

THE NIGHTHAWKERS

PART 1: EARTHBOUND

Chapter 1

No, no, no, no. Not now. Not again. But especially not—right—now. Damn, I wish this thing would warn me. Go away and never come back. I suppose that's too much to ask at this point. The *pulse* is enveloping me as it always does when I least expect it. Because I never expect it. A cascade of sensations descends which I am powerless to prevent. I've tried holding my breath until I nearly pass out. Drinking gallons of water, as if I could flush it away. Eating lots of dark chocolate. Waving sage-clouding smudge sticks in my various rooms. I've tried lucid dreaming. I even tried to pray it away. Nothing helps. Once, I nearly called an exorcist I found online, before coming to my senses. No one knows about my condition—if you can call it that—and I didn't think an exorcist should be the first.

As I say, nothing stops the *pulse*. And here it comes, beginning with a light fluttering in my stomach, like moth wings beating against the walls of my belly. That's happening right now, as I sit here on stage facing 72 fellow students enrolled in the Carthage University Master's Program in Archaeological Sciences. The stage lights are shining straight into my eyes, but at least that means I can't watch my peers watching *me* and three others who have been singled out for awards. I'm acutely aware that many of my peers do not wish me well. They harbor suspicions about me. Some may actually fear me. No doubt, they've heard rumors.

India Nojes, our dean, the living legend who has run Carthage's graduate archaeology program with an iron fist for decades, walks toward me across the stage in a black cap and gown draped with red, yellow, and purple ribbons signifying various career-making academic achievements. She cradles a gaudy statue, glass and gold with a green marble base.

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The moths beat rapidly now as stage two of the *pulse* begins its assault. Tingling pricks my skin, followed by waves of light radiating like electric shivers along my trunk, my arms, my legs. My hairs stand on end, my breathing is shallow, my nerves on fire. I'm encased in a bolt of lightning about to shoot rays out the top of my head. A few minutes more pass as stage two gives way to stage three: I begin to lose touch with the ground and float above the auditorium, untethered, on the verge of becoming something else. But I do not actually float away or become anything other than who, or what, I already am.

I've never been able to describe the ordeal of the *pulse* accurately, even to myself. I literally do not have the words to explain the phenomenon. It just *is*. It *happens*. And even though I'm used to it, I am still caught off-guard every time, going back to the very first time, when I was eleven. But there's no time to think about that now.

Dean Nojes is two feet from me when she begins speaking.

“It is my great honor to announce that this year's recipient of our university's most prestigious award, the Boniface Prize for outstanding scholarship in the field of archaeology, goes to...”

In the final stage of the *pulse*, stage four, a brown filmy haze obscures my vision. I do not drive for this reason: I never know when I might lose my vision, and I've always worried I wouldn't be able to pull over in time to avoid an accident. Dr. Nojes speaks just as I am temporarily blinded. I turn my head toward the sound of her voice.

“Pauline Marsh,” Dr. Nojes continues. “In all my years at Carthage, I have never met a graduate student with such an exceptionally gifted grasp of the art, science, and history of archaeology as Pauline. She is also only the second student ever, after yours truly—” I imagine Dr. Nojes flashing a fake-humble smile—“to achieve and maintain a 4.2 average in each and every

semester of our program. Truly a remarkable achievement and Carthage is fortunate to now claim her as an esteemed alumna. Congratulations, Pauline.” Tepid applause, as expected.

The brown film recedes and my eyesight clears just in time to receive the heavy Boniface statue in my lap. The *pulse* is over, yet again. And yet again I am drained, exhausted, and slightly giddy. I purse my lips to stifle an inappropriate laugh. My body craves release; I have yet to find a satisfying outlet. Thank God I’m not expected to give a speech. No one is allowed to upstage Dean Nojes. Fortunately, my brief moment in the spotlight is over.

I know I am weird. I have yet to meet another living soul who has experienced, or even hinted at, anything like the *pulse*. Not my foster parents, not my teachers, not my only friend at Carthage, Bette French. So I pretend to be just like everyone else. Sort of.

Bette, seated next to me, receives a certificate of excellence for her graduate thesis on ethical practices in archaeology. I focus on my breathing while the dean acknowledges the other students on stage. Fifteen minutes later, though it feels much longer, this embarrassing ritual is over. The crowded auditorium comes alive as students quickly sidle out the long rows of folding seats, eager to escape the confines of academia.

Dean Nojes raises her deep alto voice to be heard above the chatter. “I’ll see you all back at the compound,” she yells. “Remember: it’s a party *and* a requirement. You skip out and I’ll know it—and there will be consequences.”

