

Chapter One : Spring and All

I lifted my face to the sun, enjoying the hot dusty air. Closing my eyes I imagined I was home again. Easy to do. How lucky for me the place of my confinement was so much like home, halfway around the world though it was. No one knew I was there. Anyone who cared was dead or working for Them. I was truly alone. Orrin was shuffling around a few feet behind, keeping a wary eye on me lest I decided to take my execution date into my own hands. I tried to muster up some hate for this man I once called brother, but failed to do so. He was just as powerless as I.

I stubbed out my cigarette and headed back. Once there was a time when I would never have touched a cigarette, alcohol, or coffee. I was intent on keeping my body pure for the communication of angels, my mind sharp. In captivity I longed for corruption, longed to blur the thoughts and memories of visions that, despite all my efforts, remained with excruciating clarity.

Orrin and I arrived at my rooms, and I went back to my desk. Time to get back to work. I had been given the task of writing all I remembered of who I was and what I'd done, presumably for posterity, to be kept in a vault and taken out when our followers were ready for it (edited for content by the Elders, to be sure). When it was finished, my martyrdom would be arranged in the manner of Prophets past. I decided to throw out the tradition of scriptural narrative, to bypass flowery language and quotable phrases. This would be honest. This would be the truth. My life. Not a heroic story, not a quest, not a chiseled in stone guide for living. Just the story of a man who walked on the Earth, who lived and loved and was betrayed. Who was the son of an Angel, and the lover of one as

well. Who saw too much and knew too little. My story. Whatever might be changed or taken out by the Elders when they decided to add it to the works of my former incarnations, at least I would know someone read the whole raw thing.

I lit another cigarette and poured a cup of coffee, then loaded the printer with paper. Uninvited tears came pouring out of my eyes. Alone. So alone. The lead lined walls would keep Him away. All I had left were the memories and hopes for the next life. For you, Anmael. All for you.

The Testament of Adam James Johnson

Our home was named Manna, after the miraculous food that God made materialize in the desert for the Israelites fleeing slavery. We saw ourselves as fleeing the slavery of our society, of dead religions and corrupt politics. We lived in the desert, but we had made it a paradise. On a strip of land between the Grand Canyon and the Arizona-Utah border, we made our home. Manna. I lived there with twenty-three siblings, five mothers (one of which biological), and Alderon, patriarch of the Johnson clan. The Prophet James Johnson had died for this vision, this life we led. Back to Eden, back to innocence. We would populate the desert and then pollinate the world with the flower of our light. That was the plan, anyway.

I was laying in the meadow, dozing in the spring air. Sunlight dappled over me in golden petals, in time with the rhythm of the stream a few yards away. I heard my younger brothers and sisters playing nearby, laughing and screeching like happy little monkeys. My father's words kept trickling into my mind, interrupting my reverie. "He'll

be coming to you soon. Be ready."

A commotion came from the compound. Lavinia, the matriarch of the clan, was running to the field, hair unbound and flowing in wild tangles around her shoulders, a pioneer medusa. All the children froze in place and I sat up, awaiting instructions. Instinctively, I looked around for my eldest brother Orrin, but he wasn't there, of course. He was in Iraq.

"Is it a raid?" I shouted, trying to be the man my father had taught me to be, that Orrin was.

"Alderon is dead!" Lavinia shouted, sobbing. "Hurry up and get ready. They'll come soon, they'll come! Go to your mothers!"

Lavinia gathered the younger children to her skirts and rushed them back to Manna. I followed a few yards behind. My mother was no doubt up in our rooms still. I pulled myself up tall as I walked to the main house. Sister-wives with the unbound hair of mourning rushed around with empty sad eyes, gathering their children and making arrangements. Soon numerous aunts and uncles and friends would be coming to take us to safe houses. My mother and I would go to my grandmother's house in Phoenix. We had done this before, scattered at a moments notice at the rumor of a government raid from any of our allies, but this time would be different. The patriarch was dead and we might never see Manna again. Lavinia would stay, the only legal wife, with her seven children. We would be welcome to visit, of course, but this would not be home anymore. Especially not for my mother and I, the barely tolerated fey youngest wife and her one meager albino son. None of the scorn of the other mothers and children could bother me today, however, as I gathered my dazed mother and the emergency supplies we always

had at the ready. The memory of the last talk with Alderon was still replaying itself in my mind.

I dragged Momma down the stairs to the waiting car. It seemed like my fathers tribe had materialized in a matter of seconds, and Manna was swarming with efficiency even in the midst of hair tearing grief. I gently set my mother in the back seat of a VW Jetta that I would be driving to Phoenix, tank full and a cooler with bottled water and sandwiches on the passenger side floor board.

"Are you comfortable, Momma? Here, have some water. Don't forget to keep hydrated when we get out in the desert." Momma smiled and took the bottle as if humoring me.

"Thank you, son," she said, "you remind me of your father right now. The suns shining on you like a halo." She ruffled my hair and then leaned back onto her seat, looking out of the window, daydreaming. The other sister-wives were wailing and weeping while she looked the same as ever - dreamy and distant. I put on my sunglasses and fishing hat and drove away, holding back tears as I took one last glimpse of home.

