**TIME:FALL**

The Jeweled Mask of the Ferryman

By R. P. Miller

*(An Excerpt)*

Chapter X

**Lighthouses**

August AD 1848

Valentina had no need of a camera to capture images of the stunning rocky shores of the California coastline and the crashing surf below. Without her pendant, the brilliant California sunsets would have been something she would have missed. When she did finally return to her true time, she would develop and produce the images stored in her dazzling pendant to hard copies, snapshots and video as seen through her eyes. She had an extensive and grand display of her travels pinned up on the walls of her cut stone home near Aguas Calientes. Only Martin knew what they really were, a record of her experiences.

The young George Simpson had provided her with a suite of rooms, at his Gothic façade hunting lodge. The cement and stone dwelling overlooked the Pacific Ocean and the small fishing village of Mendocino, across the small cove, just to the north.

On her first night here, they’d dined on delicious lamb and garden vegetables. She’d worn her richest olive satin dress, a less encumbered garment than her bulky wine colored traveling ensemble. For lunch, the next day, they took a picnic lunch up the sloping hills to the east, arriving at a broad plateau, upon two of his most handsome steeds. They watched the horses graze on wild grass, as they talked of Paris, sitting on the bluff and enjoying the view under the midday Sun.

For tonight’s dinner, she was dressed in her finest peacock colored silk gown, adorned resplendently with sapphires, aqua marines, emeralds and peridots, something which set off her greenish eyes and matched its embroidery. It was a sumptuous contrast to her simple riding gear, if slightly more comfortable without the obligatory corset. Her San Francisco tailor had sewn proper boning support into the dress, as to not allow her bosom to be too unseemly and relaxed, a style that wouldn't be popular for at least another century. Just a century ago, back in Shanghai, she had picked up forty yards of the bolt of richly hand embroidered fabric, while visiting the Himalayan region, on her way back from Tibet. The small gem she'd added to the neck and collar enhanced her pendant's perception and range of observation. Though not made of Sacred Stone, they worked well enough.

The cloth makers of Shanghai had produced the cloth, having been impressed by the tales of peafowls that a Portuguese trader had brought from India, a gift for the emperor of China. The trader, according to the story, had called it a bird that carried its own bejeweled throne, wherever it went. Even as he was beheaded for the unintentional insult, the emperor kept the glorious birds. It was rumored that he liked their sad wails in the evening hours, songs that helped ease his troubled thought and allowed him to fall sleep.

On a Mendocino evening such as this, there was no rain, nor had fog swallowed the scenery in shimmering tones of charcoal and gray, as it had the day before. The sea air was fresh and clear without a hint of chill.

“I am truly grateful,” said the young George, “that the offensive and malodorous whaling season had come to a halt for remainder of the summer. The whales have taken to warmer, more equatorial waters, perhaps even as far as Panama or Columbia.”

In this time, they were still plentiful, though sadly, too highly valued for their rich ambergris. In future centuries, *ambroxan* would become its synthetic equivalent, a slightly sweet and nonastringent fixative commonly used in the manufacturing of perfumes, allowing the scent to last for much longer periods than without it.

From the dining room below their catwalk, George's lodge had a commanding view of the small cove and the whaling town. The granite house’s cleverly channeled plumbing piped volcanic geyser water within its walls and floors, radiated warmth and preventing the great mansion from becoming a dark and drab Gothic cliché.

Electricity had replaced gas a few decades too soon as a source of energy. In keeping with his love of the most advanced gadgets and technology, George Simpson had a steam powered conversion generator specially made for the house to keep it running efficiently with a minimum of staff. In one of his trips from New York, George had brought the kitchen's experimental oven and range, a spinning Faraday coil that cooked food by induction. The glass and ceramic stove was far ahead of its time, by at least a century and a half.

“The only drawback of the place,” said George, “is when the whales are in full harvest. The stench is utterly horrendous and pervades the entire valley all the way up to Ukiah. That’s when I choose to stay down in Vallejo or in San Francisco City. That’s when I get to catch up on all the news and gossip I’ve missed. However, the whale harvest does draw a fair amount of bear, out of the wild wood, just in time for the hunting season.”

“I’m not one for the hunt,” said Valentina. “There’s too much slaughter in the world as it is. Hunting for food is understandable, but hunting for sport and trophies generally goes against my spirit.”

