

LIGHT

a Novel

Steve Dunn Hanson

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Book Cover by Steve Dunn Hanson

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A Conversation

I have a question.

Yes?

Are there other universes?

Yes.

Are there intelligent beings there?

Yes.

Do they interface with us?

Yes.

How? Why?

You'll know when you're ready.

Chapter 1

Tav and Nadia

“Are you and Mommy ever gonna live in the same house?”

Alef Welch put his hamburger down and wiped his mouth. For a five-year-old, his daughter came up with doozies. He glanced at his watch. “Eat your hamburger. She’ll be here any minute.”

Nadia grabbed her chin like she’d seen Alef do when he was thinking. “That’s not an answer, Daddy.”

“Yeah, but you need to ask your mom about that, not me. Eat your hamburger.”

Nadia’s dimples formed as she pulled her lips back into a grin. “You never answer hard questions.” She picked up her hamburger and took a big bite. Her tight black curls, a remnant of her African heritage so many generations back, hung in strings over the side of her face. She didn’t bother to push them back, just ate through them. Her hair wouldn’t stay in place without a clip, and she’d just take those out. But she was going to be a beauty. Just like her mother. Her skin was a shade or two lighter, more warm beige than honey, but she was her mother’s clone.

For a moment they ate, then Nadia spoke in the middle of a chew. “How come I can only come here Tuesday and Thursday? I like McDonald’s food.”

Alef laughed. “McDonald’s? That’s why you like to come to my

house?”

“Yeah.” She guzzled her drink. “I like to be with you too. You don’t yell so much now.”

“Uh, thanks, I think. But what if we didn’t get McDonald’s food?”

Nadia put her hand to her chin. “I’d have to think about that.” Alef laughed, and she slurped the last of her drink. “Can we play Xbox?”

“Next time.” Alef stood to clear the table. “Your mom’s...” The doorbell rang. “There she is. Get your coat.”

Alef went to the door and opened it. “Hi, Tav, c’mon in.” Tavia’s three-inch heels brought the top of her head just an inch or two below Alef’s. At 5’7” in stocking feet Alef thought she was the perfect height. Alef motioned to the sofa. “Nadia’s gone to get her coat. Wanna sit?”

Before she could respond, their daughter ran in with her coat mostly on. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi Sweetheart. Kiss your dad. Let’s go.”

“Bye, Daddy.” She pecked him on the cheek and ran out the door.

Tavia glanced at Alef. He had a wistful look. “You okay? Your business still booming?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. A little stressed. We move to our new facility in three weeks. It’s been a ride.” He looked into his former wife’s soft chestnut eyes. For a second, she held his gaze. Was there still a spark there? Did he want there to be? The corner of his mouth turned up. “Thanks for asking.”

“Hope it goes well for you.” She gave him a quick smile and left.

He closed the door and went to the window. He pushed the drape aside a little to watch them get in her car. A year ago that was *his* and Tav’s car. She drove away, and he muttered, “It was *her* fault.”

He glanced around the room. There was nothing inviting about the hodgepodge of cheap furniture he had bought for his living room. A gray fabric tufted loveseat with two matching chairs sur-

rounded an oval birchwood coffee table in the center of the room. Two large framed pictures hung on the wall. One of Monterey Bay to remind him of California where he used to live, and one of the Sawtooth mountains near where he lived now.

He went to the kitchen and cleared the table of the McDonald's stuff. That's all Nadia ever wanted. At least he didn't have to cook for her when she came over. He didn't have time for that anyway. As it was, he was sacrificing to spend two evenings a week and a part of every weekend with her. He was trying to be a good father, but his business... Yeah. His business.

When they divorced, Alef gave Tav their house, and he moved into a small apartment. Four months ago, with business thriving, he rented the upscale home he was in now so Nadia could have her own bedroom when she came. If she ever needed one. So far, she never stayed overnight. He also increased his already generous child support to Tav. Alimony wasn't part of their divorce settlement since she was a high school counselor with excellent benefits. He wanted to be generous, though in his mind, she was the one who wrecked their marriage.

He went to his study and woke his computer. His screen saver was a collage of pictures of Nadia with a few of Tav as well. It was the same one he had when Tav left him a year ago. He didn't know why he hadn't updated it or at least removed the pictures of her. He stared at the one with her in her blue-green sweater and her chin on her fist. His all-time favorite. Her let's get to know each other look always melted him, and her high cheek bones and full lips perfectly framed her slightly flared nose. Nadia had her mother's thick black hair, but Tav used a straightener and softener on hers. Alef chuckled. "And a brush."

It was a year ago. Almost exactly. And gazing at Tav's picture now brought back the memory.



Alef bit into the cinnamon roll and gulped down his coffee. He glanced at the chrome digital clock on the kitchen counter. 6:47 AM. “Running late,” he said. He left his breakfast unfinished and headed for the door.

“We need to talk,” Tav said. “This’s getting old.” Her lips were tight, her face drawn.

“C’mon. Not again, Tav. I’ve got enough to worry about without you complaining.”

Tav glared at him. “If you don’t want to be around your family, why’d you even marry me? Why’d we have Nadia?”

“Drop it!” he demanded. “Thanks for starting my day off so good!” He grabbed his briefcase and headed for the door. “I’m doing this for you guys. Be supportive for once.”

“Right. Fourteen to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week at your business? Thanks!” Then, with obvious hurt, she implored, “Your partners aren’t married. Nadia needs a father! I need a husband!”

He left.

That evening, he quietly opened the door to his home and glanced at his watch. Three minutes after midnight. He hung his coat in the hall closet and walked to the kitchen. Sometimes Tav had a snack waiting for him. Nothing there tonight. He shrugged. She’d been in a mood. She’d get over it. She always did. He poured himself a glass of milk and dumped a couple of Oreos out of their package. He gobbled them down, drank his milk, and put the glass in the dishwasher. That was his supper. He went upstairs and peeked into Nadia’s bedroom. She wasn’t there. The bed hadn’t been slept in. Strange. His and Tav’s bedroom door was open, and he walked in. No one there.

“Tav?” No answer. “Nadia?” Silence. His anger pushed his blood

up into his face, and he swore. “Where’d she go without telling me!”

Then he saw the note on the bed.

You’re married to your work. You want to be by yourself, so we’ll let you. This isn’t just a threat this time. We won’t be coming back. I’ll be in touch.

Alef stared at it, then crumpled it and threw it on the bed. “You can’t do this to me!” he yelled. For a long moment he glared at the crushed note then pushed his head into his hands.

His marriage was over.



Alef tapped his fingers on his desk. Why did he keep replaying that memory? Most of the time now he wouldn’t let himself get angry at her for walking out on him. His impossible work load at his company helped keep that at bay. And her leaving was a whole year ago too.

“Time heals, or whatever,” he grumbled.

Their relationship was pretty good now. She was definitely more relaxed around him, and without the pressure he was always feeling from her the last months of their marriage, he was in more control of his temper. Temper? What was it Nadia said? Something about him not yelling so much? He shrugged and looked at Tav’s picture on his computer screen.

“Wonder if she’s dating anybody?”

A stupid question. How could somebody who looked like that and was as cool as she was, not have guys swarming all over. Maybe she *was* getting serious with somebody. He wouldn’t know. He sure wasn’t getting serious with anyone. His business partner, Eli, didn’t date much either. Rand, his other partner, did, and he was constantly trying to fix Alef up. Then he thought about Belinda their marketing

director. She was a looker and super cool and maybe... He grunted. Tav was probably right. He was married to his work.

“Better get back to my bride,” he grouched, and pulled up the artificial intelligence model he’d been working on. He smiled to himself as he thought of the extraordinary machine learning algorithms Eli was developing for what he claimed would be the world’s first god computer. What Alef was doing was state-of-the-art, but what Eli was doing... Well, Alef had neither the brains nor the desire to joust with Eli’s Don Quixote windmill, but he was the first to admit the sophistication of Eli’s work was mindboggling. As president, Alef focused his time and energy on enhancing and promoting his company’s already leading-the-pack products. He was good at that. That’s all he had time for anyway, and that’s what he was doing tonight.

Three hours later, and twice that many cups of coffee, he put his computer to sleep and headed to bed.

Then the dream.

Chapter 2

The Dreams

Rand smirked. “You say that was your dad’s dad?”

“Yeah.”

“And he was a professor at Caltech?”

“Yeah. Behavioral economics. At least thirty-five years, I think.”

“How long’s he been dead?”

Alef shrugged. “Seventeen years. Give or take.” He regretted saying anything about his dream last night to Rand.

Rand laughed and dropped his report on Alef’s desk. “And all this eminent professor at Caltech said in your dream was, ‘You wanna trade hair?’”

“Yeah. That’s what he always said to me when I was a kid. It was his joke.”

“Was he bald?”

“Mostly. What he had was almost white. It was his joke.”

“Weird. Your grandpa died seventeen years ago, so you were what, fourteen or fifteen?”

“Yeah.”

“And you never had that dream before?”

“Never had any dream about him before.”

“Maybe you have. Just don’t remember.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Gotta get back to work.”

Alef’s brownish blonde hair was carefully combed to look un-

combed, and Rand gaped at it. “You look anything like your grandpa?”

“My grandma and his siblings said I did. I’ve only seen one or two pictures of him when he was about my age now. His hair’s about the same color but he slicked it down, and my eyes are clear blue like his. My jaw’s a little squarer than his maybe, but we’re both about six foot.”

“You’d look good bald,” Rand said as his lips formed an almost grin. “I mean, sans the white stuff.”

Alef rolled his eyes, and Rand left. He touched the report on his desk then leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling. The 17-year-old memory that had gripped him since he had the dream last night took hold again.



Alef sat in his grandpa’s big rocker, his hand rubbing the maroon velvet upholstery on its arms. That’s what his grandpa always did, and the tuft was almost worn off.

“You okay, Alef?” Aunt Selma reached her hand over and patted his. Even though she was his grandpa’s sister, she treated him like he was her grandson. Alef liked that.

He nodded but didn’t look at her. He didn’t want to start bawling again. He and his parents got into LAX from Denver three hours ago. His mother said they would stay there in Pasadena until the funeral. His grandpa had pancreatic cancer, but Alef thought things were going okay. Then his grandma called them yesterday to tell them his grandpa had deteriorated fast. The doctor said he only had another couple of days.

When they arrived, Alef went into his grandpa’s bedroom with his parents. Big mistake. He looked like he was already dead. Just

bones with yellow skin hanging on them. Alef lost it. He went back to his grandpa's chair in the living room and kept telling himself that teenage boys don't cry. For all the good that did. His sobbing stopped, but he left his arm over his eyes. He kept thinking about what a good grandpa he had.

All those funny stories he told about when he was a kid and sometimes even far out stuff like different universes and what might be there. Alef liked that his grandpa talked to him like he was grown up. Almost like he was a peer. And he'd listen to Alef's teenage junk. Alef was always complaining about something. Last time he was here he told his grandpa about his calculus teacher who mumbled and Jolene who avoided him when she found out he might like her.

