

Chapter 2

Summer Gold

After a couple of weeks in Phoenix, the idleness of Grandma Lily's home was getting to me. I offered to do every chore, and when those were done, would often create projects to do. I always think better when I'm involved in physical labor, it gives me a heightened sense of awareness, my body and mind aligned with purpose. I had made five birdhouses so far, each one more elaborate, in my boredom. Grandma Lily worried about me and told me to relax, but what she called relaxing just seemed like a waste of time to me. I was shocked at how mother had slipped into complete idleness on our return, spending her days parked in front of the television, engrossed in the soap operas that ran day and night on the satellite. Oh well, let her. Let her have whatever she needs. Momma wasn't made for this world.

Even though the weather was dreadfully hot, I insisted on working outside and going for long walks. I was used to wandering the fields of home, fishing and hunting, foraging - and I was determined to make my body adjust to the heat. I still woke around five a.m. most mornings, because I found it to be the most inspiring time of the day. Sunrise was ever a miracle for me, and I hated to think I would miss it just because I didn't have to gather eggs for breakfast.

One morning, I was changing the oil in the Volkswagen and listening to the radio

when a girl around my age came walking by. She had choppy bleached blonde hair, an abundance of eye make-up, and wore a dusty, old, velvet and lace dress. She had on little ballet slippers, and was carrying a bag from the corner store.

"NPR?" she asked, mocking, as she sauntered up to me.

"I like to keep myself informed," I replied, smiling at her.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Did you just come of the set of some show? What's with the pioneer gear?"

I blushed. Grandma Lily had bought me some new clothes since my arrival, but I often wore homemade clothes I had brought with me from Manna.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to make fun of you. It's cute, really. Very 'Little House.' My name's Calliope," she said, holding out her hand for me to shake. Her short nails were coated in chipped blue nail polish, large plastic and little silver rings adorned her tiny fingers.

"Adam," I said. She pulled my hand up to her face and studied my palm.

"Let me see here," she said, as she pleasantly traced the lines of my hand with a soft fingertip. "You like to work with your hands," she stated matter-of-factly, rubbing a callous. "And your relationship line...whoa, you really stick with someone, don't you?"

I blushed again, not saying anything in reply, thinking of the vision I had of Amnael.

"Are you seeing anyone right now?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

"Well, start saving up for the wedding now, because whenever you do find someone, it's going to be for life. Maybe longer," she said.

I smiled. "I'll be sure to do that. Do you live around here?" I asked.

"Two houses down," she replied.

"I'm surprised I haven't seen you before. I'm always walking around here."

"Yeah, well, that's probably because I avoid coming out in the summer for fear of incineration. You should do the same. Albino's and the Phoenix sun? Not a good mix."

"Sunscreen," I replied. "Where are you headed?"

"Home. I just had to go out and get some milk and cigarettes." she answered.

"I'll walk with you," I said, holding out my arm to her. "Shall we?"

"Such a gentleman," she sighed. "What a pity. The nice ones are always gay."

"What?" I asked, pretending not to understand her.

"Oh, nothing," she replied. "Here's my house. Already." She gave a little wave as she went inside and I waved back. I felt comfortable around her for some reason. I realized I really wanted a friend. I decided to visit her, maybe make her a birdhouse.

A few days later I was knocking on Calliope's front door. A tall, gangly boy with inflamed skin answered.

"Is Calliope in?" I asked.

The boy snorted and mumbled some approximation of "just a minute," and slouched off, partially closing the door behind him.

I was wearing some of the new clothes Grandma Lily and Diego had picked out for me. I was glad they hadn't tried to get flashy with my wardrobe and stuck to basics. I was far too inexperienced socially to try to fit in with any group at this stage, and would be content to just blend in. I wore black and white canvas sneakers, straight legged jeans,

and a plain gray t-shirt that was neither loose or tight. I had on black sunglasses more because the sun burned my pigment-lacking eyes like fire than from any fashion statement.

After a couple of minutes, Calliope came to the door. Her face was free of makeup, and as I suspected, it was quite lovely. Her skin was olive toned, her big, round eyes were dark brown, nearly black, and her mouth was small with full lips, giving her a petulant look. Her eyebrows were plucked into thin arches, and her white blonde hair was pushed back behind her ears.

"Hey," she said, arms crossed. She was wearing plaid pajama bottoms and a white tank top with a very visible black bra underneath. "Come on in."

I followed her into the air conditioned house. The furnishings were more modern than Gran's. The main areas of the house looked like model showrooms, unlivd in and untouched. We went to her bedroom.

"I brought you something," I said, holding up a birdhouse I had recently made.

"Cool, a fairy house. I'll put it out back tonight, with the proper offerings," she said, taking it and placing it on a dresser.

Her room was furnished with a white and pink bedroom set, obviously one she grew up with that no longer suited her. Books on witchcraft and fantasy novels crowded her bookshelves and any other flat surface. Her walls were plastered with prints of dreamy artwork that I of course didn't recognize. A fat, black, long-haired cat was cleaning itself on her bed.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like Andy Warhol?" she asked.

I didn't want to admit I had no idea who he was, so I just said, "no."