“Oh my goodness,” said George. “I’ll have all of those removed.” He pointed to the mounted heads of bears, deer and the singular mountain lion on the walls of the balcony's adjacent inner room.

“There is no need for that,” Valentina assured him. “I’m not one to faint on things that would make another person squeamish.” His smile denoted his relief that she accepted his quirks and flaws, just as they were, accepted him, just as he was. She had learned a bit about hunting from the Miwok, as well as Sioux, the Iroquois and the Lakota tribes in her travels on Earth.

Simpson didn’t pursue the matter and moved onto discussing his expeditions, his love of California and its particular sense of wildness, untainted by a growing population.

Though she couldn’t reveal future events, Valentina knew that in the coming year, San Francisco’s population would increase in swift and exponential magnitudes. Midsummer of 1848 was just before the discovery of gold in California would make global news. Although *Gold fever* wasn’t, as yet, a recognized term, but it soon would be.

Since her arrival just over a year ago, the city’s population had barely reached a full one thousand inhabitants. The small port towns scattered around San Francisco Bay and along the Pacific coast, in both directions, had no way of knowing what lay in store for them in the coming months, let alone what would unfold in the next three centuries. What would one day become Sausalito, Mill Valley and San Rafael was still a fecund and widely untamed marsh, full of plump water fowl and vermin trapped for their fur. San Francisco was little more than a port of call at the edge of vastly undiscovered lands, barely a spot on the map that one could hide under a well-placed thumb.

Her pendant, which appeared as a cushion cut deep violet sapphire, reminded her that *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* would soon be signed, signifying the end of the Mexican American War. Even a dozen years after the 1836 Battle of the Alamo, tensions between the two nations were still volatile and easily aggravated. Various regions to the east were hotly defended, in spite of the temporary agreements of ceasefire reached by the two nations.

The Hidalgo Treaty would be the final word, ratifying all the land, south and east of San Diego as part of the United States, as far as Nogales, Mexico. The treaty also defined the famous *Galveston Region Purchase*, which would allow the newly expanding United States railroads to be routed along the less demanding southern lands below the Sierra Nevada Range.

The new shortcut would thereby save time and energy in reaching the western regions of the newly opened continent with goods, supplies and people from the overpopulated Eastern States. The “Old West” would become known as the “Midwest” and *Eminent Domain* was in full swing.

Valentina remembered reading articles in the Parisian newspapers about the most argued points in the treaty. Although she’d read about them months after they were finalized, she had landed here, right before the treaty was to be signed.

Most of the upcoming talks would focus on how to split the Baja Peninsula and the Sea of Cortez. They would bargain, argue and negotiate whether or not each area would be part of Mexico or the United States. Along with Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming and Colorado, Valentina remembered that Mexico would concede the Baja Peninsula to the U.S., giving them the coastal towns of Ensenada, Guerrero Negro, Puerto San Carlos and everything all the way to El Cabo de San Lucas. Everything east of the Sea of Cortez and south of El Puerto Peñasco would be Mexican land.

From other negotiations with both the Spanish and the French, the northern borders of *The California Purchase* would include the towns and villages of Astoria, Portland, Pendleton and Bend, excluding everything north of the mighty Columbia River. Towns such as Boise, Tacoma, Seattle, Spokane and the two Van Couvers, once in the former American regions of Washington and Idaho were bought and claimed by French Canada, in a similar purchase from Spain.

Half a year later, French Canada would sell the region clear up through the Alaskan Yukon, to Czar Nicholas I of the Russian Delegation, to settle outstanding debts. It would bring a great deal of peace of mind to the Russian and French settlers there, no longer worried about being forced to migrate away from their new homes in the Northern Wilderness. They had no idea that one hundred years of trapping and trading would deplete the stock to near extinction. It would also be true for whaling. Gold would change everything for only a while. Then, it too would be gone.

In the current moment, the new railway lines would bring plenty of cargo and commerce from the prosperous cities of New York, Boston, Atlanta, Houston and New Orleans, within the first two years of gold's discovery. The trains would bring many who were desperate to improve their existence to this newly acquired American West Coast and those of the newly opened Russian regions of the west. All this had come to occur just as she remembered it.

Using foreknowledge was illegal and dangerous for an officially sanctioned time traveler such as her. Such violations of the Temporal Mandate flew in the face of the vows she’d taken to preserve this Universe and its unique worlds on all the known timelines. Those who were not sanctioned were brought in before The Council of Elders, to face the consequences of their meddling or tampering.

