

CHAPTER ONE



THE INVITATION

My hands trembled from a combination of fear and excitement. The instructions were simple. I was to burn it and go to bed as usual. It didn't make sense but neither had my fifteen years of life thus far. Since I felt I had nothing to lose, and being that I was beyond curious, I filled the sink with water, lit a match, and held the flame against the parchment paper. Pulling the flame away I read it one last time.

To: Levi Levy

From: The Interdimensional Council of Cognition

*Congratulations, Mr. Levy! You've been chosen as a participant in the *Selective Thought Studies Program*, a 2-year interdimensional program at the Universe City of Ceres, Dimension 11. Should you wish to participate simply burn this invitation at precisely 11:11 on the evening of November 11th then off to bed as usual. Sweet dreams. Enjoy the ride.*

The Honorable Elton Hemphelius III
Director of Dimensional Transference

Everything about the invitation was strange. Universe City? Is that a college town? Odd spelling. I'd never even applied to college. I was fifteen and a sophomore in high school. But, for as strange as it was it was also incredibly exciting.

There were only two possibilities as far as I was concerned. At worst, I'd burn the invitation, nothing would happen, and I'd resume life as usual. At best, I'd wake up somewhere else as a student in the Department of *Selective Thought Studies* (whatever that meant) at the Universe City of

Ceres in Dimension 11 (wherever that was) and get to skip two years of high school. The possibility of being released from the academic meaninglessness that surrounded me five days a week – all but a few months of the year – would make risking an unknown future worth it. It was an offer I couldn't refuse.

I lit another match and pressed it against the parchment paper. I watched the orange flame devour words. Charcoal flakes fell and turned the water grey. Panic and wild anticipation rushed me. There was no turning back. Burning the invitation meant I accepted the offer and, ready or not, it was going to happen. Whatever *it* was.

The hardwood floor squeaked beneath my bare feet as I crept down the narrow hallway to my bedroom. I could hear my heartbeat through thick silence. I caught a reflection of myself in the trophy-lined cabinet and raised a hand defensively before recognizing myself. Matted golden curls dangled like dirty carpet fringe over cavernous emerald eyes that seemed to belong to someone else. Staring at my reflection I couldn't help thinking that maybe the school psychologist is right. Maybe there is something wrong with me. Maybe I'm imagining all this. But, what about the invitation? Surely that's real. I held it. I burned it. It had come to me through a dream. One morning I awoke with it crumbled in my hand beneath my pillow.

At first I thought my brother, Darryl, had played a joke on me but I realized he couldn't have known about my dream. Hard as I tried I could find no logical explanation for the existence of this strange otherworldly offer.

I questioned my sanity on more than one occasion. The only thing that kept me from feeling as if I were completely bonkers was my Yorkshire terrier, Alphia. Every night before bed I'd present her with the invitation. Every night she sniffed, barked and licked it. The fact that she could see it proved to me it was real.

More bizarre than the existence of this invitation is the fact that every time I touched it I felt a current travel through my body; a mildly shocking sensation that made me feel as though half of me were here and the other half somewhere else. I'd never felt that way before and honestly, I liked it.

I told the school psychologist, Dr. Oblivia, about it but I hadn't shown it to her. I tried bringing it to school more than once but each time I had no sooner would I walk down the driveway than the thing would squirm out of my back pack and explode. Poof. Up in flames before my eyes.

The first time this happened I was really upset because I thought it was gone forever. I felt as though I'd lost the only key to a parallel world I'd never know. That was THE most stressful day of

my life but when I returned home from school that day the invitation was on my nightstand. I didn't know how it got there but I cried tears of relief when I found it. It was at that moment that I realized how important it was to me. Not so much the invitation itself but what it stood for. I always felt there was something more outside the scope of the seemingly meaningless routine that had become my life.

I couldn't help wondering if Dr. Oblivia would have diagnosed me differently had she actually seen the invitation as opposed to my just telling her about it. Paranoid and delusional was a bit harsh as far as I was concerned.

Of all eleven sessions I had with her, one in particular stood out. It happened the last Tuesday in October. At the end of our session as I approached the doorway she placed her hands on my shoulders, looked me square in the eyes and said, in her usual irritatingly, nasal voice, "I realize being an adolescent is stressful. There are all sorts of pressures kids your age must deal with. Sometimes we create imaginary friends to help us handle stress and sometimes we create worlds where we can escape. But Levi, please remember none of this is real. Other worlds simply don't exist."

My jaw stiffened as I gazed into her shallow eyes. I could hear the faint grinding of my teeth inside my head. Her condescending tone and coffee breath grated on me like nails on a chalkboard. I left her office and began to walk down the empty school corridor hearing only the squeak of my sneakers against the polished floor. After a few steps I stopped and turned back toward her. She was still standing there looking perplexed.

"I see you wear a symbol around your neck," I said, pointing to a sparkling piece of metal resting against vampire-white skin. My words echoed.

I watched as her hand search her neck and throat for the silver –rhinestone encrusted cross as though she'd forgotten she were wearing it. When she found it she held it and rubbed it between her thumb and index finger.

"You probably believe in things like heaven and hell since you're wearing that," I whispered, as I jammed my notebook into my backpack. I had no interest in religious debate. I only wanted to seize what seemed the perfect opportunity to make a point.

She lowered her chin to look at the cross then looking up at me whispered, "I do - believe."

"So, when you say other worlds don't exist what you really mean is other worlds don't exist outside the ones you believe in."

Our eyes locked as I said this.

She opened her mouth twice to speak but only silence spilled from her lips. It was as if my words were churning through her head challenging her deepest beliefs.

Satisfied at seeing doubt transform the wrinkles on her face, I considered the possibility that we had something in common – the diagnosis. I also considered the possibility that the worlds we each believe in really do exist.