"Funny," she continued, "because you look just like him. When he was young, that is. Maybe it's just the hair. Your face is actually more long and pointy than his. I really dig your hair, by the way." She ran her hands through it as she said that, mussing up the top. I was pretty unaware of celebrities, but I did know that my hairdo was supposed to be an approximation of James Dean's that went somehow wrong because of its fine texture. Alderon had more than a passing resemblance to that late movie actor. I, of course, did not.

I was staring at a stunning black and white drawing on the wall. "You like Beardsley?" She asked.

I assumed that was the artist, so I said, "Yeah, I guess I do."

"I love him. I love art nouveau and the pre-Raphaelites. I hate most modern art. No offense."

"None taken," I said, wondering why she thought there would be any.

"Well, just you looking so much like Andy Warhol and all," she explained.

"So..." she paused, looking around. "Let's go shopping."

She started changing clothes in front of me. I wasn't sure if it was because she thought I was gay or that she was trying to show off. I wondered if I should look or not. She was petite, maybe five foot two at the most, and skinny. She wore very fancy black lace lingerie under slightly shabby vintage clothes. I was used to my sisters and mothers, who wore no makeup, wore their hair long and natural, and made all their own calico print dresses. I had a great appreciation for that kind of natural beauty, but I also saw the charm in Calliope's contrived appearance. She seemed very exotic and glamorous to me at the time, like a gypsy or dance hall girl, spangling the bleak landscape with some much

needed glitter.

She put on a little purple velvet dress with pink satin roses at the bodice and fishnet tights and big, black, manly boots. She teased her hair, then started putting makeup on. I wanted to tell her she looked better without it, but knew she wouldn't take it well, so I looked at some of her books instead.

"So, I hear you used to live in some kind of commune," she said. "Were you in a religious cult or something?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that. I suppose I was, from her perspective. "Yeah, kind of," I said.

"I'd love to hear about it," she said, drawing onto the inside rims of her eyelids with a black pencil. I winced just watching.

"You'd probably be disappointed," I lied.

"Yeah, right," she replied. "Let's go," she said, and rolled on some earthy smelling perfume oil before grabbing her tattered velvet purse and stomping out of the room.

We got into a small Japanese car covered in stickers advertising bands I'd never heard of. We didn't speak while she drove, mostly because the music was too loud. She lit a cigarette and we rolled down the windows. I started to let my mind drift, listening to the music and letting the hot breeze blow on my face. I wished she wouldn't smoke.

We arrived at a thrift store. I was glad she hadn't taken me to a mall. She bought herself some odd little dresses, and picked out some clothes for me. We spent the day wandering around town; everywhere she took me was a private hole-in-the-wall, quaint little shops and cafe's. Our last stop was an occult book store called Cerridwen's

Cauldron that smelled of incense and coffee. The lady behind the counter growled "merry meet" in a voice that was far from merry, and nodded grudgingly at Calliope. She was obviously a regular, and treated the place like a second home.

"I'll buy you a tarot deck," she said. "It's best if it's a gift. I'll show you some spreads back at my house."

I let her purchase the cards and a little drawstring bag to keep them in. I bought her an ankh necklace in return, and a statue of Isis. Her make-up made me think of ancient Egypt.

As we were about to walk out, a stunning boy about our age breezed through the door. He had glossy black hair that hung over one of his ice blue eyes, and wore a black linen peasant shirt with a few dozen amulets hanging over it. When he walked by me, I felt the air pressure around me change. A warm, electric breeze of perfumed sex appeal nudged awake a part of me that had been dormant. He was carrying a bag of take-out, Chinese, from the smell of it.

"Raven!" Calliope exclaimed, holding her arms out.

"Hey Calli," he said, putting his bag on the counter and giving her a quick hug. I wondered if Raven was his real name. The lady behind the counter, a scowling, handsome woman with long gray hair and flowing gypsy garb, reached into the bag.

"I got you the tofu and pea pods, Mom," the boy said to her. Then I knew Raven probably was his real name after all.

"Who's your friend?" he asked, turning back to Calliope. His pale blue eyes swept over me, making my skin prickle. Part of me was self conscious of the scrutiny, but I also desperately wanted him to notice me. I straightened up and held his icy gaze,

trying to summon a "come hither" look into my pinkish red, heavy lidded eyes.

"This is Adam," she said, gesturing to me. "He's my neighbor."

Raven smiled and held his hand out. His long fingers were covered in stacked silver rings, his short nails painted black. I tried not to blush when we touched. There was a connection between us in that instant. Maybe it was just the raging hormones of youth, though I wanted to think it was more mystical than that. I wondered if he would break my heart; he seemed like the type of person who could make you forget your name, forget your family, and make you do damn stupid things to impress him, without even asking. His touch felt like electricity, and it took a lot of willpower for me to pull my hand away. Calliope rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, we were just leaving," she said. "See you around." She grabbed my elbow and we left.

"Bye Calli. Adam," he called, nodding, before turning to his mother. I made a mental note to come back later.

"Does he go to our school?" I asked, sensing she probably didn't want to talk about Raven, but wanting to know too badly to care.

"No. He's home schooled. He spends most of his time helping his mom out and doing psychic readings and stuff. He's a real heartbreaker, so look out." She had put on her big plastic sunglasses so I couldn't see her eyes.

"Why would I need to look out?" I said.