Amateurs learned quickly to avoid causing temporal dilemmas and paradoxes, remaining exclusively as witnesses. Usually, they were implanted with some form of experience recorders, as their actions were monitored closely. If they strayed, there would be enhanced restrictions initiated, preventing them from causing any further damage to the timeline.

Yet, the indications were clear that there were other time travelers around, possibly amateurs, messing up the natural course of standard history. Martin would not have done this as he was equally bound by the edicts of the Temporal Mandate, as a member of the Clan of Earth. It was why she had to remain as discreet as she possibly could, so as not to reveal her presence to any perpetrators of temporal crimes.

However, Valentina sensed that there was something else at play, something unknown to the enforcers of the Mandate. Judging by certain rapidly unfolding events, temporal and historic landmarks were appearing out of their natural sequence. There were certain things which had *not* happened in her timeline. It was more than the actions of someone who’d been hedging their bets, by making discreet purchases of newly acquired lands or buying stocks before their values skyrocketed. It was the actions of someone with clear knowledge of future events and how they would unfold. Events were occurring too soon, events that weren’t supposed to happen for centuries later.

The possibilities of great damage by these time travelers were endless. They could have been criminals hoping to profit from their foreknowledge. By the evidence, overt markers to Valentina, they couldn't have been novice travelers, innocently sightseeing their way through history. The alterations were too specific.

Every advancing civilization had its period of meddlesome temporal rookies, agents and scientists who believed they were being careful in their endeavors, often not realizing that their slightest actions and influences had vast repercussions. Until, of course, it was too late.

When she returned to stand before the Council of Elders, her experiences would also be entered as evidence of the errors in the timeline. She knew it would trigger correcting teams of fixers, agent of the Council, sent back to realign the course of events. Whoever these rogues were, they could be in key positions to profit and perhaps alter the outcome of future events. If they were indeed innocent, it was certainly a significant gamble for an American entrepreneur to construct the railroads across what was currently Mexican land. With the rails nearly complete and connected, someone was counting on the treaty to be signed, ensuring the safety of their passage.

Then again, this was the era of the maverick and pioneer. In less than a century, cars too would be everywhere, whether or not there were roads to drive them on.

The United States military occupied a fair portion of the San Francisco peninsula, a region that many would still consider Mexican territory, even after the treaty was signed. They were there as defenders from invasion and protectors of newly acquired territories. These things had happened in the way she’d remembered them so far.

And still, some things were strange here, odd occurrences and mixtures of certain historic events. Some were right and some wrong. The upside was that the temporal enforcers of the Mandate could easily use the military as cover to make the proper corrections, having a “legitimate position” to track and remove the culprits.

In this timeline, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by the stage actor, John Wilkes Booth. It was not the other way around, as in her timeline. Here, Thomas Alva Edison had won the electrical patents in order to bring electrical energy to the United States, not Nicolai Tesla. But it happened almost half a century too soon, much earlier than it should have, according to her pendant. Both inventors should not have been born this early.

Henry Ford, not Harrison Ford, developed the first assembly line production for motorcars. In this timeline, Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot had competitively brought photography into the world. John Eastman’s cameras had become inexpensively abundant, also around forty years too soon. The process had already moved to still prints being produced onto photosensitive paper and moving pictures onto celluloid film, leaving glass and silver salt compounds in the proverbial dust of history. This mixture of oddities was a little comical and a little crazy with respect to what she knew.

Having lived through these events in a different way made her uneasy. It could mean that she was in the wrong timeline to find her brother, Martin. It might also mean that they wouldn't return to the proper world, the one they'd left behind.

In the long view, that was probably best for her to remain as more a witness of these unfolding events and less of a participant. The sooner she got what she’d come for the better things would be. Let the temporal enforcers deal with the calamities of this era. It wasn’t in her mission or in her jurisdiction to interfere.

Valentina thought back to her temporal lessons with Kalindor, her father’s devoted lover, the man whom he’d taken as a life mate, after her mother had died. Kalindor was a wonderful stepfather who had taught her the intricacies of *temporal physics*. Kalindor had been part of the Temporal Mandate team, sent to correct errors before they happened.

“In all my experience,” Kalindor said, “I am convinced that certain points in the timeline are immovably fixed. There are places along the timeline where things have a tendency to align themselves back to a proper course. These moments have a tendency to allow surrounding events to correct, or rather to realign themselves to these points, putting everything back in order. But one mustn't count on them to be there.”

