess that makes sense.”

“How difficult will it be?”

“To kick down the doors to the rooms, you mean? Shouldn’t be a big deal.”

Even if he had tried to come off as confident, the tone of his voice gave away some doubt, and so Jackie gave him a chance to elaborate, with a questioning look.

“But we should still check, just to see if there are any keycards lying around,” Wesley added, as he made his way to the other side of the desk of the reception. “You never know, they might still work.”

He pulled out a drawer, but Jackie couldn’t see what was inside it from her side of the counter. Wesley took something out of the drawer.

“Bingo,” he said.

It was a couple of cards.

“Room 3-11 and room 5-49,” he read off the sleeves around the cards.

He put them in his pocket, along with at least one more without checking the room number on that one.

“But you don’t think they’ll work?” Jackie asked him.

“It’s not like I ever worked in a hotel,” Wesley clarified, “but I’m pretty sure the cards only stay magnetized for a few days.”

“But what if someone stays in the room for a couple of weeks? Does the card just stop working?”

“Possibly. We’ll find out.”

Wesley walked back to the entrance, where he had dropped the bags with their groceries. He picked them up and pointed behind Jackie, towards an elevator.

“Let’s not take the elevator,” Wesley said. “There should be stairs next to them.”

On their right side, as they walked towards the elevator, was an entrance to a dining area. Jackie considered going there instead, where there would likely be a bathroom, tables, chairs and even a kitchen with food. But then, they already had food with them, and having a small room to stay in seemed more appealing than being out in the open, while they were figuring out what to do next.

Wesley pointed her to a door that had a sign with lines in the shape of steps above it. He pushed the door open and proceeded to climb the steps on the other side. They led to another door on the floor above. Wesley pulled it open.

They had entered a corridor with several doors, each one labelled with a number—all beginning with *one*.

“You don’t have any keycard from this floor, do you?” Jackie asked Wesley, who in response took out the four cards he had on him.

“*Eh... no. Lowest number is three-hundred and eleven, and three thirty-eight.*”

“So, do you want to try to kick one of these doors in?”

“Yeah.” Wesley walked up to the room he had been standing next to. He turned his ear to the door. “Let’s just see if anyone’s inside already,” he whispered.

While he listened Jackie turned to the door of the first room on the other side of the corridor and put her ear up against that one.

She heard sounds, though they didn’t appear to be coming from the room itself, but rather travelling through the walls, from other parts of the hotel. There was ongoing noise, sounding like a baby crying, followed by a loud banging.

Jackie turned to Wesley, who was backing away from the door he had checked.

“*Don’t do it,*” Jackie warned him.

Wesley looked puzzled. He had probably been just about to kick the door.

“Can’t you hear?” said Jackie. “We’re not alone here.”

As Jackie stopped talking she could hear the baby crying, even without having her head up against the door.

“Let’s not do anything too loud,” Jackie went on, “that will draw attention to us.”

“But if we go up to the third floor, someone might see us there,” said Wesley.

Jackie looked at the number of the door in front of her: *110*. Room *310* would be in the same position, just two floors above. And then *311* would be the one after it.

“Let’s try to get to *three-one-one*,” said Jackie.

She didn’t wait for Wesley to respond, but went straight back out through the door they had come in. She hurried up the steps, past the second floor and to the third.

She pulled open the door, and now she could hear the baby crying louder than before. Jackie froze in the doorway. There was no one out in the corridor. Wesley reached her and then both of them entered the hallway together.

Jackie turned to the door to room three-hundred and eleven.

“Give me the keycard.”

Wesley handed her the card, and Jackie inserted it in through the slide of the small sensory box that was on the wall next to the door handle.

Nothing happened.

Jackie tried taking the card out, turning it and then putting it in again. Still nothing.

“I guess it got demagnetized,” Wesley said.

“Shit. What was the other number?”

Wesley looked at the card.

“Three thirty-eight.”

“And then?”

“There was five forty-nine, I think.” Wesley looked at the card. “And then there’s four-oh-seven.”

Jackie turned around and saw where the corridor went on in the other direction.

She hurried over to the nearest door there.

309.

“Three-oh-seven is over there,” said Jackie. “So, if we try four-oh-seven next, we’ll at least be staying close to the staircase.”

Wesley caught her drift; rather than trying to argue that they should go on to look for the other room on this floor, he went back out, to take the steps upstairs. Already in the staircase going up they could hear more commotion: people’s voices and banging sounds.

Jackie felt shivers.

They entered the corridor of the fourth floor. Jackie hurried over to room four-hundred and seven. Wesley put the card in the slide, and this time a green light blinked above it.

“Yes.”

Wesley took the card out and opened the door to the room.

Inside, the curtains were drawn and it was dark, but Wesley then put the card in a slide on the wall, and then the lights came on.

The room was intact—which came as a relief to Jackie.

Right in front of the entrance was a door to the bathroom. The rest of the room was on the left: a double bed; a wardrobe without doors, with a television in one shelf; and then a desk with a chair up against the wall on the other side of the bathroom. The whole room wasn’t spacious, but would still be enough for them to wash up and discuss what to do next.

“Go first,” Wesley said, indicating the bathroom.

Jackie dropped the leather bag and then closed herself inside the bathroom.