"Come on," she said, exasperated. "It's obvious your attracted to him. I just saw your aura like, flare in big sparks of lust when he looked at you. He has that affect on people."

I shrugged. "I've just never really seen anyone like that. Sheltered life. I've never met anyone like you, either."

"What are the girls like back home?" she asked, glad to change the subject.

"Relatives," I answered, and we both laughed.

As we neared our street, she said, "do you want me to drop you off at your house or can you walk from mine?"

I laughed at the suggestion that I couldn't walk two houses down. "I thought you were going to show me how to use these," I said, holding up the tarot cards.

"I'm a little tired now," she answered as she stopped the car. "Maybe tomorrow."

I looked at her hard for a minute, wondering if I should press the issue. She pulled off her sunglasses and rolled her eyes at me.

"Look, I'm sorry...I used to have a huge crush on Raven. One time we got drunk and fooled around at a party - nothing serious, you know, but still," she sighed. "I guess I'm just jealous is all."

"Jealous of what?" I asked.

"Jealous of you, that's what!" she answered, laughing. "You actually stand a chance with him."

I couldn't hide my joy at that revelation. Calliope's mood lifted after her confession and she squeezed my arm. "Come on in," she said, "I'll tell you all about him."

We went in her house and went straight to her room. She left for a couple minutes and came back with some fruit punch and gummy candy. She turned on some music, a little more subdued than what we were listening to in the car, and kicked off her boots. I

slipped off my sneakers and we sat cross legged on her bed.

We ended up chatting till late in the evening, when I finally had to leave. Calliope and I had become fast friends, sharing intimate and frivolous details about each others lives with equal relish. I walked home elated, realizing that I'd never really had a friend, surrounded as I was by family and obligation all my life. It was a wonderful feeling.

At home, I lay in bed with my mind fixed on Raven. I had only seen him for a brief moment, but it was emblazoned across my brain. I constantly replayed the meeting, imagining what I could have done differently, how I could have made myself more charming and sexy. In the end, I knew I'd done all I could with the materials I had. I was almost glad Calli had pulled me out of the shop when she did, knowing that I would have become a gibbering idiot if I'd stayed much longer. I had to prepare myself for the next meeting, make myself irresistible, or at least somewhat interesting. I had learned a little about Raven from Calli, most of it gossip and trivial things like his favorite bands that I wouldn't really be able to use. I didn't feel like pretending to be anything other than who I was. I tossed around in my bed and tried to clear him out of my mind, tried to get some sleep. I knew that I would not be able to stay away from him long. I was, in fact, fighting the urge to go back to that shop immediately, even though it was closed, just to try and feel a trace of him there, see a ghost of his trail through the window. I laughed at myself. If it hadn't been for Alderon's murder, I'd likely be preparing for an arranged marriage to a cousin who would then choose my other wives for me. No matter how much I would have given to have Alderon back, I couldn't help but be relieved at my current freedom.

Around noon the next day I decided I would go to Cerridwen's Cauldron. I

agonized as I got ready. My clothes all seemed hopelessly inadequate and plain, and I felt more colorless than usual. All the confidence I had gained after my vision of Amnael, the sense of divine purpose, had gone up in smoke. I felt like it was all a dream. Laughing, I wondered if James Johnson had ever doubted himself as he wooed his twenty-three wives. Probably not. What had happened to me? Why was Raven so intimidating? I shrugged off my doubts and pulled on some army boots, armed for battle against my own insecurity.

I had the Volkswagen from the journey still, and I drove to the shop listening to public radio. I still couldn't wrap my head around any of the popular music I'd heard, and felt I should learn something of the outside world, since I had to live in it now. As I parked, it occurred to me that he may not even be there, but then I saw him through the glass door.

He smiled knowingly when he saw me. Was I that obvious? Deciding not to be shy, I smiled back. "I heard you did psychic reading," I said.

"Sometimes," he answered, sipping coffee and wiping down a glass display counter. I pretended to look at a rack of rather gaudy ceremonial robes, anxious to keep my hands occupied. His eyes were burning holes into my back.

"When my mom comes back I can take you to the reading room," he said. "She won't be long."

He went behind the case to a tall stool and folded himself into it gracefully. He was dressed like a gypsy, but his posture and movement made me think of a Victorian dandy. I imagined him dressed in that manner, walking through a carriage lined street with a silver capped cane, and smiled.

He tilted his head to the side and said, "look at that Cheshire cat grin. I can't wait to find out what's behind it."

I laughed. "I was just imagining you as a Victorian dandy," I told him.

He laughed back. "That I didn't expect," he added. He appeared to relax then, letting some of his psychic guard down. I went over to the counter, looking at the jewelry and breathing in his scent. He smelled like incense and roses. I'd never smelled roses on a man before, but I liked it. He somehow made the rose seem wild, spicy. I was intoxicated. I hadn't even noticed my eyes were closed until I heard the bells on the door as it opened.

"Hi Mom," Raven said, breaking my reverie.

"This is my mom. Her name is May," Raven said, gesturing to her. "This is Adam," he said, as she approached, giving me the once over with her steely gray eyes. I was ridiculously pleased with the fact he remembered my name.

"Hello Adam," she said, before walking to the back. She emerged a couple of minutes later, lighting some incense.