“So,” said the young Valentina, “they are like lighthouses on the open ocean of Time, landmarks one can use to navigate time trajectories.”

“Yes,” said Kalindor. “I suppose that’s as good a description as any. Any events occurring before or after these points were irrelevant to these lighthouses, as you call them. All other events simply add to the rich convolutions of Timespace, across the broad expanse of possibilities and outcomes.”

“But what if someone changes them?” she had asked.

“Well, now,” he said. “That’s the oldest question there is. Firstly, you have to understand that *everything happens*. No matter which decision you choose, *both* results can be real. You can see that when a choice or decision is made, each outcome happens, in one way or another. I mean to say that each potential result creates its own reality, separate and divergent from the other results, choices or outcomes.”

“All exists,” said Valentina. “Every outcome will come to pass.”

“Yes, exactly,” said Kalindor. “Although, they will unfold into different time streams, as a result of the choice made. And each of those leads to a new set of choices. What we choose determines where and how we arrive. What we think or what we believe determines how we choose.”

“So,” said the ten year old Valentina, “when I believe that my mother is alive and well, she really is, somewhere, if not here.” Kalindor picked her up and gave her a squeeze. He was nearly as tall as her father.

“Somewhere,” he said, with a kiss on her brow. “And some *when*. It’s the crossing over, the switching of lines that is the greatest challenge. Doing so might cause damage, but may also allow for the correction of that damage.”

These ideas had intrigued her endlessly. He had posited her with the view that many realities could lay in harmonious parallel to one another, each being an alternate outcome of another previous event. Both sides of the same coin could live out to see the next outcome of action and reaction. It was rumored that the Council had machines that saw such events unfold. Perhaps it was the Mandate agents, men and women like Kalindor, which she'd sensed here to make corrections.

Martin was somewhere, some *when* and she was going to find him. This was her first experience in crossing over to an alternate world line. It bothered her that she had not been in control of events as it occurred. Martin might not even be in this time stream. Yet, she had to begin somewhere. If she thought about it for too long, it would give her a severe headache. For now, George Simpson II was her best chance of getting more information.

Suddenly, as she stood at the railing, there was the dull thud in her brain. It was the residual awareness of the altered timeline, all the known information stored by her pendant of both timelines.

She remembered, that in her personal past, the past she'd had experienced, she'd been given a very new house. The charming house in San Francisco, had been perfectly built and decorated to her own highest standards, as if she'd done all the work herself. Until now, she never knew who the mysterious benefactor had been. She only knew that it was someone of the royal family, sent to guide her on her next mission. It was then she had met the young George Simpson II for the very first time. It had been so long ago that she'd completely forgotten how much it had meant to her.

Valentina knew she would complete the circle of events and bequeath herself the house at the top of Market Street. When the note had arrived at her hotel in Paris, it had been seal with the heraldry of a citizen of Sphere. Back then, she recalled making the proper arrangements to see her new gift and moving to San Francisco.

Once she had sent the letter, her other self would arrive within the month. Even as it was taking advantage of a loophole in the articles of the Temporal Mandate, there would be consequences for which she would have to atone. She knew the arrival of her younger self, currently in Paris, would alleviate the gap of her approaching departure to rescue Martin. Valentina had done this to herself, but was willing to pay the price if it meant sidestepping her historic obligations here.

She was rapidly approaching events in her personal life that would break her heart. The bittersweet memories were too strong as her pendant dampened the natural emotional responses churning in her heart and mind.

From her perspective, she had already come to her own aid, had already taken up a heated and tempestuous relation with the young George Simpson. They had become betrothed... and lived happily for nearly two more years. He had made her part of the City's elite, even as she had borne him a son, Tobias Alpha Simpson. Her little boy, with his black hair and amber eyes would not be with her for long. As George had taken to an adventure in the Great North, and urgency to reach the North Pole, both had come to be lost.

It had been a wonderful life before the urgency of her duties, duties to the Universe encroached once more upon her. Little Tobias had been adopted and put in protective care, carried away by her home world, Sphere, only to be raised by someone else in another distant world. It had been best for both of them while there were so many dangers in this world.