We have all heard this odd pronouncement before. In fact, at our grad school orientation two years ago, one of the first things we learned was that Dean Nojes throws a party at her house for all graduating Masters’ candidates and attendance is mandatory. Miss it, and the dean will withhold final credits, without which a student cannot graduate and officially call herself an archaeologist. As for what goes on at this party and why it’s so important, nobody is willing to say.

It’s as if the dean’s party induces some form of amnesia. It’s common knowledge that this event has

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been a Carthage tradition for years, yet the details remain a blank. The standing joke is that Dean Nojes's graduation party is like Las Vegas: whatever happens there, stays there.

Bette and I leave the auditorium together and walk to Nojes's house about four blocks away from Carthage's leafy, suburban campus a few miles north of Baltimore, Maryland. I clutch my statue, which looks like an odd mash-up of a winged angel and a wolf.

"That's an impressive piece of crap you got there," Bette says.

"Should I lug it around for the rest of my life?"

"Put it on your coffee table, smack in the middle."

"I don't have a coffee table," I say. I have a bed, a mini-fridge, and second-hand clothing. Not much else.

"Something to look forward to then," Bette says, heaving the statue out of my hands. "Wow. Great doorstep. Or no, when somebody breaks into your house. Clock 'em over the head."

I laugh. "What house?"

"Some day," Bette says, "you'll wake up and find you've become a little more ordinary, like the rest of us. You know, a house, a husband, a kid or two."

"I'm ordinary now, Bette."

"Yeah?" Bette says, swinging the statue with both hands as if she's about to hurl it away. "I guess they give these out to just anybody off the street, then."

"Well, you know."

"This thing weighs a ton. It could be dangerous in the wrong hands." She changes her grip on the bulky award, raising it up and down as if it's a barbell and she's working on her biceps.

"You have a suspicious mind, Bette, you know that? You could probably find a rotting corpse in the middle of a field of daisies."

"Uh-huh. And you are all sweetness and light."

“Anyway,” I say, “I can’t see you chipping away at rocks, sweating in the sun. You don’t do slow-mo.”

“And I can’t really see you with the hubby and the kids.”

When I first met Bette, at the beginning of our program, I thought she wasn’t a serious person. That was stupid of me and I was wrong. She rocks an ‘80s-Madonna look, with short, spiky hot-pink hair, which fooled me. She even wears fishnets, for reasons I haven’t figured out. I stick to skinny jeans and wrinkled prairie dresses plucked from the *haute couture* racks of Goodwill.

“I keep telling you, Marsh, not everybody in our field is swishing a soft brush and peering at bone fragments under a microscope. There are so many bad guys infiltrating honest digs.”

“Infiltrating? Ooh, that *does* sound bad.”

“Seriously,” Bette says, getting worked up, “they sneak stuff out that doesn’t belong to them. They sell stolen artifacts because they’re greedy bastards. And they just piss the hell out of me, y’know? Somebody has to go out there and stop them in their tracks. Nobody’s paying enough attention!”

Yeah, Bette is one of the most serious people I know. She is going to kick ass. But I’m still not going to tell her about the *pulse*. I’d like to hold onto the only friend I have right now, if possible—one of the only friends I’ve *ever* had.

Our peers stream into Dean Nojes’s mid-century ranch house. I take my statue back from Bette and hide it beneath a hydrangea bush near the house. I might leave it there and hope the dean doesn’t question me about it. I look up and there she is, Dean Nojes, looming in her doorway, waving people into the house like a modern-day Gertrude Stein, short and round, dressed as usual in a loose, gauzy blowse and a loose full-length skirt. Even her hair reminds me of Stein—close-cropped, gray, with bangs. But unlike Stein, her arms are loaded with bangles that clink every time

she moves. In her seminars, the sound of all those bracelets knocking together as she wields a laser pointer at her slides drove us all crazy. I'm convinced she does it on purpose.

Nojes smiles and pats my shoulder as I enter the house. Before I can slip past her, she leans over and whispers. "I wonder what's in store."

"Excuse me?" I say. I'm not sure I heard what she said above the crowd of students talking, laughing, and drinking beer in her living room. But she just smiles again and waves the next batch of students into her house, which is filling up fast. *I wonder what's in store.* What does that mean? Or did I misunderstand? Maybe she said, *I wonder what's by the door.* Did the dean see me ditch the award? Is she insulted? Is she going to prevent me from graduating? I squeeze past her to the long sideboard loaded with beer, wine, and baskets of pretzels and chips.

"What's wrong now?" Bette asks, handing me a beer.

"Nothing," I say. "Nojes said something to me on the way in. I just—"

"You're her pet. You know that, right? I don't care, personally. We're done here. This place is already in my rear-view mirror. But you're this year's flavor. At least you don't humble-brag, which is why I can stand to put up with you." Bette holds her bottle out so we can clink them. "What should we drink to?" I shrug, feeling stupid. "Oh, c'mon. You just won the biggest award this place has to offer, the one they only give out, what, like every five years? And you can't think of a single reason to celebrate? I take it back—what I said about you not humble-bragging. This is borderline obnoxious, Marsh."