"Adam came in for a reading, " Raven said. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not," May said, glancing at me sideways as she took her place on the stool Raven had just slid off of. She stared knowingly at me as I followed him through the beaded curtains into a back room. I was glad to be out of her presence, feeling like she could see right through me. She probably could, too.

"Does she make you nervous?" Raven asked, gesturing to a tattered leather Queen Anne style chair in front of a sturdy antique card table.

"Kind of," I admitted, sitting down. He lit some incense and put a deck of tarot

cards on the table.

"I'll get you some mineral water while you shuffle these," he said. "Make sure to think about whatever your question is while you handle the cards," he added, before walking out.

I idly shuffled the cards around in a little pile in front of me. I really should ask him something useful, I thought, but all I really wanted was to spend some time with him. I suddenly felt quite silly, wishing I had been more upfront. He came back with the water.

"Okay," he said, businesslike, as he sat across from me, "now cut the cards."

I reassembled the deck and cut the cards. He had me shuffle and cut them two more times, closely observing me all the while, before taking them back.

"So, what is it you want to know?" he asked, as he laid out the cards.

I was silent for a minute, trying to come up with something. "Well, I guess I just...want to know where I stand with someone."

He was staring above my head intensely when I looked up. I felt a little nervous, like he might be angry that I was wasting his time.

"Who's your friend?" he whispered, his face white as a ghost.

I looked behind me. Amnael - transparent, like a ghost, but there, looking serene as a Buddha.

"You tell me," I said, and then I couldn't help but smile.

He closed his eyes and pulled himself together, then looked at me again.

"Why are you really here?" he asked, quietly.

I could feel myself blush. I decided to be honest. "I really just wanted to see you

again," I answered.

At that he laughed, but not in a mocking way. He leaned back in his chair and relaxed.

"Alright," he sighed. "You have my attention." He smiled at me then, and I felt warm, like I'd been blessed.

"When do you get out of work?" I asked.

"I can leave right now," he shrugged. "I haven't had a day off in ages. Let's go." He gathered his cards and put them away. I suddenly wondered about the lay of them. Then he stubbed out the incense and drifted out of the room, me trailing behind.

"Mental health day," he told his mother, kissing her cheek. He grabbed a tote bag and went out the door. I followed him to his car, letting him lead the way. I was weightless with relief. I felt like Amnael must approve of him, that was why his image appeared, making me suddenly interesting to this exotic creature.

I had to stop there. I would need more than coffee and cigarettes to sustain me if I was to start in on Raven. Raven, Raven. How many times have we danced this dance? How long are you going to put up with it? I wiped more tears from my eyes with my shirt. I couldn't help but notice the softness of the cotton, the fine fit and quality of all the clothes I had been given. Only the best for us. The chosen. I called down for some food. The food, by the way, was excellent as well. I wondered how this place looked back when James Johnson wrote his Testament, how comfortable they could have made this hidden pocket of Kurdistan back then. Of course, having access to Annanage skill and

technology, I supposed it was much the same. I was stretching on the bed when the food arrived. The servant was veiled. They didn't want anyone distracting me with beauty, I gathered. I said my thanks and sat down. Food and rest. Tomorrow, Raven. Tomorrow, heartache.

It's not because I was holding on so tightly to life that I didn't rush this story, it's the fact that I wanted to savor it. No matter where I ended up or how gruesome my death would be (and according to tradition it must be), I wouldn't change it. I refuse to regret and I refuse to stop. I won't hide and go underground with the rest of them, to live their ordered life and look upon humanity as a sad, failed experiment to sweep under the rug. I'll be back. We'll all be back.

When I finished my meal, I pulled the tasseled cord to summon a servant to take away the tray. Orrin came in with him. He looked through my papers, curious, I guess. I went to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. When I came back he was stacking the papers neatly on my desk.

"Got to admit they have a funny sense of humor, making you queer and all," he said, smiling.

Again I couldn't feel angry with him. I shook my head in pity. "Haven't you learned anything?" I asked. "This," I gestured to our bodies, "this is temporary. It's clothing. This isn't real. This isn't us. It's a costume. Queer. Don't be pathetic, Orrin. You're better than that."

He smiled sheepishly. "I know Abby. Just a vessel. But you have to admit, considering the former teachings, it'll be hard for people to swallow."

I shrugged. "From what I can recall, I've always been the same. I think the problem was in the editing. The visions I had as James, as Abbasa, I was much as I am now. James was a ladies man too, make no mistake, but he didn't have this aversion our people have developed to love between two men or two women. It's ridiculous, Orrin, a misunderstanding that was created by the Elders for the Gods know what."

"Well, I always assume it's because of the blood. We have to spread our blood, to save people, to make them stronger and better. We can't just give into impulse and lust. It's an obligation," he reasoned.

"Look around Orrin," I exclaimed, "There are already too goddamn many people on earth. I think we all need to work with what we've got and not be so concerned with breeding. New life will come, babies are born whether their wanted or not. No need to force it. Think of the children James Johnson spoke of as children of the spirit. We are all children, right? When an adult wakes up to truth, wakes up to the hidden God inside of them, they are re-born. That's the new blood, that's the fruitfulness."

