

TITAN'S TEARS

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For my mother.

“For even Satan masquerades as an angel of light.”

2 Corinthians 11:14

PROLOGUE

Oregon

A newborn wailed in the arms of a sobbing young mother. Footprints marked the otherwise pristine snow. The cutting winter wind blew the woman's red scarf against her frostbit face as she trudged through knee-high snowpack. Under the dying light of the moon she continued, one step in front of the other. Wolves howled from the conifers beyond. She clutched her little one closer. The snow was getting deeper, up to her waist now. Her newborn wailed. She tried to shush the baby, but it was no use and now both of them were crying. Something rustled beyond the tree line, a lurking shadow. She wasn't used to being alone in the woods.

Whatever it was, it had been following them since she started at the trailhead. She tried to move faster but it was much harder moving now, every step was more exhausting than the last and the bite of the cold sapped what little strength she had. She knew she shouldn't have tried to make such a trek in her condition and she knew it was stupid to come out all this way by herself but she needed to do it—before anyone found out.

She took a few more steps and collapsed.

As she lay in the snow, the wind brought in the smell of woodsmoke. She was close. She groaned as she grabbed a nearby branch with one hand and climbed back to her wobbling feet. With her other hand she clutched her infant to her chest. She followed the scent until she came upon a lone forty-foot-tall belltower in the middle of the woods. Below it stood a timeworn hacienda with wooden shutters and a terracotta roof. A dull flickering yellow light filled one of hacienda's windows. It wasn't just a dream—it was real, and she had found it.

She stumbled to a wrought iron gate that led to an inner courtyard. She tried to lift the latch, but it was frozen. Crying out, she shook and pounded the gate. It didn't budge. She began to walk toward the other side of the compound in hopes of finding another way in. Then came a squeal. She looked back and noticed that the gate was now open.

She lurched her way into the courtyard and saw a wooden sign that read "Donations." Below the sign was a door. She opened it and walked inside. Only a single oil lamp illuminated the plain plaster walls and rough-cut timbers of the floors and ceilings. Halfway up the wall was a built-in shelf with a revolving cupboard atop it, a barrier between the worldly and the sacred. Next to the turnstile was a single brass bell with a long string attached.

She gazed at her infant one last time and began to place her on the shelf. As she let her child slip from her arms, she hesitated. She turned her head and tried not to look at her little girl but she couldn't help herself. Her breath came heavy and she started sobbing. Then she clenched her jaw hard and placed her little one on the shelf and slowly turned the revolving cupboard. She put her hand on the long string of the bell and held it for what felt like an eternity.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

She rang it.

Then she fled the hacienda and hobbled back down toward the trailhead, her tears frozen against the winter wind.

CHAPTER 1

BELLE

Kobuksville, Alaska

Modern Era: Post-Singularity

Belle was later told that a woman in a brown habit heard an impossible sound that night. The woman spied a thin winding trail of winter breath emanating from a bundle of cloth in the donation turnstile. As she drew nearer, she was surprised to see a baby girl.

Sister Maria lived in the remote Oregon monastery with her convent of off-the-grid Carmelites. Their dwelling was indistinguishable from the Spanish-style haciendas generations of Carmelites had called home for more than half a millennium. They lived a simple life of self-reliance and were typically found as far away from modern civilization as possible—but it seemed civilization had found them.

Of course, the convent couldn't keep the baby girl. It was said that Sister Maria had to be dragged away by the other sisters when the authorities came to pick baby Belle up. Belle would later learn that some considered Sister Maria to be a bit off her rocker. The nun often

talked of visions and foretelling dreams. She told the other sisters that Belle needed protection, that she had seen “something” in the child. She said she had seen God in her eyes, but the baby girl’s innocence had attracted a malevolent force, something dark, something lurking after her immortal soul.

Well, what else was a nun supposed to say?

All Belle knew was that she needed to get out her village or she was going to go stir crazy. She had been there ever since she began her self-rehabilitation. It had been a long and arduous struggle but now she wanted to get out of the town and hoped to find some work. Ideally as far away as possible. She kept applying for jobs, but no one was interested. She was stuck. Her memory was foggy these days and her troubled childhood was something she did her best to forget. Now she found her thirty-year-old-self living alone in a secluded Alaskan village, unemployed.

No roads led to Kobukville. The only way in or out was by the small airstrip just outside of the village. It wasn’t all bad. The surrounding landscape was a place of snowcapped peaks against swaths of pine-strewn glory along the winding Kobuk River. Salmon passed through streams as clear as glass, and moose and great herds of caribou roamed the ancient valleys.