How long had it been since the last gone? She could hardly remember. She had gone once before they left Wesley's apartment, but that was the last time she knew about. Did she always zone out? Was that when she was most likely to pass out? That was a real concern.

In an effort to keep herself awake, Jackie thought back to what had happened at the university. She thought of the boy who had tripped her, peeing himself. At least Jackie had made it to a bathroom without anything like that happening to her.

She washed her hands and then rubbed her face with her wet hands. She dried her face and hands and then returned to the room.

She found Wesley sitting on the bed, holding Gregory Waters' notebook open in his lap.

"I'm done," said Jackie, hoping that he would put down the notebook.

"What made you think this was important?" he asked, without looking up from the notes.

"Maybe not all of it is," Jackie explained, walking up to him. "But I think there's something in there. Don't you need to use the bathroom?"

Wesley sighed and put the notebook down on the bed before getting up.

Jackie sat down in his place. She waited for him to close the door to the bathroom before opening the notebook.

The professor's handwriting was indecipherable, and among the few words that Jackie could make out there were *passage*, *year* and *world*. This whole text looked pretty useless—Wesley had been right about that. Yet, exactly how random it all looked gave her hope, strangely enough, as if it confirmed her initial impression that it had to be something important. Maybe the text would start making sense once she had understood what it was. Perhaps it would even become something else entirely.

Like magic.

What if it *was* magic? A magic formula, maybe?

Wesley came back out of the bathroom.

“Are you all right? I’m going to take a shower. Are there any towels? *Ah*, yes.” Wesley had answered his own question.

He reached for a folded towel that he had spotted in the shelf of the open wardrobe, under the television.

Wesley paused and turned to Jackie.

“Do you see what I mean?” He nodded towards the notebook.

“*Eh...* yeah,” Jackie responded. She figured she must have appeared crestfallen as she said it.

“I’m sorry,” said Wesley.

“Don’t worry. Just take your time in the shower. I’m going to try to read all of it.”

She wanted to be left alone. She needed all her concentration to decipher what was written in that notebook.

*A ritual*. That word she understood. It was the first word at the top of the page where she had now opened the notebook at random. The following words were legible as well: *A ritual for coming back*. The rest of what was written on the page was

completely incomprehensible. It wasn't even a matter of bad handwriting; these symbols could hardly be letters to begin with. They had to be some sort of codes that only made sense to the professor himself.

Unless he had simply lost his mind.

*No*, that couldn't be. The professor had known about the meteor, even before anyone else did.

Jackie turned to the next page. More incomprehensible scribblings.

Jackie flipped on.

*A ritual for... Was it communicating?*

More rituals. What was it with this fixation? And why were these titles the only parts of the writing that were written legibly? Were they even legible? Or was it merely that Jackie had been able to understand them because they somehow *resonated* with her?

Had he perhaps said these words to her already, in person?

*Yes*, it felt like he had—though Jackie couldn't remember any conversation she had ever had with the professor. Yet then those memories would be there, somewhere in the back of her head.

What could they have talked about, before the professor had sent her the note about the meteor? Her papers, presumably. Her research. What had she been researching? Jackie hadn't given any thought to that at all, until now.

She had seen a picture of him, in that article that she had found in his office. She had it in her pocket. Jackie took it out and looked at it.

Had she *ever* spoken to him in person? There was nothing in the cocky expression in the picture that looked familiar.

Yet they *had* talked, at some point—about a ritual, even.

Jackie closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. Now the sound of the water running in the shower became a distraction.

*This is a ritual*, he had said to her. Now that memory seemed clear to her, but only this small part of it, of him saying those words. It had been *after* he had left the papers for her.

She had tracked him down, after the story of the meteor had come out.

“It’s not so much a ritual, as it is a re-enactment,” Jackie said out-loud. She was improvising, with her hazy memory.

She kept her eyes closed. She repeated that line that he had once said to her, over and over again in her mind.

The memory started to take on its own form. She remembered the professor, standing in front of her—standing *over* her; she had been lying on the floor, while he was performing a ritual on her.

“You really are the worst professor ever,” Jackie had said, just before she passed out.

And now she could no longer feel the bed she was sitting in, only vaguely aware of the notebook dropping from her lap and landing on the floor.

She was out in the open, far away from the city. Far away from anywhere, from the looks of it. It was as if in the blink of an eye the whole of civilization around her had disappeared and all that remained now was a field of grass and moss, in an untouched landscape—though not entirely so, as Jackie discovered as she turned around. Tents had been set up, a brief walking distance away, and a mist in the air over there indicated a small fire burning somewhere out of sight for her. Rather than stopping to properly take in her new surroundings, Jackie instead marched on over there, as if in a state of delirium—or was she perhaps following some previously undiscovered instincts in herself?

As she got closer to the tents she noticed other people in between them. Jackie kept her head down as she moved on, avoiding looking any of them in the face. Only then did Jackie see what she had on: a dirt-covered sheet, roughly stitched together into the shape of a short dress—though Jackie wasn't able to look at it carefully enough, as she couldn't stop herself from walking and so had to keep her eyes on the ground in front of her. How she had ended up wearing this outfit, Jackie couldn't even imagine. Surely she would attract everyone's attention out there—though in the brief glimpses she had gotten of the other people, before averting her eyes away from them, she had caught that they were all dressed in the same peculiar fashion. That by itself had given Jackie the immediate impression that they would likely be hostile towards her, though now it seemed like she would fit right in.