She had remained in San Francisco, a remote member of the Clan of Earth, until the great quake in 1906, slowly becoming reclusive and mysterious. After her loss, few ever came to visit, even as she released her rights to George's trading post and other properties. To anyone who had the courage to ask, Valentina hailed from northeastern Spain by way of Peru. For the moment, no one doubted who she claimed to be.

As she watched the Sun lowering on the horizon, Valentina recalled what had brought her to Mendocino. She had known that not many of the City's buildings would survive the coming earthquake and fires of 1906. Only the Mission Dolores, called the Mission San Francisco de Asís, would last into the next couple of centuries. The mission was a short carriage ride down the hill from her new house. On a warm day, she could stroll there.

She had chanced to read in the paper that the property had been secularized and had become privately owned. It had become vacant as the new and larger Grace Cathedral had been erected on Nob Hill, taking the congregation with it. However, the owner of the small mission was still unknown.

On a whim, she went to the little church and found a monk who was not too busy to answer her questions. The friar, Father Joseph, revealed that the man who had purchased the land and property was an entrepreneurial Englishman, George Simpson II. He was the son of the famous merchant who owned the Northwest’s branches of the Hudson Bay Trading Company. The Hudson Bay Company’s trading post along the waterfront was scheduled for closure due to the financial losses it had generated.

The current owner had no idea what was around the historic corner. If Valentina purchased the trading post and general store, she would turn a reasonable profit in short order, particularly in light of the coming gold rush. But history had recorded otherwise. Doing so would be a clear violation of her vows and a significant distraction from the mission to find Martin.

The gossip, according to Father Joseph, was that young Simpson vehemently chafed against his father’s decision to cut his company’s losses and abandon the San Francisco storehouse. Their dramatic feud was a substantial part of the ongoing local rumor mill. Simpson Junior felt that someone should care for the wellbeing of fine buildings such as the trading post and the church. His father did not. These were architectural landmarks no one else seemed to see as valuable. So he bought up such buildings around the town, those like the old mission, as a means of saving and restoring them. It was an idea well ahead of its time.

Valentina knew the architecturally refined trading post wouldn’t survive the coming earthquake. She, however, refrained from mentioning it to the friar. Such revelations could upset the timeline.

Father Joseph, however, was very congenial. His explanation of the church’s current ownership would have been enough of an answer to her inquiries, if he had let the story end there. But he continued and spoke of one more point, a rumor that intrigued her instantly.

“Young George,” said the monk, “has been to South America. He has a knack for collecting the most unusual items. Far be it for me to spread idle gossip, but the local talk says he’s come across a strange letter, something written on a piece of very old and preserved fur skin.”

“I’m not really a collector of such things,” said Valentina.

“In and of itself, it’s something of little value, that’s true,” said the monk with a smirk. “But there is something extraordinary, pertaining to you, perhaps, written on the skin.”

“Me?” said Valentina. “I’m no one important.”

“That’s what makes it a mystery,” said the monk. “But you mustn’t forget that in God’s eyes, everyone is important.”

“You are a charmer,” said Valentina, overlooking the unintended slight.

“I believe,” said Father Joseph, “it would be best if you could see it for yourself. Some of it is in a language never seen in any human records before and some of it is in English.”

“I do not know Mr. Simpson,” said Valentina. “It would hardly be appropriate for me to intrude on his personal affairs.”

“You see, that’s the odd part,” said Father Joseph, “he believes you are the subject of the letter. He is interested in making your acquaintance and hoping to get your opinion on the relic. I can easily make the necessary arrangements.”

“Well,” said Valentina, “I am intrigued.”

“Young George had revealed it to me,” said Father Joseph. “It is a brief tribute of a brother’s love for his lost and wounded sister. The parchment skin had been originally found high, on a Bolivian lake. It had been kept for centuries by the family of a medicine woman who had received it from her mother and her mother before that. It was handed down from mother to daughter for several centuries, until George had the chance to purchase it.

“When young George saw the skin, he told me he had to have it at whatever the cost. He convinced the medicine woman to part with it and he brought it with him to San Francisco. According to his tale, all he had to do was to drill a deep well for the medicine woman’s village. Her village was happy with the well and he was happy with his new souvenir.”

As it turned out, George Simpson II spent most of the year along the stormy and rocky shores of Mendocino, a day’s ride up the coast from San Francisco. In two days, he had responded to her letter of inquiry, by inviting her to stay at his seaside home for a day or two. He would be proud to bring out the llama skin for display.