Belle was a shy type, but she still considered herself a people person in her own way. She’d once had dreams of being an elementary teacher but her education consisted entirely of books. She didn’t have the expensive degrees and the certifications and the test results required for such a job, so her teaching career was just that—a dream. Eventually she found her niche working with children in a different way.

She used to make ends meet working as a nanny. Mostly she was in demand by parents of disabled children, but not always. Kids, what could she say? It was the type of work where in one moment she wanted to tear her hair out and in the next she realized she wouldn't have it any other way. Though in Kobuksville she was alone, completely and utterly alone.

She spent most of her days hiking, reading, or in counseling sessions with her psychiatrist, Dr. Musa, who encouraged her to enjoy the scenery, take it easy, and follow current events. He didn't live in the town but someplace far away so she had to interact with his hologram. This annoyed her. She would have preferred to talk to a person in the flesh instead of their live projection.

It just so happened that today was her regularly scheduled appointment. As Belle sipped her tea on her couch, Dr. Musa's figure, clipboard in hand, appeared in the chair across from her.

"How are you feeling, Belle?" he asked.

"Anxious," she said.

"Anxious? Why?"

"Why can't I visit my parents?"

"You will, you will, you just need to be patient."

"I've been patient for months. Why are you keeping me here?"

"I'm not keeping you anywhere."

"I talked to the pilot who comes once a week for deliveries. He refused to take me out of the village. When I asked him why he let others ride out with him but not me, he said that he had been given instructions not to let me leave."

"Did he say who these instructions were from?"

“No, he wouldn’t tell me.”

“And you’re implying that I have something to do with this pilot’s choice of passengers?”

“You’re the only person I talk to here. Granted, you’re not even really here.”

“Come on Belle, what motivation could I possibly have to keep you there? Think about it for a moment and then give me your honest answer.”

“Well, I don’t know exactly. It just seems like I’m trapped. There are no jobs willing to take me away, and I’ve applied all over the place. The stupid pilot won’t take me. I’ve hiked about twenty miles from this village in every direction and there is nothing but wilderness. Then there’s the village—it’s just so bizarre. Nobody here talks to me, and I just feel so isolated. I’m also anxious and depressed and I feel like I’ve lost something and I can’t find it. Whatever *it* is. Are you sure there isn’t something you’re not telling me? Are you hiding something?”

“Hiding something? I’m sorry to disappoint you, Belle, but you came to quiet Kobuksville to get well, remember?”

Belle rubbed her temples. “I don’t remember. I only know it doesn’t feel right to be here.”

“Anxiety is perfectly natural. Just relax and enjoy the beauty around you. That’s what you need to do right now, just relax. Everything you seek will come in good time. We’ll talk again soon.”

And that was that. Talk? She didn’t really talk with Dr. Musa, she was being psychoanalyzed. It wasn’t a two-way conversation. Naturally, when she asked about his personal life, he gave superficial answers or was coy or in some cases just outright avoided

them. One morning, she'd been so desperate for a real conversation she started mumbling to herself during breakfast. When she realized what she was doing, she clamped her mouth shut.

What she didn't tell her psychiatrist was that somehow, even though she couldn't explain it, she felt like she was being watched. She tore her accommodations apart one day looking for hidden cameras, but there were none. During her hikes in the forest she even studied some of the trees, searching for surveillance devices, but of course there was nothing but her paranoia. She had no proof, so what good would it be to say anything? Besides if anyone was watching her it was Dr. Musa. Then again maybe it was all in her head. She didn't know. She only knew she was tired and lonely and confused.

Yes, Kobuksville was peculiar. Very peculiar.

It was Sunday morning. Belle had gotten dressed in her finest clothes and left her quarters. The buildings she walked past looked like a collection of shipping containers with square holes for windows. Every building was a featureless box along the grid of gravel roads. Some of the boxes were metal, some were made of composites, others of wood.

As was her Sunday routine, she stepped inside the ruins of a Romanesque chapel just outside her remote mountain village. It was the only edifice left in that old village that had any semblance of character and she was its only parishioner. The windows were long gone, and green foliage and wildflowers grew on the inside. In the springtime the chapel was filled with a magnificent combination of yellow and magenta and white. Only a single wooden pew remained—her pew. She sat and prayed.

