

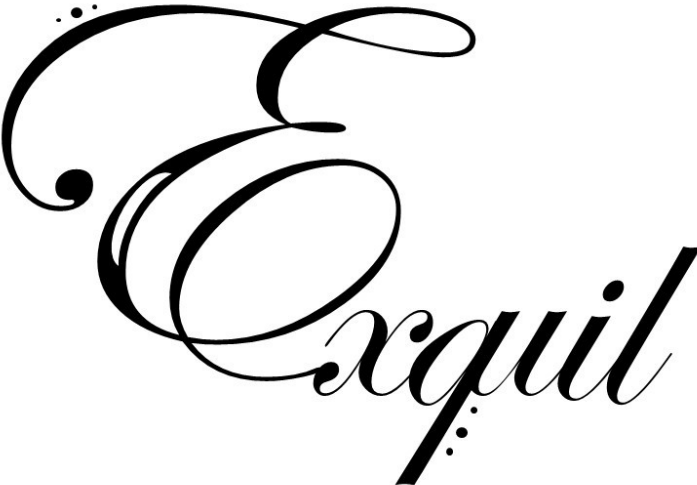
THE NEPHILEM



SE WILSON

EXQUIL

The Nephilem



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First Sample Book edition June 2022

Book cover design copyright ©2020 by Maham Aziz
Sun Is Shining Illustration copyright © 2020 by Sylwia Art
Characters Solomon Vaughn, Nathaniel, and Seth 'Hammer of God' based on creations by Jay Astill

ISBN 978-1-7397050-2-2 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1739705008 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-7397050-3-9 (hardback)

www.exquil.com

THE NEPHILEM

To Carla and Ricardo and Mikey

Love began with you

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Prologue

“You *shall* go to the ball, Cinderella!” Catherine grinned and clapped as her big sister twirled a swishing circle in her new evening dress. “Perhaps your Majesty would care to address the huddled masses.” She dropped an extravagant curtsy and threw open the elegant French windows leading to the balcony.

The smells of roasting garlic, charcoal grills and moped fumes quickly filled the marble-floored apartment as Carmelita ignored the balcony and clicked across to a heavy scrolled mirror. She turned first one way, then the other as the diamonds cascading down her neck glistened and winked against her dark, flawless skin.

For a moment both sisters fell silent as Catherine joined her, also resplendent in her own gown and matching ruby accessories. “Did you really think we’d climb this high?”

Carmelita turned to her little sister and smiled fondly. “With you two beautiful belles by my side, I never doubted it for a moment!” She turned back to the mirror and traced a sculptured fingernail along the string of brilliant gems resting comfortably on her ample bust. “Just think, some poor kid with an empty stomach and bare feet probably dug these up. Most likely got paid in cigarettes and booze. There’s always agony behind the beauty.”

Catherine’s expression changed to something between determined and thoughtful. “No need to dwell on that stuff. We didn’t make the world this way. There must be thousands of poor bastards born into that darkness every day, but how many end up *wearing* the diamonds rather than digging for them?” She gently squeezed her sister’s shoulder. “Come on, we’ll be late, and I don’t want to keep the mayor waiting on our first date.”

Carmelita rolled her eyes. “This again? Just wait till I tell your sister.”

Catherine feigned a hurt expression. “Hey, this is the closest *I’ve* ever got to a genuine bigshot. Makes me kinda hot to tell the truth.”

The older sister took the younger by the arm as they walked to the tall double doors leading out of the apartment. “Now don’t you get tunnel vision over one provincial mayor. This is a big deal and we’ve no idea *what* kind of whales we could land if we’re smart. There could be bankers, arms dealers, playboy gamblers and mysterious Middle Eastern men with royal connections. Hell, there might even be some old Europe money mixed in too.”

Catherine stopped and put her hands on hips. “Always the one with the sensible advice and a broad perspective. I *knew* there was reason I’d hung out with you all these years.”

“Why thank you kindly, little sister.” Carmelita opened the door and reached for the light switch.

Both women suddenly froze as a startling and blood-chilling sound suddenly warbled through the apartment.

Catherine broke the silence after a few seconds. “No way!”

Carmelita closed her eyes and gently shut the door. “Oh, come on, not *now!*”

The younger sister kicked off her designer shoes and padded back into the apartment, where the tinny electronic ringtone was much clearer. “Yeah, it is.”

Carmelita followed her sister. “We can’t be at home all the time, can we?”

“*You* can tell that to Rosalita if you want.”

Once again both women stood still as they listened to the plaintive chirping of cheap electronics echoing through the opulent and tasteful Mediterranean apartment.

Eventually Carmelita gestured towards a short hallway leading to the bedrooms. “It’s your turn.”

Catherine stamped across to a small but elegantly scrolled walnut table and reached beneath it. After a few seconds of grunting and face-pulling there was a tearing sound as she retrieved a battered cell phone and hurriedly pulled off the duct tape securing it in place. “There go my nails, goddammit.”

Carmelita pulled a sour face. “If this is some guy jacking off in a phone box again...”

Catherine rolled her eyes and pressed the green answer button. Holding the handset to her ear, she said nothing as she heard the line disconnect. She raised her pencilled eyebrows at her sister.

“Do you think...” Carmelita was cut short mid-sentence as the phone rang for a second time. After three chirps it fell silent once more.

A tense atmosphere descended rapidly as both women stood motionless, just staring at the scratched handset. That silence grew heavy and thick as they anxiously awaited the next development.

Both sisters jumped as the phone rang for a third time, its strangled electric call bringing with it a sudden rush of nervous anticipation.

Catherine swallowed hard and answered the phone once again.

This time she heard a smooth, deep, and educated male voice on the line. “Hello, my dear aunt. It’s been such a long time since I called you.”

Both women exchanged nervous glances before Catherine gave the prearranged response. “I’m sorry, but I think you must’ve called the wrong woman. Perhaps you should try again.”

The voice on the line paused for a moment, then spoke clearly and deliberately. “I’m very sorry. I was trying to reach my aunt Margarita. I will hang up and dial again as you so wisely suggest.” The line promptly went dead once more.