His grandpa just laughed. "Don't let it grab you, Alef. It'll be over before you can blink twice." How many times had he said that?

This won't be over before I can blink twice! The thought jammed into his mind. *Grandpa's gonna be dead!* His dam burst again. Aunt Selma didn't say anything but gave him a handful of tissues. She was cool.

"Alef?" His grandmother had come into the living room. "Your grandpa's awake. He wants to see you. You feel up to talking to him?"

Alef's body shook a little, and he blew his nose. Aunt Selma squeezed his arm, and he slid out of the chair. Tears started again, and he reached back and picked up the tissues.

"Go ahead and go in," Grandma said kindly. "Nobody's there right now."

He walked down the hall to the bedroom. The door was open, and he stopped and wiped his eyes. He didn't want his grandpa to see him cry. He shoved on a smile and went in. His grandfather was propped up on his pillows, and he turned his head to face Alef. He pointed to the chair by his bed, but Alef stayed standing.

"Sorry ya got this, Grandpa." Alef didn't know what else to say,

and he tried not to look at him. He didn't want his emotions to swamp him again. The grandfather he knew was robust with mostly tight, pink skin, not the sallow apparition that was on the bed in front of him.

"Hey, it's just one of a bunch of things that'll get us out of this experience we call life." His grandpa's voice was raspy, soft. "Eighty years around here is long enough, don't you think?" His pleasant look was an obvious effort. "How you're doing is what I want to know."

Alef shrugged, then stammered, "Okay. I guess." He glanced at his grandfather and started to cry.

"Hey, it's okay, Alef. It's okay."

"Thought they had a cure for cancer," Alef blurted. He tried to squelch a sob, but it pushed out.

"Apparently this one got by 'em, huh?" His grandpa kept his composure. "It really is okay, Alef. I just don't want you to..." He stopped and gazed at the foot of his bed.

Alef watched his grandpa stare at nothing. "Uh, you alright Grandpa?"

His grandfather's face seemed to brighten, but he stayed silent. Then he slowly turned toward Alef. "You aren't the only one in this room with me," he said like it was an afterthought.

Alef stared at the empty space at the end of the bed. His grandpa was hallucinating. Or was he? Alef faced him, and his grandpa met Alef's look with his own unwavering one.

"When the time is right, we'll discuss this," his grandpa said quietly. Then with an almost impish look, he reached out and took Alef's hand. "You know this hair trading thing?"

Alef's face went blank. What kind of a question was that at a time like this?

"You know this hair trading thing?" he repeated.

“Yeah. But I... I don’t understand.”

“Remember it.” His grandpa could not have been more serious. He let go of Alef’s hand and weakly patted it. “Go get your grandmother.”

Alef left the room and told his grandmother to go in. He sat in his grandfather’s chair again and closed his eyes. In less than an hour, everyone rushed to his grandpa’s room.

He was dead.



Alef shook off the memory and turned his chair to face his computer. On the screen was a stylized picture of one of the jagged peaks of the Sawtooth Mountains near the industrial complex where his Boise office was. It was the logo for their company, Sawtooth ML, LLC. They were just one of a zillion start-ups in the machine learning arena, but they were beginning to make some noise.

He glanced around at the blank non-descript beige walls of his office. He was always going to hang some pictures but never got around to it. He’d been surrounded by these walls for over two years. That’s when he, Rand, and Eli began their company. What little money they had, they spent on three quantum computers and non-exclusive artificial intelligence (AI) software. Having old used blah desks didn’t matter. Knock on wood, that was all about to change. Business was humming, and in three weeks they’d move into a suite of offices that would make a statement about the success they were starting to see.

Alef picked up Rand’s folder and opened it. Last month’s sales. He already knew what they were. They needed to add two more programmers and another IT systems operator. That would have to wait until their move though. There wasn’t a square inch of spare space

where they were now. They were growing. No, they were exploding! He tried to digest Rand's figures, but his mind wasn't ready to let go of his grandpa and last night's dream.

"You want to trade hair?" was all his grandpa said in the dream. It was so real it was unreal. Seeing his grandpa seemed completely natural. Not the grandpa he saw dying, but a grandpa that was full of life. There was an ageless quality to him, and there was certainly no reason for the grandpa in his dream to trade anybody hair. He had a headful of it, and it was light brown with a tinge of gray. His trading hair question now made no sense. Why would his grandpa even ask it? In the dream, he was kind of smiling, but his eyes seemed to bore into Alef's. Like there was something more to his words than just words.

"But why was that all he said?" Alef mumbled. His mind responded. *Because that's the question Grandpa told you to remember, idiot. That's why the nutty dream.* Then from nowhere popped the question he hadn't thought about forever. *Who did his grandpa think he saw at the foot of his bed?*

It had been a long day, and by the time he got home, it was nearly midnight. He put a frozen meal in the microwave and went to his bedroom and got into his pajamas. He made himself a blueberry smoothie then sat at his breakfast bar and ate. Getting ready for the Sawtooth move just added to his load. Work was becoming a grind. Hopefully, when they got settled in their new offices and brought on the additional help they were planning, he would have a more normal schedule. Whatever that was. Maybe he would even have some time to do some hiking and biking that he'd missed doing since before his divorce. And maybe he could spend more time with Nadia. She was growing too fast.

He finished his meal and cleaned up. He did his toiletries and got in bed. He had to be at the office early tomorrow and needed at least

some sleep. He set his alarm for 5:30 AM then thought again about his weird dream last night. He was hiking by himself in the nearby mountains when his grandpa showed up out of nowhere and asked that ridiculous question about trading Alef hair. That was it. The dream ended. Alef woke up, laughed at his stupid dream, and went back to sleep.

Tonight, he was too tired to think about it anymore. To think about anything. He closed his eyes, and in less than a minute was zonked and dreaming.

And there was his grandfather. Again.

This time they were in his grandpa's oak-paneled office with two walls full of books and a plush off-white carpet on the floor. His grandpa was sitting in his old rocking chair near a large lattice window that bathed him in an ethereal light. He beckoned Alef to sit on the large footstool in front of the rocker. Alef did and looked at his grandfather expectantly. There was no offer to shake hands or embrace. For some reason, Alef just understood that that wouldn't or couldn't happen.

He knew he was in a dream, but the reality of it bespoke something beyond that. What he *was* certain of, he would wake up and whatever this was, would be gone.

His grandfather spoke. "Do you have any questions, Alef?"

He did. "In my dream last night, why did you ask me that ridiculous thing about trading hair?"

"So, you would know that it was me. Not a deceiver."

"A deceiver? Who? What?"

His grandpa's smile was his only answer. "Do you have another question?"

"Uh, yeah," Alef stammered. "When... You know, when you were in that bed and you were, you know, dying, and you said there was somebody else besides me in the room and I couldn't see them? Uh,

who was it?”

“My grandfather, Malachi Welch. I was named after him.”

“Your grandfather? He was dead. Weren’t you just imagining he was there?”

“Are you imagining our conversation now?”

An implication of what was happening here grabbed Alef, and he began to shiver. “Uh, if your grandpa visited you when you were dying and uh...you’re visiting me now, does that mean... Uh, am I dying, Grandpa?”

“Are you?”

His grandfather’s eyes reached into Alef’s and stirred something that Alef had never felt before. An awareness? Maybe. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation. It was as though something inside him was beginning to open. To expand. Like he was becoming conscious of something he already knew. Something as familiar to him as his grandfather’s office he was now in. As familiar as his grandpa’s chair.

For a moment his grandfather silently rocked, his eyes fastened on Alef. “I have another question,” he finally said. “We’ll talk about your answers when I return.” He raised an eyebrow. “*If* I return.” Then, with a piercing look, he asked, “Who are you, Alef?”

The whole scene winked out, and Alef woke with a start. His mouth felt like he’d eaten a bunch of dry crackers . He reached for his water bottle on the stand next to him. It was empty. He slid out of bed and went to the bathroom and filled it up. He drank most of the water, filled it up again, then went back to his bed and laid down. “What a dream!” he muttered. He felt a tremble. “A dream!” he said loudly. “Just a dream. That’s all. Just like last night.”

Maybe so, but sleep fled him. The intensity of his grandfather’s eyes and his *Who are you, Alef question* roiled his mind. Then his grandfather’s other jarring implied question shoved that one aside. “Are you dying?”

Alef reactively felt his pulse. *Stupid*. Of course, it was there...but it was heavy and fast. Okay. So, he was a little anxious. He laughed at his paranoia. Other than routine physicals, he hadn't seen a doctor since he fell off his skateboard and cracked his knee the year after his grandpa died. He was as healthy as a... As a what? His grandfather's questions would not go away.

Chapter 3

Omnimach

Alef's intercom buzzed. It was Rand. "Got something the three of us need to talk about."

"Sure. When?" Alef said.

"Now. I'll get Eli, and we'll come to your office."

"About our move?"

"Sort of. See you in a minute."

"Okay."

Alef glanced out his small office window. Besides a couple of dying shrubs that were probably there when the industrial park they officed in was built at least 50 years ago, his view consisted of boring buildings on the other side of the complex with a pocked parking lot in between. In two weeks, this would be a memory. Sawtooth would be in a new brick facility sitting on a slight rise near a copse of maple, Douglas fir, and spruce. For Alef, that couldn't come fast enough.

He turned back to his computer, but his mind didn't. It had been a week since his last dream of his grandfather. He had plenty of questions he would ask him now, if he ever appeared in a dream again. Like this dying business. That had gnawed on him all week. Of course, he wasn't dying. He couldn't be in better health. Sure, maybe a little high blood pressure from his anxiety about their upcoming move and his lack of exercise given how busy he'd been. But his weight was right on. He was eating good. He felt good. No pain.

No aches. So, c'mon. He had a thirty-two-year-old body for heaven's sake. He let out a long breath. *Just a dream, idiot. Stop hassling about it.*

His grandfather's other question also absorbed him. "Who are you, Alef?" When he mulled it over during the week, a litany of surfacy answers popped up. Like what he looked like and what he'd accomplished. He was smart. That was a given. Number one in his software engineering graduate class at USC didn't come by luck, and as the very young president of Sawtooth, he led this start up to its near explosive stage. But all this stuff was skirting around his grandpa's actual question.

Who was he? Really?

He had avoided considering that Tav and Nadia were part of that answer. As he thought about it now though, he couldn't deny that his relationship with them *was* defining him. Or was who he was defining their relationship?

And his mind-debate began.

Tav crashed our marriage, not me. She's the one who walked out!

He shifted uncomfortably as an opposing thought raised itself.

And who ignored his wife days and weeks at a time? Who always broke promises to do things with her and Nadia?

That was easily answered.

Yeah? Well, I was getting my business going. It's always been for them. Why wasn't she more supportive?

His mind would not let him off.

C'mon, Alef. You were doing it for you. They were just in the way. You wanna be the next Bill Gates.

Now he was defensive.

Hey, I loved them. I was trying to do what was best for them.

Yeah? Like yelling at Tav when she pleaded with you to spend more time with them? Like giving her the silent treatment for hours and days

at a time?