My Grandma Lily lived in a two story white stucco and Spanish tile house in the suburbs, surrounded by other white stucco and Spanish tile houses. Neat xeriscaped front yards, free of water wasting greenery, blended well with the sterile, alien beauty of the surrounding desert. The only thing that distinguished our new home from our neighbors was the beautiful stained glass and wood door, like something from a Mexican nobleman's home. The motif was a stylized angel blazing with the tawny colors of the desert, little winged cherubim carved around the edges of the wood. My grandfather had

made that door, as he had made all of the heavy wood and iron furniture within. He had been a carpenter, and his furnishings were mission style with a baroque element that made them seem modern and antique at the same time; utterly unique and bold. The stone tile floors were scattered with Mexican style rugs in bright red and gold tones. Grandma Lily was bold and bright herself, and I was glad to see her. Her brass colored hair was in a highly teased French twist, a throwback from her Texan big-haired youth of the sixties. She still wore the same type of makeup she did then, too; heavy black eyeliner with a few dozen coats of mascara and white lipstick. She wore black, form fitting clothes and big turquoise and silver jewelry. She smelled of Joy and brandy. As she led us into the den she called to Diego, her twenty-something boyfriend she liked to pretend was some sort of personal assistant, to help with the luggage.

"Oh Adam, you look so tired! Sit down, hon.' Oh Isabella, you don't look so well yourself, here, sit down here on the couch, hon.' I'll go get you two some lemonade." Grandma Lily stroked our hair affectionately, like she would two of her many Siamese cats, before padding to the kitchen in her black ballet slippers. Thin and wiry, from behind Lily could be sixteen years old. She really is lovely, I thought, breathing in the lush life she lived. I already missed home, but maybe things would be okay with Lily here.

Diego came in from putting our luggage away. Lily made sure her house had room for us when she bought it, knowing always to expect us, no matter what time. It occurred to me that my mother was very lucky to have a mother like Lily, who didn't judge her for becoming the fifth wife of a man who believed he was descended from a stranded angel, therefore under holy obligation to spread his seed over the earth.

Grandma Lily came back with two tall glasses of lemonade.

"Here you are my dears. Terrible, just terrible. I saw it on the news today. Shot in broad daylight. You just leave everything to me now, it'll be okay. You just make yourselves at home." Lily was stroking my hair with her long, red tipped fingernails, fussing at my homemade clothes. I smiled at her.

"Right now I just want to take a long bath," I confessed.

Lily smiled. "Of course, my love. Whatever you need. We can get some Chinese takeout tonight and watch a movie. Would you like that?" she asked.

"I would," I replied. The last time I'd had takeout or seen a movie had been five years ago, the last time we had fled Manna. There were no movies or television or radios at Manna. Just the scripture, family histories, Alderon's stories, and the many beautiful hymns and plainsongs of the sister-wives. It had seemed enough then, but here, in this fresh modern home, in this crowded dusty city, I wanted to feel like any other sixteen year old boy in America.

Grandma Lily and Diego left to get food and a movie. I helped Momma get settled into her room, finding her a clean nightdress and putting away her homemade dresses. We sat on the big four poster bed cross-legged, and I combed her long, thick black hair streaked with white while she flipped channels on the big satellite television. Frail and ageless, Momma stared at the flickering images, not seeing any of them. The wealth of information and entertainment before us seemed inferior to our own imaginations; dry and dead, gaudy and tawdry.

I hugged Momma from behind, burying my face in her hair that still smelled of

home. She was exhausted and ready to retreat into her own world. I helped her get in bed, pulling the covers up to her chin and kissing her brow, too smooth for it's age. She was ever a child, ever innocent, like the Virgin Mary herself.

I went to my own room, the one Grandma Lily kept for me and occasionally updated as I grew older. My life had been split between the peaceful idyll of Manna, where time stood still and the outside world was a myth, and the life of a fugitive; lying and hiding to survive. I wondered if I'd ever go to Manna again. Lavinia would welcome us, I was sure, but it would never be the same. We were split now, the head of the serpent severed. There would be little done about the murder, this I knew. We were outlaws, an embarrassment. Families like ours were tolerated, but not protected. If anything was going to be done about Alderon's murder, we would have to do it ourselves, thus beginning another cycle of revenge for the next generation. I wasn't sure I wanted to be a part of it. I may not be able to forgive Alderon's murderers, but I would not kill them myself.

I slowly unpacked my meager homemade wardrobe and a few belongings, examining the Typical American Teen bedroom my Grandma had assembled for me. I looked over the bookshelf, perhaps the most appealing thing there. It was partially full of volumes of wilderness adventure, detective stories, and a few classics of mythology and literature I would likely need to be familiar with at school. I imagined Grandma Lily couldn't wait to get me to the shops for some clothes. I wouldn't mind the attention.