Orrin smiled at me and got up to leave. "You're the Prophet," he said.

"Goodnight Orrin. Sleep well."

We gave each other a brotherly hug and he retired to his adjoining rooms. I wondered if anything I said to him ever sunk in. Did it matter? Will there ever be true change? I went to bed and dreamt about innocence.

I don't remember many details of the first day I spent with Raven. I only remember him. I think we went to a museum, or maybe it was a gallery. It doesn't

matter. The world was a blur, really. I couldn't help staring at him. memorizing the planes of his fine boned face, so strong and yet so feminine. His long, lanky body was similar to my own, but he handled his with far more grace than I. His hands were expressive, his face lighting up as he spoke of art, music, magick, films. I listened intently to his voice, smooth, low, and melodious, not actually hearing much of what he said. I was under a spell, hypnotized. The heat of the day seemed to make him only smell better, his body chemistry mixing with that enchanting perfume, intoxicating me further. I almost couldn't stand it, almost had to leave, but I stayed. I tried to hold up my end of the conversation as best I could. I didn't try to match his wit or pretend to know about all the culture he was so passionate about. He was too good for games or pretense. Fortunately, he found the tales of my former life and the beliefs of my people fascinating. I didn't tell him everything, not wanting to risk too much right away, but I didn't lie either.

As the sun began to set, we arrived at the bungalow he shared with his mother. We were alone at last. As he closed the door I had the urge to pounce on him, but I of course held back. We had all the time in the world, and I knew that whatever may develop between us I wanted to last. I would take things slowly, or at least as slowly as I could stand.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked, going into the kitchen.

"Just some water, please," I replied.

"You don't drink, do you?" he asked, pouring a glass of water from a pitcher in the fridge.

"I like to keep my body and mind clear. It makes it easier to focus on my purpose." I took the glass he offered. He poured himself a glass of wine.

"You don't even drink coffee, do you?" he continued.

"No," I answered. "It's a drug too. I need to be aware of my body, and to keep my mind open and clear."

He looked at me thoughtfully, leaning against the counter. He was so close, just a few inches away. I could see the blue veins of his eyelids. I bit my lip. Not now, I thought. Hold back.

"What do you need to keep so clean for?" he asked, moving even closer.

"Anything to do with your...friend?"

I took a deep breath. "I communicate with what many would see as an angel, or a spirit guide. It's very difficult to open myself up this communication, as he lives on a different plane of existence. Sometimes he comes to me very strong, visual - fireworks and all that - other times barely a whisper. Just a feeling or hint. The more pure I can keep myself, the more clear the messages are."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You sound like your on some kind of mission. I guess we all are, aren't we? But you take yours a lot more seriously than the rest of us."

I smiled. "You could say that. I don't have much choice. I don't think He'll let me be lazy for long."

Raven walked out of the kitchen, bringing the wine bottle, and I followed him to his room. It was quite large, with an adjoining bathroom. His bed was a futon that was currently converted into a couch, which I sat on. He flopped on a bean bag chair in front and to the left of me.

"I want to know more about you," he said, looking down into his glass. "I had a dream about you, a couple nights ago. I wasn't going to say anything about it, but...you

seem understanding about such things."

"Yes," I said, wanting him to continue. I tried to radiate trust to him, to make my aura a cocoon of warmth. I wanted him to feel comfortable enough to open up to me, even if what he had to say sounded crazy. This was mostly so I could also open up to him, and not be judged as crazy myself. A lonely part of me needed to tell all, to have someone who would listen and not judge or use me. I hoped Raven was that someone.

"When I saw you in the shop yesterday, I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I had the dream the night before. We were somewhere in the desert. It was a different time period I think, some ancient time. I had long hair. I was wearing a linen skirt and I had a heavy necklace on, I think it was gold, with a big amulet that nearly covered my chest. I don't know what it looked like, I couldn't see it, I just felt its weight on me. You were there. Your hair was long, too. You had on a skirt made of eagle feathers. You held out your hand to me and told me to follow you and I did. And then we weren't there anymore, and we didn't look like that anymore either.

"It was pioneer times, I think, from the clothes. We were in what appeared to be a prison cell. You and I were with that spirit guide I saw you with, your friend. He was huge...at least seven feet tall, and glowing, it seemed. He crowded the cell, and seemed so awkward in the clothes, but also so...beautifully strange.

"Your friend was looking out of the barred window while I paced, pulling at my hair. You sat on a bench, slumped forward with your head in your hands. You kept saying 'my fault. This is all my fault.'

"'Their coming,' he said, and you and I rushed to the window. It was night-time - we heard them before we saw them - the angry mob. Wielding torches and pitchforks,

like something out of a Frankenstein movie, they came to the jail. The guard didn't even try to stop them as they came through the gate and up the stair to our cell.

"We were huddled at the window, cornered, looking at their grimy, ugly faces twisted with hate. They all pounced, arms grabbing and dragging.

"Your friend put up the greatest resistance, he was so strong. I clawed and scratched like an animal. You just seemed to slump deeper into despair, your body dead weight as they dragged us all down the stairs and into the open.

"As our feet hit the ground we took off running. Your friend was in the lead, pulling us along behind him. But they were only playing with us. After we ran about half a mile, he went down - shot in the back. We tumbled to the ground, as the mob surrounded us.