Hey, that's not fair! I'm working eighty-ninety-hundred hours a week or more. You can't expect me to be on top of my emotional game all the time!

Right. And being with Nadia a couple of hours a week now, if it's convenient for you, is being a good father? Who are you Alef?

The question slapped him in the face. Was he a dolt for losing his family? Wasn't he at least part of the cause? Was he *the* cause? His common sense tried to take over again.

How could I accomplish what I did with Sawtooth without my huge sacrifice over the last two years?

Your sacrifice? What about Tav's and Nadia's sacrifice? Who are you, Alef?

Whatever was stirring up his mind was doing a good job and wouldn't leave. Okay. Yeah. He needed to make some changes. Like spending more time with Nadia now that Sawtooth was heading right. He could take the time to be a better father. And Tav? Should he apologize after all this time? He'd have to think about that one. Maybe he should at least invite her to do some things with Nadia and him. He groaned at that thought as he imagined her eyes rolling.

There was another question that hung. One he had struggled with from the moment Tav left him.

Was he still in love with her?

He wasn't ready to deal with that one. Not yet.

His thoughts turned to something a little more comfortable. Sawtooth. It would be an exaggeration to say that his company was the leader in the conversational AI industry. They were only two years out of the chute. But given their focus on research and development and the minds of the three that were its brains, it wouldn't be a stretch to see that bigtime financing could push this young company to the top.

He, Rand Elton, and Eli Kao had been employees at Omnimach, a Silicon Valley world leader in machine learning apps. That's where they met. All three had advanced degrees. His in software engineering, and Rand's and Eli's in computer science. But at Omnimach they were relegated to nuts-and-bolts stuff that would generate immediate maximum profit for the company. Their salaries and benefits were good. Their chances for advancement were not. And since none of them were part of research and development there, their work time was spent on customizing apps for Omnimach customers.

All three had breakout ideas focused on conversational AI and developing intelligent virtual agents. In other words, computers that respond to customer online or telephone requests. For over a year, while employed by Omnimach, Alef and his partners, on their own time, commiserated on developing underlying software for AI that was deep ML, an artificial neural network that mirrored or exceeded human performance. They were particularly careful to never work on Omnimach time or to use Omnimach computers or proprietary software.

When they broke with Omnimach two years ago, their non-disclosure clause in their employment agreements was not a problem. They hired an attorney to look it over, and she gave them the green light with what they were doing. Non-compete agreements were not legal in California, but they set up their company in out-of-the-way Boise, Idaho just to be safe. Boise was a wise choice. A mini-Silicon Valley with a spectacular outdoor setting and peace and quiet.

They started their company and, within six months, they were ready with their initial product. It was a potential gamechanger. Their conversational AI took intelligent virtual agents to a new level. They could carry on informed dialogue with a customer, either online or on the telephone, and process and act upon virtually any request.

And within a year, Sawtooth, or rather Eli, was on the verge of creating the unthinkable. A computer that would have the power of a god.

“Ready?” Rand said, as he and Eli came into Alef’s office. “Want to bounce something off you.”

That jarred Alef out of his thoughts, and he motioned to the chairs sitting in front of his desk. If he could feel inferior to anyone, it would be Rand. Rand was the proverbial all-American, and Rand knew it. His thick, loosely combed light auburn hair accentuated eyes that gleamed like blue diamonds. His chiseled features and athlete’s body were model-worthy. It didn’t hurt that he was personable and very bright. He could be with about any woman he wanted and changed partners like he was in a mixer dance. And he was sometimes, no, most of the time, a nearly unbearable egotist. Maybe those characteristics made him the crackerjack marketing VP that he was for Sawtooth.

On the other hand, Eli’s idea of the perfect date was spending the evening on his quantum computer. He was multilingual in programming languages from JavaScript to QCL (Quantum Computer Language) and was the operations and research VP for the company. There was nothing flamboyant about him. He was steady as a rock but carried the temper of a constipated grizzly. He was particularly challenged putting up with those not in his brain-class. Few were.

Eli’s research brain focused on deep learning models that spelled power and money. Those two objectives seemed to be his near obsession lately. His Chinese American features were pleasant enough and were set off by dated horn rimmed glasses. His shoulders had a slight slump from his computer slouching, and his slender body reflected its lack of exercise.

“What’ve you got?” Alef asked as they sat down. They always came to his office because he was the president. In their new facility,

they would have a conference room. Alef was adept at anything and everything dealing with computers, but he also had exceptional organizational skills and a unique ability to make discerning and timely decisions. That's why he was president.

Rand spoke. "Got an interesting call today from Elaine Pritchard. Remember her?"

"I'm not sure," Alef answered. "Wasn't she a big fish with Omnimach?"

"Yeah. Executive assistant to the CEO, Deepa Coates."

"And you got a call from her? How do you know her?"

Rand smirked. "You really need to ask?"

Alef just shook his head. "I'm assuming her call was something more than personal."

"Yeah. More than personal. It was an exploratory call. She was speaking for her boss. She said Omnimach was looking to expand in conversational AI apps and would be interested in talking with us."

"They want to do something together with us?" Alef asked.

"I hope they want to invest in us!" Eli exclaimed. "We're doing great, but what we could do with a cash cow!"

Rand shrugged. "She didn't specifically say what their interest was. Just wanted to know if we'd talk to them."

Alef looked around at his spartan surroundings and thought of the paneled office he would be in within two weeks. "A year ago, I might've been interested, but given where we are now, being independent sure feels good. What do you guys think?" He pointed a hand to Eli.

"I'm thinking of the kind of resources that might open to us," Eli said. "We're on the verge of something completely unprecedented with our deep learning models. We're going to need a ton of money and the kind of equipment we can't afford for a long time to get where we want to go. I say let's talk to them."

“You, Rand?” Alef said.

“I agree with Eli. If we could work out something acceptable that could open the door to their mega client base for our products, we could all get very rich very fast.”

Alef put his fingers together. “I guess it won’t hurt to talk. It’s got to be after our move though. None of us has the time to spend on anything but that and our business until we get settled. Agreed?”

Rand and Eli nodded and stood up. Eli went out the door, but Rand came back and with a smirk said, “Had any more hair trading dreams?”

Alef didn’t laugh. “Not lately.” He hid the more than touch of annoyance he felt. Was he taking the dream more seriously now that he had the second one?

Rand cleared his throat. “Uh, Tav’s probably already told you, but if she hasn’t, just wanted you to know. We’ve been seeing each other.” His face took on a playful look. “Hope your hair dreams are over before you go bald.” He turned and left.

Alef sat stunned as loathing grabbed every cell of his body, and a six-year-old memory came crashing down.



“**Y**ou’re marrying Tav?” Rand exclaimed as his countenance darkened. “I guess you think congratulations are in order?” Congratulations was not in his voice or his eyes. “When you going to do this?”

Alef was taken back by his stark disapproval. “Uh, we’re looking at the beginning of summer.”

Rand’s look hardened. “Guess all’s fair in love and war, huh?” He glared at Alef. “Never should have introduced her to you.” He swore. “Wouldn’t have if I had any suspicion you were going to rob me of

my girl.”

Alef returned his glare. “Rob you of your girl? She hasn’t been on a date with you forever. Her choice. You don’t own her or anybody. He turned to walk away and chastised himself. *Stupid to say anything to that blowhard.*

“This isn’t over!” Rand threatened. “You better be watching.”



Alef shoved the memory out and stood up. That was a long time ago. Rand had changed. So had he. Yet... Alef gave an acid sigh. “I’ll take your advice,” he muttered. “I *will* be watching.”

Chapter 4

What Might Have Been

“C’mon. How many times have we had this discussion?” Alef’s voice carried a bite.

“Doesn’t matter.” Eli stayed facing his computer. “We’re there. Or almost there. The future’s now. I’m banking on it.”

“Let’s bank on keeping Sawtooth on a roll,” Alef said.

Eli turned and scowled. “That’s a given! But if you think I’m going to sit here and let somebody else...” He pursed his lips. “All I need is time. If I had access to a million-qubit quantum computer like Omnimach has, I could...” His eyes widened. “I know how to do this, Alef! We’re already knocking on the door of immortality. Look at what they’ve done in bionics. With a computer like Omnimach’s, I could put *us* over the top.” He paused, a far-off look in his eyes. “I could implant in me the entire knowledge of the universe. I’d be like a...”

“In you?” Alef interrupted with undisguised concern.

“Uh, you know, uh, I mean in anyone. Uh, anyone who’s qualified that is.”

“And who determines who’s qualified?”

Eli’s eyes were ablaze. “Whoever creates the freaking program to do it, of course!” He swung back to his computer.

Alef glanced around Eli’s paneled office with its textured light gray drapes on the two windows and the three 500 qubit quantum

computers on the new oak credenza behind his matching oversized desk. Alef's own office was at least comparable, and a corner of his mouth lifted as he mentally compared this to the not much more than closets that were Sawtooth's home for the last two years. They moved into their new facility just over two weeks ago and were still marveling at the difference.

Alef rubbed the top of the upholstered guest chair in front of Eli's desk and gave a grunt of satisfaction. "Might be a while before we can afford anything like a million-qubit machine, but we're doing just fine."

Eli spun around, a trace of concern in his eyes. "Uh, you're still planning on going to Omnimach next week, aren't you?"

"Yeah. We'll see what they say." He headed for the door. "I'm leaving for the day. See you tomorrow."

Eli glanced at his watch. "Four o'clock? What's getting you out of here before midnight?"

"Nadia. Haven't been spending the time with her I want to. I've got some making up to do."

Alef drove to his former home that was Tav's now. It was a modest, not quite townhouse in a well-kept neighborhood. Eight feet separated each of the five-look-alike beige stucco two-story homes that faced a small community park with a kid's playground across the street. The park was why he and Tav bought this place so Nadia would have a neat place to play. He parked in front of the house and for a moment just sat. The house was new when they bought it, and it still looked new. He was going to plant rose bushes to frame the walkway to the front porch when he lived here but never had the time. He smirked. Never *took* the time. He could have done that. Just a couple of hours. Quick trip to the nursery. Dig some holes... He closed his eyes as his mind took him back to when they moved into this home.



Tav punched their old lumpy couch. “At least we’ve got our own *new* home now.” She put her arms around Alef, and that evolved quickly into something more passionate.

“I wanna see my bedroom,” a shrill voice yelled, and three-year-old Nadia pounded on their legs.

“Bad timing, kid,” Alef muttered with a grin and picked Nadia up.

“Well, let’s go take a look then,” Tav said.

She had painted the small bedroom a light pink and stenciled Winnie the Pooh characters on the walls. They had splurged on a white sleigh bed now that Nadia was out of a crib and bought her a matching dresser. A white-pink comforter covered the bed with Nadia’s Raggedy Ann doll, Molly, sitting smugly on top.

“Yes! Yes!” Nadia screamed and wiggled free from Alef. She ran to her bed, climbed up on it, and started to jump.

“No jumping on your new bed!” Tav warned with mock severity. “That bed’s got to last you a long time.

Nadia grinned sheepishly and lay down by her doll.