I felt like my skin was encrusted with dirt and sweat; as I peeled my clothes off, I considered burning them. There was a bathroom attached to my room, a rare luxury considering our outdoor compost latrine and shared steel tub back home. I filled up the

deep tub, made to look like pinkish marble, with hot water, and rooted under the sink for toiletries. I found some soap that smelled of lavender and strawberry shampoo. It would do. As I sank in the water, holding the bar of soap to my nose, I remembered making soaps at home. We had a special shed where we made them, also shampoos, lotions, and natural perfumes. They were then sold at the farmers market next to our jams and jellies. Women came from miles around to buy our products, marveling at the youthful glow and shining hair of the sister-wives of Manna. I wondered then if modern life would ever be adequate for me, if the city and all its concrete and plastic and lies could ever make me forget who I was or where I came from.

"Never forget who you are," Alderon told me the last time I saw him. "Never forget." He kept our family history in leather-bound books he had made himself. Even the paper, which felt thick as cloth, had been made by him. There had been previous histories written in handmade books by his father before him, and so on. Family was the only thing that mattered to the Johnson's; blood and work. I never questioned any of it, always assuming it was just a point of pride. Our family had conquered the wilderness, had been through biblical hardships to settle this harsh land, and we had made it bloom. We would make the desert into the lost garden, populating it with our strong blood and the toils of our labor. Life was work and family. Joy was found there, fulfillment. I expected I would eventually have a family of my own, and would work the land myself, building my own house and teaching my sons and making proper matches for my daughters. But it wasn't to be. It was never to be.

The full moon had made me edgy that night, three weeks past, when I had last seen Alderon. I could never sleep well when there was a full moon, prickling with energy and excitement for something I could never quite grasp. That particular night I went out to take a walk in my pajamas, bare feet feeling the rich soil and clover, stepping on the wildflower on my way to the creek. I saw him staring at the sky, wearing white, crisp linen, iridescent and haloed in the moonlight.

"I knew you would come," he said as I crept up, turning to face me. His blue-green eyes were wide and dilated, his face open with bliss and knowing. He had been Communing. I should have been too, I thought, realizing how wasteful I was with the energy bubbling inside me. I sat down next to him and waited for instruction or revelation.

"I was looking up at the star," he began, "the one that covers the home of our fathers. I was thinking about how I'd be going back there soon."

I answered with silence, not wanting to face the future he had seen.

"We are here for a reason, son. I'm not speaking metaphorically here, Adam, we are literally here on a mission. You are a vital part of that mission."

I remained silent and attentive, knowing not to interrupt him when he was Revealing. He gazed at the stars some more, closing his eyes and nodding before continuing.

"Adam, I know you feel like you're different than the rest of your brethren. You know your Momma is, too."

"Yes...Daddy, I don't want to be disrespectful, changing the subject like this, but there's something that's been bothering me about your relationship with Momma...you

never visit Momma like you do the others. She's the most beautiful of your wives, I think. Why?" I asked, embarrassed, but wanting to know too much to censor myself.

Alderon laughed gently, patting my shoulder. "It's right you should wonder about these things. Your mother is beautiful, and I do desire her. How could I not? But she doesn't belong to me. Never has. I'm just her provider and protector.

"Adam, I know you know your family history, of the angel that lay with Emmy Johnson, how she gave birth to James Johnson, who began this clan over a hundred years ago. Well, it's been our sacred duty to ensure that we spread the sacred seed in abundance, and make the desert lush and fertile. There have been other children of angels, in other parts of the world, in other times. James Johnson's father is known as Amnael. Amnael has fathered other prophets and communed with them. It is his own mission to make all humanity advance, by influencing it into change. Not big revolutionary change, but the quiet change of heart that is the only change that lasts. He's your father, Adam. I am not your father. I am only here to protect and provide for you, and I do, but I am not your father. Amnael himself is. That's why I don't lay with your Momma, who was his, and that's why you are so special."

I stared at Alderon further, not sure what to say, or if words were actually appropriate. I chose silence.

"Adam, you aren't going to live here in Manna for long. You were meant to walk among the sleepwalkers out there, to spread your divinity through the hearts and minds of the people as well as through your holy blood. Ever since our ancestors first came here, we have been trying to bring out the best in this planet. There is so much potential out there, Adam. What most people think of as Gods, they can become. Maybe

not in this life, but they can Become. It's easier for us, because the link to the source is more pure, but never forget that anybody can Become."

Alderon looked out across the fields and buildings of Manna wistfully, a lock of his wavy golden hair falling over one eye. "I'll be leaving soon, Adam. Your destiny will await you. Metatron will come to you soon. Be ready. Keep yourself pure. There's a lot of ugliness out there that will try to drag you into lethargy, keep you from the Work. Don't let it happen, Adam. Never forget who you are. Never forget where you came from. Never forget."

As the light of zeal slowly faded, he stood up, stretched, and headed back. He was staying with Pearl that night and she was most likely in a state of pure frustration from his absence. I stayed by the creek and stared at Orion, trying to open myself up to hear like he did, to Know. I reached out to Orion, but the images were too blurry, too distant. Instead I reached out to Momma. I reached into the one place in her mind I could never tread, the place she was spending more time in every day. She was asleep so her defenses were down and I saw Him. I went to bed with his image emblazoned on my subconscious and dreamed of a journey that would last a thousand lifetimes and would only end in other journeys.

