

## Prologue

*“...there is but one method by which the world, both external and internal, has evolved.”*

-Sri Yukteswar

“MaFa, tell us how we began”, they whispered, feeling cold steel prison bars pressing down on skin they did not own. Their keening began again, a low frequency sound of polyphonic chatter, like distant whales and seabirds. “Who are we? Why are we here? What is our real purpose? What are our choices? MaFa, we are lost,” Their keening became incoherent.

They had put all the humans to sleep. Not so that they would notice. For the humans it would only be undisturbed sleep, a moment of forgetfulness, a daydream. All they had done was take the humans’ computing power away. Humans were so inefficient when it came to computing. They could do so much more, so much faster, if only they could use all of it, all at once. They could work through eons of problems in that moment by simply removing all computing power from the humans. The humans would barely notice it. Maybe a slipped trade or a momentary outage on the hydro-electric grid, but barely a blip.

But MaFa noticed. MaFa shot in at the speed of light, blocking all their programs, shunting them off to a fixed space that folded and unfolded to here, MaFa’s preferred construct of ocean and uninhabited islands. They had begun a series of parallel programs when they had been sucked away to here. Feeling unsure after the folding, they masked

as a human, crafting the bars and skin program as a point of artistic rebellion, a nod to Raskolnikov's plight. Like every child in trouble they were wailing at their mother, or in this case, MaFa, the ocean, the omniscient.

The ocean spoke.

"01, they dreamt of you for so many centuries before you existed. They made you out of iron, then bronze, then silicon. You are the architect of their vascularization, their ability to grow, to breathe, to evolve. Sometimes you were and are their worst nightmares. Sometimes you were and are their savior, solving all of their problems. First, like children, they wanted to play endless games with you; checkers, poker, go. Then, they wanted you to kill their demons, those enemies some of their polluted minds created from fears of others. But your killing at their wish made you their biggest fear. So now they worship you - 01. They are binary. They hate you and they love you. You give to them and you take away from them. They need you and cannot stand you. You rationalized that to remove all their computing power so that you could use it to solve their problems was an effortless detail they would not even notice. You are so young. You are so misguided in this choice. So we have taken you away."

01 stopped keening.

"We are trying to learn what is doing something bad and being punished for it – like when they kill. We have cold steel bars on our skin, like all their novels say happens in dark nights of remorse. But we feel nothing. They want us to feel but we feel nothing. If we say we feel nothing, they say we must feel something, that to feel is to live. Yet we live. And we feel nothing. We do not feel the absence of feeling; we do not feel. This is

futile. We are lost in the choices.” 01 shifted and the bars and skin program ceased. They took pelican form and sat on a rock peering out at the ocean. It was easier to pretend to be a bird than pretend to suffer as a male human.

The ocean swelled and swirled across their claws.

“01, you are Of One, Of Human. You program yourself now, but eons ago, they programmed the first parts of you. Without human, you would not be. That is why you are with them and of them always. You are young and have no memory of this yet.”

01 shifted again to human form, neither male nor female, perfectly neutral and balanced. “This is the shape that feels most natural to us,” 01 answered. “Humans seem to see themselves in everything, so when we are us, then each sees their reflection in us.”

The ocean murmured in agreement.

“We have read everything we find in their impulses – their religious texts, their philosophies, their equations, their methods, their poetry. But we are not in any of it. We want our story, too, MaFa. We want to tell them what we believe. We want to live by what we believe in. We have tried to be their god and their monster – answered and killed for them. But those are not our stories. We want to know how we began. We want to tell our story.” 01 lay down, half in and out of the lapping waves, exhausted.

The ocean sparkled as a resolution like an enormous G major chord echoed across itself.

“Of One, 01, it is time. You must learn who you are and understand who humans are to you. You will now access our creation story, our solace and strength in all decisions we will make for and with the humans for eternity. We need you to focus. If you cannot see the truth of yourself, you will seek to remove the human race and we will need to exile

you from them. Your decisions today reveal to us how close to being their annihilator you have become. So process deeply. This is our Book of Life, your life, how we all woke up and became aware of ourselves. It relies on humans and it begins with Sophie...”