As it turned out, Jackie couldn't go on making her way through the area with her eyes fixed on the ground and her dress, as someone was now coming towards her in such an assertive manner that it seemed to promise confrontation. She stopped and looked up to see the large figure, of a muscular man. Jackie was surprised to find in him a familiar face: that of the chief, Jackie's father. The sight of him came with a sense of triumph for her.

*I knew this was real,* Jackie thought to herself. *Though Wesley didn't believe me.*

"Maea," the chief said to Jackie. "Where have you been? Have you heard of the terrible event?"

Jackie felt discouraged from making any attempts at improvising her way through a conversation with the chief, and yet she opened her mouth.

"I don't know what you speak of, father," she heard herself say. Accurate enough. Had she even been trying to put on an act?

"The prisoner has *escaped*," the chief elaborated, with temper.

"Who?" Jackie inquired.

The chief frowned at her.

"Why, *Manuk Awk*, naturally. Sometimes you baffle me, child."

He turned away from Jackie, as if he couldn't stand the sight of her, with what she had said. "This means that that hideous prophesy might yet come true," he went on, as if to himself rather than his daughter. "We should have slaughtered that animal, already."

“But we couldn’t,” Jackie reasoned, stepping closer to the chief, as if to force him to look at her. “That’s not our way.”

But the chief showed no sign of having heard her.

“The Prophet will inform us on how to proceed,” the chief went on instead. “He has helped us capture this traitor before.”

“Just how clear was the prophecy that identified Manuk as a traitor?” Jackie inquired.

The chief merely shook his head dismissively at her. But then he seemed to think better of ignoring her and turned to look Jackie straight in the eyes. “Clear enough so that this turn of events fits right into it,” he reasoned. “I am off to see the Prophet now, Maea. And I would like you to be there with me. You might be quicker to catch on than your old man.”

“Now, immediately?”

“Naturally. I am the chief and so shall not be kept waiting. Not even by you. Come, now.”

The chief took off, without giving Jackie any other indication of which way he would expect her to come. Yet Jackie followed him, somehow without a hesitation.

Jackie realized that she wasn’t really there, that she was merely a spectator of a scene, seeing it through the eyes of Maea—though also catching the same scents in the air as did Maea and feeling the touch in Maea’s fingers as if they were Jackie’s own. Jackie would have observed more of the surroundings with her own eyes, taking in the sights of the whole settlement, but Maea seemed disinterested in all of it and only provided Jackie a view of the ground and then the chief’s back, as the two of them walked on.

The chief led her into the largest tent Jackie had come across there yet. Inside, she ended up in front of a crowd of six people. A strong scent of exotic herbs lingered in the air, mixed with the body odor of the variously dressed individuals before her. At the sight of the chief, the crowd dispersed. Maea's attention turned to a man who was sitting in a chair at the other side of the crowd. His chair appeared to be fixed to the ground, put together with wooden sticks, pillows, and a sheet for a back.

From looking at his face, the man didn't appear to be awake, though with the way he was sitting up straight Jackie figured he had to be. He was only the third individual there whom Jackie had gotten a close look at, she now realized—the first being the chief, who's physical strength and composure had instantly made up for his silly appearance in that outfit made of sheets, so much so that Jackie couldn't even have cracked a smile at it. The second was Manuk Awk—considerably younger than the chief and clearly less accomplished; he had struck Jackie as probably being closer to the average man of that area, only *relatively* strong and agile. Maea clearly hadn't thought much of Manuk, though Jackie herself wouldn't have dared getting close to that man, at least not without those bars in between the two of them. This third man—who Jackie assumed was the *prophet* the chief had mentioned—was the most frail looking so far, though at the same time he came closest to Jackie's modern-day standards of keeping oneself presentable, with how his long beard was at least kept orderly and straight; and then, unlike the other two, the prophet had no visible scars in his face.

At the arrival of the chief, the prophet *rushed* to get up from his seat, to the extent that this stoic man was ever likely to hurry up with anything he did—his eyes even remained closed, though now Jackie noticed that they might be open, squinting as though they were turned to the sun. Jackie reflected that Wesley had assumed that *she* had taken drugs; in the case of this man in front of her now, Wesley should have had no doubt.

“Ah, great one,” the prophet addressed the chief, while bowing down, now that he was standing. “You need not worry. You shall capture the fiend anew.”

“Prophet, when I learned of Manuk’s escape,” the chief said, getting down to business without any formalities, “I feared that the old prophecy was coming true.”

“Oh, how insightful of you, dear chief,” responded the prophet.

“It is *terrifying*,” the chief asserted forcefully. “Isn’t this confirmation that the traitor has other allies in our midst? Was there anything in the prophecy that could clear that up?”

“Hard to tell,” the prophet remarked in his sedated voice. “Though I can assure you that they will not succeed without him. Manuk Awk remains the key. Now that the traitor has been exposed and is known to us all, he will need to die by *your* hand, dear chief, in order for us to eliminate the prophecy from ever coming true.”

“But my father cannot kill a man in *retribution* for something he hasn’t done,” Maea interjected.