The isolation of the people matched the character of the town. They rarely strayed outdoors. Everyone in this place lived in their own little world. In fact, only a third of the population of the town was human. The rest were the townspeople's android companions. The bots looked human but too beautiful, with the predictable features exaggerated.

As she left the ruined chapel and headed back to her own nondescript accommodations, Belle saw a man in the middle of the gravel road. She saw him regularly, but like the other villagers he rarely spoke. Beside the man stood three bots of the female persuasion. On the opposite side of the gravel road was a woman with three bots of the male persuasion. The people were dressed for the cold mornings while the androids weren't wearing much of anything. The man and the woman looked at each other. Then they looked at Belle, who said hello and gave a weak wave.

They said nothing in response. The man and the woman went into separate quarters on opposite sides of the road with their bots in tow. Then Belle returned to her quarters, alone. Taking off her jacket, she realized that there was something else lacking about the village. It took her a while to put her finger on it—the laughter of children.

As she finished her morning coffee she received a call. It was strange, for she never got calls. A man by the name of Dominic appeared. He said he was representing the chief executive of the world's premier tech company, Eccleston Evolution.

"We'd like to fly you out, all expenses paid, to meet with our CEO—Sophia Eccleston. She has requested to meet with you about your job application."

"The reclusive inventor?"

"Yes."

"Who won the Nobel Prize?"

"Yes."

"And she wants to meet me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We found your resume, and we think you're a great fit."

Belle paced her quarters and wrung her hands together. It was finally the opportunity she had been waiting for. However, it all seemed too good to be true. She had sent hundreds of copies of her resume out months ago, and she knew she hadn't sent a single one to Eccleston Evolution. It was very curious.

"I don't understand. I'm not a tech person. I'm looking to be a nanny or governess or something like that. Are you sure you're not confusing me with somebody else?"

"I'm sure."

"Forgive me for asking, but why would the CEO bother to interview a nanny? Besides, everyone knows that Sophia doesn't have children."

"We happen to have a unique opportunity for your skill set. Though, you'll be required to sign a nondisclosure agreement and follow strict security protocols. Is that something you can do?"

"Security protocols?"

"We can explain that during the interview."

"Okay then, I suppose I don't see any problem with that."

"Excellent. The pay will, of course, be extremely competitive."

"That's all very good news. What kind of position is this exactly?"

"There will be a private jet arriving at your village tomorrow at noon to pick you up. We can discuss it then."

"I'm sorry, this is all very strange and abrupt."

"I'm aware of that, and you have my apologies. It's all for security reasons, I assure you. I hope you'll understand."

"I feel like I need some more time to think."

“Understandable. Of course, the plane will be there tomorrow at noon either way.
Either get on it, or don't. It's your choice. Thank you for your consideration. Goodbye now.”

The call ended.

CHAPTER 2

SOPHIA

Eccleston Campus, Alaska

Modern Era: Post-Singularity

Sophia Eccleston sat at the end of a long boardroom table. Her elbow was casually propped up on the arm of her black saddle leather chair. She was filled dread and a tinge of something else. Excitement, maybe — she liked a good fight. At the far opposite end of the table sat the chairman, Mr. Raymond Dearborn. On Sophia's left side sat her executives, facing a group of stern lawyers on the right. The lawyers were led by Mr. Chase Chamberlain, Esquire. He placed his interlaced fingers atop the table and did his best to feign a sigh of concern.

“Ms. Eccleston, as chief executive, you've had a fine run —” said Mr. Chamberlain.

“No, I've had and continue to have an outstanding run,” said Sophia.

“Well, ma'am, if we're being honest —”

“Lawyers are never honest, Mr. Chamberlain.”

Mr. Chamberlain licked his lips and smirked. “It’s time for you step down. The company, frankly speaking, isn’t in good financial shape. Our client—”

“The bank?”

“No. The private equity firm, Madurai Capit—”

“Same difference.”

“Ma’am, are you going continue interrupting, or should we just take this to court?”

“Not at all, please continue.”

The lawyer straightened his back and glared at her.

“We’ve offered an outstanding bid for Eccleston Evolution. Are you willing to accept, yes or no?”

“Of course not. My company isn’t for sale.”

“In that case, our client will demand, and win, billions for breach of contract. That’s not including the potential criminal charges you personally face—conspiracy, theft of funds, accounting fraud, and the list goes on. Of course, lest we forget, you’ve also kept proprietary treatments that are vital to my client’s health away from him. Yet, my client is forgiving. Too forgiving, in my opinion, and despite my protests, Madurai Capital is merely asking you to take your golden parachute and allow Mr. Ivanov to lead your wonderful company into the future and put the past behind him.”