The carriage ride took a full half of a day, starting from sunrise. She realized she missed the rapid travel of the late twenty second century, which would have gotten her there in about an hour. Using her temporal gifts would have not been wise and would have led to many questions she didn’t want to answer. She arrived in the afternoon, with the gray and cold incoming fog beginning to creep in.

His hilltop house was warm and he proudly boasted of his circular grand room of windows, impressive from all directions. The room’s brass telescope offered views to the Great Pacific Ocean and the surrounding lands. As the fog had come in with a vengeance, she had to take his word for it.

On this second evening, she sat in her peacock finery as James brought in a preliminary course of breads with butter. With a nod to his butler, a cue to allow George to pour the wine, her glass was filled with a pleasantly chilled Chablis.

“I’m a very private man,” said Simpson, as he poured wine for himself. “I don’t usually get to share meals with anyone here. I don’t allow many to visit my private estate, let alone allow anyone to see the reason you’ve come. When you wrote me, I was elated to know you were namesake of the subject of the letter in my possession. You will be the first to view it since its arrival.”

James entered with simple salads for each of them and then quickly left.

“I had no idea,” said Valentina between bites, “that the letter even existed, that is until just recently. Father Joseph was rather coy about its contents, but heavily implied that there would be something of great interest in it. While traveling in South America, myself, I had heard stories of strangers here and there, up to unusual dealings and conspiracies. Some of the stories were quite extraordinary in their details and nuances. But I’ve learned to take such stories with a grain of pepper.”

“Salt,” said Simpson. “The saying, at least in this part of the world, is ‘with a grain of *salt*.’”

“Oh, I see.” Valentina had become quite good at feigning humility and a certain naiveté, as was expected of a woman of this era, especially a foreign one.

“Father Joseph is a dear friend,” said Simpson. “But, I must say, it is you who are unique and extraordinary. To have you visit my little home on the coast is a special treat for me. You have no idea how much talk there is about ‘the beautiful lady from afar.’ But the rumors do you no justice whatsoever.”

His smile was admiring and sincere. She couldn’t help blushing and wondered if he was going to propose once more.

“You needn’t go on,” she said, trying to redirect the subject. “I have an insatiable sense of curiosity, perhaps too much so. But I am eager to see what this letter says.”

“You’re most certainly right,” said Simpson. “Although, I could go on endlessly on the depth of your beauty alone, I shall refrain from adding to your discomfort. Let me produce the piece in question. I believe you will find it fascinating.”

With that, he went into the great room, to a locked cabinet, fumbled with a set of keys he had taken from his desk drawer and opened the burled walnut armoire at the back of the room. Valentina followed him into the room overlooking the ocean.

“Sir?” said James. He looked confused.

“Give us about twenty more minutes,” said George. “We should be back to the table by then.”

Simpson placed the dark wooden box on the desk and withdrew a bag with a drawstring on the end. From within, he carefully pulled out the aged skin roll. It was edged in tatted fur with patches missing here and there. As he unrolled it onto the surface of his desk, wincing as it wanted to crumble in his hands, he gestured for her to come around to where he was standing. With her silk gloved hand, Valentina pushed the upper corner of the skin, to read the beginning of the letter.

Instantly, she knew the handwriting and the writing style. It was shocking to see her name as the addressee. It *was* from Martin and only now, she knew where and when he landed. Unconsciously, her hand rested over her arm’s scar, hidden under the long sleeve of her silk dress.

*My Darling Valentina,*

*Moments ago, you were injured, taking a bullet to the arm. I am crazy and concerned for your health and strength. I know that I have made it safely to Lake Titicaca. I believe this is Puno, or what will be Puno in centuries to come. If you find this skin, you need to know that I have begun a journey here. I am walking, as there are no other forms of transport here, toward Machu. There are natives here who could use a little updating of their technology, namely their hunting techniques. They are a warm and caring people, but I don’t believe this time is too long after the Ice Age of eleven thousand years ago. My bracelet will listen for your arrival. I miss you dearly. I hope things have come to their right end.*

The rest was faded, written in code, in the language of her home world. Those perfectly circled curves, dots and lines were the language of Sphere, their artificial star traveler.