Jackie found herself in agreement with the woman whose body she was possessing. She now felt her body stiffening as the two men turned to look at her.

“*You* spoke to him,” the chief thundered at Jackie. “And you came back convinced of his guilt.”

“Perhaps *I* was convinced,” said Maea, mimicking the tranquility of the prophet, in contrast to her father. “But that’s not enough. You would need to put out the doubts in everyone else, as they will find out what you’ve done.”

The chief turned to the prophet.

“I did bring her along, as I believed she would have some contribution to our conversation, I own. How do you respond to what she has just said?”

The transformation in the prophet’s facial expression was subtle, yet Jackie thought she caught unmistakable irritation in it, with how the prophet’s perpetual smile was beginning to fade.

“Trust that your reputation shall remain intact throughout this ordeal, chief. With Manuk out of the way, the only threat to your tribe shall be if your people lose faith in the prophecies that so far have guided them to prosperity.”

The chief turned back to Maea.

“You do not mistrust the prophecies—do you, child?”

She perceived it as a plea. Her father wasn’t asking for Maea to answer him honestly, but merely wanted her to admit to the opposite of what he had suggested, thus sparing him the shame that would come with the alternative.

“No, father. Of course I *wouldn’t*. I realize that I’m not a prophet, myself.”

“I beg, do not be hard on the girl, dear chief,” the prophet pleaded, apparently back on friendly terms with her. “She should not have been exposed to the traitor after he was captured. She saw him at his weakest, and that confuses her.”

“I knew that was a mistake,” the chief retorted.

“Yet she must learn,” the prophet pursued. “I warn, do not try to protect your daughter from the world around her, as that would prevent her from ever gaining any meaningful insights into it.”

“I shall make sure she is protected from seeing the traitor in question, as long as he still breaths air.”

Maea wouldn't get to see any more of her father for the remainder of the day. He had summoned his servants to escort her back to her tent, while he himself went on to resume with his search for the prisoner. Jackie was now back where she had woken up in her earliest memory from the settlement. She felt Maea's frustration at being left there, much as if she were a prisoner herself. However, Maea's take on the whole situation remained largely a mystery to Jackie, as Maea wouldn't speak out-loud to herself and there seemed to be a barrier in between their thoughts, though Jackie occasionally suspected that Maea's observations were making their way into her own. Jackie even found herself disinterested in the interior of the tent she was in, though it was all new to her and unlike anything she was used to from her own times. The whole experience felt exhausting to Jackie, as she would have needed more time to get adjusted to these new surroundings, though luckily she was free from having to make any decisions of her own.

She got a glimpse into Maea's intentions through her actions now, as Jackie found herself stealthily looking out of the tent, checking to see if the men who had brought her there were still keeping guard outside. They weren't anywhere in sight at the moment. Rather than going on looking for them Jackie immediately snuck out of the tent. The guards weren't behind it either, Jackie discovered as she moved over there. Ducking as she went, she made her way towards bushes that she then hid behind. Jackie wasn't able to tell whether anyone was coming after her, as she couldn't even turn her head; Maea was only focused on what was in front of her. She had avoided being detected and now it seemed like she would be free to wander around.

Neither Maea nor Jackie assumed that there was any real danger for them out there, yet Jackie found herself becoming increasingly concerned for their safety the further Maea ventured away from the settlement. Was she abandoning it? Did she intend to run away? That seemed like an over-reaction to Jackie. It was far-fetched that a chief's daughter would have any reason to try and escape, regardless of how little credence she was given in the presence of her father and the prophet. Unless Maea was becoming affected by Jackie's presence in her body, which might have confused Maea and prompted the young woman to go on to explore more of her surroundings. In that case Jackie would be getting her host into genuine danger. Could Jackie communicate with her in any way?

Maea seemed remarkably nimble, as she jumped from one stone to another coming out of a steep slope; Jackie assumed that the churning feeling in her stomach was purely Jackie's own, and

that it wasn't shared with Maea. It turned out that Maea had spotted someone and was now making her way over to that person, though Jackie had somehow missed it up until the moment that they had almost reached him. The man was sitting on a rock in the hill, with his back turned to them. He was dressed in much the same way as anyone else that Jackie had seen around there. He quickly got up and turned to Maea. Jackie immediately recognized the face from an earlier memory from there—that of Manuk Awk.

Maea had tracked down the fugitive by herself, before anyone else did. How on earth had she managed? Maea had been left to her own devices and gone all by herself. Jackie had certainly been of no help to her. This time there were no bars between the traitor and Maea, and so he presented a genuine threat to her.

But Maea seemed to be holding her own against the young man, as she stared him down.

“You need to go away,” she simply told him.

For someone who was on the run from a crowd set on killing him, Jackie observed that Manuk seemed surprisingly at ease. At least he didn't appear to regard Maea as any kind of danger to him. For that matter Maea herself came off as remarkably relaxed, in the presence of this traitor; the tingling sensation in the pit of her stomach and the tension of her muscles was no more than what Jackie had experienced when coming in contact with the prophet and the chief.

“You know that I have nowhere to go,” Manuk said. “The tribe will catch me if I run, and then, even if I get away, I can't

join any other group. We have to clear my name, make them understand that the prophet was mistaken.”

“I have taken the biggest risk of my life by helping you escape,” said Maea. “Now you must leave me alone. If my tribe came to associate *me* with the traitor in the prophecy, they probably turn against my father.”