"I don't have a job. I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't have any money. Maybe I can sell the angel-wolf statue on eBay, or something."

"Poor little you," Bette says, tugging on one of her enormous hoop earrings. "So let's toast to *me*. Off to Hell Gap, Wyoming. Where I guarantee you I will *not* spend all my time digging for Paleoindian spear tips. They've had a rash of thefts out there."

“I expect to see you on insta with your pickaxe buried deep in the skull of some artifact-stealing loser,” I say as our bottles tap. “Our very own Jessica Jones of the pit crew.”

“Something ridiculously amazing will fall out of the sky for you,” Bette says, sounding half-sincere. “I mean, you make everything look so easy. I don’t know why you’re worried.”

Bette goes off to mingle but I stay put. I watch my classmates talking in clusters, laughing, flirting. I know some of them are talking about me. Their quick, furtive glances in my direction give them away. There’s Sue Rios, heading to Princeton for a PhD. She has said all along she has no interest in actually getting her hands dirty. Gayle Connaught is off to a museum job in Saskatchewan. Also dirt-averse. And Dan Finland, who landed a six-figure job with Exxon, which as far as I’m concerned, means he’s made a deal with the devil of fossil fuels. The three of them become aware that I’m staring at them, waiting for them to break off first. And they do. The trio walks toward me as though they’re a single beast and I’m their wounded prey.

“So, congrats and all,” Sue Rios says to me, with a little toss of her head. “Can I ask you something, Pauline?”

“Sure,” I say, taking a slow, casual swig of beer. The four of us are now standing in a tight little group, while scores of students swirl around us. “What do you want to know?”

“What I want to know—*we* want to know, actually,” Sue says, looking at Gayle and Dan, “is why you seem to know absolutely everything about archaeology, like *everything*, all the chemistry, all the cultures, all the important digs and what they found, the whole entire discipline.”

“From the first day, even,” Dan says. “I never saw you open a textbook.”

“I never saw you in the library,” Gayle says. “What’s your deal? We just really wanna know.”

“And then you graduate with, what did Dean Nojes say?” Sue says. “Like a 4.2 GPA. Better than perfect. I mean, how the hell did you do that?”

“Have I been a puzzle all this time?” I ask, smiling. “Like a hard sudoku where you just can’t fill in the grid?” I’m so used to being the kid nobody quite trusts, this interaction feels normal—just more of the same. Graduate school didn’t magically turn me into Miss Popular.

“Well, sorta, yeah,” Sue says, a tiny bit sheepishly. Gayle and Dan nod.

“I studied,” I say. “You just didn’t catch me at it. It’s not like we were hanging out or anything. I don’t know what to tell you. I guess I found the right field. I don’t think you’d be asking me this if we’d studied, like, astrophysics.”

“It just seems weird, is all,” Gayle says. “I don’t mean *you’re* weird.” (*Oh yes, you do.*) “I mean, it’s like you’re a walking encyclopedia, I guess that’s what seems weird.”

“Do you have a photographic memory?” Dan asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I never thought about it. We only know what’s in our own heads, right?”

Colored glass beads.

An awl made of bone.

A wooden chest filled with gold jewelry.

“Did you cheat, Pauline?” Sue asks suddenly, not at all sheepishly. The others look away. Sue tosses her head again, whatever that means. She squints at me. “Did you?”

I take a slow breath before answering. “If I did,” I say slowly, “if I cheated, why would I admit that to you, here, now, in the dean’s house?”

“Well, I—” Sue says.

“Get a grip, Sue,” I say. “Your career is on track, isn’t it? Why do you care what I did or didn’t do, or how I got through the program?”

“Because,” Dan says, his teeth almost clenched, “we all worked our fucking asses off and you never seemed to make an effort. It all just poured out of you. It just makes us wonder.”

“What do you wonder, Dan?” A deep voice, vaguely familiar, takes me by surprise. Grey Henley is suddenly on my left, facing my trio of inquisitors. Grey and I never had a class together; we’ve never even had a conversation. I know him only by sight, usually surrounded by students hanging on his every word—or so it appeared from a distance. But here he is, and I instantly feel he’s going to take my side. “Do you wonder why Pauline graduated with highest honors while you skated by and did just the right amount of brown-nosing to get your cushy job with the biggest oil polluter in the world? Is that what you wonder, Dan? ‘Cause I sure don’t.”