Catherine ended the call and looked at her sister, nodding slowly.

Carmelita motioned to her expensive evening dress and jewellery ensemble. “So *that* was a complete waste of time. You know I blew fifty Euros on my hair? *Fifty Euros!*”

Her sister nodded, making a similar gesture to her own exotic outfit. “We’d better get moving. Should we call Rosalita?”

Carmelita shook her head. “No time, and we’ve nothing to tell her yet. We’ll just have to fill her in later.”

“I don’t like it. I feel kind of vulnerable when we’re one short; but you’re right.” Catherine quickly removed the sim card and battery from the cell phone and placed all three items on the baroque style table. Reaching underneath once more, she prised a small, twenty-two calibre automatic free from its own nest of duct tape. After chambering the first round, she followed her sister hurriedly towards the bedrooms.

* * *

Within ten minutes two of the three Moirae sisters were in the narrow street below their apartment, dressed in cheap, mass-market clothes which were a thousand miles and just as many dollars removed from the designer dresses they’d so hurriedly discarded.

Catherine stood by with a crash helmet in each hand as Carmelita started up the battered little scooter which always waited faithfully outside, come rain or shine.

Within seconds, both sisters were on the bike and weaving expertly through the meandering throng of commuters and tourists that milled around the countless cafes, bistros and street-food stalls crammed into Barcelona’s achingly fashionable El Born district.

As the architecture began to thin out, so did the tourists and commuters, to be replaced by roving gangs of kids kicking footballs outside concrete apartment blocks.

Carmelita reached out and tossed the battered cell phone into a trash can as they slowed at some traffic lights, having disposed of the sim card and battery earlier on. She glanced at her cheap watch as they bumped up a cracked curb, weaving between some bollards and coming to a halt at the edge of a small public square.

Their destination was a far cry from the fashionable awnings and elegant apartments of their home district. Although they’d only been riding for about fifteen minutes, this grey, brutalist version of a public space felt like a different country, a different world even. Weeds sprouted through cracks in the uneven paving, struggling for sunlight in the shadow of the surrounding tower blocks; while graffiti policemen, bankers and boxers gasped for breath behind an encroaching spread of sun-bleached posters and cheap, faded flyers.

Both women left their crash helmets on as they scanned the square for signs of trouble. Although it was early evening and the weather was warm, the place was mostly in shadow and fairly quiet, with just some old bloke feeding the pigeons and a group of teenagers skateboarding around a dry, cracked concrete fountain.

This was a place their well-heeled neighbours knew nothing about, but the Moirae sisters were only too familiar with those endless acres of concrete warehouses used to store surplus citizens who languished on welfare or struggled vainly in poorly paid and thankless tourist jobs.

In many ways, these forgotten corners of the great city were the true source of the sisters’ strength. They knew such places intimately, and each fleeting visit renewed and reaffirmed their cold, unshakable conviction that they would *never* go back.

The payphone stranded near the dead fountain was already ringing by the time the sisters reached it, but nobody else heard that lonely call for contact, save for the army of bottle blondes pouting from poorly printed contact cards that fluttered and flapped in the warm evening breeze.

Catherine glanced around once more before removing her helmet and picking up the greasy receiver. "Yes."

The same educated voice crackled over the line, although this time it was somehow more distant and tinnier, as though somehow diminished by the payphone's public utility components. "I've lost my delivery."

Carmelita leaned in to follow the exchange, although she faced outwards to keep a watchful eye on the surroundings.

Catherine twisted her body to allow her sister to hear. "You should be more careful with valuable and volatile consignments. I assume you're taking every measure to recover your property."

"That's why I'm calling, out of courtesy, and to reassure you there is no cause for concern should you see my spotters in your genteel neighbourhood, or even outside your apartment."

The sisters exchanged silent glances before Catherine spoke again. "There's no reason either of those packages should turn up in *our* neighbourhood."

The voice on the phone remained polite and professional. "I sincerely hope not, but missing consignments do have a habit of returning to their senders, one way or another."

Catherine's voice hardened. "Those packages were delivered in good faith and *exactly* as you specified. If you can't keep hold of two valuable items for more than a week then I suggest you review your security before bothering your suppliers."

There was a pause before the voice crackled down the phone once again. "In point of fact I have only mislaid one package. The other has already been recovered; alas it was damaged beyond repair."

"Damaged? How?"

The caller sighed heavily. "Water damage. I'm afraid some of my movers were a bit careless during a delicate situation, but it's so hard to find good staff these days. Naturally I'm very upset with them and in turn they're determined to recover at least *some* of the considerable losses we've suffered during this transaction. I assured them that you were reliable and acting in good faith, although you know how suspicious staff can be. Some of them went so far as to outright accuse you of covertly recovering your own merchandise in order to redirect it to another buyer."

Catherine bristled. "Now just you wait a minute..."

The voice on the phone continued. "Let me put your mind at ease. I have placed you and your dear sisters firmly off-limits to all investigators, so once again you have my reassurance that my contractors pose no significant risk to yourselves, despite their rather brusque and martial manner at times. Of course, they are aggrieved at their own failure and are very keen to put things right, hence their commitment to keeping a watchful eye around your neighbourhood. Just in case."

"We'll be keeping watch too."

“I’m sure you will. Now, if you hurry, you’ll still catch the second act, although you’ll have to change first. Personally, I think your working clothes imbue a kind of spray-painted urban wisdom which you’ve worked hard to achieve and thoroughly deserve, although it’s hardly suitable attire for the great and the good of this fine city. Goodnight, ladies, and do take care on the way home. You are not in the brightest or safest of districts.”

The line disconnected.

Catherine replaced the handset, grabbed a tissue from her pocket and wiped her palm. “What you think?”

Carmelita glanced around before taking a small flyer from her pocket and sliding it beneath the other adverts for French lessons tutored by unfeasibly busty courtesans with comically accentuated features. The flyer carried a new cell phone number to replace the one they’d just abandoned. “I think our friend should be more careful with his inventory, although I don’t like the idea of merchandise just wandering around unsupervised. Anything could happen.”