Alef and Tav slipped an arm around each other, and Tav looked around the room reflectively. “I never had a bedroom like this as a kid. Never even had my own bed. My two sisters and I shared a bed until I was ten or eleven.”

Alef feigned playing a sympathy violin, and she gave him a light slug. He pulled her close and started to resume where they had left off.

She pushed him away gently. “Later,” she said with a coy smile.

“That a promise?” he said as he raised an eyebrow.

“Only if you behave.” She pulled away with a wink and sat on the bed next to Nadia and Molly.

“You like it?” she asked. Nadia’s grin took over her face, and she threw her arms around her mother.

Alef watched the two of them and for some reason started to choke up.



He pushed out the memory and slammed his steering wheel. He slowly shook his head at the changes that had taken place since then. “Why’d you ruin it, Tav?” he grumbled.

Why did you ruin it, Alef?

That thought came from nowhere and left him slightly bewildered. “I didn’t...” He started to argue with himself, then stopped. This wasn’t the time to be in a mood. He got out of the car and went to the door, but before he could knock, Nadia opened it. She must have been watching for him through the window. “Where we going, Daddy?” she yelled. “McDonald’s?”

Alef smiled. “Where else?”

“Can we eat there this time? I wanna play on their slides and stuff.”

“Sure. Let’s do it!”

“Here’s your coat, sweetheart,” Tav said as she came into the room.

Nadia put it on and grabbed Alef’s hand. “Can Mommy come?”

“Nadia!” Tav said reprovingly.

Alef looked at Tav. Would she really go? With an almost stutter, he said, “Uh, that’d be great. Uh, I mean if you’re free. Uh, we could go someplace better than McDonald’s.” He felt like a kid asking for his first date.

She laughed. “Sure. Love to. And we’d better go to McDonald’s if we want to keep Nadia happy.” She got her coat, and they went to Alef’s car.

Tav opened the door to slide into the back with Nadia. “Mommy,”

Nadia called out disapprovingly. “Grownups sit in front. Did you forget?”

“Looks like I forgot. Hop in, and I’ll make sure your seatbelt’s buckled.

Nadia rolled her eyes. “Mommy, I know how to do it.”

“Course you do.” She watched Nadia put on her seatbelt and got in front with Alef.

He drove off and for a moment no one spoke. Then a small voice in the back said, “This is like it used to be, huh.” Alef and Tav didn’t say anything but gave each other an awkward glance.

Just like it used to be, Alef thought. And if it were really like it used to be, he would reach over and take Tav’s hand.

At McDonald’s, Alef and Tav let Nadia do most of the talking while they ate. She was good at it. She still finished her food before they did and ran out to play in the McDonald’s Playland.

Tav was first to break the silence Nadia left them with. “You getting settled in your new facility?”

“Yeah. What a difference. We’ve got room and even a little style now. We’re even inviting clients to visit us.”

“Sounds like everything’s going great.”

“Well, the business part is.” Alef fiddled around with his empty cup. “Uh, to state the obvious, I could probably be a better father.”

The argument that he started having with himself before he picked them up now played heavy on his conscience, and what might even be remorse quivered through him. He glanced over at Tav. She was facing the Playland, but her eyes didn’t seem to be looking at anything. He looked back at his cup and mumbled under his breath, “And could’ve been a better...” He sat up and pushed out a silent sigh. “Anyway...” His voice was loud, and Tav faced him in surprise. He smiled an apology and spoke softer. “Anyway, I want to be a better father. We’ve hired a couple more people, and I’d like to spend more

time with Nadia.” He gave her an imploring look. “I mean, if that’s okay with you.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’d be wonderful. What did you have in mind?”

He relaxed. “If you’d agree, maybe she could be with me every other weekend, like from Friday night to Sunday afternoon, instead of just the couple of hours a weekend we do now. I’m okay keeping the weekdays as they are. That way she and I could plan some fun things and... And, well, just be together more.”

“That *would* work for me,” Tav said. “She’d love that.”

“Thanks.” He looked at her warmly. “And maybe sometimes, I mean if you wanted to, we could all three do something together. Nadia seemed to like us doing this today.” What went unstated, so did he.

Tav’s look was indiscernible. “We’ll see.”

Alef looked down at his coffee that had been his crutch forever. What was he thinking to bring that up?

“I understand Omnimach wants to talk to you guys,” she said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had developed.

Alef’s eyebrows pushed up. How could she know that? He had never mentioned it. Then a grating awareness grabbed him. *Rand*. He didn’t respond and turned to seek out Nadia in the playground to control the anger that was rising. He could feel Tav watching him.

“Yeah.” He finally said without facing her. “They seem to be interested in us. Don’t think I’m interested in them though. Not sure how the others feel.”

He turned toward her, his look almost accusing. “Uh, Rand tell you? Understand you’ve been seeing each other.”

Tav’s face reddened, and she glanced down at the table. “Yes. Uh, how did you know we were...”

“Rand.”

Tav pushed her hair behind her ears. “I guess I probably should have said something.”

“No problem. Not my business.” Alef hoped he sounded like it didn’t matter. His face broadcast something else.

Another uncomfortable silence descended, and they both watched Nadia. She was having fun with the other kids. Alef glanced at his watch. “What time do you need to get Nadia to bed?”

Tav looked at the clock on the wall. “Probably should leave now.”
“I’ll get her,” he said.

Nadia was the only one who talked on their ride home.

Chapter 5

Free

Alef couldn't sleep. He tried to think about Eli's fixation with a god computer and their upcoming meeting with Omnimach, but being with Tav and Nadia tonight and his wrestle with his conscience wouldn't give those thoughts room. What Nadia said when he dropped them off brought both hope and trepidation. "I liked Mommy being with us. I wanna do it again."

"We'll see," was all Alef said. Tav said nothing. In fact, she acted like she didn't hear anything.

It wasn't just the who-was-at-fault battle he was having with himself tonight. The question that even trumped that was, was he still in love with Tav. But why linger on that? It was stupid. It was over. It was over a year ago. She only had a platonic interest in him now. If that.

"Guess she thinks Rand's the better prize," he mumbled. He shook his head. "She doesn't know him." Yeah, Rand had changed since he dated Tav six years ago, but he was still Rand. Alef's hands turned into fists. *If he does anything to hurt her...* For a while, he let his mind dwell on the unpleasant possibilities there, then relaxed. She was more than capable of taking care of herself.

It took another half-hour for him to get to sleep. And then the dream. It had been several weeks since his grandfather had appeared to him, but tonight there he was again. This time he was sitting in a

lounge chair on an ocean liner, and Alef could even smell and feel the salt air. His grandpa motioned for him to take the chair next to him, and for a while they both watched the gentle roll of the ocean.

“I like it here,” his grandfather said.

Alef didn’t know what to say, or even if he was supposed to say anything. What do you say in a dream?

His grandpa turned to him. “I asked you a question last time, Alef. Who are you?”

“How come you haven’t been in my dreams for weeks?” was Alef’s response.

“You weren’t ready to talk to me. Who are you?”

“I wasn’t ready to talk?” Alef shrugged. “I don’t know what you...” He stopped as the mundane thoughts that came to his mind a few weeks ago when he first started thinking about the question came back. Those weren’t the answers his grandfather wanted. Those weren’t the answers Alef really wanted either. He closed his eyes. For a moment, he concentrated on the refreshing breeze that caressed his face and arms. Then ideas started churning in him and became words.

“Who am I? I’m me. No one else is me. I feel and think, and maybe... Maybe, I’ve *always* been.” That realization suddenly expanded in him, and with wonder he said, “I can’t imagine that I never was. Or that someday, I won’t be.” He stopped talking and watched the sun glimmer on the gray-blue water.

“Anything else?” his grandfather asked.

There was something else.

“Yeah! I can choose!” Alef exclaimed. “I can choose what I do! I can choose who I want to be!”

His grandfather nodded and gazed out over the ocean. “Peaceful here, huh?” He rubbed his fingers across his legs. “Wonderful thing about peace. It frees you. Frees your mind. Opens it to truth.” He

reached out his hand as if to pat Alef's leg but withdrew it. Instead, his eyes caught Alef's.

"Choosing defines existence." His voice carried quiet power. "Perhaps that's the only reason *to* exist. To know who you are, Alef, to know who you *choose* to be, is the key to everything." He looked back at the ocean. "You like poetry?"

Alef shrugged.

"Well, I heard a little poem once that I... Well, just listen. If first I'll seek the truth in me, then I'll find truth where ere it be." He paused. "To be willing to see ourselves... I mean, to *want* to see ourselves for who we are, opens the door to..." He looked at his grandson. "You exist, Alef. You can choose. You become who you *want* to be. *That* is truth."

His grandfather closed his eyes and tapped the arm of his chair. "Truth." His voice was little more than a whisper. "To see what is, we must first see who *we* are. We must *remember* who we are. Not easy. You must *want* to remember, Alef."

For a time they were silent as the cool ocean breeze fanned them, then his grandpa spoke. "I believe you have a question for me."

That shook Alef out of his reverie. He did have a question. "Last time, you asked me if I was dying. I don't understand. I'm healthy. At least, I think I am. How could I be dying?"

"Is your body the only thing that can die?"

"You think there's something more to me than my body and mind?" Alef asked.

His grandfather gave him a wry smile. "Who are you talking to now? My body and brain have been dead for years."

"But you're just a dream."

"Am I? We're having quite the conversation for just a dream."

Alef stared at him. "Okay, then, what else is there besides my mind and body? Uh, I mean, what are you?"

“An *essence*. I’m an *essence*, Alef. No beginning. No ending.”

Alef looked his grandfather up and down. “And, uh, my essence looks like my body? Uh, you kinda look like what I remember your body looked like, but...”

His grandpa smiled.

Alef didn’t know whether to be cynical or just confused. “If my essence is eternal,” he asked, “then how can I be dying when my body’s doing fine?”

“For an essence, dying does not mean non-existing, Alef. It is moving away from our potential. Our *infinite* potential. It’s moving away from Light.” He looked intently at his grandson. “Are you becoming less than you can be, Alef?”

“Light? What do you mean by Light?”

His grandfather didn’t answer, just repeated his question. “Are you becoming less than you can be, Alef?”

Alef thought about his experience this evening with Tav and Nadia and about what a weak father he was. He thought about his feelings toward Rand and the kind of husband he had been to Tav and a million other things he did or was doing or wasn’t doing or had thought or was thinking. He slumped and lowered his head.

“Maybe I *am* dying,” he muttered.

“You won’t change unless you acknowledge the need to, Alef. Seeing yourself in need of change, is a big step.”

Alef had never felt so weak and useless in his life. He gazed out at the water. A storm was coming, the wind lifting the waves. A storm was also rising inside him, his devastating realizations seemingly rocking his very existence. Would it irreparably unsettle? Or would it cleanse?

“Another question, Alef.” The breeze stiffened and brought the smell and taste of salt. “Are you free?”

That momentarily pulled Alef from his own brewing storm.

“Huh? Yeah. Course I’m free. I live in the United States. I’m not in jail. Nobody owns me.”