"Your friend still lived - I guess it takes more than bullets to kill one of those bodies. I think he got away, but I couldn't tell. As I was pounded and stabbed, eyes blurry with soot and blood, the last thing I saw was your head on the end of a pitchfork before waking up.

"As I lay in bed, cheers and screeches of the crowd still rang in my ears." Raven took a deep breath. "I don't think I'll ever forget that dream. And here you are. With your friend. I can't see him now but I know he's here. Is he the angel?"

I nodded.

"I don't know whether I should follow you or run away. There's something about you that's very beautiful and pure. And it's dangerous. You aren't dangerous yourself, it's what you represent. I think I'm doomed if I go to you, my body is doomed. But if I don't, it's my soul that will miss out." He looked up at me for a second then laughed

awkwardly, pouring another glass of wine. "I don't know," he said quietly, shaking his head, "I feel like I've been warned, but I can't stop any of it anyway. I've already committed the script to memory."

I didn't know what to say. I recognized the first image of me from his dream as the one Amnael had shown me. But when was it exactly, and where? The other vision I knew the meaning of, more or less. It was a familiar enough scene in my family history. James Johnson, Amnael, and his brother Orrin fleeing the mob that would kill them. So this is the start of it, I thought. This starts the new cycle, my destiny. I looked at Raven and saw him as an apostle, a brother, and maybe one day a lover. No wonder I couldn't keep my mind off of him. We were bound. I would have to meditate to find out exactly how, but I felt comforted knowing that it was real, that these feelings had meaning.

Raven was looking at me. He wanted some answers, I could tell. I cleared my throat and took a drink of water. I put the glass on the table and leaned forward, elbows on my knees. "Raven," I began, "I believe that what you dreamed were actually visions of former lives. I recognize the images you had of me. I don't know a lot about either of those incarnations, but I have had visions about them, especially the first one. The second one you saw has been written about, but I would trust visions more than I would the written word, seeing s it has been edited for content. If we really did know each other in those times, we could probably work together to learn more about them, and also more about our connection in this life.

"I knew when I saw you that there was something special about you, something special about us. At first I thought that maybe it was just my hormones talking, but now that you've mentioned this dream, I feel it must be real. I've had some...pretty crazy

dreams myself. Would you like to hear about them?"

He nodded, eyes a little wide. It almost felt absurd talking about these things...it's one thing when it's in your head, another when it's out in the open. Trusting him, I told him about the vision I had at Lily's, and a brief history of Amnael and his role in my family.

"So...what do you think?" I finally said, when I had done with my story, waiting a couple minutes for it to digest.

He took a deep breath before finishing the last of the wine. He looked even more pale than before.

"I don't know Adam. I don't know. It's so much...information. Who knows what it all means, how much of it is relevant or fantasy?" he sighed heavily. "You know, we were having such a wonderful day. I think...I think I don't want to think about destiny or reincarnation right now," he said, shaking his head.

We looked at each other for a few minutes. We were no longer two boys who had just met and spent the day flirting together. We were old souls reunited on a doomed quest, one we didn't remember signing up for. Eons of unspoken love and pain passed between us before he slid off the bean bag and onto his knees in front of me. I leaned forward and he took my face in his long, pale, hands, clammy and cool with nerves.

"Let's not think about it right now. I just want to go with this feeling I'm having with you. I don't care who we were. I don't care what we're supposed to do, or why. I just want to be with you right now," he whispered, and then kissed me.

I clung to Raven then, like it was the kiss at the end of the world. I guided him onto the futon, coaxing him on top of me as I ran my fingers through his hair. I don't

think I had ever wanted anything as badly as I wanted him at that moment. He pulled away from me and smiled, tracing the lines of my face with soft fingertips before burying his head on my shoulder. We held each other in silence, our hearts beating in time. He put his hand under my shirt while nibbling my earlobe. I stroked his hair and his back, pulling him closer. I knew I should probably play the game, go on a few dates before awkwardly fumbling to bed, but I just couldn't bear it. I rolled him onto his back and ran my hands under his shirt, pulling it off, but he stopped me.

"Adam, not yet," he said. His eyes were burning with desire but also terrified. For some reason I had assumed he was the experienced one, but looking into his eyes then I knew differently. He was afraid. I gently replaced his shirt and lay back down next to him. We faced each other, wrapped in a tangle of long arms and legs.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be," I replied, touching his face and smiling. "We have all the time in the world."

He smiled back and kissed me again, soft and timid. "I hope so. Adam, I still want to know more about you, about your life. This life, that is," he smiled. He was touching my face, stroking my hair; I felt luxurious, like a pampered cat.

"Let's pull this thing out first," I said, straightening up and kicking off my shoes. "You'll want to be comfortable for this."

After pulling out the futon, we stripped down to our boxer shorts and lay under a homemade quilt.

"Have you heard of the prophet James Johnson?" I asked him.

"Kind of," Raven said, shrugging, "but only as...well, a cult leader. Sorry."