Catherine tossed the tissue onto the ground as the sisters walked back to their battered but well-maintained scooter. “There’s nothing to connect the merchandise to us, unless Kal squeals to save his own skin.”

Carmelita nodded thoughtfully. “We could arrange a meeting to, you know, take care of the situation.”

Catherine smiled ruefully. “I always thought the younger sibling was supposed to be the hothead. There’s nothing to suggest anyone’s looking in our direction but creating corpses without good reason would pretty much guarantee that happening.”

The older Moirae sister donned her crash helmet and jumped onto the moped. “You’re right let’s not make any risky moves unless we see a reason to. Come on, little sister, there’s a whole battalion of eligible bachelors waiting to wine and dine us; and I’m really hungry.”

Catherine shivered as the sun dipped behind a drab grey tower block, sending a chill shadow slicing across the tired and dusty square. She couldn’t shake the sudden feeling that it was some kind of portent, a vague warning expressed by some supernatural means. She silently scolded herself as she jumped onto the seat behind her sister. Their client was the superstitious nut job, not them. All the same, Catherine knew she’d feel safer once all the Moirae were together again, although she didn’t relish the idea of breaking the news of a stray to Rosalita.





Sun Is Shining

Sunlight gleamed and glittered on a languid ocean as the ferry began its slow, lumbering turn towards the shore. The vibration of the steel deck plates all but vanished as the engines throttled down, allowing momentum to steer the large and unwieldy vessel as it inched towards its allocated berth. No hurry.

Hyienna reluctantly sat up and opened his eyes, blinking in the bright Mediterranean sun, despite his good quality if somewhat dated sunglasses. High up on the open deck, he yawned and stretched as he watched a general ripple fidget through the passengers scattered across the sun-bleached space as parents gathered in children and retirees began packing away newspapers in preparation for disembarking.

Hyienna knew he'd soon have to move too, and that realisation elicited a vague and surprising frisson of resentment inside him. This was a nice place, a good place, a place of warm sun and calm seas. During their short time together, the ferry had become something more than just a big boat; it had come to embody thoughts of reunions and happy times, adventure, and discovery.

As he watched his nameless companions begin trooping down towards the dusty car deck, Hyienna wondered which of those symbolic meanings would loom largest in the coming days. Reunion had called to him and discovery was a certainty, while he fervently hoped for happy times and always daydreamed of adventure. Despite the very mixed feelings churning around inside him, he figured that the omens were generally good. The weather was calm, the crossing had been easy, and a peculiar feeling of peace had crept through his soul as the short journey had unfolded. Maybe it was merely a matter of distance, of leaving his own life behind him, if only for a while. Whatever the case, he couldn't shake the feeling that his was an important journey, a life changing journey.

He smiled and nodded at a young mother who was busy readying both herself and her child for departure.

The pretty young woman smiled back while her infant son stared curiously at him, having not yet learned the unwritten rules of interaction with strangers.

As he smiled at the kid, who clearly had his mother's eyes, Hyienna wondered how strange he must look to that small child from a small island. He removed his sunglasses, pulled a funny face and deliberately made himself cross-eyed, a trick he'd learned while he was still at school.

It worked, and the kid started to smile and kick his little legs around as infants have a habit of doing.

Mum joined in and whispered something in her son's tiny ear as she lifted him up and waved at the strange and silly black man with the funny eyes.

Hyienna found himself smiling back as a tiny hand pawed at the air, trying to mimic his mother's friendly gesture. He gave his own little wave of farewell as mum smiled once more and

turned towards the steps leading down to the car deck; filtering in with the last few passengers as they clambered down to ready themselves for departure.

Almost alone on the open deck, Hyienna stood up as he watched mother and son disappear through a doorway. Cute little kid; couldn't have been older than three or four. It always amazed him to imagine how that tiny facsimile of a man could become a high-powered executive or maybe a hulking special forces operative in just a couple of short decades. It didn't seem possible, and yet the proof was all around him...

He quickly replaced his glasses and mentally reigned himself in. There he was again, dwelling on what kids might become as they grew to adulthood, cheerfully wandering back down the darkening trail of what might've been. Although the counselling hadn't really made him feel any better, it had at least taught him to look out for the warning signs of trouble inside himself. Children were always a possible trigger; the first link in a chain of thought that could quickly take him into a confusing, shadowy, and ever shifting labyrinth of introspection, fruitless speculation and self-recrimination. The shrink had been right about that much at least, and the only sure defence against the shadows of the past was to concentrate on the sunlight of the future, wherever he could find it.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Hyienna forced himself to focus on the present by not just looking but really *seeing* the idyllic holiday island of Formentera as the ferry finally docked. Although it was less than an hour from Ibiza, the contrast was quite striking. Whereas Ibiza was an alcopop fuelled twenty-something partying hard into the night, Formentera seemed like a much more settled, stable, middle aged kind of island. Hyienna immediately detected a more measured kind of milieu as the ferry's hull squeaked against its wooden berth and the cables were secured. The place seemed a little slower and somehow more self-aware, which was no bad thing. Even the buildings seemed to be more grown-up and neighbourly, with the large coastal hotels spacing themselves out more evenly rather than jostling for space and fighting for prominence.

It was almost a shame to leave the deck and break the oddly reflective mood which had overtaken him, but he sensed that reflection was something he'd be getting plenty of in the coming days.

* * *

The hot Spanish sun flared brightly as Hyienna bumped his scooter off the ferry ramp and hit the tarmac of Formentera proper for the first time. Settling down into the seat, he took the chance to glance around quickly as the traffic slowly filtered into town and began to disperse across the island. If anything, his first impressions were reinforced as he noticed that Formentera looked like a typically Spanish tourist resort, although perhaps a little more rustic and better organised than the heaving mainland or the thumping party island he'd just left behind. At the same time the place exuded a kind of generic Mediterranean vibe shared by a large area stretching from southern France to the northern reaches of Africa.