“Why do you let what others say or do control what you say or do?”

“What d’you mean? Nobody...” He stopped. It was true. He thought about Eli and Tav today. About Rand. About everybody. Everything. His response was almost always a reaction.

“What about your coffee, Alef? Does that control you?” Alef fidgeted. His grandpa went on. “The list of things you can let dominate you is almost endless. Passions. Money. Fame. Power. Prestige.” His grandfather lifted a finger. “And there’s one that’s constant. The circumstances you find yourself in. Whatever they are. Do you let those dictate what you’ll think or say or do? Do you let them control you?” He looked kindly at his grandson. “So, Alef, I ask again. Are you free?”

Alef’s feelings of inadequacy and perceived failure became a weight that threatened to sink him in the ocean that surrounded them. He was anything but free.

His grandfather’s love wrapped around him. “If you want to become one who *acts* and is not *acted upon*, you can be free. You can learn not to be controlled by any other person or thing or situation. Act, and you are free. You *live*. Let yourself be controlled, be acted upon, and you cease to be free. You *die*.”

“But how can I do that?” Alef moaned. “I don’t know if I...”

“You can. If you *want* to.”

“How?”

“You will know.”

The dream closed abruptly, and for a moment, Alef gazed into the near darkness of his bedroom. “I don’t want to die,” he whispered.

Chapter 6

The Meeting and the God Computer

Late yesterday afternoon, Omnimach's limousine picked up Alef, Rand, and Eli at the San Francisco airport and took them to their hotel at Half-moon Bay. Each had suites with balconies looking out over the bay with luxury amenities. Wood burning fireplaces, marble bathrooms, down pillows and comforters, personal spas, and on and on. From there they were taken to dinner at a Michelin three star restaurant in San Francisco. They couldn't even pronounce the names of most of the delicacies they were served, but savored their once in a lifetime experience with food that was beyond succulent. The price Omnimach paid for that meal would likely buy them a dinner at a good restaurant in Boise every night for a month.

This morning they were ushered into one of the more intimate Omnimach conference rooms. Alef gazed at the mahogany and marble that spoke of a luxury he'd never seen. Deepa Coates came into the room and shook each of their hands with an attempt at a warm greeting. She was the legendary woman who built Omnimach from a startup some 15 years ago to the \$45 billion behemoth it was now.

The 54-year-old's four-inch platform heels only brought her up to average height, but she was imposing. Her white pantsuit was professionally tailored to her full figure, and her smooth wheatish

complexion highlighted deep brown eyes that conveyed power and experience. She invited them to sit across from her at the elegant six-foot diameter table in the center of the room.

“I trust you enjoyed your dinner last night and your hotel accommodations,” she said. “I apologize for not joining you at the restaurant, but my schedule wouldn’t permit.”

“It was fantastic!” Alef exclaimed. “Thank you.” Rand and Eli echoed him.

“You are most welcome.” She opened the folder in front of her. “I understand all three of you worked for us at one time. Why did you decide to leave?” Her tone was pleasant enough, but the question put Alef on guard. He was the one the three agreed would be their spokesman.

“We had no complaints about how we were treated,” he responded smoothly. “Salaries and benefits were very good, but we wanted to try something on our own.” He sounded sincere because he was. “My guess is that you can understand that desire.”

Her eyes showed she identified with what he said and respected it. “I took the liberty of pulling up employee reviews on each of you for the few years you were with us. Commendable. Very commendable.”

She pulled a sheet from the folder. “Thank you for sending me a current financial statement and your pro forma financials. Impressive. You’ve done well in your, what is it, two years on your own?”

“It’s been a little over two years since we started Sawtooth,” Alef replied.

“Why don’t you each briefly tell me something about you and what your roles are in your company,” she said. “Our main purpose bringing you to Fremont today is to see you in person and get to know you a little.” She pointed her hand at Eli. “Would you please start. It’s Eli, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He seemed nervous and took a deep breath. “A real compli-

ment you having us here. Thanks. Uh, I got my MS in computer science at UC Berkley. Did a lot of machine learning research there, and I'm VP of operations and research and development at Sawtooth."

"Any interests?" she asked.

"Uh, well, I'm single. Don't have much of a social life. Pretty much stick to my research and the company. I watch a movie sometimes. That's about it."

She turned to Rand. "How about you."

Rand gave one of his patented smiles that was a magnet to some women. Deepa appeared unaffected, and he blinked and cleared his throat. "I did my graduate work at USC and got my MS in computer science. I'm the marketing VP for Sawtooth."

"Anything else?" Deepa asked.

"When I have time, I'm into hiking and camping and some pickup basketball. I'm single," he threw a glance at Alef, "but I'm working on a relationship."

"Thank you. And you, Alef?"

Alef knew the relationship Rand was referring to, and a touch of depression and resentment bound his tongue. Then a thought shoved into his mind. *Be free. Don't react. Act.* He silently thanked his grandfather and pushed the darkness out. "You know I'm president of Sawtooth," he said confidently, "and I have a master's in software engineering from USC." He was about to mention he was first in his class, but instead just added, "I'm divorced and have a five-year-old daughter, who I love very much." He signaled he was through.

Deepa's eyes held his for a second and conveyed unmistakable respect. She sat back and briefly faced each of them. "Thank you, for coming," she said. "Your presence has confirmed our desire to invite you to become part of Omnimach again, but on a significantly different level than when you were with us before." She gave what could be taken for a smile and stood. "We will overnight to you

our proposal with contracts to sign. Our offer will be realistically generous and not negotiable. Please respond back within two days.”

The three looked at each other with obvious surprise that the meeting had only lasted 10 minutes. They had assumed they would receive some offer today, or at least be told what Omnimach was thinking. They got up, and she shook each of their hands.

“One other thing,” she said. “We will want to do an audit to verify your assets, finances, and the pro forma you gave us.”

That was standard protocol of course, but what raised a red flag for the partners was what she said next.

“Please also understand, we are always concerned that those who leave us have not violated non-disclosure and confidentiality agreements. We vigorously protect our proprietary software and business techniques.” Her look and voice were straight business. “I feel quite certain we have nothing to be concerned about with you. Especially if we agree to work together.” Her tight smile seemed more threat than congenial, and her implication about what might happen if an agreement was not reached was clear.

On that disconcerting note, the partners were dismissed.

They were mostly silent on their flight home, and when they arrived in Boise, they drove straight to their office building and went to their conference room. A beige short-tuft carpet covered its floor, and the walls were a dark oak veneer paneling. It’s large walnut table and taupe corduroy upholstered matching chairs were nice, but the partner’s heady view of their new facilities had been brought down to earth with the opulence of the offices they were in this morning. The partners just looked at each other and laughed.

“Oh well,” Rand said. “Maybe we got a preview today of what we’ll look like in five or ten years.”

Alef sat down. “Interesting trip.” His face carried a neutral expression. “What do you think?”

“Great dinner,” Eli said. “I didn’t know you could pay that much for an hour’s worth of eating.”

“What a cold fish,” Rand said.

Eli smirked. “You talking about our raw appetizers or Deepa Coates?”

“I liked the food.”

Alef assumed Rand was still smarting from Deepa’s non-response to his smile. “Besides the food and the hotel, what’s your take on our meeting,” Alef asked him.

“She was operating with a stopwatch. We weren’t with her more than ten minutes. That’s an insult.”

Eli cocked his head. “Let’s see. You add the cost of our plane tickets, hotel rooms, and once-in-a-lifetime dinner, our visit cost her maybe five hundred bucks a minute for the time she spent with us. That sounds like we’re pretty important to me.”

Rand folded his arms as if in a sulk. “I don’t buy that. I think the whole thing, including the extravagance and the non-substantial mini conversation, was show. It was Deepa’s way of telling us we weren’t very significant at all, and we’d better accept her offer and consider it an overly generous gift.”

“Your take, Alef?” Eli asked.

“Overwhelmed by the preliminary doings. Underwhelmed by the main event. I don’t know what kind of proposal we’ll get tomorrow, but it’d have to be something off the charts for me to be interested. We’re doing fine without selling our souls to Omnimach.”

“I agree,” Rand exclaimed. “I’m not going to lose any sleep worrying about it tonight.”

Eli clasped his hands. “Well, I’m excited about it! This might be the kind of opportunity we’ve dreamed about. I’m near maxed out on my god computer project with our hardware and software.” He eyeballed the room. “What I need to get where I want to go we don’t

have and maybe never will. Omnimach's got everything right now to take me where I want to go."

That rattled Alef's chain a little. "God computer? We've had unending conversations about this, and I still have the same big question." He sat back. "You're trying to create an infinite ability to tap into all the info in the world and control it. Create what you call a god. But what is a god without consciousness? Without conscience? Without a basic sense of right and wrong or desires or emotions? Without innate caring and concern for the sanctity and quality of life?"

"That all exists in the one that's creating and operating it," Eli argued defensively. "That's me. That's all that's needed."

"And what if your computer begins operating you?" Rand sneered. "You're programming it to accumulate and to dominate. What chance does the operator have?"

"I can pull its plug," Eli retorted.

"Yeah. If it *lets* you get to the plug," Alef said dryly, and his latest conversation with his grandfather pushed into his mind. "Okay if I share some thoughts I've had recently about consciousness?"

Eli turned a hand up and Rand lifted a shoulder.

Alef took that for a yes and continued. "We've talked about this lots of times. We exist and are aware of our existence so that means there's such thing as consciousness. But the thing that's been on my mind lately, is what exactly is it? So here's my thought. Whatever it is, is it possible it's separate from our minds and bodies?"

Rand's eyes widened. "Interesting. How did you come up with that?"

Alef wasn't about to tell them it came from his dead grandfather who wanted to trade him hair. "Just something I've been thinking about," he said. "What if we are essences separate from biological evolution and existed before we were born and will exist after our

bodies and minds are dead?”

“You mean something that controls our minds like I control my computer, but it’s never not existed?” Eli asked facetiously.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Eli scoffed. “There’s zero empirical evidence for anything like that.”

The vibrant image of his grandfather and their conversations slid into Alef’s mind. His grandfather was evidence of that. Or were those just dreams? He was still wrestling with that. And what his grandfather said rang true to his soul or his essence, or whatever that was that was home to his deep feelings and desires.

“Who knows,” Rand said playfully. “Maybe the fact we’re even talking about this or considering it is evidence that it exists.”

Alef didn’t look at Rand. It was a battle to suppress his growing antipathy for him. Despite Alef’s struggles to *act* as his grandfather had admonished, his thoughts too often turned to Rand with increasing bitterness. He was fighting to control his reactive impulse. Was some external something now helping him check his feelings? It sure felt like it. He gave Rand a cordial look and nodded in agreement.

“Here’s something I’ve been wondering,” Rand went on. “At last count there could be at least six billion planets in our own galaxy that are earth-like and could potentially evolve similar life to what we have here. The Milky Way is just one of maybe some trillions of galaxies. Evolution’s a numbers game. Even if we assume a small fraction of those galaxies could incubate earthlike worlds, the probabilities are that we come up with an unimaginably enormous number of life yielding planets like ours.”