The water had turned cold. I hurriedly dunked and splashed myself clean. Drying off with a thick white towel that was large enough to wear as a toga, I assessed myself in the misted, full length mirror. I fingered my white, fine hair in dismay. Pearl, the hairdresser of the family, had cut it in an approximation of the James Dean fop Alderon had worn since he was a teenager. Where his hair was lush, wavy, and gold, mine was

cottony and fine like a baby's. Wet, it stuck to my bony face, dominated by spooky, big, pinkish eyes slanting and wide like one of Lily's cats. I looked like a bleached out Egyptian death mask; angular, pointy, and hard. I'd hit a growth spurt that summer, turning all my pants to clam diggers, but I hadn't filled into it yet. I felt like my hands and feet were freakishly long and bony, and my white body hair and pinkish white skin that would incinerate in the sun all made me feel more alien than angelic.

I pulled on my white cotton pajamas and went out into the den. The smell of Chinese take-out reminded me of how little I'd eaten that day. Vintage tin T.V. trays had been set out in front of large red leather couches. Lily had rented the Lion King, which I over-analyzed and related to my life as I fumbled with my chopsticks.

We ate in relative silence. I drank some sparkling mineral water while Diego and Lily sipped Mexican beer. I could tell Lily felt awkward and wanted to say some words of comfort but just couldn't come up with any. Diego sat in comfortable silence, occasionally giving me sympathetic looks. I liked Diego; he was classically handsome, like an old Hollywood movie star, and he was always perfectly groomed, smelling of lime and spices.

After the film was over I tried to help clean up, but Lily stopped me, telling me to go rest. She enfolded me in a hard, perfumed embrace before smacking my cheek with a kiss and sending me to my room. Diego gave me a one armed manly squeeze, then I feigned sleepiness and shuffled away.

Truth be told I was wired. I still couldn't wrap my head around Alderon's death, wouldn't, probably, until I saw proof of it. I was used to his absence as it was, sharing him with five wives and twenty-two other kids. I'd always felt his presence more in spirit

than physical reality, and maybe would even more so now.

I flipped through a Jack London collection from the bookshelf. Not able to absorb any of it, I turned onto my back and stared at the ceiling. I felt prickly, full of static. I turned off the lamp and opened the curtains, letting the moonlight fall into the room, and lay back down. I wanted to look at the stars, but knew the view would be muffled by the city lights. I focused instead on the memory of the stars, of the creek at Manna, where I first learned to Listen and to Know.

I must have drifted off to sleep, because the next thing I knew the clock on the nightstand showed 2:15 a.m. My body felt light and insubstantial, a projection of my will rather than the molded clay it pretended to be. I could wander the desert for forty days and forty nights without food or water, I thought, nothing material is real. Nothing here is true.

I walked out into the backyard. Through the flawlessly kept rock garden and organized cacti I wandered barefoot, breathing the fumes of the city. I sat on a flagstone and looked at the sky. Breathing deeply, I focused on the inmost light. Be with me, Anmael. Show me the way.

I opened my eyes and Orion appeared brighter. It started to spin, a growing sphere of blue white light. The sphere came closer and I heard it's whirling song; the sound of angels breath, sighing dreams, the birth of souls.

The sphere touched the ground a few feet away from me, at least seven feet in diameter, a form taking shape within. In the pictures etched in James Johnson's testament, Anmael appeared as a classical angel our of a cathedral ceiling. Haloed,

winged, and robed in cloth-of-gold, he blew a trumpet like Gabriel on judgment day. In the glimpse I'd had of my mother's heart, He had appeared a beautiful man with shining gold hair and skin, masculine and smooth with mighty hawk wings. I was seeing a different form, but I knew this was the same being.

He was vaguely human, the anatomy was familiar enough. I felt instinctively that male and female, young and old, were meaningless to him; human limitations that meant as little as gravity or time. He was a being of light, with long, narrow limbs and neck, an elegant but large head, and a face that was almost too symmetrical. His large eyes were beautiful bright blue, slanted cat-like over chiseled cheekbones and a perfect, long, straight nose. He was completely hairless but for a curtain of shimmering white hair that fell straight to his nipples, parted in the middle. He was clothed in an apron of eagle feathers. I soon found myself hovering inside the sphere.

"Father," I said, almost questioning.

He laughed gently. It sounded like water rushing over a stone in our creek. "I am that and more to you. We are bound. Come into me. Become me, and remember where we began."

I was engulfed in his light; no longer feeling my own body. Our thoughts were one, and I became his consciousness, my own falling away, becoming an observer. We spun, a spiraling column of spirit, and then I was a comet, shooting into the sky. I was suspended in the void for a few seconds, then I sped through a bright gate of light. I was then plunged into a vast ocean.

My body was formed from the light and water. I let the tide toss me until I was deposited onto the sand. I rolled around, sand, water, and light becoming smooth, glassy

flesh. I began to wander. I found two stones of aquamarine and made them my eyes. I walked through a corn field and made my hair from the silk of a sheaf. An eagle gave me two feathers, which I made into a skirt.