Eventually he reached a busy junction, where gleaming storefronts jostled with more traditional and, well, Spanish looking streets as the traffic honked and weaved its way across a crowded stretch of tarmac. The directions he'd been given told him to turn right, so he went left, a move which he figured had been pretty much typical of his whole life generally and the last few years in particular.

He knew he'd have to find his way to the rendezvous soon enough, but Hyienna just didn't feel quite ready to meet that part of his own history; not on such a beautiful and carefree day as this. After all, there he was, on a Wednesday morning with no compunction to be anywhere or to do anything. It was a freedom that few were able to enjoy, even though the accompanying stress and financial worries were familiar to many. Still, he could be worrying about money *and* sweating in some office rather than worrying about money while driving around a beautiful Mediterranean island instead. He knew he had the best of it, or at least that was what he told himself.

As both the traffic and the architecture began to loosen up, Hyienna knew that sooner or later the road would lead to his true destination, but the only thing that felt right in that moment was movement. He couldn't figure out whether he was escaping from an unresolved personal past or just enjoying the feeling of riding into an unknown future. Whatever the case, he felt almost powerless to quell the urge just to keep moving and to find something new. Maybe it was a different kind of living and a different way of seeing things that he sought, or maybe it was just delusion and self-justification; yet another novel excuse for his not knuckling under and doing as he should.

In truth he didn't really care which was his true motivation as he rode through that scorched Mediterranean scrub, just letting his instincts do the steering.

He knew was heading *somewhere*, but not knowing where that somewhere might be just added to the sense of freedom, whether that feeling of freedom was truly real or not.

* * *

Hyienna had been riding for quite a while, enjoying the sights and soaking up the laid back island vibe when he first caught sight of it. At first he thought he'd made it up in his head, but as he rounded a corner beside a grove of dry and thirsty looking trees he realised he'd been right the first time.

It was a lighthouse.

He pulled onto the dusty verge, kicked down the stand of his scooter and stepped onto the deserted country road to take a better look. Shading his eyes against the mid-morning glare, he glanced at the incongruously tall structure perched peculiarly on the horizon, as though the gods of Olympus had misplaced a child's toy. He wasn't sure why that functional building had caught his attention so, but for some reason he just couldn't take his eyes off it. Maybe the fact it was easily the tallest structure for miles around held his attention, as though the fates had brought him to this very spot in order to convey some kind of deep, esoteric message that could never be spoken or written down.

Hyienna looked around and realised that he was completely alone for the first time in...well, he couldn't even remember how long. No cars travelled that cracked and sagging rural route and his only companion was the dust hurrying before a ceaseless Mediterranean wind, a desiccating breeze that dried and crumbled everything beneath its gentle yet unending assault.

Hyienna turned a slow, full circle as he observed the flat countryside around him. There was nobody nearby and nothing to break the monotony of dry, undeveloped scrubland interspersed with small orchards and distant flat-roofed farmhouses. There was just him, that lonely wind and his inner meditations on a distant lighthouse, a beacon erected to warn against danger. Was it a message, a metaphor...?

Just hold it right there, my boy! Remember what the therapist said. Hyienna took a deep breath for the second time that morning, reminding himself just how easy it was to fall into that endless fog of introspection, forever following phantom spirals of existential speculation...all leading nowhere except to unreliability and unemployment. That was something else the shrink had been right about, although she could offer no real help explaining why *his* brain was wired that way while everyone else just saw the world with pragmatic eyes. She'd told him it was just an abnormality of his psyche, as unpredictable and inexplicable as genius or being unusually tall. The medical experts didn't know how or why Hyienna was the way he was, only that the reality of his peculiar personal makeup meant that he had to be on the lookout for flights of fancy.

Despite the quiet warning inside him, Hyienna knew he'd be headed down the road towards that mysterious lighthouse the moment he was back on his faithful little two-stroke.

* * *

The scooter's battered seat squeaked reassuringly as Hyienna leaned back and looked up at the lighthouse. He struggled to fathom why it held his attention so, but it somehow seemed to stare back at him as he observed its silent, inscrutable lines picked out against the bright blue Mediterranean sky. He didn't know what he was waiting for, after all it was just a pile of painted stone and metal, yet still he expected something to happen as the breathless and sultry atmosphere prickled over his skin and inside his own head.

He'd expected to see more people there, given how the lighthouse was easily the tallest building on the whole island, at least from what he'd seen of it. There were a couple of tourists wandering around the base, looking out to sea and no doubt discussing big plans for their own futures as they escaped from wherever it was, they'd come from.

Hyienna watched them standing arm in arm, looking out to sea, and not for the first time did he envy those couples who seemed to have somehow found a solution to sharing a life together, at least for a while. It wasn't even the physical side of romance that Hyienna missed so much; it was something deeper, something more fundamental. It was just the idea of someone truly *knowing* that you were alive, to somehow bear witness to your hopes, dreams, triumphs, and failures. Maybe that was the secret to humanity's endless quest for romance; maybe it ran far deeper or higher than a purely biological drive. Maybe it was something almost spiritual; maybe there really *was* something to the whole soulmate idea. He wouldn't be at all surprised.

Leaving the couple to their private moment, Hyienna turned a slow circle, glad for his ageing designer glasses as a squall of warm Mediterranean wind picked up a handful of orange dust and sent it hurrying past him, leaving a dull film on his clothes, backpack and less than pristine scooter. Some sort of bird twittered through a huddled group of stunted and wind twisted trees, but there was no sign of any other human life. Here he was, standing on an idyllic Mediterranean island with more of a future before him than he'd known for a while, and yet Hyienna felt uneasy for some reason, almost as though he were being watched.

Back to the lighthouse again. He knew it was irrational, but still he couldn't shake a feeling that the place was somehow meant for him, that this was where he was supposed to be at that particular moment.