“You mean the chief executive of Madurai Capital.”

“I mean your third-largest shareholder.”

“Unfortunately for him, he isn’t the first.”

“Not yet.”

“Not ever.”

“Mr. Ivanov has consistently ranked as one of the top business leaders in the world, and he will take very good care of Eccleston Evolution and its shareholders. As you know, your shareholders are already abuzz talking about the extremely generous tender offer we’ve made to purchase the company. Share prices are up, way up.”

“Of course. Out of curiosity, what share of the payout would go to your law firm?”

“Ma’am I don’t discuss confidential contracts between my firm and my client. In any case—”

The lawyer was interrupted by a knock at the boardroom doors. Sophia’s assistant, Dominic, helped himself in and placed a cup and saucer in front of her, then left as quickly as he came. Sophia held up the small porcelain cup of espresso. She closed her eyes and smelled it. Then she took a loud slurp. The legal team’s expression ranged from bemused to annoyed and—in the case of Mr. Chamberlain—angry. Sophia patted her mouth with a bloodred napkin. Then she smiled her usual wry smile.

“Did you know that river blindness is caused a curious species of coiled worm — *Onchocera volvulus*? They’re known to crawl through a victim’s skin and trigger an immune response, a terrible rash. Victims have been known to scratch themselves to death. Of course, from the parasite’s perspective it’s only doing what it needs to survive. So what can I say, some people imitate other lifeforms.”

“So you’d prefer the courtroom then?”

“Ah yes, the courts. Well, I suppose I could finally see how effective decades of my legalized bribes to our benevolent government officials has been.”

“Ma’am, I don’t think you appreciate consequences of your actions today. Trust me, campaign donations won’t help you.”

“If they’re not helpful, then why do people make them? No matter. What do you think, Raymond?”

Startled, the sleepy old chairman at the opposite end of the table opened his eyes and coughed. “Well, as always, I trust your judgment on this matter,” said Raymond.

“What do you make of Mr. Ivanov?” Sophia asked.

“Shrewd. Effective. Ambitious. Smooth talker.”

“So he’s fit to take the reins?”

“There would be much he’d have to learn. Our company is quite unique. Though I suppose it’s possible,” he said.

“Well then, Mr. Chamberlain, it seems I have some thinking to do.”

The lawyer glanced at his colleagues, nodded, and then tilted his chin up. “Ms. Eccleston, don’t take too long to come to a decision. My client has already been extremely patient.”

Mr. Chamberlain and his four colleagues stood up in unison and walked toward the door. As the lawyer put his hand on the door handle, Sophia swiveled toward him.

“Well, I certainly don’t want to make any rash decisions, now do I?”

The legal team left without responding.

Sophia and Mr. Dearborn left the boardroom soon after. As they walked the expansive granite halls adorned with embedded fossils of mammoths, Raymond hobbled along with his cane, pleading with her to slow down.

“Excuse me, Raymond, I need another.”

She stopped at a nearby espresso stand and pulled two shots. She handed a small white porcelain cup to him. They finished their espressos and put down their cups and continued walking.

“That went about as well as I expected,” Raymond said.

“If they had only demanded money, I might have considered their offer, but they want my whole company. I’d sooner die a slow and painful death.”

“I know you would. You’re a woman with a vision. After all these years I’ve known you, you’ve still got the fire.”

“Raymond?”

“Yes?”

“How strong is their case?”

“Very.”

“What are our chances of losing in court?”

“High.”

“Well then, I guess I’ll just have to beat the odds—as usual.”

“You don’t seem very concerned.”

“That’s because I have far bigger predators to worry about.”

CHAPTER 3

SETH

Port Auburn, Oregon

Modern Era: Post-Singularity

He stood over the maimed body and held up his blood-covered hands and studied them. He really was a bastard, wasn't he? His life wasn't supposed to turn out this way. He struggled to think back all those years ago, to figure out where his downward spiral began.

Thirty Years Earlier

Twenty miles per day Seth walked in the warehouse. The machine told him to pick. So he picked. The machine told him he was too slow. So he worked faster. Still the machine, the algorithm, the powers that be wanted more.

Pick those products. Ship them out.

Pick.

Pick.

Pick.

Shoppers are waiting.