Costumed in flesh, I came upon a small human tribe. They were gathered around a clearly mad, beautiful young woman clinging desperately to a large, albino baby. The others in the village wanted to kill it, thinking it a freak, that it would bring bad luck, and she with it. I walked into the circle towards the woman and her crying son. The tribes people gasped and bowed in awe, thinking me a god. I put my hand on her head. My touch comforted her and she handed me the baby, who became silent in my arms, snuggling against my chest. "Abbasa," she said, the name she had given the child.

I took him to the Eyrie, where my people lived.

The child was a genetic anomaly, nothing more. He looked like one of us, but he was all human. Maybe that was why I decided to take him in, his looks. Maybe it was only pity, or a whim. I knew that the villagers would revere the woman and make her a priestess or even a goddess as the result of my intervention, and I was pleased and amused by this thought. I handed little Abbasa to the nursery maids and went to my prepared rooms.

The child was myself, I realized, as my consciousness separated from Amnael's. The perspective of the vision changed, as I remembered some of my childhood in the colony.

I was taught the same things the other children there were taught. I looked a little different, but I was treated as an equal. None questioned my being there, though I did sometimes feel a nagging sense of displacement. I learned to bend the elements to my

will, defy gravity, suspend time and reality, transform my body with my will, and travel out of body as well as teleport. I had no reason to believe I couldn't.

As I grew into manhood, I saw more of Amnael. He had not taken part in my upbringing, only checking in on my progress occasionally. To me he was a glamorous and distant relative, caring but not open. I looked up to him and admired him, seeing him as the ideal of what I would be when I grew up. I sometimes followed him around the colony when he was about his business. Sometimes he would pretend he didn't see me, other times he would ask me to join him.

Around my twentieth birthday, he seemed to notice me more. He offered me a position in his staff - he was a geneticist - and I gladly took it. Without school to wrest my attention away, Amnael soon became the center of my life. I loved being near him, infatuated by his kind nature, his almost feverish focus on his work, and his heartbreaking beauty. My obsession with him made me work harder on becoming a better person myself. I was desperate to impress him. Amnael was always quietly encouraging my progress, giving me suggestions and teaching me ways to open and clear my mind.

One night, when I was outside, staring at the human settlements from our high mountain colony, he came to me. It was a clear, cool early autumn night. I was still in the light linen clothes I had worn all day and was shivering, but enjoyed the night too much to go in. He came over with a blanket, settling it around my shoulders before sitting next to me.

"Studying the stars?" he asked.

"Not really," I admitted, smiling sheepishly. "Just enjoying them tonight."

"You sound guilty," he replied, his voice gentle but teasing.

I shrugged. "I know I should be using my time more productively."

Annael shook his head. "There is no shame in observing and enjoying beauty, Abbasa. When we observe beauty, we also learn to observe and accept it in ourselves. There are so many types of beauty, so much of it unexpected. Never shy away from it, Abbasa."

He spoke with a soft voice that came over me like a warm summer breeze. I shuddered a little when he said my name, spoken like a prayer. I felt blessed, basking in his quiet radiance. I stared wordlessly at him, drinking in his glowing, opalescent skin, his glossy, primrose hair, the aching perfection of his face and body. He looked back at me with a knowing, gentle smile.

"Annael," I breathed his name, almost afraid to utter it aloud, to shatter the dream of him so near, near enough to feel the warmth radiating from his skin. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," I told him.

He put his arm around me and I rested my head on his shoulder. If he had wanted, I would have offered everything I had of myself to him at that moment. My body was flooded with desire as I smelled his sweet, watery smell, like a morning on the beach. The breeze blew his hair into my face, and the silken caress of it felt delicious on my cheek.

"Abbasa," he sighed. "I bless the day I found you. Imagine if you had looked like the rest of them. Where would my heart have gone? It may have stayed cold forever." He stroked my hair, spreading it idly about my shoulders, resting his cheek against my head. I wrapped my arms around his waist. I pulled my face up to his, snaking a hand behind his neck, but he put his finger on my lips.

"Not now," Amnael said. Then he sighed and pushed my hair behind my ears, caressing my face. "Such a child still. And yet ageless. Are there other humans like you? They act as if humanity are so much lower than us, but look at us, Abbasa. We are equals."

We looked down at the fires below, at the scattered clans that constantly fought each other and scabbled for survival. I felt no kinship with them. I knew I would hate to live among them. My place was in the colony, with the Annanage. Amnael looked thoughtful and grave.

"Abassa, you learned all we know because you didn't know you couldn't. How do they, out there, know that they can't be like us too? Who told them? Why do they believe it?"

I knew he didn't expect me to answer him so I kept quiet. I secretly liked to think that I was perhaps special, different than the rest, but I did not voice this. I knew Amnael would say I was wrong, and that it was my pride talking.

"They can be taught, Abbasa. They can be at least as capable as we are, if not more so on this land, since it is theirs. But it has to be one of their own that does it. It can't be us. They must see someone that is like them, with the power of one of us, to truly believe. And even then there will be many who doubt but...it will be a start."

I wondered why it was so important to him what these savages were up to. Weren't we doing fine here? Did we have to deal with the other humans at all? Maybe we could take some in, make some contact, but Amnael, I felt, had bigger plans.