“Oh, come off it, Grey,” Gayle says. “Dan deserves—”

“You wanna know how Pauline did what she did?” Grey says. It feels odd letting him speak for me—given that we don’t know each other—but I’m curious to see where this goes. He knows my name, I notice. He takes a step toward Dan that borders on menacing—or it would be, if we weren’t in the dean’s house, drinking her beer, waiting for her to live up to the legend about this party. Grey takes that step and then holds his ground, leaning just slightly into Dan’s space. I notice his hands curling into fists and I wonder if he’s even aware he’s doing that. “Because she’s a fucking genius,” Grey says, “while the rest of us are morons who try hard. End of story.”

“Fuck you too, buddy,” Dan says. He melts back into the crowd. Sue and Gayle follow him, while also smiling sweetly at Grey.

“I’m not—” I say.

“You’re welcome,” Grey says.

“I didn’t need—”

“I know, but they’re—”

“I’m not a genius and I don’t need defending, but thanks, anyway,” I say. “They’re assholes. Obviously. Always have been, always will be. Always sucking up when it suits them and putting

other people down—or trying to—when it makes them feel good. Sorry if I’m insulting your friends, but—”

Grey laughs. “But what do you *really* think of them? And they’re not my friends.”

“Anyway, who says all archaeologists are nice? Just ask Bette.”

He smiles and I have a moment to take him in. *Handsome. My God, so handsome. I’ve had two years to notice him and I failed.* He looks like the kind of guy who plays rugby or some other rough-and-tumble sport. Broad shoulders, a muscular build. Curly dirty-blond hair with stubble to match. His only imperfection—a mole just to the right of the bridge of his nose—somehow adds to his looks, rather than taking away from them. That’s my first impression, anyway, and for all I know, it will be my only impression. I don’t expect a good-looking guy like Grey to be into me—not because I’m flat-out unattractive, or because I somehow look the circus freak I suspect I am, but because *nobody* is ever that into me. Even Bette acts like our friendship lives in quotation marks most of the time, like we are “friends,” which isn’t the same as *friends*.

“So what are your post-grad plans?” I ask Grey, more for the pleasure of looking at him than because I’m deeply interested. I assume he’ll launch into a detailed recitation of his great new job, his big archaeology dreams, blah, blah, blah. I brace myself to tune out. But instead, he shrugs and smiles, and I notice that his smile is a bit crooked, one side of his mouth turning up slightly higher than the other. It gives his handsome face a slightly goofy look.

“I’m keeping my options open at the moment,” he says. “Can I grab you another beer?”

I’m surprised by his noncommittal answer because Grey Henley doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who is at loose ends. I’m relieved he hasn’t asked me about my plans. If and when he does, I’ll feed him the same line he fed me: I’m keeping my options open. That’s a good way to worm out of trying to explain why I have not lifted a finger this entire last semester toward finding a job, any job. I don’t know why. Like so much else about me, I can’t explain it.

“Come on,” Grey says, “Nojes is holding court outside. I’m curious.”

“Me too,” I say. “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, right?”

“Yeah, right.” He laughs again and I look for the crooked smile.

We walk out through the kitchen’s sliding glass door into Dean Nojes’s grassy backyard.

Little white lights are strung in the trees and along the railing on the patio, giving the spring evening a festive, expectant air. Our entire class is out here, sitting on the grass or standing in clusters. We seem to have unconsciously recreated the semicircular shape of the amphitheater where the Dean delivers all her lectures. She sits on a lawn chair at the center of our “U,” her bangled arms gesturing energetically, making a familiar racket.

I look for Bette, thinking I might join her, but she’s melted into the crowd. I stand slightly apart, expecting Grey to wander off to join his own circle of friends, whoever they are, but to my surprise and mild embarrassment he remains a few feet away. Women come up to him, one after another, smiling, tossing their hair, but he doesn’t appear to give them any real encouragement. He nods, swigs his beer, and offers a less dazzling version of his smile. I guess I’m spying on him.

I try to forget all about Grey and concentrate on what Dr. Nojes is saying.

“If you want to stay high and dry, go to law school,” Nojes says in her lecture-hall voice. “If you’re looking for glory, play sports. But if you’re ready for back-breaking labor, diarrhea, scorpions, long days that make you want to scream from boredom, and you thrive on frequent disappointment, then you’ve chosen the best, most rewarding profession in the world.” She then removes all her bangles, rolls up the right sleeve of her gauzy blouse, and holds out her bare forearm. “My favorite scar,” she says, sliding her fingers up a jagged pink scar running vertically from her wrist to just above her elbow. Several students gasp. Is this the thing—the hidden thing—that this party is famous for?

Grey moves closer to me and whispers loudly. “Is it me or is this just a little bit lame? Isn’t she due to retire any day now?”

“Isn’t that a little harsh?” I whisper back. “I think it’s too soon to judge.”

“You think this is just the warm-up act?”

“Maybe,” I say. “I hope so. I hope there’s more.”