Every day a new employee and every day a new termination. Most couldn't keep up with the machine and most were fired by the machine—but Seth wasn't most people. In the old days when he fell behind, a fat man wearing a reflective vest that said “coach” would follow him around and bark at him to go faster, faster, but he didn't blame the man. Deep down Seth was just happy the guy was eating well. Just another man doing his job, trying to make it. Besides, the “coach” was just taking orders from the machine, the data, the higher-ups. Or was it the higher-ups that were taking orders from the data? He didn't know. What he did know was that he couldn't blame the messenger.

Every afternoon, a sheet was put up on the wall. It listed how fast every employee picked products. Every afternoon, his name was at the bottom. So he pushed himself harder, faster.

Pick those products. Ship them out.

Pick.

Pick.

Pick.

Shoppers are waiting.

Until one day he made it to the top of that list—and stayed there unsurpassed. He remembered when he made it to the top. It was during a morning that was identical to all the other mornings. He had just completed his stretches at the usual morning huddle. His boss called him to the center of circle.

“Everyone, once again, I’m pleased to announce that this month’s stock picking champion, Seth Johnson.”

Yawns. Polite clapping.

He was good at his job.

Employees regularly murmured during lunch break that they were trapped in a corporate cult. There were three tribes. The true believers, the grudging toe-the-line types, and the heretics. The heretics didn’t last very long at The Company—the system—was designed to root them out. The toe-the-line types nodded along when wild-eyed supervisors chanted Company slogans to encourage them to work harder and give rousing speeches declaring war on rival companies. The true believers were an elite few—the Elect. They were people who shouted and cheered along with the supervisors. They’d laugh along with their dull jokes. Types that aimed to please. People who wanted to be part of something greater than themselves. Types who embraced the company religion.

Seth was a toe-the-line type.

He kept his mouth shut. He needed to accomplish his goal. There was an old house on the edge of town. The rundown manor was built of solid stone and sat on an acreage of weeds and wildflowers. The last remnants of a nearly extinct dynasty. If he just worked a little longer, a little harder, he could buy that dilapidated house before it was condemned to rubble.

Snow crunched under his feet. Timeworn chestnut trees loomed over an expansive estate. He stood before an old manor. Its gargoyles looking down upon him. The whole place had been built of stone in a bygone age of craftsmanship. The places where the windows once shone were now mostly empty. The interior beyond the stone facade had been gutted long ago. The

upper floors were rotted and only the fireplaces and their beautiful mantles remained. The slate roof had gaping holes in it. Even in its ruined state it remained the grandest home in that rural northwestern town.

There was a family name, carved in stone, above the doorway.

Johnson.

His earliest ancestors had come along the Oregon trail and settled in a log cabin that they built with their own hands. His great-great-grandparents were timber barons. They became wealthy and built a grand estate. They once owned a million acres of forest, which they tended to carefully. They always made sure to only take the minimum number of trees and move plot to plot in order to sustain the forest and thereby sustain their family. His great-grandparents were also successful timber barons, but his grandparents decided to go their own way. They didn't take care of the forest. They cut down too many trees to squeeze a quick profit. They liked a life of leisure. They liked to spend. His parents inherited no estate, no acres of prime woodland, only debts and worries. By the time Seth came around, there were only fading memories and an abandoned house, a monument of what once was.

So it was that the beautiful old stone house was slated for demolition.

In its place a gravel parking lot was planned.

It was a Saturday when he bid on the old house. In truth he was bidding on the land. The ruined house wasn't worth anything except to him. He brought everything he had, his life savings. The Stetson-wearing auctioneer cried out and up and up the price went. The townspeople told him he was crazy. It was true that he could have bought a decent house in town for less than it would cost to fix up the old manor. God knew he could never afford a house in a city or a suburb, and he was sure God knew that he had no desire to live in such a

place either. The townsfolk reminded him that his bid was way more than the land was worth. He had to admit that it was telling that none of the local farmers were bidding on it. What else could it be used for? Like many small American towns, his town had a net loss of residents, so there wasn't exactly demand for housing developments and shiny new condominiums.

The bidding stagnated. Then the last bidder backed out.

SOLD.

Most of his savings were gone, and now he was the proud owner of a ruined house. He brought a blue tarp and a sleeping bag and some jugs of water and he moved into that old house the same day.

Before his time at the warehouse, he had done carpentry and roofing work in the summers. He bought some secondhand tools and old books about woodworking, the way it used to be done. He bought timber. Lots of timber. Then he went to work.