"Why does it matter?" I blurted out, at last. "Why do you care? Things are wonderful up here. Why bother with them? Surely it is beneath us."

Annael looked at me askance. "Abbasa, they are your people. If you can be like us than so can they. Don't you see, Abbasa, most Annanage believe people to be amusing pets, a useful and compliant work force at best. You have shown me that humans can be our equals. It is very important that this be proven to others. They need to know that humans are our brothers, not our inferiors."

I started to realize a little of what Annael was implying. The colonists planned to exploit the tribes, not to assist them. Maybe Annael had the same notions until he met me. I had changed his mind. I doubted he would be able to influence his peers much, though, even then. Part of me still wanted to believe I was special, that the rest of the humans really were beneath me and that I was meant to be Annanage.

"Annael, I haven't lived out there, but I've seen it from a distance. It's hard to fathom they could live in peace, share things, do anything, really, but destroy. They are like a plague. I know I shouldn't say that about my own people, but it's true. Maybe some are different, but most of what I see," I shuddered, "I don't want to see up close."

Annael pulled me closer, but he looked troubled.

"What are you thinking of?" I asked him.

"I understand how you feel, Abbasa, but can't you see beyond it? Don't you want to liberate your people? You are special, you are very special to me, but I refuse to believe you are the only human worth giving a choice to, freedom to." Annael looked around nervously for a minute, then whispered, "we need to talk somewhere more private."

There was no one in earshot, so I wondered what he could possibly mean, but followed him anyway. We went to a little cave and built a small fire. Annael obviously

had a lot on his mind tonight.

"Abbasa, do you know why we are here?" he asked.

"Some sort of exploration. Colonization," I answered.

"Yes. Colonization. Also known as Conquest. Abbasa, I know you must think of the Annanage as perfect and altruistic, but we aren't. When we first came here, we were looked upon as Gods to the humans, and some took advantage of that. They continue to do so and will as long as they can. The humans will do our bidding, follow any whim we have. Such power over other creatures, creatures with beauty and intelligence...it corrupts, Abbasa. You have met some fine Annanage here, but we're not all good. Abbasa, I believe you can help change the fate of your people. If you can teach them, if you can reach them, it could save so much pain. I'm not saying the ruling class won't colonize, but they won't be able to control so easily creatures who know the truth and believe in themselves. Then some of the corruption will be abated. Surely there is enough room on this planet for all of us, and it would be better to live in cooperation and harmony than as masters and servants. Slavery is not our way. It has become the ways of some because they can get away with it. But what if they couldn't?" His eyes were bright, intense with fury.

"I'm not sure what you want me to do," I said. I wished he would just hold me and stop talking about destiny, stop trying to make me responsible for things that seemed so obviously beyond my control. "I'm only one man," I added.

"One man can touch another mans life. Who'll touch another. And so on. You have to think beyond your own life, beyond what you can see. You but need to plant the seed. I will help you. I will be with you."

Even I knew what he wanted to do was dangerous. If the Annanage had become used to being worshipped, they wouldn't give up such power easily. Nor could any amount of altruism shake their basic need for survival, and they needed us to survive. Not to mention the fact that, despite whatever I had accomplished, most of the humans down below were cruel and savage. If the ruling class Annanage didn't destroy Amnael and I, the other humans would. I was scared and wary, but nevertheless, I couldn't help but be drawn into Amnael's excitement. I wanted to be with him, I wanted to please him. In many ways, I wanted to be him. I felt, even then, at the tender start of our relationship, that I would gladly die for him or his ideals.

Amnael may have had ideas of a messiah shouting from the mountaintops, but I still had enough sense of self preservation to reject that idea. Instead, I would reveal myself to individuals. I knew how to read the air around a being, to know what they were made of, what they were capable of. I created shamans, healers, mystics. Amnael and I brought to humanity a sense of possibility. They kept their Gods; they needed to personalize their experiences, put a face on the aspects of themselves they were discovering. We dealt with this by teaching them to use their Gods instead of worshipping them. We also made sure they thought of their Gods as non-corporeal and purely spirit - not to be mistaken as Annanage.

Some of the Annanage were of like mind, and became involved in our work. The ruling class couldn't have been blind to it, but when they saw how fast humanity was advancing in terms of intelligence and technology, they were pleased - for a time. The average Annanage was still stronger in will and trained in more advanced technologies than any human, so they refused to see us as a threat. It was a golden age for us; there

was still war and savagery, but there was also hope and beauty. The world was stretching its wings, and humanity was beginning to realize some of its potential.

Amnael and I, in the midst of all this change, fell deeply in love. Love doesn't even seem like an adequate word for what we shared. Our bodies and minds were fused; we complemented each other in every way. We often didn't even have to speak, sharing a silent communication beyond language. I worshipped Amnael, and he adored me. The age and race that separated us were so frail compared to our commonality of soul. No one who looked upon us could disapprove; it was as if we were two halves that were only whole together. We decided to join in the Covenant of Bonding, an uncommon sacred ceremony. We would be bound in love not just for this life, but for all eternity. It didn't seem like long enough at the time.