Nojes keeps her scarred arm outstretched, presumably so everyone can get a good look. “An unexpected encounter with the Khmer Rouge,” she says. “Cambodia. Nineteen seventy-eight. A band of sweaty men, armed to the teeth, found us on a night dig. They jumped from their Jeeps, blinded us with flashlights so we couldn’t see. Next thing I know, a machete blade is coming straight down on me. I thought he’d sliced my arm off, but it wasn’t that bad, really. A few nights in a local infirmary, where no one spoke English, and I was good as new.”

Nojes pulls her sleeve down, slides the bangles back onto her arm, and leans back in the lawn chair. This little performance seems intended to burnish the lore every student already knows about her—much of it hearsay, I suspect. Nojes was awarded a MacArthur ‘genius’ grant when she was thirty for her field research at the Carrick ringwork, one of Ireland’s most important medieval monuments dating from the earliest stages of the Anglo-Norman invasion. But what really impressed us were the stories that circulated about her being shot at, burned, and nearly drowned when she was our age, doing fieldwork in one of the most remote sections of the Amazon. It wasn’t the Indigenous people who came after her, apparently, but corporate emissaries for a giant logging company. Nojes got the last laugh; several of her finds are on display in museums around the world and she’s published three highly esteemed books about her digs and exploits.

She reaches into the folds of her voluminous skirt and pulls out a small object. “It was all worth it,” she says, “for this.” She holds up an elaborately carved Cambodian bronze dragon, about four inches long. A row of dramatic, pointy scales arch along the figure’s back like a headdress.

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Everyone but me leans in for a closer look. I don't need to. The bronze dragon is already familiar to me; I know every carefully shaped detail. I can turn it around in my mind's eye, see it with crystal clarity. I may as well have stared at this object every day of my life.

I don't simply *know* the dragon. I hear fragments of its story too.

She held me in her palm, showing me off to her father, but he ignored her and she nearly dashed me to the ground in frustration.

I look around the yard for a sign that anyone else hears what I hear, but I already know they do not. My imagination's roots grow in a wild tangle within a strange and private forest that I cannot share or explain to another soul.

The bronze dragon is one among many. Every single archaeological artifact shown to us in grad school, every photograph of every artifact in the books and websites we used, and the museums we visited, is equally familiar. Dan, Sue, and Gayle were right to be suspicious of me. There *is* something going on. I *do* seem to know things that other people do not know. But I don't know where this knowledge springs from or why it's in my possession. I don't know if my perceptions are connected to the *pulse*. I know so many things—and almost nothing about myself. Who I am, why I'm made this way: blank mysteries.

My foster parents were worse than clueless; they were generally indifferent to my welfare. Perhaps this big blank at the center of my identity is what's holding me back now from trying to map out a future for myself—any future. Feeling a renewed self-consciousness and hyper-aware of the difference between me and all of my peers, I try to concentrate on what Nojes is saying.

“When I die,” she says, holding up the bronze dragon, “this goes straight back to the cultural antiquities museum in Phnom Penh. Unless, somehow...” She pauses unexpectedly, her gaze distracted. Is she looking in my direction? Why? “...Someone comes to claim it sooner... Anyway, I

believe in repatriation. But after a thousand years, a few decades spent privately caring for something as magnificent as this surely will not matter.”

I feel a tug on my arm. It’s Bette. Grey has moved closer to Nojes to look at the artifact.

“She fucking stole it,” Bette says, hardly bothering to whisper. “Did you hear what she just said? Am I wrong?”

“Well, you could say she’s just borrowed it for a long time. Like checking a book out of the library and then holding onto it for a couple years past the due-date.”

“It’s not like that at all!” Bette says. “You don’t really believe that, do you, Marsh?”

“Look at it this way, Bette,” I say. “The dragon will never find its way back to the water-carrier who carved it to please her father because she’s been dead for centuries.”

“Wait, how do you know a water-carrier made it? And how do you know the artist was a woman? Why would you say that?”

“Did I? Just a wild guess. But anyway, the dragon is safe. Nojes has taken good care of it. It’s not like she uses it to crack walnuts. And eventually, it will find its way back to a place where Cambodians and tourists can enjoy it. Looking at the history of the object as a whole, over many thousands of years, this is a really short detour. I don’t see the problem.”

“Wow,” Bette says, shaking her head and swigging the last of a beer. “I’ve known you two years, and I’m just realizing you are a completely amoral person. At least, your morals are pretty squishy. Nojes has no business holding on to that object and I’m going to report her. She’s breaking the law. She’s a criminal, Marsh.”

“Bette, hold on,” I say, but Bette turns her back to me and walks away. I watch her bright pink head merge into the crowd of students still tightly packed on the lawn. I’m wondering if she just ended our friendship. Bette does tend to see things in black and white. You’re either with the good guys or the bad guys, and she seems certain she can tell the difference. Where making friends

are concerned, I always get it wrong, somehow. Bette turns around and heads back my way. To apologize for being so hard on me, perhaps?