“And your point?” Eli’s pursed lips showed his impatience with this conversation.

“My point is, why haven’t we heard from any of them? With these numbers, there must be countless civilizations out there that are

more advanced than ours. Maybe billions of years more advanced. What we're calling a computer god could be a child's toy to them. They could have mastered quantum entanglement and applied it wholesale, including to themselves. Travel or communication to any place in the universe would be instantaneous, so the speed of light would never be a limitation."

"So?" Eli's frustration with where this conversation was going was obviously on the rise.

"So, where are they? Unnumbered civilizations would have moved lightyears beyond our computer version of a god. Contacting worlds like ours to aid us, or destroy us, or enslave us, or just observe us, would seem an expected objective."

Eli snorted. "I don't see why. We'd be of as much interest to them as a colony of ants is to us."

"Or there's another possibility," Rand continued. "They became so advanced that their computer gods destroyed them or they destroyed themselves. They don't visit us because they're no longer there." He gave Eli a condescending look. "Something for us to think about before we go too far with our own *god* ambitions, huh?"

While those two glared at each other, Alef had his own strange thought. *Maybe our essences were sent here from such a world. Maybe we're the aliens here.* He quickly shook that notion away. For one thing, it would beg an unanswerable question: *Why are we here then?* He stood. "Hey, didn't mean to get everybody stirred up. I suspect we'll get word from Omnimach sometime in the morning." He left for his office.

Belinda Norton, their director of marketing, was waiting for him. "Mind if we close the door?" she asked.

Alef gave her a questioning look. "Sure." He shut it behind him and motioned to a chair in front of his desk. He sat in the one next to it.

Belinda was nattily dressed, and her radiant skin and deep black hair reminded Alef of Tav. She was a little older, in her early 40s, and her trim figure and high cheekbones and full lips, were more than attractive. She had been divorced for several years and had a son who just started college. Always pleasant, she had a facile marketing mind and tried to maintain a close relationship with her sales force. She was a real asset to Sawtooth.

“What’s up?” Alef asked.

“How did your meeting with Omnimach go?” She didn’t try to hide her anxiety.

“Interesting. Rand will talk to you about it.”

She lowered her head, her face showing obvious concern. “Rand hasn’t been too communicative with me lately. He pretty well lets me do my thing.”

Alef looked at her inquisitively. “Have you and Rand been, uh, seeing each other socially?”

“He’s asked me several times to do stuff, but I haven’t been interested.” She gave Alef a weak smile. “I suppose that might have something to do with our current, uh, kind of chilly relationship.”

Alef held her gaze. Was there attraction there? She was a class act, but getting romantically involved with an employee was something he’d have to think more than twice about. Anyway, Tav was too much on his mind now.

“We’re going to get some kind of offer from Omnimach,” he finally said. “Probably in the morning. We don’t know what it’s going to be or if we’d even take it.” He pushed himself back in his chair. “But I’m happy staying right where we are.” Seeing her look of relief, he added, “In any case, I can’t see any scenario where we’d want to let you go. You’re a huge reason why we’re doing so well.”

She smiled broadly and got up. “Thanks.”

He stood and reached out his hand. “Thank *you*.”

She grasped it, pulled herself next to him, and remained close for a few seconds. She stepped back with a blush and held his eyes. “I’m glad to be here.”

Chapter 7

Love

Alef pulled up to Tav's to pick up Nadia. He had called Tav to tell her he would be late and to go ahead and have dinner. He would take Nadia out to get some dessert. He was ready for bed himself. Tomorrow would be stressful no matter what kind of offer they'd get from Omnimach.

It had rained off and on all day, and tonight there were still sprinkles. He sat in the car and looked at Tav's house. *Their* first house. Last Saturday he took Nadia to Zoo Boise. Gratefully, the weather cooperated, but it was a bit cool. They went to all the animal encounters and rode the carousel enough times to make Alef sick. Sunday, he took her to a family fun zone in nearby Meridian, and they were both beat when he brought her back to Tav's. It was the best weekend he'd spent in a long, long time. When he called Tav tonight, she told him that Nadia kept asking, "Can I go with Daddy every weekend?" Tav laughed. "Maybe next time I should go with you guys."

Wonder if she would? he thought as he got out of the car and walked up to the door. For some reason Belinda and her pulling close to him today came to his mind. *Maybe... No! No way!* He shook off wherever that was going as the door opened.

Tav greeted him with an engaging smile. "I don't know what you're planning tonight, but I've got donuts and ice cream that'll go to waste unless I have some help eating them. What do you say?"

Nadia was jumping up and down. “Can we Daddy? We can be a family!”

For a few seconds, Alef studied Tav’s face. Her eyes seemed to be saying, “It’s your call.”

“Let’s do it!” he said. “I love donuts.”

They ate and played a game of Old Maid. When they finished, Tav started to put the cards in their box. “Just one more game!” Nadia begged. “One more.”

“Time for bed, sweetheart. It’s past your bedtime.”

“But Daddy’s still here.”

“I’m leaving,” he said. “Been a long day.”

“Give your dad a kiss,” Tav told her, then shooed her upstairs to get ready for bed. She looked at Alef. “I’d love to hear how things went with Omnimach today. Could you stay just for a few minutes?”

His eyes riveted on hers and lingered. “Sure.” She motioned for him to go into the living room. “It’ll only take me a minute to get her down.”

Alef sat on the simple three-cushion beige sofa that had been one of the first pieces of furniture they bought when they moved into this house. He rubbed the memory with his hand, then closed his eyes. He had nearly dropped off to sleep when Tav came in the room.

“Sorry. Shouldn’t have asked you to stay. We can talk about this some other time.”

Or get the info from Rand, he thought. He pushed his eyes wide open. “I just had the twenty-second nap I needed. Let’s talk.” She sat close enough he could hold her hand. He didn’t try.

“So, what happened? Did it go like you expected?”

“I’m not sure what I expected. Had a neat night last night, but this morning bordered on a dud.” He gave her some specifics and shared his reaction to it all.

“Do you have a feel for what they’re going to offer?” she asked.

“Not really, but I’m not optimistic. Besides, I like where we are now.”

“How about Rand and Eli?”

“Hard to tell. Eli seems to want something to happen. Rand’s probably more wait and see. Our differences generated another interesting discussion about Eli’s computer version of a god though.”

“How so?”

“It got down to consciousness and essences and intelligence on other worlds.”

“Wow! Are you too tired, or can you tell me about it?”

Alef laughed. “That’ll put both of us to sleep. I’ll give you the condensed version.

“Want some coffee?” Tav offered.

“Uh, no thanks. Don’t drink it anymore.”

Her puzzled expression invited an explanation.

He wasn’t ready to mention his dreams and what his grandfather told him about being free, so he fudged a little. “Got tired of its taste. Probably better for me not to depend on stuff to keep me awake.”

She smiled. “Maybe I should do the same. Tell me about your discussion.”

For the next hour Alef and Tav had as meaningful a talk as they had ever had. He even shared his strange thought about our essences or inner selves being transplanted from another world.

“What about other universes?” she asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean maybe we originated from another universe. Another dimension.”

He smirked. “You’re as nuts as I am. I’ll think about that one, but I better go, or I’ll fall asleep driving.” She walked him to the door and touched his elbow. “Thanks for staying. Thanks for talking to me.”

Rand’s alluding to Tav this morning as a relationship he was work-

ing on jumped into Alef's mind. And he thought about Belinda again. He quickly shoved that stuff out. He wasn't going to let anything ruin a really good evening. He took Tav's hand from his elbow and held it, like it was the most natural thing to do.

"Thanks for the dessert and the game and for you wanting to talk to *me*." Their eyes stayed locked for a few seconds, and he left.

He made it home without incident, and it took him all of five minutes to get ready for bed. He was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

And his grandfather appeared.

Alef couldn't tell where he was this time. The background was blurry and non-descript, and everything was silent. For a while, Alef wondered if this dream would play like a muted video. Then his grandfather spoke.

"Why did you leave Tavia?"

Alef was confused. "Uh, I had to. I was tired. I was about to fall asleep."

"Not tonight, Alef. Why did you leave her?"

"Oh, you mean..." Alef shook his head. "You got that wrong." His tone was defensive. "I didn't leave her. She left me."

His grandfather peered at him. "You weren't there for her. You weren't there for Nadia. You left them. Why?"

Alef was shocked into silence, then lamely mumbled, "Uh, I had to. The business. It was the business. I couldn't..." He stopped. It was as though his mind was as fuzzy as his surroundings here, and what he had convinced himself was true for the last year dissipated like fog in a breeze.

"How did you treat them, Alef? How did you treat Tavia?"

Alef's conscience now stood naked, and he knew it was his anger and neglect and boorish behavior that broke up his family. A sudden remorse enshrouded him. Heavy. Agonizing. Unbearable. He want-

ed to melt into nothingness. Shame bound his tongue, and for a long time he was silent. At last, a few words tumbled out. "It was always about me, and..." That's as far as he got. He buried his head in his hands and wept.

When he looked up, his grandfather met his eyes. "And now?"

Alef fought to control his emotions. "I'm trying, Grandpa," he mumbled. "I... I want to be a good dad. I'm trying."

"What about Tavia?"

Alef swallowed. "Too late. How I treated her, she'd never... Why would she ever love me again?"

"Does that mean you can't love her?"

Alef didn't respond.

"Do you love her?"

Alef's answer to that question was sorrow etched on his face.

"What does love mean to you, Alef?"

He shrugged meekly. "Like everything else. I guess, love's been all about me." He laughed cynically. "Like I'll love this person if they make *me* happy."

"Is that love, Alef?"

"Can't be. Not much anyway. Maybe it's all about the happiness of the one you love. You kind of want them to be happy no matter what. That's how I feel about Nadia. Now anyway."

"And Tavia?"

Alef thought about Rand and Tav. Would she be happy being with him? Could Alef actually want that for her? Did his love for Tav go that far? For Rand? "I need to work on that," was all he could manage.

"Love has levels," his grandpa said, "The highest? Well, you want what's *best* for another person. Gives you joy to help bring that about. Maybe you sacrifice for them too. Give of yourself, huh? Have compassion for them." He looked off somewhere, then asked softly,

“Have you ever felt the hurt when someone else hurts? Are you ever happy because someone else is happy?”

Alef thought about Nadia. About Tav. “Yeah,” he whispered. He looked up at his grandpa. The love his grandfather was describing seemed to physically flow from him and embrace Alef.

“Another thing.” Were there tears in his grandfather’s eyes? “With that love, we let others choose who *they* want to be. Even if it brings us sorrow.”

Again, Alef’s mind wrapped around Rand and Tav. Was that even possible for him?

“Who should you love, Alef?” It was like his grandpa was reading his mind.

“You mean, who *will* I love,” Alef grunted.

“Should? Will? Those answers are in your heart, Alef. Listen.” He paused. “Remember our conversation about being free?”

Alef nodded.

“How you choose to love has everything to do with how free you will be.”