*I’m following the northwest valley that will take us to Cuzco. If I don’t recognize Cuzco, I am sure I will recognize Machu Picchu, farther up the Urubamba. I will await you there. I am hoping the portal is already there and working. If not, I know where it will be. I hope this finds you well and in good spirits. In the battle, I think Seth had taken a shot to his leg, but his comrades arrived as we departed. Know that I love you dearly and would do anything to know that you are healed and thriving. Come find me. I don’t know how else to find you but by writing this in the hope that it reaches you with all my love and hope. The land here is stunningly green, before the desertification has set in. We have some business to finish with the Evil One.*

*Love, Martin*

Valentina felt the tears burning her cheeks. She let them fall onto the parchment of llama skin. They absorbed into the skin, clinging to the traces of his writing. She turned apologetically to Simpson, for damaging his precious treasure. He was more concerned about her wellbeing than his treasure, his hand upon her shoulder in support. He offered her his kerchief in response, as any gentleman of the time would.

The script of the letter had begun in what might have been charcoal, but by the third line of the coded writing, he’d finished it in blood. Martin had used his own flesh to ensure the longevity of the text. He was incredibly smart, knowing that only she would appreciate his efforts. If she didn’t find him, he would have to live all that time until he reached their natural time, living it out the long way. It would have made some people very bitter and disillusioned indeed, people like their uncle.

Simpson took his thumb and wiped a tear from her cheek. In this day, it was not considered something appropriate to do. But she didn’t mind the tenderness of his caress. She looked him in the eyes. Her sadness brought tears to his eyes. He pulled her close to him until her sobs came and went.

Like a little boy, he had used his sleeves for his own tears. It was all more than she had expected. Her sadness had affected him as much as the letter had affected her. She had a new admiration for this strange young man. He possessed a sensitivity balanced with intelligence. She was unnerved by her sudden attraction to this handsome man who with his dark curls, who otherwise looked a little like Martin, if not quite as tall.

“I don’t understand how,” said Simpson, “but you would appear to know quite a bit more than I do about this letter.”

“Do you think so?” said Valentina. She could tell that he didn’t want to press her on the issue, but he was willing and eager to hear her story. He continued when she said nothing more.

“There are some strange words in it,” said Simpson, “words I do not understand. Perhaps you might...understand them, that is.”

“Which words?” said Valentina.

“Well,” he said, pointing, “to begin with, there is this word, the one with the capital *M*. It suggests that it is a formal name. I do know of Lake Titicaca and of Puno. La Paz isn’t far away from there. I was there as a child, but it was such a barren terrain I didn’t find attractive in the least. So *Machu* could be a person.”

“That would follow,” said Valentina, attempting to not give anything away by her response. Hiram Bingham wouldn’t make his discovery of the Inca ruins for another sixty three years, *if* thing unfolded correctly in their proper time, in 1911. Valentina had her doubts. Certainly, she didn’t want to encourage this young adventurer in that direction. It wasn’t his place to be there, to discover Machu Picchu.

“And this one is rather strange,” he said pointing to the word. “*Technology*, with a small *t*. It has to be something special. Something new, perhaps something foreign. The word *technique*, on the other hand, is a known French word meaning the manner in which something is done. But the suffix *ology* implies a study, or perhaps a school of thought about how things are done.”

“I see,” said Valentina. Of course, she saw far more than she could share with him. Valentina realized that she felt a longing to be open with this clever man, but she’d grown tough and keen on keeping secrets, secrets that would have disturbed the timeline.

“So, by this,” said George, “I surmise that its meaning may have to do with the study of technique, or something along those lines.”

She nodded slowly, as if to imply that she had also just understood the conclusion he’d reached. She'd played this game many times before.

Valentina had come to understand the men of this time. They were often accustomed to talking down to the women in their lives, explaining the tiniest things in the simplest terms for their “weak minds” to grasp. Understanding that much about the men of this time allowed her to pass over the umbrage he had not intended.

Yet, it was equally obvious that Simpson was somehow different, eager to hear her opinions and include her point of view. It wouldn’t pay to be offended at something he was attempting to share. He was merely influenced by his environment.

“Go on,” she said calmly.

“Then there is this term,” he said, “*The Ice Age*, in capitals. What that could possibly refer to, I couldn’t begin to guess.”

“How is that special?” she asked.

“Well it is certain that he is searching for something or someone he is sure will be there. I mean, how does he know it’s there, or will be there, as he implies later? It’s a mystery, don’t you think?”

“It could be,” said Valentina. “If one knew what it referred to.”