“And why would you make shit up?” she asks. “A female water-carrier? I get that you’re smart, Marsh, but when you invent the history of an artifact you know zilch about, it’s like spitting on your degree. Like archaeology’s just one big joke. Think about that before you go off somewhere to dig shit up and claim to know all about it.”

“You’re right, Bette,” I say. “You’re so right. I’m sorry.”

Bette stalks off again without acknowledging my apology. Add her to the list, I think with a familiar twinge of regret. I didn’t mean to irritate her. I never intentionally mean to irritate *anyone*. I’m furious with myself for speaking so freely. I need to say less, about everything. Like the slogan says, what goes on in Pauline’s head, stays in Pauline’s head.

“All right, children,” Professor Nojes says, rising slowly from her lawn chair. “It’s time for the next chapter in our final evening together.”

“Finally,” Grey says, once again by my side, standing so close his breath lightly grazes my neck. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Won’t you miss Nojes’s lectures?” I ask him, still thinking about how to get back on Bette’s good side. “Especially since they always seem to star the professor herself. Have you noticed?”

“No, really?” His crooked smile makes me forget all about Bette. Grey’s smile is beginning to feel like something sweet and delicious—and dangerous?—like an addiction. Well, I think, *this* is new. I’m so glad the *pulse* had visited me earlier in the day, because I won’t go through it again for days or weeks. I know I’m safe—that is, normal—for the time being. Which means I’m free to concentrate on whatever is happening right now.

The dean resumes holding court in the center of her living room, which is far too small to hold all of us. We are uncomfortably crammed together, pressed to the walls. Grey’s arm touches

mine and I am acutely aware of the heat radiating from his body. I force my attention back to room at large. The professor's living room is curiously devoid of any personality. The art on the walls looks store-bought, pale abstract images like those you might see in a hotel room. There is no sign of any artifacts, sculptures, figurines, or even photos that would speak to her decades of adventurous travel and excavation.

"Listen up," Nojes says loudly, looking very Gertrude Stein-ish, her bangles knocking together. She is the shortest person in the room, yet she seems to take up a lot of space. I suspect none of us has forgotten that she still exercises control over us. "What happens over the next few hours will put a stamp on your future, your whole life, in fact. The experience you are about to undergo will stick with you to your dying day. Rituals, people, rituals make the world go round." Nojes's gaze moves around the room, resting on me for an extra second or two, or so I imagine. I'm curious to know how Grey is taking this, so I turn to watch his face. He appears wary, perhaps cynical, his eyes slightly narrowed.

"I'm going to call you in pairs," Nojes says. Only two at a time? Whatever she is planning will take forever. A lot of eye-rolling in the over-crowded, over-heated living room makes clear what everyone is thinking. Several students inch toward the front door, no doubt wondering how to make an escape without forfeiting their graduation. "Don't even think about it," Nojes says. I guess she's seen this before.

Bette squeezes in next to me. "She's a fucking megalomaniac," she says. "And crazy. She can't keep us here. She has no right. If the Fire Department knew how many people were crowded in here right now, they'd impound her sorry ass." Bette is practically dancing on her toes with agitation. At least she is still speaking to me.

"Aren't you even a little bit curious?" I ask. "Don't you want to see what comes next?"

“Curiosity has nothing to do with it,” Grey chimes in from my other side. His deep voice reminds me of a coursing river. “She’s extorting us. I guess the university gives her a pass on account of her reputation which, you’ll notice, she polishes herself every chance she gets.”

“Maybe they don’t know,” Bette says. “Maybe no one has ever had the courage to report her to the provost or whoever has power up the food chain here. But I will. I won’t hesitate when this is all over.”

“Do what you gotta do,” Grey says to Bette, “but I respect her. She’s manipulative, sure, but she’s awfully clever about it. That’s a real skill—knowing exactly how to get what you want before anybody even realizes what you’re doing.”

“You think deceit is a skill?” Bette asks. “Boy, you two are peas in a pod. No offense, but you’re both ethically challenged.”

“I think you’re both right,” I say, “but all I care about right now is learning about the rituals she referred to, whatever they are. She said this is going to transform us. Don’t you see how lucky we are? We’re going on an adventure!”

“Rituals? Transformation?” Bette says scornfully. “That’s the dean’s bullshit. Archaeology only works because there are rules in place—guard rails—about what we do and how we do it. It’s science, not Burning Man.”

Grey and I respond in unison. “Rules are meant to be broken.” We look at one another and laugh. I blush and focus on the sound of his deep laughter, which holds a trace of mocking self-awareness. I would very much like to know more about him and what he thinks about, well, everything. That’s a first, for me. I doubt he feels the same about me, however.