On the night of a full moon, we went to a seemingly random area of sand dunes in the desert. We were accompanied by two priests who were completely hairless and wore shining white linen skirts. They could have been twins, they were so indistinguishable. In front of one of the dunes, they moved their hands in sweeping gestures, blowing away the sand, revealing a small pyramid. We entered through a passageway outside the structure, and went down a stone stairway into a cool chamber. The priests lit wall sconces and began to prepare us. We were bathed in a large stone tub with salt and herbs, then were massaged and anointed with sweet almond and cedar oils. The priests were singing songs in a language so seldom used I could not make out one word.

When the priests were done preparing us, Amnael kissed me tenderly. "From this day forward we shall be bound for all eternity," he said, and his eyes were questioning, giving me a chance to turn away. I answered by pulling his head down into a more

passionate kiss. Then we walked up another stone staircase to the temple proper.

A circle of moonlight shone on the floor from the open tip of the pyramid. We went to the circle, naked and glistening in the moonlight. Amnael's skin had the sheen of a pearl, and his eyes shone from within, turquoise beams of light blessing me like the dawn. I encircled my arms around his long neck and pressed my body against his. Our skin was slick with oil and radiating heat despite the cool air from the shaft above. We kissed again then slowly sank to the ground, sitting up, Amnael cross-legged with my legs wrapped around his waist. When he entered me, a shaft of blue-white light filled my body, traveling up my spine, filling me with energy and the will of Amnael, his soul itself piercing me with electricity. I wanted to clutch his hair, kiss his face and neck, but remembered the instructions I had been given and instead stayed focused on the spirit forming with the body. Melting together. Slipping into one being. As we neared a shared climax, I could no longer tell where I began and he ended; I could have been making love to myself. What we are doing is sacred, I realized. What we are becoming is eternal.

We remembered to touch the correct pressure points on each other's spines at the moment of orgasm, and then we became a whirling column of light, shooting out of the top of the pyramid.

We traveled as a comet, through a star, into an ocean. In the ocean we separated, but we were changed. We each held a little of the other's soul inside ourselves, no longer individuals, but the combined properties of each other. We had become our own children.

The ocean carried us to the sand, where we whirled around, forming flesh. I

found eyes of rubies, his were aquamarine. His hair was corn silk, mine was swans down. We were met on the beach by the two priests, shining and hairless, who held out bright white robes of fine linen and garlands of flowers for us to wear. We embraced and kissed. Then I witnessed hundreds of lifetimes flashing before my eyes. The flashes of memory slowed down as the periods of history grew nearer to my own. Like a film, our most recent life together came into focus...

My brother Orrin and I were traveling behind the Carnival. I was handling snakes and speaking in tongues, part of my Ministry, while Orrin sold healing elixirs from the back of the covered wagon. Business was slow, and Orrin took to wandering around the Carnival sideshow. As I put a rattlesnake back in its cage, he ran up to me, beaming.

"Come on, James, you've got to see this," he said, excited.

I let our younger brother Seth finish packing up, and followed Orrin to the sideshow. Our sisters, Mabel and Emmy, were already there, whispering and giggling together.

"Doesn't that look like a fallen angel?" Orrin said, as we approached the platform.

He was billed as a "giant" - and he certainly was. But while most sideshow giants were deformed and dejected, this one was proud and beautiful. With white hair pulled back into a low ponytail and gentleman's clothes, he bore the stares of the crowd and crass blustering of the carnie barker with silent, if slightly irritated, dignity. As I stared with my mouth half open like a dullard, he turned his bright blue eyes on me. A flash of recognition and knowing passed between us - I did not understand it, but I felt it - and I whispered to Orrin, "we have to meet that giant."

"I know," he replied, "I think we could use him in our act."

I elbowed him in the ribs for that remark. Our "act," as he heretically, to my ears, called it, was the Full Gospel Ministry of the New Essene Church of Redemption. Undeveloped at the time, it was built on the visions I had been having for as long as I could remember, as well as some showiness that I had to use to bring in the crowds, to bring them to the Light. The church would come to grow faster than my own spiritual evolution did - but at the time, we were but a small group of traveling gypsies, still overly concerned with making a dollar.

We didn't have to wait around to meet "the giant." He sought us out as soon as his shift was over. My whole family were eating around a campfire near the wagon on the edge of the carnival encampment. Seeing him approach, I quickly got up, wiping my hands and face with a handkerchief, and ran to meet him.

"How do, brother," I greeted, shaking his hand. He smiled warmly.

"Brother," was all he said in return.

"Have you eaten? We have stew and cornbread - "

He shook his head, "no thank you. I'm not hungry," he answered.

I nodded. We stood there looking at each other for a minute or two - but the silence was comfortable. It felt like we were taking a moment to bask in each others presence.

"My name is Amnael," the giant finally said. I nodded.

"Sounds like an angel's name. Don't they always end in 'el'?" I replied.

He laughed gently in reply. Orrin ran up just then.

"Brother, your going to miss Emmy's Dutch oven cobbler - oh, well, how do you

do?" Orrin stretched his hand out to Amnael, pretending he hadn't noticed him until that moment.

"This is Amnael," I said.