Alef pushed out a laugh. “At least I’ve given up coffee. This act and not being acted upon business is...” He shook his head. “Hard.”

“Yep. But you’ve been getting some help now though, I think.”

“Help?” Alef looked confused. Then he remembered. “Yeah. I think I must have. I mean, sometimes I was really trying and couldn’t do it, and it was like I’d get this nudge or something that helped me do what I wanted to do.”

“That something, Alef, helps you when you’re trying.”

“Does it have a name?”

“Several. I call it the Mentor.”

“The Mentor? You mean like some kind of an adviser? I’ve never heard of anything like that. What is it?”

“It’s real. As real as you and I are.”

“Why haven’t I ever heard about it?”

“Maybe you weren’t ready to listen to it or feel it before.”

“Listen to it? Feel it? What is it?”

“I like to think of it as an enhanced radio signal to your essence.

“Uh, so what’s it supposed to do?”

“Lots of things. Like remind you of what you’ve learned. Expand your memory. Increase your knowledge. Empower you in wonderful ways.”

“What drives it? I mean, who operates it? Why would it even be interested in me?”

“It just exists. Like you and I exist. You could call it a super essence, I suppose. It’s there for those who want it. Who will do as it directs.”

“Directs? Like what?”

“Lately, you were prompted to act and not react. You followed that direction. If you hadn’t, you may have forfeited that help in the future.”

“Are you saying that how much the Mentor plays a part in my life depends on how much I seek it and follow its urging?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Why would it do this for me?”

“Love. The kind of love we’ve been talking about. If you want to have that higher level of love, you’ll have help from the Mentor.”

Alef shook his head “So, if I want to be empowered by this...*Mentor*, I’m expected to love everybody, even if they want to bury me?”

“The Mentor operates in your life only if you choose to love. Your level of love determines how much it *can* help you.”

Alef’s face formed a question. “Uh, is there more? I mean is there more to being free and getting help from the Mentor besides loving and learning to act and not be acted on?”

“There’s more. It’s all tied together. It’s all one.”

Alef waited. When his grandfather didn’t elaborate, he asked, “You

mind if I ask you one more question?”

“Besides that one?” There was a twinkle in his grandpa’s eye.

Alef smiled. This was the grandpa who always asked him to trade hair when he was a boy. “Yeah. Besides that one. Where do our essences come from? Where did my *me* come from?”

“Where do you think?”

“I don’t know. Maybe from a more advanced civilization in our universe?”

“What did Tavia say?”

“How did you know that Tav and I were talking?” He sighed. What didn’t his grandpa know? “She thinks our essences maybe came from another universe.”

“Listen to Tavia.”

Alef’s dream ended as suddenly as it began, and he stared at the ceiling for a long time. Then, Nadia’s words to him several weeks before shoved into his mind. “You don’t yell so much now.”

And that triggered a memory.



“Get off my case! Both of you!” Alef yelled and glared at Tav. She picked up Nadia who was sobbing and left the room. He kicked the couch. Why couldn’t they see? Tav was so demanding. So completely inconsiderate. What did she want from him? Blood? When you work 16 to 18 hours a day and finally have a little time, you need to just crash. Not go to a stupid park and push Nadia in some dumb swing. Well, there was one place he could go to get away from the carping. He left for his office.



Alef grabbed his head. “Yell so much? Oh my...” He pushed his hands against his eyes. “Who are you, Alef? Who in the...” He could have brought up countless scenes like this before his divorce. But that was then. What about now? “You don’t yell *so much*,” Nadia said.

So much? He snorted. He was *still* yelling.

“Who are you, Alef?” he mumbled and closed his eyes and pleaded, “Help me, Grandpa! Please. Help me!”

Chapter 8

The Offer

Alef opened the FedEx overnight envelope. Rand and Eli watched. They were all nervous, but Eli's hands were shaking. Alef pulled out several documents clipped together. A brief note from Deepa Coates was attached. Alef read it aloud.

I have enclosed an offer summary along with a contract. Please contact my assistant, Elaine Pritchard, by phone within two days with your decision and send the executed contract within five working days. We are looking forward to a long and prosperous relationship. Welcome aboard. Deepa Coates.

Eli looked at Rand. "Is that the Elaine who's your friend?"

"She is. Or was. Deepa sounds pretty confident about our decision. Let's see what they're proposing."

Alef glanced at the offer synopsis. "I can read this aloud now, or we can make copies and read it together. It's short."

"Read it now." Eli was anxious. Alef looked at Rand who nodded. Alef read it.

We propose to purchase Sawtooth ML, LLC upon completion of an Omnimach conducted audit. See enclosed contract for details. In summary:

1. *Sawtooth principals will be given:*

- a. *.\$3,000,000 in cash*

- b. *100,000 shares of Omnimach preferred stock redeemable in five years. Note: Current per share value is \$91.35.*
 - c. *Five-year employment contracts with guaranteed annual salaries of \$200,000 plus bonuses tied to department performance. Employment contracts can be terminated at any time by mutual agreement or for cause.*
2. *Sawtooth will be integrated into a new Omnimach Conversational AI department with its geographic location to be determined.*

Alef's expression was indiscernible. "Well, there it is," he said. "Obviously, we need to read the contract for details, but this's not the buy-in I was thinking. It's a buy-out. Sawtooth would be no more." He set the paper down. "What do you think?"

"What an offer!" Eli roared. "I'm in. Guaranteed minimum big-time salary. Million bucks apiece now and three million each in five years. Wow!"

Alef raised an eyebrow at Eli's reaction and assumed that access to Omnimach's million qubit computer was likely driving his manic response.

Rand's reaction was rain on Eli's parade. He grimly studied the brief notes he'd written and shook his head. "Too many holes in this. Too many places they could pull the rug out from under us. All that's really guaranteed is the cash up front, and we're giving them our exceptional intellectual property and book of business for that. We're at their mercy for production bonuses, and who knows what their stock will be worth in five years. They can even terminate us for any trumped-up cause anytime they want so the so-called guaranteed salary isn't worth the paper it's written on."

"That's nitpicking!" Eli said testily. "Let's take them at their word."

It's obvious what they intend. Let's look at the contract. If we need a little rewording to make it more acceptable to us, I'm sure they'll do it."

"Deepa made it clear their offer was non-negotiable." Rand's tone was condescending. "What you see is what we get. Period."

The tension in the room was palpable as they waited for Alef to speak. He appeared to be studying the offer but was contemplating how to say what he had already decided. And not *react* to the negative vibes that filled the room.

"Have a couple of concerns." Both his voice and expression were calm and professional. "I've gotten used to being independent. I like it. Our projections we gave Omnimach are reasonable. We're poised now to take off, and I think within a year or two we'll personally be drawing at least the kind of salaries Omnimach's offering. Within maybe five years, with some venture capital help, I think we could see eight figure profits and a net worth ten to twenty times that."

He turned up a hand. "Sure. On the surface, Omnimach's offer's tempting. But I think Rand has a point. There's potential problems with that contract, and for me personally, I don't like the possibility we'd have to leave Boise. My daughter's here."

Alef sensed that Eli and Rand were surprised at the level of insight and prudence they just saw in him. *He* was surprised and held up the Omnimach paperwork. "I'll make copies of these and the contract for us to study. We can get back later today or tomorrow to discuss what we want to do."

"I don't need to read the contract," Rand responded sharply, "I reject it!"

Whatever transfixion the two might have had with the new Alef was gone. Alef paused to keep himself in control then pointed his hand at Eli for his response.

Eli was shaking and spoke with forced calm. "I'm assuming this's

we're all in or there's no deal given our LLC agreement?"

Alef nodded. "I think it's clear that Omnimach's offer is for the entire company. Which means the three of us."

The lines in Eli's face furrowed into angry ridges. "We'd be stupid not to take them up on this incredible offer, but it looks like I'm spitting in the wind." He threw up his hands.

Alef waited to keep his composure, then spoke softly. "I understand where you're coming from, Eli. But for all the reasons I gave, I vote to keep our status quo."

Eli stood. He glared at Rand and Alef and stomped out.

Alef rose and looked at Rand. "I'll check with you and Eli tomorrow morning to confirm what you want to do before I give Omnimach a call. Probably worth at least reading through the contract." Alef knew that the Sawtooth team that had worked reasonably well together for two years was probably irretrievably fractured. And for him, Rand's involvement with Tav might widen that gap.

He went to Eli's office to try to talk things over with him, but Eli refused. Alef proceeded to his own office but had a tough time concentrating on anything other than what transpired this morning. He wasn't ready to discuss the Omnimach offer with Rand in any detail either. Alef's struggle to control his mounting dislike for him was all he could manage right now.

He read the contract. It accurately reflected the offer summary with standard non-competing and non-disclosure agreements added. He stared at the Omnimach documents, then slapped them. "I'm not leaving Boise," he muttered and left the office. He wanted to be by himself.

He drove home, put on some sweats and his Nikes, and slipped on a windbreaker. It was mid-50s. The sky was a washed out blue with large cloud clumps that were not dark enough to threaten rain. He got on his bike and rode to the Boise River Greenbelt. It had been a

year since he last did this, and for over three hours he soaked in the beauty of the river, the serenity of the cottonwoods that had begun to leaf, and the friendly greetings of walkers and bikers that he passed. When he got back home, he was both refreshed and exhausted. He had his elixir.

He threw a chicken pot pie into the microwave for his dinner then took it to his recliner to eat and watch a brain escape movie. The movie only held his attention until he finished eating. He had to talk to somebody about his day. About what might be happening to Sawtooth. But who? He wrestled with that all of five seconds and called Tav.

“What was their offer?” she said before he could even say Hi.

He had brought a copy of the summary from the office. He went to his desk and read it to her without comment.

“Wow! That’s a lot of money,” she said. “Do you think... Uh, what are the chances they’d move you to Fremont?”. She didn’t try to hide her concern. But concern for what? For who? Alef leaving? Rand leaving? Both?

“I’m not moving anywhere,” he said. “We won’t accept their offer.”

“Was that a unanimous decision?” She hesitated. “Uh, what did Rand want to do?”

That was a gut punch, and he suddenly regretted calling her. He should have let her find out from Rand. He answered anyway. “Neither Rand nor I want to accept the offer. Eli does. Isn’t very happy with us.”

“Is that the end of it then?” she asked. “I mean, could they come back with an offer you might accept?”

“That’s the end of it. They made it clear we’d only get one offer.”

“Do you mind telling me why you... Uh, why you and Rand didn’t like the offer?”

Alef told her and emphasized that it was also not acceptable to him

to move away from Boise and Nadia.

“We, uh... I mean Nadia... Uh, I mean...” She stopped. “Oh, hang it. Neither one of us want you to move, Alef. I’m glad you didn’t take it.”

That made his gut punch feel a little better. He’d probably regret it, but now he had to ask. “What about Rand? You glad he’ll stick around too?”

She didn’t respond immediately, and there was an uncomfortable silence. It was then that his experience last night with his grandfather with its wrenching realization of the kind of husband and father he had been and person he was, became an agonizing weight on his conscience. His need to set things straight with Tav pushed his obsession with her relationship with Rand from his mind. For a moment, he battled with what to say and how to say it. Finally, with a cough and a sour laugh, he just let it spill out.