“Freiburg and Sullivan,” Nojes calls, consulting a printed list in her hand. We watch the first pair of students work their way from opposite ends of the room toward the dean. Do they even know each other? Is she pairing students at random? Or is there a method at work? The dean opens

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a door to another room and gestures for the pair of students to enter. She follows them in and closes the door.

The living room falls silent. I imagine we are each trying to figure out what is in store for us, and with whom we will undergo this experience, whatever it may be.

“This is stupid.” I can’t see who says this but I know from the voice it’s Sue Rios. “Next, she’ll have us playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.” Titters run through the crowd.

“This is probably illegal, you know,” Bette says loudly, “a violation of all the codes this school is supposed to follow. Who does she think she is, holding us here against our will? I’m gonna do something about it. Who’s with me?” I hear murmurs and whispers but not one single student responds to Bette. “Bunch of sheep,” she mutters.

Less than five minutes later, the door opens and Cynthia Freiburg and Carl Sullivan emerge. I stand on tiptoes to get a look. All eyes are on them. Neither of them returns our collective gaze. They appear drained and decidedly not together. Whatever happened in that room does not seem to have been a shared experience or a pleasant one. Carl trails behind Cynthia as both head toward the front door, shaking their heads. I catch a brief glimpse of Carl’s face: his eyes are blank pools. A shiver runs through me. I’m not scared. I have a powerful sense of anticipation. Something is unfolding here, in this house, something far beyond the imagination of everyone here. Including, perhaps, me.

“What happened?” Gayle Connaught asks. “Can’t you at least tell us what to expect?” There is no response.

“Will she let you graduate, at least?” Dan Finland calls out.

“Will you testify against her?” Bette shouts as Cynthia and Carl leave the house without a backward glance.

“You were right, Pauline,” Grey says to me. “This will be an adventure. Good luck.”

“You too,” I reply. “Whatever goes on in there—”

“I’m game,” he smiles. “Why not?”

“Same,” I say. Grey presses a finger to the back of my hand and that simple gesture sends a shock wave through me. The second time our skin has made contact. The sensation is nothing like the *pulse*; it’s earthy and grounded. Is he flirting with me? And why me? He can have any woman in this room. Perhaps he already has. I force myself to remain casual, as if I don’t notice his touch. But I do not pull away, either.

Nojes re-emerges from the mysterious room, list in hand. “Harvin and Loren,” she calls. I watch Dawn Harvin and Bruce Loren thread their way through the crowd. They look terrified. The pattern is the same. In less than five minutes, the two of them re-emerge, shaken to the core. Stumbling, they make their way to the front door, clearly anxious to leave the house. This time, no one says a word. We simply watch. And wait.

The room fills with a shared sense of quiet dread. Everyone stops drinking.

“Off with their heads!” someone says quietly, in an attempt at gallows humor. Hardly anyone laughs.

Someone else voices the opening to Chopin’s famously haunting funeral march. “Dum, dum, de-dum, dum, de-dah-dah-dah-dah dum.” Bette stands near me, quietly fuming. She’s on her phone, probably sending outraged texts to the president of the university and anyone else she can think of. I don’t ask. I’m not eager to set her off again or endure another lecture on my “squishy” ethics.

Grey turns to me. “I’m taking bets on who faints first. My money is on Finland.” His smile is mischievous, this time. He is a man of a thousand smiles, I decide. I clamp my hand on my mouth to keep from bursting into laughter. Grey and I seem to be the only ones feeling energized, even exhilarated, by this entire episode. He is clearly no more afraid than I am.

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“Marsh and Henley,” Nojes calls. Grey and I immediately turn to one another. I am astonished and also feel extraordinarily lucky. If I’d been asked to choose a partner to undergo this ritual with me, I would not have hesitated to choose Grey Henley, despite the fact that I might have passed him on the street with the barest nod until two hours ago. Before this evening, I would have chosen Bette, given a choice. But now she is the last person I want to enter that room with, and Grey is the only person. Grey takes my hand (!) as we head toward the door and I am flooded with a happiness I have never known. This may be the first really good thing that’s ever happened to me.

The windowless room is dim and gray, as if lit by shadows. An odd smell lingers faintly, and I wonder if I smell my classmates’ fear. In contrast to the blandly decorated living room, every inch of the walls in this room are adorned by tribal masks and shelves of figurines from all over the world. In each corner stands a statue or sculpture. I do not need an instant to think; I can identify every single object in the room and where it comes from. I swiftly catalogue the sources of the room’s contents. Edo. Yoruba. Igbo. Burkina Faso. Inuit. Aztec. Yunnan. Guizhou. Venice. Papua. Dominican Republic. The masks grimace, leer, and smile, their faces painted bright red, yellow, green, black, brown, white. Some are framed with halos of coarse straw or feathers.