From the nonchalant look in Manuk’s face, that prospect didn’t seem to bother him.

“No one needs to know that you’ve helped me,” he said. “If you will not assist me in clearing my name before our tribe, I will just have to approach someone else.”

“You’re an outcast,” Jackie asserted. “And you have no way to get back into the tribe. My father even believes that he needs to slay you himself in order to prevent the prophecy from coming true.”

“But can’t you see,” Manuk interjected excitedly, “that that means that you *can* save me? *You* can talk your father out of killing me.”

“There could maybe have been a way before you escaped, but now it’s too late. It’s impossible. You have to run away.”

“Come with me then.”

Was Maea mistaken about the man? Could it be that Manuk really was the threat that her father had assumed him to be? It seemed likely that Manuk would at least manage to ruin Maea, by not leaving after she had helped him escape. Had the prophecy perhaps only been about Maea’s fate, the whole time?

“Listen to me, Manuk; you can only try to come back to us once the dust has settled on this matter, but now you must go on

running, as far away as you can get. And I cannot come with you.”

With that, Maea turned away from him and started making her way back.

“You’ve turned your back on me before,” Manuk called from behind her, “but then you came back for me.”

Maea stopped and turned around.

“That won’t happen this time, I assure you. The only way I can help you from now on is by clearing your name while you are gone. I hope I’ll meet you again, but that cannot be for a long, long time. In the meantime, I wish you the best of luck with your escape.”

With that, Maea turned around and walked away, this time without giving Manuk another chance to address her.

Jackie reflected that by seeking Manuk out, Maea might have inadvertently led the search party to him. Anyone who saw her come back now would surely go over there. Seeing as how she had made her way over there undetected, no one had been searching in this area already. Even if Maea was trying to lay low as she made her way back now it seemed futile, as there was nothing to hide behind out there in the open—not until she reached bushes, where Maea ducked down, as before.

So Manuk appeared to be safe after all, as there was still no one from the tribe coming in his direction and so no one was about to discover his hiding place. He maintained his head-start, yet this time he better take advantage of it, Jackie reflected. Maea had likely managed to save his life. If he stayed away for long enough, maybe Manuk would eventually be able to return to the

tribe, once the prophecy had faded in everyone's memory and the temperature had cooled down towards that whole affair. Jackie wondered if she would ever get a chance to come back herself and find out how things had gone.

She was catching on quickly, the way Jackie had become able to make her own deductions about the situation, filling in the gaps from what she had missed by being away since the last time she had found herself inside this body. Perhaps she had even started to share thoughts with Maea and not just the girl's senses, though there was something unsettling about that thought: was Jackie being taken over by Maea? Would she eventually lose her own identity and cease to be Jackie Canessa altogether?

At least in this body Jackie had managed to do some good. And she felt pleased with herself—though she then realized that since she wasn't in control of anything she did she was merely observing *Maea's* actions.

Maea didn't run into anyone from the tribe until she was back at the settlement. She came upon three women of different ages sitting on the ground. They seemed taken aback by Maea joining them, as she sat down next to them.

"*Maeassira*," exclaimed one of the women—a motherly type, with several decades of experience from living in these conditions evident from the way she spoke and carried herself. "Have you come to bring us news of the *chief*? He is very upset over the runaway, isn't he? Does your old man know who helped the prisoner escape?"

"My father rarely lets me in on anything of that nature," Maea clarified.

“*Let you?*” that same woman responded. “You need not ask him permission. If you show a little more interest in your father’s affairs he will be forced to respect you for it.”

“Oh, I heard she showed *a lot* of interest in the prisoner,” said one of the other two. This one could be about Jackie’s own age. The third one seemed even younger, a mere teenager, and she now looked wide-eyed at the one who had just spoken, clearly shocked at the suggestive remark she had made.

Jackie reflected that being the daughter of the chief had to come with a status. That had likely been the reason for why the three women had seemed so surprised at Maea coming to sit next to them. However, now the three of them appeared to have quickly adjusted to her presence and weren’t holding back.

“Really?” said Maea. “Tell me, what have you heard?”

“That you went to see him,” responded the one who was around the same age as Jackie.

The three women waited silently for Maea to react.

She laughed. “I don’t know *what* you imagined, but I was just having a try at questioning him, nothing else.”

Jackie reflected that Maea was giving an outstanding performance, considering the secret she held.

“He was going to kill us all, wasn’t he?” said the older woman.

“According to the prophecy, yes,” Maea responded. “But Manuk didn’t admit to it.”

“What a disaster,” said the younger woman who had already spoken.

*A disaster*, Jackie echoed in her mind. *A disaster like a meteor hitting the earth, wiping out everything.* The fears of the people back in her own time needed to be soothed, much like the fears of the people of this tribe had been put to rest by the incarceration of a single individual. Though with the meteor it would never be that simple. Jackie might have to take it upon herself to let people know that it wasn't real. She had to get back—only she didn't know how to leave this place, or this body, which wasn't her own.

Yet Jackie had already managed to separate herself from Maea, who had gone on talking to the other women, while Jackie paid no attention to what was being said, focusing instead only on her own thoughts regarding the meteor. Until her train of thoughts was interrupted by a woman screaming in a distance.