As he looked again, Hyienna realised there was something wrong with the place in general and the lighthouse in particular. The angles were odd, with a wide stone path cutting an oblique, almost diagonal course towards the front entrance. A strangely angled path shouldn't make any

difference, but Hyienna saw it as a sign of some deeper and more esoteric design. After all, there was nothing around the lighthouse, so why not just lay the path straight up to the front door? It didn't make sense, unless the architect was trying to say something unspoken with ageless stone. The more he stared at it, the more it seemed like the tall cylindrical structure was leaning over, moving and yet motionless at the same time. One moment it seemed to be gliding forward as though to crush him beneath it, yet a single blink later it looked to be leaning precariously over the cliff, ready to topple into the sea at any moment. The whole place exuded a weird kind of vibe, reminding him of an old movie where some kid's drawings came to life in the world of her dreams.

He swallowed hard, his mouth and throat suddenly dry as he thrust his hand into his pocket and grabbed a small, polished pebble of tumbled brown agate he'd bought from some cute chick at the hippy market back on Ibiza. Apparently, it was good for helping to stay grounded and steer the mind away from distractions...and it worked too, at least for him. He couldn't really vouch for some deep adjustment of spiritual vibrations, but it had still become his anchor when the tide of fancy threatened to sweep him away. Although therapy had been pretty questionable in some ways, it hadn't been a total loss, and ideas like his pocket-sized anchor had saved him from slipping away into spirals of speculation more than once. Not that there was anything *wrong* with spirals of speculation, but he knew from bitter and hard-won experience how that glittering road of fantasy led only to darkness, just as chaos rode hard on the heels of that first unparalleled trip down the white powder trail.

With his hand wrapped tightly around his own personal rock, Hyienna deliberately tore his gaze from the lighthouse and kicked his feet through the dusty Formentera scrubland to make certain he stayed in the here and now. He gazed out across the idyllic blue horizon, where distant yachts and powerboats cut silent white wakes while huge commercial ships dissolved into the haze at the edge of the world, all working hard and heading somewhere...all except for him. No, wait, that wasn't true, he *was* heading somewhere, maybe for the first time in years, maybe ever.

With his equilibrium restored and his feet back on the ground, Hyienna replaced his pet rock in his pocket and smiled as he caught sight of what looked like an old kids' den, complete with a crude skull and crossbones painted up on a decaying pallet. He looked around again to find there were no kids, adults, or anyone else in sight. Hell, for all he knew the kids who'd built that little pirate den might be his age by now, with their own kids worrying about skin cancer as they stayed glued to the Xbox or whatever they had these days.

He turned and glanced back at the lighthouse as it struck him, he was standing between two dusty relics from a bygone age. Hyienna was no maritime expert, but he'd heard that lighthouses were no longer necessary in the traditional sense, what with satellite communication and radio markers. Just like the old kids' clubhouse it was another human experience supplanted and nullified by the rise of the microchip. Another signpost of ages and rites of passage made invisible, impermanent and digitised.

Hyienna idly kicked at the sun-bleached and crudely painted warning to strangers, only to see it fall flat and splinter at the merest touch. He stepped back suddenly as he realised that the decaying old pallet most likely *hadn't* been left there by kids after all, but by adults with a serious purpose. He backed away as the broken pallet tilted and slid into what looked like a deep fissure in the ground. Sand and pebbles clattered after it, sending up a cloud of choking dust as the rumble of falling debris grew steadily louder.

Realising the danger, Hyienna turned to beat a hasty retreat but it was too late as he felt his left leg suddenly vanish beneath him. He instinctively lunged forward and grabbed at a tuft of brown scrub as his body slithered over the edge of a rapidly expanding chasm. He wanted to say *oh shit* as he slid backwards, but all he could manage was a strangled cough as the dust clogged his throat and he plunged into the darkness below.

* * *

Pain.

Pain and darkness. Those were Hyienna's first thoughts as his consciousness limped back after its sudden and unscheduled absence. Had he been dreaming? He grasped at the ghost of some nocturnal adventure involving an old woman on a riverbank, but the shadow cast by his subconscious mind faded away as he began to sense the light beyond his own eyelids.

As Hyienna's faculties slowly returned, so did his sense of his own experience, bringing his pain sharply into focus as it settled around both his leg and his head. Some sense of feeling slowly returned as he noticed a hard surface beneath his buttocks and back, jolting him into a much more alert state as he realised he was sat upright...sort of.

He blinked rapidly as he opened his grit filled eyes, wiping away the tears as his blurred vision began to show him some sort of orange light. At first he wondered if he was concussed and simply seeing random colours and shapes displayed by his rattled brain, although his opinion quickly changed as he began to discern his surroundings.

He moved his arms and legs a little even though his left knee hurt like crazy. Hyienna began to think he'd had a lucky escape, although how the hell he was going to get out of wherever he'd fallen into was another question altogether.

He jumped and scrambled back against the wall as something large moved in front of his slowly clearing vision; then it was gone again.

"Just relax, my friend. You took quite a tumble."

He rubbed his eyes again, harder this time as he willed them to show him where he was and who was speaking. It was hard to see in the low light, but at last the world slowly sharpened into some sort of order, although what Hyienna could discern made about as much sense as the blurred shapes and flashing blotches.

Unsure even of where his limbs were, Hyienna felt around and gingerly tried to push himself up with his arms. He felt sharp stones and rock under his palms for a second before he collapsed back down as a wave of pain and nausea robbed him of what little strength he had left. Some distant, rational part of himself seemed to be trapped far away, calling to him from the endless darkness of concussed confusion.

He knew he must have fallen pretty hard, and some distant alarm sounded way off in his stranded consciousness as some quiet part of him feared he might be seriously hurt.

Was that singing he could hear? He struggled to focus as some distant and alluring siren song hummed from somewhere close by. He tried to speak but his body simply refused to obey his commands. Oh God! Perhaps he really *was* hurt badly. It was an idea that he didn't want to face

and yet knew he couldn't escape as that distant angel hummed right in his ear and the world stubbornly refused to settle into focus.

Suddenly something moved in the distance, a dark shape passing in front of that indistinct orange glow. Was someone there with him, wherever *there* was?