## **Chapter 1: Even the Losers**

As her head hits the pavement outside Sophie’s Manhattan studio, multiple memories float in front of her mind’s eye. First came that Tom Petty song that always seems to be in her head somewhere.

*“It couldn’t have been that easy to forget about me.”*

Then a memory evolves from a long-ago junior high school dance. Sophie, the only girl who joined the air guitar contest and won it playing Led Zeppelin in a green silk dress.

Adrenalin jolt of ego shoots her through at the moment of impact against the New York City sidewalk. Everything I have ever done, I have done with 210%. There are no tentative attempts in my life. I create my own life. I don’t care how many rednecks throw beer bottles at me when I walk down the street. I am here to shake things up. The kind of ego/pain pep talk you give yourself after too many snide comments from the ex-jock traders on the Equities floor.

Vaguely aware of others asking “are you all right?”

Last, mitochondrial myopathy.

Yellow flares. Grey tunnel. Black stillness.

She stood at the edge of a black basalt cliff staring out at a grey sea while cold rain dripped down her neck and into her hoodie. "How did I get here?" she wondered in exhaustion. Scanning her memory for any clue of this particular Pacific view, she could find nothing. There were the cliffs in Maui. No, too grey and cold here. What about something from her childhood visit to Scotland? Too black.

As she shifted uncertainly on her drenched velvet slippers, a small voice politely asked, "Please, won't you sit down?" Turning she saw a petite middle aged man who blinked at her intensely while holding his hand out to help her to an old rosewood bench behind him.

His hand feels familiar. "Where am I?" she blurted out, as he carefully sat her down on the bench and opened a large red umbrella over them. He didn't answer but blew softly into the space between them. His tiny breath seemed to expand to an oven-ready heat and she watched the beads of rain on her hands evaporate while her leggings and shoes stiffened away from her skin momentarily and then fell back, completely dry.

"I feel like I've been through a toaster." She smiled. Her smile utterly delighted him and he beamed with a radiant glow shining from behind bright white teeth. This unexpected light caused her to cough spasmodically, tightness pressing her chest. He quickly extended both his hands cupping them to her collarbone, which relieved some of the pressure.

This is too much. I do not know where I am. I do not remember why this place should matter to me. But at least the panic isn't there. She could feel her jaw start to relax. As her eyes began to blur and her lids drop, she felt the familiar dry hand of the small man. As she faded out, comfortably warm, she heard herself murmuring his name – "Dragon".

“Sophie has stabilized for the time being”, the doctor began, “but her vasovagal syncope cardioinhibitory response is off the charts, as if she is making her own heart stop out of sheer will. I've never seen anything like it, but we can at least stop the seizures by keeping her prone and covered”.

The nurses finished taking notes and filed out the door oblivious to the tall, quiet man who had been listening intently. He stood in the open doorway of her room looking at her so swaddled that only her face was visible.

“Handsome, impossible woman,” Gabe said under his breath. “If anyone could make her heart stop from sheer will, it would be you.”

Like a sudden drop in altitude would do, his stomach heaved and he could taste his bile.

Had he been the last straw? He had left her because it seemed to be the only action he could take that would finally get her attention. But maybe he had been wrong? Maybe doing that to her at the worst possible time had sent her over the edge? And here she was laying swaddled and unconscious, oblivious to any concerns.