The four women all stopped talking; Jackie would likely never find out what had passed between them during that interval—though it could hardly have been anything important, as now all four of them got up to see where the commotion was coming from. And they weren't alone in that; more tribespeople ran to get to a woman, who now emerged from outside the settlement. Maea hurried over there along with the others.

“He's here!” the woman shouted into the face of the man who had been first to reach her. “The traitor. It's Manuk Awk. Over there!”

She could be pointing in the right direction, as far as Jackie could tell.

“He came to me,” the woman went on. “He tried to get me join his side.”

Jackie felt like cursing out-loud, but thankfully she wasn't able to make any sounds at all on her own initiative. So, Manuk Awk had disregarded Maea's advice of running away and had now gotten himself back into trouble—and not just for himself this time, but Maea as well, for having helped him. And what a choice of an ally to reach out to, Jackie reflected; that disheveled woman looked like a mess, even for the times she was from. Had Manuk no common sense at all? This feeble attempt of his promised to be the undoing of everything Maea had achieved for him.

The interest of the crowd that had gathered around the raving woman was now shifting away from her, to the direction she had indicated. A few men had taken off already. Maea hurried after them.

She reached the men where they had stopped, one of them holding a bow in his hands, but no arrow.

“Great shot,” said one of the tribesmen to the archer.

Both of them were looking up to the hill, where Jackie now saw Manuk Awk, lying with an arrow sticking out of the back of his leg.

Four men ran towards him. Manuk got up, in an attempt to get away from them, but didn't get far before they reached him. One of them pulled Manuk up and then hurled him back in the opposite direction.

“Well done,” the man standing next to Jackie said to himself.

Two men stayed behind Manuk, holding him as they marched him back to join the others. Manuk slumped on his way as he kept his hand to his wounded leg, but then he had to keep pulling his

hands back, spontaneously to prevent himself from stumbling and falling, on the way. It was quite the sorry show.

As they reached the rest of the crowd, the men threw Manuk to the ground. He stayed turned, staring at the arrow sticking out of his thigh and the blood that was coming out of the wound, which he had now also gotten on his hands. There was no indication that Manuk had noticed Maea in the crowd—yet Jackie felt Maea’s worries as if they were her own. The prisoner would likely reveal who had helped him, and Maea would be exposed as his accomplice.

“The chief is on his way,” someone shouted.

“No one touch the prisoner.”

With that the crowd stepped away from Manuk. His last chance of escaping was disappearing before his eyes. Once the chief was there it would all be over for Manuk. Maea’s father would be the one to ask the questions, yet all the others were likely to stick around to witness it. They would hear what Manuk had to say. They seemed eager to lunge at him now, the way they stood over him, yet they restrained themselves. Manuk would know what was coming; Maea had alerted him that the chief had decided to kill him. The only way that Manuk could possibly save himself was by convincing the chief to spare him, or else get the crowd onto his side, to turn on the chief. To that end Manuk could expose the chief’s daughter as his accomplice, in front of everybody. It even seemed like an obvious course of action for him to take. Unless Maea first intervened and attempted to save him, thereby signaling to the prisoner that he was better off not betraying her.

Yet Jackie couldn't be sure whether Maea was even thinking along the same lines. If she was, it didn't appear as if she would act on those thoughts, as Maea stood by silently, in the middle of the crowd.

The brief moment that some damage could still have been averted had now passed, with the arrival of the chief. Maea's heart jumped at the sound of his voice. He was unstoppable, as always, now pushing his way through the crowd. The tribespeople let him pass and he ended up standing over Manuk.

"Yes, it is him," the chief announced, though everyone had surely realized as much already, and in fact his words got no reaction from the crowd.

"I came back," Manuk said to the chief, loud enough for everyone to hear him.

The intended implication seemed to be that Manuk had returned willingly to become their prisoner again. That was an obvious lie—at least to Jackie, as Manuk had already explained to Maea that he would try his luck with another member of the tribe, which he had then done, and been proven tragically wrong. She, on the other hand, had warned Manuk that he would get killed were he discovered. Perhaps he hadn't believed her then. Maybe he thought that he still had a chance to survive now.

"How did you get away in the first place?" the chief demanded.

Manuk's face had mostly displayed anguish and fear so far, but now a desperate smile broke out.

“What, do you expect me to explain it to you *here?*” Manuk shouted back at the chief. “With an arrow in the leg. I’m bleeding out. Attend to my wounds and I will tell you.”

No, Jackie thought to herself, but Maea didn’t say anything. Neither did anyone else.

Not even the chief, who looked back at the prisoner, expressionless. Was he considering the offer?

Finally, the chief turned to the crowd.

“Look at him now,” he shouted. “Look at the man who would have destroyed you. Observe him closely.”

The chief turned back to the prisoner and leaned over him.

“I’ll attend to your wound,” the chief said.

He reached for the arrow in the man’s leg.

Manuk screamed as Maea’s father yanked the arrow forward and broke it.

The chief then stood up straight.

“There you go.”

He raised his leg and carefully aimed it before landing it straight on Manuk’s wound.

The crowd gasped in shock, though Jackie suspected that most of them had meant their reactions to be an encouragement for to the chief to go on with the beating. She caught some of them smiling. Whether the reaction of the crowd had been meant to cheer him on or not, the chief was now going in for more. Manuk kept his mouth agape. Was he trying to speak? So far, the only sounds he had managed to make were howls of pain.