Hyienna breathed a long sigh as the pain receded and the edges of his vision began to darken once again. The humming stopped and for a moment there was an eerie, almost unearthly stillness before the dark shape reappeared, only this time much closer, only inches away, blocking out the orange glow and leaving just an ethereal outline of a woman dressed in some sort of shawl or blanket.

There were no features within those dark, dense folds of cloth, yet the figure seemed to stare intently at him, despite being little more than a deep and almost flawless shadow hovering just inches from his face.

Part of him was glad that he was so badly concussed; otherwise, the idea of a solid shadow rearing up in front of him would've been more than a little frightening. As it was, all Hyienna could muster was a drowsy curiosity as he stared at the woman who wasn't there and listened to her strange and urgent whispering. He tried to follow the words but it was difficult to pick out one distinct language as her words tumbled forth in a stream of syllables that failed to form sentences, yet somehow elicited strange ideas from somewhere deep inside him.

Hyienna sensed he was hearing a story, some sweeping epic that turned around the timeless themes of life, death and eternity. He wanted to hear more, straining to focus on the stream of ideas suddenly conjured forth into the empty and confused vessel of his conscious mind. He had to hear the ending, sensing some great and secret wisdom woven through that whispered, wordless tale; yet he also felt himself sinking back into the dark ocean of nothingness from which he'd so briefly surfaced.

If he'd been more awake, Hyienna guessed he would probably have screamed with terror as that impossibly dark, human-shaped hole in his out of focus world leaned closer still, extinguishing the last light of his brief awakening and leaving him alone with only that urgent whispering for company in that silent, endless sea of the unconscious.

Time passed once again, and Hyienna found himself slowly drifting back towards the waking world a second time. The throbbing in his head and the pain in his knee hastened his journey back towards something resembling a sense of self awareness.

Blinking rapidly, his eyes watered as he smelled a strong and unexpected scent. Was that disinfectant of some kind? Maybe he'd been asleep longer than he'd thought. Maybe he was in hospital. Maybe that strange dream had just been a garbled and mixed up mess of meaningless images, his synapses firing at random inside his shaken and shocked brain.

Maybe.

At last his eyes began to focus and the throbbing in his head was complemented by a sharper antiseptic sting to match the smell in his nostrils. Whether by accident or design, that sharp odour

acted much like smelling salts, clearing the buzzing confusion inside his head as the world finally flickered into focus.

He was underground, that was clear. Luckily, he hadn't fallen as far as he'd first feared, although it had still been enough to knock the wind out of him and render him senseless for a while. The bright morning sun streamed through a ragged hole above, picking out the dust swirling in that cool subterranean space.

Hyienna gingerly clambered to his feet, wincing as his knee complained but did its job by supporting him. He tried not to think about Alice in Wonderland, but he couldn't help it as he realised he'd somehow dropped into another world. He just hoped the inhabitants would be friendly.

An oil lamp burned on what looked like a makeshift table fashioned from a pair of tea chests, throwing its light across a chaotic collection of empty food cans, old bits of paper and what looked like discarded blister packs of pills piled high and spilling across the uneven stone floor.

Other shapes lurked in the shadows, maybe a bed and some more of those tea chests, although it was difficult to make out any details in the darkness. The one thing he *could* see clearly was the woman who raised herself out of what looked like a cheap garden chair.

"Err, hi." He said, feeling both foolish and frightened as he nervously broke the silence. He also tried not to think of the countless zombie movies he'd watched as the dishevelled figure shuffled past him in the semidarkness. He didn't know if she could even hear or understand him, but he thought better of speaking again straight away. Instead, he concentrated on observing as much as possible lest he should have to make a sudden getaway, although he fervently hoped that wouldn't happen as he doubted his knee would be up to the task. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness and finally stopped watering, Hyienna began to make out dozens of mysterious symbols and glyphs, all scribbled on curling paper and pinned to the sides of tea chests and any other available surface. He didn't know their precise meaning although he recognised an astrological symbol here and there, or something he'd maybe seen in a movie somewhere. Maybe he'd watched too many movies.

Realising that his eyes wouldn't be much more use in the dim light, he turned his attention to his ears. Hyienna could hear the languid song of the sea echoing somewhere in the distance, seemingly from behind him. He figured it made sense because whoever the mysterious cave dweller might be, she sure as hell didn't drop into her strange subterranean home the same way he had. That meant there had to be another way in, or out.

There was a sudden scraping sound as the woman struck a match and lit another lamp. "That's better. Now I can see my knight in shining armour."

Oh crap, she's crazy! I hope I don't have to get physical. Hyienna instinctively took a deep breath as the cave woman picked up her lamp and finally turned to face him. In truth he didn't really know what to expect, but in any event he was still surprised at what he saw, and again he had to remind himself that he wasn't starring in any kind of straight-to-video, Wednesday night horror flick. She was tall, and her age was hard to determine, especially as the dim flickering light gave her sunken features an unsettling and cadaverous look when she smiled broadly at him. Hyienna noticed that although her hair was matted and her clothes were dishevelled, she still sported a full set of expertly worked teeth which seemed completely at odds with the rest of her unkempt appearance.

She swayed slightly as she shuffled forward, as though her painfully thin legs could barely support her. She wore quite a large skeleton for a woman, which made her obvious weight loss even more apparent and uncomfortable to look at.

Hyienna had no idea of who she was or what she might say and do next. In fact, when he thought about it, he had no idea of what *he* should say and do next either. In the end he just repeated himself. “Hi.”

The cave dweller changed course and reached out for her chair, lifting it forward and placing it carefully on the floor of the cave. She groaned into it and pushed some of the debris from the tea chests to make space for her second lantern. She seemed not to notice the empty medicine bottles and other detritus clattering to the floor as she pointed in Hyienna’s general direction. “Sit yourself down; you’re making the place untidy.” Her voice was papery, thin and tired sounding.

Hyienna felt a pang of sorrow as he glanced round and located another cheap garden chair. He couldn’t believe that anyone could be living and suffering like this in the twenty-first century, at least not in Europe. For a moment he just considered grabbing one of the lanterns and finding his way to the sea, but both compassion and a sense of morbid curiosity prevailed over him.