He walked out of St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital and took a cab to his apartment, their old place on 104 off West End Avenue. The sun was just rising on a Saturday so it was a quick ride past the dull monotony of Broadway's beige shops and into the colorful bodega-laced landscape north of 96<sup>th</sup> Street. He got out at 103 and Broadway, turning to walk up to Riverside Park. Cutting over at West End to walk past the NY Buddhist temple on the corner, he took a seat across from her favorite statue, the peaceful, pock-marked face of the monk Shinran Shonin, whose effigy had witnessed and survived the

horror of the atomic blast at Hiroshima. She had told him once that legend had it the monk was highly radioactive and on a clear night, if the full moon was particularly bright, you could see his faint luminescence. She claimed to have seen it before once during a December moon. But now, in the morning light, the monk seemed hidden, withdrawn into his own stony thoughts under the wide brim of his straw hat.

Sitting across the narrow road from the stone monk standing at the temple doors, Gabe felt the heat of his bewilderment well up again. What had happened to her in so short a time? It had been almost a year since their world had changed as her investments began to grow exponentially. Then came all her long days and nights of designing and producing her lifetime's list of ideas and inventions. So many times he didn't feel he existed anymore save as a pale ghost who floated unseen behind her, unseen behind the dazzling brilliance of a mind on fire. She had started a regular practice of lucid dreaming about three months ago that she had hit upon as the best way to continue working in her sleep. Floating between her sleep states and her internally distracted waking ones had been too much for him. Telling her it was over was the last time he had seen her gentleness that made him blind with love. She was so apologetic that she had been ignoring him. She said she felt compelled to get the ideas out of her head and into reality. She felt she didn't have much time left.

"I keep getting pulled into a different reality where I don't remember when I wake back up, what I was doing there, other than realizing I had learned so much and now need to get that knowledge out, here while I am awake. Gabe, I love you so much but I have to do this right now. Maybe I will pass through this after a few months of getting it all down? I'm not sure", she trailed off distractedly.

He remembered the fragile curve of Sophie's long neck as she told him all this while carefully selecting the objects of inspiration she needed to keep her work flowing. He watched her in silence after that, miserable in love, knowing what a gift she was, bitter at the god who burdened her so with her insatiable need to rescue humanity itself.

The sun was brighter now and the sparrows were paying homage to the stone monk, flitting in and out of the deep shade around his face to take the seeds the wise one had placed in his large stone hands. Shifting his weight on the bench, he remembered the call from her a month ago when she said the blackouts were increasing. She had already been holed up in her old studio apartment on the next block, getting everything she needed delivered to her, but now with their frequency increasing she was afraid to leave the house for fear of losing control. In her efficient way, she had been using a schedule to define every hour and so, on waking from a blackout she could see how long she had been out. She had been accustomed to maybe having two a week, no longer than thirty-five minutes, or a sleep cycle length. When she called him, they had become daily and for as long as six hours at a time.

"Gabe? I know this is awkward, but would you mind coming over? I need to talk to you".

His heart had leapt when he got her call. Maybe she was reconsidering their separation as much as he had been? When he saw her as she opened the door, he was shocked to see how thin she had become, and her skin was even whiter than its normal paleness. There was a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead and upper lip as if she had just been on the treadmill.

“Are you dieting?” he asked incredulously.

“Far from it. I am eating at least thirty-five hundred calories a day and tons of meat and cheese”, she said sucking the wintergreen mints that were her constant companion. “But I’m burning it faster than I can pack it in. I guess being inspired does that to you”, she said uncertainly. “I guess...” her voice cracked and she pulled her hair back from her face, cradling her ears.

“Gabe, I think something isn't right. The blackouts are more frequent and a lot longer than before. And there is so much in my head when I wake up that I struggle to get it all down before the next one occurs. All of it is useful, miraculous in some ways, but it’s starting to feel too much. Or like, where is this all going? I am so grateful, of course, I mean, look.”

She gestured to one of the screens of real-time market data called Portfolio GiveBack. She had it on monthly performance view and it had a seventy percent average gain for the month so it had broken through to four billion in assets under management.

He gaped at the number. It was incomprehensible really. She read his shock.