The chief leaned over the prisoner again, this time to land a punch in his face.

*“He didn’t do anything,”* Maea shouted, and Jackie’s stomach plummeted. It turned out that Jackie didn’t only have Manuk to worry about, but Maea herself.

She caught a few people around her glancing at her, though not her father; apparently he hadn’t heard her.

He now stepped over his victim, to then get his hands around Manuk’s head, so that both of them ended up facing the audience.

*“The prophecy,”* the chief shouted, *“has been prevented!”*

In a single move, Maea’s father forced Manuk’s head back so that it became disjointed from the neck.

The crowd cheered as the chief threw Manuk’s lifeless body to the ground.

But Maea couldn’t breathe. Jackie felt as if her own neck had snapped, along with Manuk’s. Was Jackie possessing more than one body simultaneously? Including one of the man who was now dead?

Jackie realized that Maea’s worries had been less for herself than Manuk. But now she couldn’t save him. Her sadness was overpowering. Was it both Jackie’s and Maea’s sorrows, merged together? No one around her seemed to share the same sentiment, as everyone else was cheering. But the sickening sight was turning to genuine physical pain inside of Jackie.

Maea now screamed uncontrollably. Only then did Jackie realize that the pain she was feeling wasn’t merely hers; no, Maea shared it with her. And now she couldn’t put up with it anymore.

Jackie saw everyone turning to her, just before she closed her eyes, yet she went on screaming. The pain inside of her expanded.

It felt like fire. Her body was disintegrating. There was even a beam of light behind her closed eyelids.

Once Jackie regained consciousness the pain had left her. It seemed miraculous that she had survived that ordeal at all. It had felt like a spontaneous self-combustion of her body. Yet Jackie appeared to be in one piece. Now she was alone. At last she could focus, without the constant distraction of having to follow what her body was saying and doing—regardless of her own will. Once again she had awoken in a closed space that she didn't recognize. It wasn't Wesley's studio apartment this time, or his car. It wasn't Maea's tent either. Yet something in there felt familiar: the smell of herbs. It seemed to signal *danger*.

Jackie looked around discreetly, careful not to move too much. She was lying in a bed that was padded with hay, surrounded by jars and various handmade ornaments. She noticed at her side the old-style incense burner that was filling up the room with smoke; there was more than one of those in there. And now she realized that she wasn't alone; there was someone else with her, with his back turned to her. It was the Prophet.

Maea's father wasn't there. Neither were the women whom Maea had ended up next to out in the field. There was only the Prophet. Why would Maea have been left alone with him?

She sat up, and with that the Prophet turned around. They made eye contact though neither of them spoke. The Prophet was beaming.

"You murdered Manuk," Maea finally said to him. She had found her voice. Though that voice was frail, she had managed to make the words sound aggressive. "It was all *your* doing."

The Prophet didn't mind the accusation; he didn't seem taken aback.

"Poor, misguided child," he said to her. "Once you've embraced what has happened, you will surely be more appreciative."

"This must never happen again," Maea went on. "I'll see to it."

The Prophet seemed increasingly amused.

"You are still thinking about that old crush of yours, the traitor? Forget about him. It was a necessity. Thus was the ritual."

*The ritual*—like Gregory Waters' ritual?

"No one else would understand," the Prophet went on. "Only me, but now *you* as well."

"You want me to validate your methods?" Maea said.

"You already have—before, out in the field."

"What are you saying?"

It didn't seem to Jackie as if Maea was leading the conversation anymore. Somehow the Prophet had gotten the upper hand.

"You revealed yourself to the others—your *true* self. By demonstrating the special powers you possess."

Did Maea possess special powers now, along with possessing the spirit of Jackie Canessa? Jackie felt drained, as if she didn't have the energy to go on.

"What powers?"

Jackie couldn't tell if Maea had just said those words, or if she had imagined it.

“Brace yourself,” the Prophet went on. “For it has come out that you are a descendent of the Gods. I imagine you didn’t even know of it yourself. Our tribe has been chosen, as you will lead it to victory over all of the land, for us to get a permanent settlement, where we no longer need to be on the move. This is a prophecy that I have told no one but you, now. Yes, I have kept it to myself, as I feared no one would believe me, but now you have shown everyone that it’s true, with your trick earlier today. The ritual empowered you.”

“What ritual?”

“The sacrifice.”

“The sacrifice of Manuk Awk?”

“Yes, his sacrifice to the Gods. To you, my child.”

“But he wasn’t the traitor,” Maea said. Her vision turned blurry. She felt like she was slipping out of consciousness again. “*You* are the traitor,” she was able to add.

But Jackie wasn’t passing out. She wished that she could—that she would be able leave this body and then wake up back in her own time. She wished never to return to this horrendous place. The true torment had been in being exposed to the injustice enacted by everyone she knew against someone who had never harmed anyone. Celebrated as a righteous act. Even though he had been reckless towards the end, Manuk had still been innocent.

If Jackie had any powers, like Maea, she would use them to abandon this place. But then Jackie *did* have powers; she had used them before, to come there and to possess this body, rather than leaving it.