Yes, I lied to Sue and Gayle and Dan. Told them I studied, when I didn’t need to. I enrolled in the Master’s program at Carthage University not to learn but to obtain a credential others would recognize—to give me a veneer of normalcy. My archaeology degree offers legal entry to digs and exploratory excavations anywhere in the world. I wanted to acquire the formal vocabulary and frames of reference for this discipline as a complement to my own innate store of knowledge. The credential is my cover. If Bette knew this, perhaps she wouldn’t be so hard on me.

All of these thoughts flash by within the first few seconds of entering the room. I don’t have time to gauge Grey’s own first impressions before Nojes issues instructions in a clipped, no-nonsense voice.

“Face each other,” she commands. “Closer. Still closer. Now clasp hands.” The sudden joining of our flesh feels incredibly intimate; I may as well stand naked in front of him. Despite the room’s dim light, I see flecks of silver in his dirty-blond hair, including in the loose curl that rests on his forehead. The silver is visible in his neatly trimmed stubble as well. And some tendrils of light-colored chest hair rise up from the neckline of his black tee shirt. I can just make out the contours of his strong pectoral muscles. I tip my head back slightly and look for the first time straight into his blue eyes, which are flecked with shards of grey. He returns my gaze without hesitation and I wonder what he is thinking. A slight smile plays around his lips.

“Keep your hands together,” Nojes says. “And do not move. Do not separate. Do not speak. Remain absolutely still until I tell you otherwise.” Nojes swiftly blindfolds me and I assume she does the same to Grey. I sense her step away, briefly, then hear the sound of a match being struck, and within seconds a strange and pungent odor fills my nostrils. Sage, loam, ground acorns, oil of oregano, and oak bark tannin. Though I am able to discern the components of the thick smoke, I do not know its purpose. The smoke penetrates deep into my lungs, triggering a spell of hard coughing. Grey coughs as well. But then we stop coughing as suddenly as we started, as if our bodies simply absorbed the smoke. Perhaps it has entered our bloodstream. That makes no sense but a change is coming over me, both familiar and strange. Not the *pulse*! It’s too soon. And if it is the *pulse*, I can’t imagine going through it while pressed up against a guy I barely know. He might think something is wrong with me—that I am frightened, weak, or even crazy, none of which is true, or maybe *all* of that is true.

But is this the *pulse* again, after all? Induced by the smoke, perhaps? If so, I’ve skipped straight to stage three—where I am floating above the earth. This has never happened before; the stages of the *pulse* unfold exactly the same way every time. I grip Grey’s hands as tightly as I can, as if to keep from flying up and away. But clutching doesn’t help. I am rising swiftly out of my own body.

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Despite the blindfold, I have sight. I am in the treetops now, above the dean's house, rising higher and higher. Then I am thousands of feet in the air, traveling not only through space but through time as well. My physical body seems to have dissolved and I exist in a realm of pure feeling and connection to all of the things that humans make, manufacture, or craft to pray or protect, nurture or defend, share love or blood lust.

Seeing and feeling become one. I sense children spearing fish in a river. The dark, open mouth of a stone cave lit from within by a fire. Small animals carved in wood and ivory, neatly arrayed on a plinth. A joint of meat roasting over a spit. A henge of stone in which people dance wildly. A woman dying as she gives birth to a child. Two men clubbing one another until both are bloody. I experience all of it as they do: heat, cold, hunger, joy, pain, fear, anger. I become aware of a parallel sensation. A presence accompanies me on this journey. Not Grey—not someone I have met in real life. This presence feels more like a spiritual companion than a person. I cannot see this figure; I only know I am not alone.

As suddenly as I have departed, I am slammed back into my own body, back to earth, back to the room in Dr. Nojes's ranch house. For a split second, I am bereft; I resent being forced to return so abruptly from an altered state that feels more real to me than my actual life. I am still blindfolded and breathing hard as Dr. Nojes whispers in my ear, so softly only I can hear. "You will have questions. Return to me when you are ready."

She removes my blindfold, then Grey's. He is breathing hard too. We look down at our hands, clasped so tightly our knuckles are white. "You may release your hands," Nojes says. We disentangle slowly, wordlessly. I wonder if I look as pale as Grey. His blue eyes are glossy. Nojes opens the door for us to leave. Surely, this was not five minutes, but five hours, five days, five weeks, and all the other students will be long gone. But no. They are all there, watching us expectantly, curious dread spread across the cluster of faces. But I am different from the others who

entered the room before us and so, it seems, is Grey. We both smile and laugh and wave before heading out into the spring night air, transformed, together.

This version of the chapter is slightly modified from the version submitted to the contest.

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