For a moment the two of them silently stared at each other; one with an expression of bemused befuddlement and the other looking as though she were studying a fascinating abstract painting.

It was the befuddled visitor who broke the silence. “Hi.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say as he stared at his unusual host, although he tried not to let the word *captor* enter into his thoughts too much. At last he concluded that the mysterious cave dweller was probably middle aged, even though she moved like a very old woman. The lines etched into her features looked more like the work of pain and stress than the passage of time. The various medical detritus scattered around her makeshift hovel also supported that idea.

At last she spoke. “I’d given up on you.”

Taken aback, Hyienna blinked rapidly. “What?”

“Are you simple or something?”

He could immediately see the annoyance on her face, even in the poor light. She had large and even features typical of someone with African ancestry, and although pain and sorrow had done their best to dull her beauty, Hyienna could see that she had once been a handsome woman. Her large frame and features meant that she’d never have made the cover of *Vogue*, but he could see that she was nonetheless used to commanding the space around her, or at least she once had been.

There was a hiss of annoyance as the mystery woman spoke again. “I pray for salvation and instead I get a simpleton. Maybe that’s my punishment; maybe *you’re* my punishment.”

“Do you...*live* here?” Hyienna tentatively asked. The simpleton jibe had kind of rubbed him the wrong way, but he figured that an unkind word might be the least of his problems.

She gestured around, her imitation jewellery glinting dully in the dim lamplight. “At least for a while, if you can call *this* living.”

“Who are you, I mean what are you doing down here?”

A sudden spasm of phlegmy coughing rattled the nameless woman's frame and she angrily waved him back when he rose to help. "I'm the eldest of three, although I'm not the first to leave my sisters behind. That's the worst part of it, thinking of my beautiful baby sister, all alone out there."

Settling reluctantly back into his seat, Hyienna tried hard not to think of Macbeth's witches but it was too late. "Do you need help? Do you want me to call someone, your sisters maybe?"

She leaned back in her chair, looking for all the world like some southern matriarch in a rocking chair on her porch. "What's your name?"

For a moment Hyienna was reluctant to answer, although he soon dismissed the danger of a confidence trick or some hard luck story. Besides, it wasn't like she'd sought him out; in fact, *he'd* dropped in on *her*, quite literally. "My name's Hyienna. What do people call you?"

"Hyienna?" She wrinkled her face as though there were a sudden bad smell in the air. "Angels should have names like Seraphim or Auriel, or Diazepam. Still, you're here now and who am I to question?"

Hyienna smiled kindly at the obviously disturbed woman. "I think maybe you've got me confused with someone else. I'm just some poor sap who fell through a hole in the ground."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He slowly rose from his seat. "Look, I should best be on my way. I'm late for an appointment anyway."

"Wait!"

Very reluctantly, Hyienna turned back. He'd already decided he should call someone about a sick woman living in a cave, but he decided not to mention it directly to her. She was obviously half crazy and there was no reason to upset her. Besides, there was just something about her, something significant, although he couldn't put his finger on what it was. "Is there something you want?"

The woman rose again and shuffled across to a dark corner, re-emerging a moment later and clutching a small rucksack, kind of like an overnight bag. "You must take this."

Hyienna smiled indulgently. "I don't need anything, thanks, apart from maybe a lamp to find my way out. Christ, that's a point, please don't tell me I gotta *swim* to get out of here."

She groaned back into her chair. "Heroes don't swim, unless it's with tridents or crocodiles or something. Anyhow, you don't look like much of a swimmer to me. It's funny, but I always thought you'd be taller; not for any particular reason now that I think about it, but you know how imagination can be. In fact, I'd be willing to bet your imagination's a lot more active than the average prole. Good, you'll be needing it in the coming days." The cave dweller leaned forward and rummaged in the bag.

Hyienna felt his knees tremble and his blood run cold as his nameless host slowly unfolded what looked like a large square of fabric. He kept the word *fabric* fixed firmly in his mind, although in truth he had no idea of *what* he was really looking at.

The blanket, if that's what it was, almost defied explanation as it greedily sucked in every morsel the light around it and gave absolutely nothing back. Hyienna had read something about the

darkest material ever created, and how it fooled the eye by looking more like a hole in the world than a regular object. That was certainly the impression he got as he stared at the perfect, flawless nothingness held casually between the old woman's fingers. He rubbed his head as a distant tinnitus whine started up from a place, he couldn't quite pinpoint.

The strange cave dweller said nothing, merely cocked her head and watched.

"What is this? Who are you?" Hyienna asked suspiciously as he began to feel oddly nauseous, as though he'd just reached the crest of a giant rollercoaster and was about to hurtle headlong into the infinite darkness that hovered between the old woman's hands. Was it his imagination, or was the world itself slowly bleeding into the edges that impossible portable hole?

Hyienna eventually turned away. The whole thing, whatever it was, was just so damned...disturbing!

The woman carefully re-folded her portable tear in the cosmos and placed it back in the rucksack. "If there were a Fate called Redemption, then I would be her; at least as far as *you're* concerned. Although in truth I've earned a different name for myself over the years."

Hyienna didn't really hear what she said due to a strange and sourceless whining sound which made the whole world seem somehow more distant and less real. He tried to think about what he'd just seen but his mind refused to latch onto the idea and stubbornly wandered off into nothingness. Eventually he was able to repeat himself. "Who are you?"

The dishevelled hermit smiled sadly. "Just a clever fool who couldn't see the danger around her; or who just didn't *want* to. Now I'm breathing borrowed air and I can travel no further, but I can at least help *you* to reclaim a part of yourself."

"How can *you* help *me*?"

"You've been lost for a long time, Hyienna, but at last you've found your way again."

"By falling down a hole? I was damn lucky not to break my neck!"

"Quests are never meant to be easy, that's why there's always a dragon or an evil wizard waiting somewhere along the road."