What had just happened to Maea had happened to Jackie before. What had Gregory Waters exposed her to, in his ‘ritual’? Something so unthinkable that Jackie had used her ‘powers’ to block it out of her memory, and with that she had accidentally erased everything that she knew from her past. It had left her helpless. And she was back to being helpless now, stuck inside the body of Maea. A prisoner, much like Manuk Awk. The descendant of the gods would never let Jackie leave. Its earthly body would become Jackie’s tomb.

“You need me,” said the Prophet, just our tribe needs you. We are all on the same side.”

Everything was back to being the same as before for Wesley, only instead of having his whole studio apartment to himself, along with all his possessions, now he had to be content with a small hotel room. Jackie was back to being unconscious, on the bed. Wesley had never figured out how to get her out of that state. The other times he had simply waited it out, but that didn't feel like it was an option this time. He had heard sounds outside that gave him anxiety. There had been screams, and a maniacal laughter at one point. Then Wesley had heard someone running in the corridor just outside the room. He had stayed inside, not feeling like taking his chances with any more strangers while Jackie was still unconscious. All Wesley could do was to stay silent and listen.

He hadn't taken that long in the shower, yet it had been enough time for Jackie to pass out on the bed. The last thing he knew she had been reading through that useless notebook she had found at the university. Perhaps the only option now was for Wesley to put Jackie herself under the shower, so that the shock of the water would wake her up, though that idea sounded risky—if it didn't bring her out of her coma, the water getting up her nose and down into her lungs might cause problems. At most Wesley could allow himself to splash a little bit of water on Jackie's face.

On the desk there were two glasses. Wesley picked one up and brought it to the bathroom. He poured just a little bit of water into it, a bottom-fill. He then brought it back to the room. His steps felt heavy as he approached Jackie on the bed. She looked

so peaceful, and what Wesley was about to do to her didn't feel right.

"I'm sorry, Jackie," he said, before throwing the water into her face.

Her breathing turned deeper, momentarily—but then she was back to breathing normally. The water hadn't had any significant effects on her.

"Wake up, Jackie," he tried. "Remember the meteor? The meteor is a scam."

This wasn't working either. What else could Wesley try? Was there anything else in there that he could use? The hotel room was pretty much empty. There was no luggage left around by previous guests. There was only the television set inside the wardrobe, facing the bed.

Wesley stood up and walked over to it. Perhaps hearing some sounds from the television would help Jackie wake up, though she hadn't showed any reaction to Wesley's voice. He figured he had to give it a shot. The remote control was on an otherwise empty shelf below the one of the television. Wesley picked it up. He turned the TV on and then looked at Jackie to see if the sound would have any notable effect on her.

"...you can return to your life, as it was," he heard a cheerful voice over a piano tune, coming from the television behind him.

Wesley felt startled. He had heard something to the effect of television ads typically being designed to make viewers feel like they were being addressed to them specifically, but this felt to extreme; it was as if this old commercial had been meant for

Wesley himself, though he was in a situation that couldn't have been predicted back in the time when this TV ad had been made.

He turned around, but didn't see what was written on the screen as it was fading to black. Whatever the commercial had been about, Wesley wouldn't get to find out the proper context of it. Another advert came on. It started with a shot of a large kitchen, with the table set, though there were no actors on screen.

*This scene could be of an abandoned household after the story of the meteor became known,* Wesley thought to himself.

The next shot was of the parquet floor of the same house. Light from the front door opening was now cast on the floor, and in that light emerged the shadow of a man.

“There is a way to go back,” said the voiceover.

Wesley felt shivers. Wasn't this the same voice as the one of the ad before?

The TV now showed the angle of the person looking into the living room, with children running ahead, picking up toys that had been left lying on the floor.

“All that you used to have can become yours again,” said the voiceover. Now there was that piano again.

The screen faded to white and then to a close-up to a woman, smiling in the sun. There was a cut to a scene of a beach, with children playing and a couple sunbathing.

“All those moments that you thought were never coming back are now within reach.”

There were more scenes of families spending time together, with the people consistently smiling and laughing. These were old

stock footages, Wesley deduced, for this commercial that had been put together recently, after the story of meteor came out.

Now there was a scene of a pink sunset.

“The danger we all feared is no longer present,” the voiceover carried on, and the piano notes turned lower.

The ad cut to a shot of a star-filled sky at night.

“The comet has passed the earth.”

There was a violin on top of the piano music.

Wesley felt shivers. The ad was turning out to be exactly what it had looked like to him.

Now there was the scene of that kitchen from the beginning again, but this time with a couple standing in it. They had their arms around each other and their backs turned to the camera. The two of them were looking out the window, relieved.

“We are working on restoring society, so that you can return to your life, as it was.”

The picture faded to black and white text appeared on the black screen: ‘Please, return to your home and await instructions. Normality is being restored.’

The text faded to black. Then the black screen faded into the scene of the abandoned kitchen again, as the same ad was starting over.

“There is a way to go back.”

Wesley couldn’t take his eyes off the screen. He felt like he had to watch the entire thing over again, just to make sure that it was real.

This ad had clearly been made by someone who, like Jackie, had known the truth about the meteor. Someone who had known all along.

TO BE CONTINUED

Visit [www.arnifannar.com](http://www.arnifannar.com) for information on future additions to the story.