I smiled at his embarrassment. "Don't be," I said. "James Johnson is one of my ancestors. He felt it was his duty to not only teach humanity but to strengthen it through his own holy blood. That's why my people practice plural marriage, to be more fruitful. I grew up in a place called Manna. It's like a little village up near the Arizona-Utah border. After James Johnson was killed up in Vermont, the rest of the clan traveled west, fleeing persecution. It was a difficult journey, and many didn't make it. I know a lot of stories about it, but I wasn't there, of course - not in this or any other incarnation. My family settled in the desert and stayed, farming the land and living their beliefs.

"It's hard for me to describe Manna to you. It was like living in another time. We drank from a well, used propane and oil lamps, no electricity. We grew all our own food, and made almost everything we had. The work of our hands, we believed, was sacred. Sometimes there would be raids, when the government would decide to crack down on our way of life. We usually found out ahead of time and ran. It was the times we had to run that I would realize how different we were. Living on Manna, I didn't think any of it strange, but this...all this, this world..." I sighed, at a loss for words. "It just feels all wrong. Like no one will ever wake up, no one is allowed to think or feel without a hundred different influences. We used to call them 'sleepwalkers,' the uninitiated.

"I was told by Alderon, before he died, that I was meant to go out among the sleepwalkers and wake them up. My destiny wasn't to stay at Manna and till the land like James Johnson's original followers. I have seen Amnael, I have felt his presence, I know what I'm supposed to do, more or less, but," I shrugged, "I still believe in free will, too."

I paused for a few moments, then sighed heavily.

"The patriarch of our clan, Alderon, who was my earthly father, was murdered.

He was shot in cold blood at a farmer's market. I know I should find out more, do something, but I wonder what the point is. I know I have a destiny to fulfill, and it doesn't include that life. It is in this world, not the dream we lived in," I said.

Raven hugged me then, resting his head on my chest.

"You don't have to talk about it right now. You've already told me so much. You must really trust me," he said, smiling up at me, "you never know what I could do with this information."

I smiled down at him, stroking his back.

"I'm not worried," I said, "No one would ever believe you." I kissed him then, a slow, gentle, and undemanding kiss.

"Tomorrow it's your turn," I added, and he nodded in agreement. We curled up together, and before long he was asleep. I watched him for a little while, drinking in the angelic vision of his smooth eyelids, full lips, and luminous skin, starting to show a hint of stubble around the jaw. I fell asleep entwined in his arms, my senses full of him, content.

It was a night of innocence, and I was almost glad Raven had stayed my hand and not let me take him right away. I had so much to learn of people, of how to speak to them, how to earn their trust. I wanted Raven out of instinct, because I felt our connection and I wanted to grasp it right away, so hungry for companionship and Communion. For him, surrounded by the world, by the noise of modern life, it must be different. He was magical, but his connection to the Source was constantly severed. I vowed to be gentle with him.

There are definite advantages to having a psychic connection with one's mother. Having stayed out all night, Grandma Lily was livid with worry for me. Thanks to my mother sensing my safety, I didn't get into as much trouble as I deserved when I came home.

"Adam," Lily said, swallowing her anger, "I know you are pretty much a man, but the circumstances of your father's death make me very worried about you. Please have the consideration of calling in the next time you are going to be out all night."

I hung my head in shame. She was so reasonable. How could I have been so inconsiderate?

"I'm sorry Grandma Lily. I lost track of time. I promise I'll check in next time," I said.

"Thank you," she said, then held her bangled arms out to me. I gratefully hugged her.

Later that day, Momma came to find me. I was lying on my bed daydreaming; highly unusual behavior for me.

"You've met someone," she said, smiling. She had come to sit on my bed next to me, brushing my hair back with her fingers. She looked so angelically sweet and sad to me, I was reminded again of the Virgin Mary. One foot in heaven and one lightly touching earth.

"Yes," I replied, smiling. Picturing Raven in my mind, I glowed from within again. I felt like even my skin must have looked golden with the radiance of his image.

"I'd like to meet him sometime," she said. I nodded. She smiled again and left.

I sighed and sat up. I had replayed every kiss and caress and word spoken from

the night before a hundred times already, and would only grow frustrated if I continued. I put on some grubby old clothes and went out to work on the car.

As I worked outside, listening to the radio, Calliope came over.

"NPR again?" she asked, raising her eyebrows at me.

"Yeah," I said, sliding out from under the car and replacing my fishing hat. "I like to keep informed."

She wrinkled her nose and sat on the driveway.

"I heard you went to see Raven," she said.

"Who did you hear that from?" I asked.

"His mother," she replied.

"Oh. Do you go to that shop every day?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I like it. And I like to see Raven," she smiled. Cocking her head to the side, she said, "you look a little tired."

"We were up late. Just talking, of course," I couldn't hide the broad smile that was creeping up my face.

"Uh-huh," she smiled back. "I want details."

"I don't owe you anything!" I teased, standing up and wiping my hands on an old rag.

"Oh yes you do! I introduced you, remember?" she replied.

"Oh yeah. Well, I have to go to the junkyard for a part anyway. Come with me and I'll buy you lunch too," I offered.

"Not until you change clothes, farmer boy," she answered.

We both went inside. I told Grandma Lily I'd be going out, then I went to my

room to change.

"A shower wouldn't hurt, either," Calliope called out. I obliged.

When I came out I saw Calliope and my mother in a huddle on the couch, watching one of those damn soap operas.