“But *that* is the point of a mystery!” he said with a bit of glee in his voice. “One does not know the reference. It begs to be solved, by its very existence. The most significant part is his use of a language that is not a natural part of the region. Before the Spanish, only native languages like the Quechua were spoken there. Where had he come from? That lake is too far inland for him to have arrived by ship. And the Andes are too rough and treacherous to traverse without a guide and a team. I should know. I’ve been there.”

Valentina admired how active and focused his mind was. He reminded her a little of her youngest brother, Iallos, when they were children, still living on Sphere, where Davin, their father, was leader of his people. Simpson was so drawn into the story that he spoke of it in a tense that reflected a present, current event, as if it were happening right now.

“I do love a good mystery,” she said. His eyes lit up at that.

“I have struggled,” said George, “to imagine its meaning over the years. But, alas, I have come to no solid conclusions. This entire piece of ancient skin is a mystery. Then, there is the matter of the dual colors of ink. Had this man run out of the faded gray and chosen another? It is too curious a thing.”

“It seems,” said Valentina, “that you have been studying this parchment for quite some time. How long have you had it?”

“I bought it about seven year ago,” said Simpson, “from a woman in the upper highlands of Peru. She told me that it had come from the maternal line of her family, handed down over the ages to her. She had also been named Valentina, as a ‘tribute’ she said. I thought it was highly suspect that the woman could neither read nor write, especially anything in English.

“Through my inquiries about her, her nature and her reputation, everyone who had known her testified that she was an honest woman and somewhat of a saint with vast knowledge of the local vegetation. As the local medicine woman, she was responsible for the general health of her village. They admired her deeply. If it was a hoax, someone had clearly put her up to it rather well. I’m convinced that she was authentic in her story. So, I’ve been studying the skin ever since.”

“Well,” said Valentina, “there is certainly a great deal of mystery here. What do you intend to do with it?” She watched as he thought hard about what he would say next.

“Well,” said George, “I’m not quite sure. I had thought of selling it once, but the mystery of it has a firm grip on me. And I don’t think I would get a fair price for it.”

“What would you consider a fair price?” she asked. “I have some acquaintances in New York who might know where to begin.”

“I couldn’t possibly take a penny from you,” said George. “Would you, however, accept it as gift? I would call it a bribe, but that implies added pressure upon you which I wouldn’t want to apply. I insist it be a token of our new friendship.” He was exceptionally charming, with that added gleam in his eyes.

“I…,” said Valentina, “I might hold it for you.” She had not intended to like him so much and certainly no intention of becoming indebted to him. In her own past, he had been a source of great joy and of terrible sadness. At this moment, she had to remain cautious.

“I shall have it placed with your cases,” he said, “in your room. James…?” Without another word, he rolled it up once more, returning it carefully to its original wooden box.

“Supper,” said James, “is ready, Sir.” He had stepped in almost too promptly, as if having stood just outside the door, listening the entire time.

“*This*,” said Simpson, “is now the property of Miss Prospera. Please ensure it’s put carefully with her things.”

James’s eyes widened slightly as he took the carved mahogany box. It was obvious to Valentina that he knew of its importance to his master. Nonetheless, with a nod to George, he took the box and disappeared once more. His footsteps faded as he ascended the stairs to her room.

Valentina squelched her feelings of deceitfulness. Valentina understood that he saw her as his equal, in spite of the boyish and immature nature of men to place women upon a pedestal. And she was nothing like the women who like being placed there. Neither would have anything less than one they could share ideas with and share the world with.

Valentina knew that for all her feelings, those he inspired in her, this was distraction. And if things went well, her younger self would take up the torch and become what he wanted most.

She had attained the information she needed and had to leave promptly. Ultimately, it could be seen as cowardly, but she had to get to Martin and bring him to the present, her present in 2258. She had to bring him to the future they’d left behind, to the middle of an unfinished battle. They had to make sure that Seth was being handled properly, and if necessary, remove him as a threat. Even if that meant they had to relocate him to a world without people on it, as Davin had once done.

“Now,” said Simpson, “you must allow me to ply you with the best we have to offer in our humble little corner of the world.” He took her hand and led her back to the table.

“Tonight,” he said with a flourish, “we dine on Pacific bass, just delivered at port this morning. James and the staff have outdone themselves in planning tonight’s feast.”

“To that,” she said, “I can most certainly acquiesce.” She had gotten used to the vernacular of the time, but it took so many words and gestures to make a point.