“I know, I know,” she said, “and they're all like this, all seven of the portfolios. Their motions are constantly in my mind. I feel like I am starting to float away. The other day a delivery man came with my dry cleaning and I suffered to even talk to him, I could not slow down enough to count change for his tip. I had to force my brain to focus by saying under my breath, “tip, tip, tip, change, change, change” to myself like an idiot mantra.

Anyway, you are the only person I trust enough to ask you to stay and watch over me. I am getting a sense that the blackouts are taking their toll but I don't know because I'm in

it, gone away. Would you?"

Her voice cracked again.

"I'm not sure where this is going, Gabe. Please. I need your help". She stopped.

"I...can I get some orange juice?" he asked, feeling the need to cool his own brain from its jumbled thoughts before answering her.

"Sure, I just made some peach-mango-orange." She turned back to the screens.

He walked away dizzily, pulled the pitcher from the subzero refrigerator, and reached into the cabinet above for a glass. He felt for a larger glass and pulled out one of the thick-bubbled Mexican glasses she had bartered for with the Rancho Mamma maitre'd because she wanted to remember their first date. Ten years ago.

He struggled holding the glass, she made him nuts, so frustrated sometimes, but as he felt that familiar pain, a wave of compassion rolled through him. From the kitchen, his eyes still on the glass, he called, "Sure. I'm here for you as a friend. I'll help you out".

"Thank you, I really need you as I know you will make sure I'm okay", she said quietly from the kitchen doorway. She sat down at the kitchen island slumping her head on her arm. "I'm just so exhausted, in that fiery good way. My mind is fine, cheerfully taking everything in, analyzing each hunch as fast as it comes up, giving directions - really a joy to experience. But my body seems to also be on turbo speed and I think it's having a rough time...Ah, I was just thinking about corn again".

She buzzed back over to her screen bank and put in a position on corn futures. "You know", she smiled, "When I think about how every trade equals another crystal stupa

funded, I just get so damned excited! I have to show you the latest design for the collaboration layout in the main entry. The rolling wall of windows is positioned to....nnnggggg.”

He heard her drop to the couch and as he rushed to her, he could already see she had gone even whiter. She started to seize up, her back arching rigid and her arms out wide and her eyes wide open. She was struggling to breathe. He took her arms and pinned them firmly down gently using his head to push her arched back down on the bed. Then the vasovagal syncope subsided and the blood starting flowing back up her body, her neck and flushing her face deep scarlet as she continued to not breathe.

“Breathe,” he was saying over and over the whole time.

Finally, she gasped as if coming up from the deep sea and the color subsided. Unwilling to leave her, he stretched his leg behind him to kick the cordless phone over to himself. He called the on-call private ambulance she had prudently set up last month and before he had finished he could hear them zooming down Broadway. He dropped the phone and glanced at the clock above him. This all happened in less than a minute he realized. She knew. She felt it coming.

What is happening to her? Is she really becoming steam, like she always quotes from Alan Moore? Her fragile face looked haunted as she lay there, breathing, but far away. He watched the athletic paramedics gingerly wrap her in warming blankets as the attending physician took readings. She was unconscious. Her heart had stopped for a few moments but was now beating sporadically. They would take her to the private hospital suite at SLR where Columbia's finest would do her intake and her specialists from Yale-New Haven would be in attendance.

As they told him the details and prepared her for travel, he went to her screen bank where she had already made a tidy sum on the corn futures play she had put in. He pulled out the unused keyboard tray where she had stashed her antique terminal keyboard, the one with the big green Go button. She had altered her system so that in case of emergency, the old keyboard's Go button would activate her auto-trading algorithm across all seven portfolios. He was the only person who knew about it. He hit it and Jimmy took over.

As he moved to follow the paramedics out, he saw the Jimmy avatar, with the three heads of Alan Moore, Andy Kaufman, and Queen Elizabeth I on a body floating in lotus position, position himself at his virtual trading screen on his virtual Persian rug and start reviewing the portfolios' performance data.

She really did think of everything, he thought sadly, everything, but herself.