"I hate her!" Calliope said, jabbing her finger at the screen.

"Really? I think she's strong. I love characters like that," Momma replied.

"But she's evil! What a manipulator," Calli retorted.

"I wish I could be more like her!" Momma said, laughing.

"Is this okay?" I interrupted, slowly spinning with my arms out for wardrobe approval.

"It'll do," Calliope answered, and got up. "It was a pleasure meeting you, ma'am," she said, holding her hand out to Momma. I was shocked at her sudden show of good manners.

"Yes, likewise," Momma replied, taking her hand in both of hers. Then I kissed Momma on the cheek and we left.

I was glad to have Calliope as a friend. She seemed very worldly to me, and gave me bits of advice about men and how to handle them. I disregarded most of it, figuring Raven and I were destiny, not mere romance, but I appreciated the input all the same.

Raven and I started spending all our available time together, I even started helping out at his mothers shop. I learned all about his life. He never knew his father, and didn't care to. His mother was some kind of witch-priestess, but she didn't have a coven or group that she worked with. He said she had tried to work in groups in the past, but her personality was just too strong - which I took to mean she was a bit bossy and stubborn.

They had moved here from Manhattan, where the cost of living had become too high.

They wanted to come and feel the energy of the desert, to start over, which I noticed a lot of people did in this town.

Raven was psychic, and also knew some basic magick and divination, but didn't like to bother much with ritual. I felt this was mostly because he had so much natural ability it made him somewhat lazy, but he would say that the rituals were mostly for people who were too mired in the material world and needed to be shaken out of it - and he wasn't one of those people. We often would meditate together, sometimes sharing visualizations like my mother and I could do. I would usually feel very amorous after any of these excursions, and tried not to be too demanding. Our physical intimacy progressed far slower than our psychic and emotional intimacy, which I knew would make the first time all the sweeter, but it was still frustrating at times.

One night, after one of our psychic bonding sessions, I looked at him from across the candle, and there was a new look in his eyes. I blew out the candle and set it aside. Slowly, I moved closer to him and cupped his face in my hands. I pressed my forehead against his and looked into his eyes. They didn't have the usual reticence I had become used to, just a sensual hunger. He kissed me, pushing me down onto the carpet. I held back a little, letting him make the first move. I felt I had been too anxious before, and wanted him to feel comfortable. He pressed himself against me, running his hands over me, under my shirt, electrifying my cells with his soft hands. I had my fingers clutched in his hair, blissfully inhaling his perfume, when he tore himself away to lead me to his futon, fortunately already folded down flat. His burning eyes never left mine as we fumbled out of each others clothes, hands and lips searching and grasping until we finally

tumbled naked together on top of the quilt.

We were both inexperienced, awkward, and feverish in our passion. I had imagined doing this for so long, had played it out in my mind thousands of times since the moment I first saw him. I was somewhat surprised that it didn't all happen smoothly, choreographed, after all that mental practice. Despite inexperience and some inevitable pain, it was undeniably the best night of my life. We shared in each others bodies many times after that, sometimes for ritual, sometimes just for pleasure, but that night was special. Furtive and feverish, we made love, rested, then made love again until we collapsed in an exhausted heap after dawn. We were sweaty and sticky, glowing with bliss.

As we slept, we walked together in a desert of dreams. We both saw Amnael. He was beckoning us, leading us somewhere. We went after him, trying to catch him, but always a few steps behind. At the end of the journey was Manna. It was empty, but covered in flowers, the garden intact and the animals safe.

When we woke up, Raven said to me, "we have to go."

I nervously agreed. If I knew anything, it was to trust Amnael implicitly.

I couldn't continue. I had to know where he was. I banged on Orrin's door, not caring that it was four in the morning. He answered in a matter of seconds, more alert than I would have expected, in his pajamas.

"Orrin you have to tell me," I demanded.

"Tell you what?" he asked, puzzled.

"About Raven," I sighed, exasperated. "I need to know what happened to him. If he's alive. Where he is. Dammit Orrin," I turned from him, pacing the floor, "I need to know."

Orrin sighed. I could tell he'd never understand, never feel what I did for Raven, would never let himself. "You need to just forget about it. You'll find out soon enough. The Elders will reveal all to you before...you know." He wouldn't meet my eyes. He looked like this was killing him and I was glad.

"Abby, they didn't tell me anyway," he added, meeting my eyes. "They aren't that stupid. But you need to forget all the same. I may not know what happened to Raven, I may never know, but I know enough about the Council and the history of the Prophets and their disciples to know it's not pretty. I love you Adam, I hate that they have to do this, but please, just..." he ran his fingers over his buzzed hair, puffing out his cheeks. "Just try to focus on writing all this down for now. All will be revealed." He turned around and went back to bed.

I should have known they would never tell Orrin any real secrets. Maybe I just wanted someone to talk to, to vent my rage on. He was right. Raven was gone. I was gone. I prayed he was safe, but I had been psychically chained, even Amnael couldn't get through to me. I felt like my fingertips had been burned off.

The following day I would write of the New Dawn of Manna. That night I would drink rum and cry into my pillow. I was starting to look forward to my martyrdom. Just make it quick, oh wise Elders. And don't forget to make me forget it all before I have to start this shit all over again.