Hyienna had heard enough, and he'd been right from the beginning. The woman was obviously nuts and he was getting the hell out while the getting was good, even if he did have to swim for it. He'd already decided he'd call social services, or the cops, or *someone* once he'd escaped. After all, it wasn't right; a woman down here all on her own, and she didn't look well either. With his mind made up, he finally stood with a renewed sense of purpose. "Look, I don't know what your angle is, but I'm out of here."

"It wasn't your fault."

Hyienna stopped and turned back. "Excuse me?"

Lost in the darkness, the old woman's eyes gleamed like polished stones as she stared at him intently. "The child, the boy. There is no blood on your hands and no stain on your soul, yet still you suffer. You have carried another's burden for far too long, and now that injustice has brought you to me."

Although part of him knew it was a bad idea, a larger and more powerful part of him knew full well that the woman's words were just too much of a coincidence. Sure, Hyienna was mindful of all those head-shrinking sessions where he'd unravelled what was real from what was in his head, but that that was why he knew the hole in the ground was real, the cave was real and the woman was real too...although he was far less certain about what she'd just stuffed into that small rucksack. Despite that strange and ominous doubt, he couldn't deny that the undisciplined thoughts in his head had brought him first to the lighthouse and next to this dark place, but surely *that* was all real too. "That's a pretty neat trick and I'm very impressed, but you were wrong about one thing; it was a little girl."

The woman frowned and tilted her head, seemingly confused. She rummaged in the pocket of her shabby coat and pulled out a tattered and dog-eared stack of what looked like tarot cards. She cut the pack once and turned over the top card before answering with a rasping chuckle. "No, it was a boy for sure, but you're wise to be cautious. Maybe you're not quite as hopeless as you look. Well, that would figure; after all, the greatest heroes never begin their trials as heroes. What would be the point of that?"

Hyienna picked up his chair and gently set it down on the other side of the makeshift table. "What's your name?"

"At last he asks. Just call me Moirae, that's the name you'll need for this journey."

Hyienna racked his brains, trying to remember where he'd heard that name before, although the answer eluded him. Instead he gestured around the cave once again. "What are you *doing* down here; hiding from something, someone?"

"You could put it that way, although both the Reaper and the Almighty found me long before I was called to this place."

"Called, how?"

She tapped the cards with a ragged fingernail. "The same way *you* were called, and for the same reason."

Hyienna jumped as a sharp digital beeping sound rudely disturbed the cool atmosphere inside the cave. He watched as Moirae rummaged among the debris on the floor, retrieving a cheap digital watch, a battered bottle of water and an equally battered packet of pills. She rapidly swallowed two of them, wiping her cracked lips with her sleeve. "Do you need help?"

"Too late for help now, and maybe too late for redemption as well. I suppose I'll find out soon enough." She paused, looking into the middle distance for a few seconds before she spoke again. "Do you know what the very worst of sins is?"

Hyienna was taken aback by the strange question, although he thought for a moment and answered just the same. "Murder I guess."

The old woman shuffled in her chair and took another sip of water before placing the battered deck of cards on the dirty makeshift table. "Many people say that, and they're all wrong. Sure, ending the life of another is something you'll have to answer for, but at least the repentant killer stands a *chance* of forgiveness. No, the very worst of sins is to carry the name of the Almighty in vain, or to put it another way, to use God's name to justify your own personal bullshit. There's no coming back from *that* one; the book says so."

“What are you trying to tell me?” Hyienna fought against a rising sense of destiny inside him, if *destiny* could really be called a human emotion.

If she'd heard him she didn't acknowledge his question. “I've committed nearly every sin you can imagine; violated nearly every commandment during my short time in this world. I've committed murder more than once and adultery more times than I can count. I've coveted just about everything I ever laid my greedy eyes on, and I made a ton of money and spread even more misery by bearing false witness. After all that, the only thing that *truly* terrifies me is that I did all those things in the name of a righteous cause, or at least I told myself that I did. You see, *that's* the sin that can never be forgiven. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't at the top of the ladder, but we all carried out the most grievous offences against both man and God in His own name. That's what I fear the most.”

Not being much of a student of theology, or much of a student of anything for that matter, Hyienna was at a loss. Sure, he had a pretty decent sense of right and wrong, but he knew nothing about mortal sin or any of that stuff, or whether any of it was truly real or even mattered. After thinking for a few seconds, he opted for a more practical approach. “Look, I can tell that you need some help, so that's what I'm going to do, whether you like it or not.”

She smiled a sad, winsome smile. “You're all the help I'll ever need. Besides, it's too late now and they cover their tracks well.”

“They?”

A short, bitter laugh escaped her lips. “Well, it's more of a he, really. Don't know if he's the Devil himself, but he sure as hell works for him. You see, that's his best trick, he persuades you to do his bidding from behind his cloak of righteousness. I guess that's why they call him the Deceiver.”

“Who, the Devil or the guy who works for him?”

“Take your pick, but at least I can draw some comfort from believing that he's just an evil man. That means he'll face his own same judgement sooner or later. If he's more than just a man then I'm well and truly damned, but I don't think so. Demons don't poison people any more than angels cure them; they leave all that stuff to mankind because it's not like we need their assistance to help or hurt each other. They know we're free to choose good or evil, so all they have to do is show us the way they favour.”

Hyienna shook his head, trying to clear it of the fog whirling around inside his brain. “Poison? Are you saying you've been poisoned?”

“I was poisoned a long time ago; first my mind, then my spirit and then my body. Like countless fools before me, I was only too eager to embrace the means of my own end. All that's left now is my soul, and I fear the Dark One will eat that soon enough was well.”

“You didn't answer my question. Are you trying to say that someone's poisoned you?”

“Who knows? It doesn't matter anyway, not now. All that matters is you're here at last.” She tapped the small rucksack with her foot. “Just make sure this gets to where it needs to go.”

Hyienna shook his head. “Look, I'm totally baffled by all of this. I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do with some weird looking blanket handed to me, no offence, by some strange old

woman living in a cave, dying in a cave, or whatever the hell it is you're *doing* in this cave. I don't understand any of it."

Moirae grunted as she leaned across and flipped over the top card of her tarot deck. "You soon will."