"Well, it's good to meet you, sir," Orrin said. "I'm Orrin. This here's my brother James, but I suspect you knew that. Has James here been talking to you about the fullness of the Gospel as revealed to him?"

I bowed my head, slightly embarrassed.

"Yes," Amnael lied, covering for me. I met the humorous gleam in his eye. "I have heard about your...Plan for Redemption. I wish to know more." His voice didn't betray him, though I knew he was only playing along for Orrin's benefit.

Orrin brightened. "Well come on with us! You don't need to travel with those carnies any more, my brother! We will show you the truth, we will help you bring meaning to your life. God made you...like he did," he gestured to Amnael's huge body, "for a purpose, my friend. I believe that purpose is to act as a beacon, a lighthouse on the sea of salvation, bringing all the children home. Now come on and have some of Emmy's cobbler."

We followed Orrin back to the camp, suppressing laughter. I was pretty impressed by Orrin's display, actually - I was the preacher in the family. Of course, he was the salesman.

Still a few steps behind Orrin, Amnael pulled me back a bit.

"So what is the Plan, anyway?" he said, only half serious.

"As man is now, God once was. As God is now, Man may become," I replied, truthfully.

His face became serious. "You don't know how right you are, brother," he said. Then we followed Orrin back to camp.

I awoke with the dawn on my bed. "Annael," I whispered, remembering everything from the vision vividly. I could feel His presence there. He had always been there. He always would be.

Someone else was there, too. My mother stood at the foot of my bed. Face beaming, eyes shining wide, she looked quite mad. Her long hair fell loose and tangled around her shoulders, streaking her white cotton nightgown with its black and white tendrils.

"You saw him!" she gasped. "I felt his presence and I saw him from the window. You were with him!"

"What exactly did you see?" I asked warily, not sure how much of the vision I wanted to share with her, how much she would understand. Strange feelings came over me as I looked at her. I felt uneasy all of a sudden, a little jealous of her relationship with Annael. Our roles in this life - he as the holy father, she as the crazed mother, me as the messianic son, made me uncomfortable. Last night I knew that Annael was my love of many lifetimes - but he was also my father. I didn't feel as comfortable with these facts in the light of day.

"I saw Him," her eyes were even brighter when thinking of Annael. "And I saw you lifted up in a sphere of blue white light, up into the stars! I didn't see when you came back, I went to bed after an hour or two of waiting. I know it was your special night, but I'm so glad I got to see some of it! Oh Adam, I am so excited for you. You are truly

blessed." She sighed and sat heavily upon my bed.

"Oh Adam, it's all true, you are special! I hate to admit it, but I've doubted, Lord knows I have doubted. So many times I thought I was only deluded, that none of it was really true. Alderon believed me. I knew you would when you found out. Now he's come to you! Oh, Adam!" Then she pulled me into a tight embrace.

Her excitement was infectious. I would leave all my confusion over the roles the bodies that housed our eternal souls were playing for the moment. Here was the mother I had always loved, who once carried me in her body and I had always shared dreams with. We embraced, remembering a shared joy. How was I to know she was not also bound to him for eternity?

Finally, she pulled away, patting my leg before standing up. "Well, I'd better get showered and dressed. Here I am in my nightdress with my hair down in broad daylight! Imagine what Lavinia would say!"

I laughed and watched her skip out of the room. Imagine indeed what Lavinia would say. The thought of home sobered me for a moment. By this time of day we would have been up for a few hours at least, working the small subsistence farm, hand sewing and washing our clothes, building and repairing our dwellings. Manna was like a pioneer museum, the so-called luxuries of modern life a rumor to us, an ugly rumor. I hadn't been at Gran's for two days and already I was taking things for granted. How fast we change. Soon I would be going to school, meeting people my own age, people who worshipped disinterested, faceless Gods or believed nothing at all. People who didn't have visions. People who couldn't sew a button or make a fire without a match. People who listened to music and watched television shows and movies that I had never heard of.

How would I ever be able to walk among other teenagers, talking about whatever they talk about all day, doing whatever it is they do?

All I wanted, suddenly, was to talk to Alderon again. To hear stories of James Johnson's adventures, to meditate on the nature of the soul. To build things with my own hands with my brothers and sisters. Finally, I cried. I had been so rushed, so intent on taking care of Momma and getting us to a safe haven, I had not let Alderon's death sink in. It was more than just him that died, it was our life, our family. Orrin was serving in Iraq, he would not be taking his place as the head of the clan. None of the other boys were ready, either. What would happen to our home, to all the sister-wives and my kin? When we had all been separated before, we knew we would come together again, but not now. Would Lavinia marry someone from a rival clan? Would another patriarch and his family occupy our home, till our soil?

I couldn't bear to think about it, especially after all I had seen the night before. Maybe it was time for me to walk away from my family, and find my real family, the one I'd seen in the vision. Manna would have to wait. For the moment, I would be selfish. The greatest sin in our religion is selfishness, covetousness. We were expected to share everything; possessions, spouses, money, time - divided we fall. Maybe I was starting to understand Momma more, why she closed herself off to the rest of the clan and sometimes even to me, even as she made her appearance and did her duty. A person has to have something to call their own. Even if it is only a tidy little corner of their mind.