“So, I was going to be the next Bill Gates, huh? That’s me, Tav. A self-serving sap. You kept trying and all I did... All I did was get angry. Yell. Neglect you and... You did everything you could, and I...” He gave a short bitter laugh. “And I blamed you. It was all *my* fault, Tav. I am so... So...” That’s as far as he got. His emotions bound his tongue.

Alef could hear Tav’s heavy breathing. Then she spoke. “This’s a pretty forward question, but I’ve got to ask it. How do you feel about Nadia now? And...me now?”

“Nadia...” Alef’s voice started to break, “...is the most important thing in my life.” He could feel tears forming. He never cried, but that was changing too. “And if I, uh... If I hadn’t been such a stupid fool,” he stammered, “you’d still be the most important thing in my life.” His feelings overcame him again, and he stopped speaking.

There was a quiet moment, and then Tav asked in an almost whisper, “What’s changed for you?”

He swallowed a couple of times to regain control. “Yeah. Big time

change, huh. Maybe sometime we can talk about it. And I mean...” Her relationship with Rand slid back into his concern. “Uh, I don’t want to get in the way if you and Rand... What I’m trying to say is, I really like it when you join with Nadia and me. It’s like being whole again. But if you and Rand...”

Tav huffed. “When I was a teenager my sisters and I had a little term for boys we felt okay about but would *never* want to get serious with. We called them NGB’s. Nice guys, but... Rand’s no more than and maybe less than an NGB. No different than when I dated him before you and I were married. And sometimes, frankly, he’s wearing.” She hesitated. “Don’t tell him I said that, okay.”

Alef’s silent breath was one of relief. “Uh, then would you be okay going out with Nadia and me sometimes? I mean on the weekends too?” He didn’t even try to quell his excitement.

“Sure. Nadia seems to like it when we’re together like that.”

“How about... I mean if you... If sometimes you’d be okay getting a babysitter for Nadia, maybe just you and me could do something?”

Her hesitation worried him, but then she said, “Sure. Let’s do it.”

Alef stood up and nearly clicked his heels. A really terrible day just turned into the happiest day he had had maybe in two years. “Better let you go,” he said reluctantly. “You don’t know what this call’s done for me.”

“For *us*,” she said. “I have some forgiving and forgetting to do. Thank you.”

“Thanks Tav.”

“Night,” she said, and they clicked off.

Alef looked at his phone. The release that settled on him with the confession and apology he should have made to Tav a long time ago was palpable. Maybe even enlivening. What would the future bring to their relationship? He was convinced now that whatever she decided, he could deal with it. He would deal with it. But he also

knew, no matter what happened, he would always love her.

Chapter 9

Decision

Alef looked at the bronze metal clock on the wall of their conference room. Their meeting should have started five minutes ago. “You know where Eli is?” he asked Rand.

Rand shrugged. “His office door was closed when I went by. I thought he was here.”

“I’m here,” Eli said as he walked in. He didn’t look at Alef or Rand, just sat down at the table and brought with him discernable tension. He was fingering an envelope in his hand.

Alef and Rand exchanged a questioning look. “Okay, this’ll be as short or as long as we want,” Alef said. He forced his voice to sound relaxed. Not easy. “I’ll make the call to Omnimach this morning if we’re ready with our decision. If you think we need more time, we can wait on the call. Would anybody like to modify what they said their stand was yesterday or want to have more discussion?”

“I said my piece,” Rand responded. “It’s a no for me.”

“My position’s the same too,” Alef said. “I couldn’t be more upbeat about our future. Omnimach wanting to buy us out is a huge statement about the potential they see in us. That just confirms big time what we all know. I’m excited for what’s ahead for us!”

Eli glowered at Alef. “And you really think we can get there on our own?”

“Absolutely! We have two years’ experience under our belt and our

current success proves what we can do. Let's give ourselves another couple of years and incorporate along the way. Then if we want, we can go after some venture capital. We'd stay mostly independent and have the kind of resources to be the next Omnimach."

Eli sharply tapped his envelope on the table. "What happens when Omnimach comes after us with a claim we've stolen their intellectual property?"

Rand groaned. "C'mon. We haven't! If they take us to court, we'll counter sue for harassment that'd make them wish they'd never heard of Sawtooth."

Eli glanced down at his envelope, tapped it again on the table, and slid it into his shirt pocket. He gritted his teeth. "Bigtime mistake." He scowled at Alef. "Calling them today?"

"As soon as we're through here."

Eli stood, mumbled something indiscernible, and left.

The silence that lingered was unsettling. Finally, Rand asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"About Eli?"

"Yeah."

Alef twisted his mouth. "Concerned."

"Yeah, me too. How's this gonna affect our relationship long term?"

"Eli's always had a short fuse. Hope this's temporary. Guess we'll see, huh."

"You and I both know he wants to get his hands on that million-qubit quantum computer," Rand said harshly. "That's nothing but pure ego! Eli's focus is Eli. Period!"

Alef resisted looking at Rand as the irony of what he just heard almost made him smile. The pot calling the kettle black came to mind. He stood. "Who knows. Maybe in a couple of years, the price may come down so we can get one. I'll go make the call."

Rand held up a hand. “This’s got me thinking. Worrying, actually. What’s our software patent status with our proprietary conversational AI and marketing system?”

“Eli has all our key stuff patent pending.” Alef answered.

“You ever checked up on it?”

“No need. That’s Eli’s baby. He said it was done. That’s good enough for me.”

“Yeah? Well maybe given what’s happening here we should get an outside company, like AI Comp Security, to look at it.”

Alef thought for a second. “Wouldn’t hurt, and we can have them do a due diligence on our systems and marketing as if they were doing it for Omnimach. We’d have our guns loaded if Omnimach presses us. Good idea. I’ll contact them.”

“By the way,” Rand’s mouth turned up, “you’ve done a pro job handling all this.” He laughed. “Don’t let that go to your head though. Give my regards to Elaine when you call Omnimach.”

Alef nodded a thanks and went to his office. He picked up his phone, pressed the record button on its base, and dialed Deepa Coates’ executive assistant.

“Elaine Pritchard here.” The voice carried an I’m-all-business tone.

“Hello, Elaine. This is Alef Welch from Sawtooth ML. I understand you know Rand Elton.”

“I did,” was her curt reply. “I am assuming you are calling regarding Omnimach’s offer.”

“Uh, yes. Deepa asked me to contact you.”

“Do you have any questions about the offer, or are you ready to proceed?”

There would be no get-to-know-you conversation here. “I’m ready to proceed,” Alef said, “and to make you aware, I’m recording our call.”

“Understood. So am I.”

They would both be careful in what they said. “Please thank Deepa for the generous proposal,” Alef continued. “We understand that this offer is non-negotiable. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“We’ve discussed it and have decided to remain independent at this time.”

“You’re refusing the offer?” Elaine sounded surprised.

“Yes. We’re honored and flattered by Omnimach’s interest in us but feel we have the internal resources to take our company to the next level. We’ll take another look at potential outside involvement at that time.”

There was a long wait. “In that event,” Elaine’s voice was now mechanical, “Deepa has instructed me to read the following. ‘Omnimach is concerned that the principals of Sawtooth ML, LLC, having been former employees of Omnimach, may have used Omnimach proprietary intellectual property and marketing systems contrary to agreement. We will pursue all legal avenues to ensure that the integrity of our company has not been compromised in any way.’”

“We are expecting that.” Alef’s voice was matter of fact. “We’ve gone to great lengths to make certain that no proprietary Omnimach systems, ideas, or information were used by us at any time or in any form. We are confident that any objective analysis will confirm this, and we’ll be happy to cooperate if you have any reasonable questions.”

Elaine seemed taken back by his response. “Just so that’s understood.”

“It is understood. And, of course, you understand that we will be prepared to countersue for harassment if you decide to pursue this without justification.” He paused for effect. “I might add, the negative publicity that Omnimach would get, if this became a public issue, could likely be substantial.”

“You’ve made your point, Mr. Welch. I’ll pass this on.” Alef didn’t know whether her now very frosty tone came from respect or anger.

“Please relay to Deepa our gratitude for Omnimach’s generous offer,” Alef concluded, and they both clicked off.

He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Would he have been this much in control several weeks ago? No way. He looked up. “Thanks, Grandpa.” He buzzed Rand and Eli and asked them to come to his office. They were there within a minute. Eli was still churlish. Alef motioned to the chairs in front of his desk.

“Rather than me relate my conversation with Elaine, let’s just listen to it. I recorded everything.”

When it finished Rand said, “Run that again.”

“They’re going to sue our tails off!” Eli spit out. “They’re going to kill us!”

“That’s bunk and you know it,” Rand responded. “We’ve got nothing to be concerned about.”

“Right,” Eli said cynically. “Like we’ve got this huge bankroll to pay a cadre of lawyers to defend us. Deepa probably doesn’t even care if we didn’t violate their non-disclosure agreement. They can bleed us dry by forcing us to court over countless issues then push their cronies to badmouth us and give us negative press.”

He glared at Rand. “We’re dead in the water, and you know it. Stupid. How could you guys be so stupid to reject that offer?” He pushed himself out of his chair and stomped out.

“That went well,” Rand smirked. “What do you think we should do?”

Alef stared at the chair Eli had vacated. “Give it time. Eli’s reacting right now. We’ve seen him do this before, but he always settles down.”

“C’mon Alef, he’s ballistic with this one. Who knows what he’ll do.”

“I still say give it time, but let’s prepare. I’ll contact AI Comp Security and tell Eli what we’re proposing to do. We’ll do it with or without his approval though.”

“Agreed. Be interesting what they find out.”

Alef stood. “I’ll talk with Eli. Maybe I can calm him down a bit.”

“Wouldn’t bet on it.” Rand followed Alef out the door.

Eli’s office door was closed, and Alef knocked.

“I’m busy,” Eli yelled.

“It’s Alef. Got a minute?”

“Suit yourself.”

Alef opened the door and closed it behind him. Eli sat facing his computers and didn’t turn around.

“I understand where you’re coming from on all this,” Alef said. “Hope you can see our position too.”

Eli didn’t respond. Just kept doing what he was doing.

“We’ve had disagreements before and worked them out. We can do it again, I think.”

Eli snorted. “If there’s anything left of Sawtooth after Omnimach chews us up,” He still didn’t turn around.

“I think by preparing we can minimize whatever Omnimach could do if they decided to follow up on their threat, but I don’t think they will. They don’t have a leg to stand on.”

Eli turned around. “Preparing? Like what?”

Alef explained what he was going to ask AI Comp to do.

“Do what you want. We’re dead meat anyway you wanna look at it.” He turned back to his computer and Alef left.

Alef texted Rand. “Got grudging approval. Attitude remains. Patience.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Rand texted back.

Chapter 10

The Tenets

It had been a long day. Tav had texted Alef that Nadia had a little cold, and she thought it best if she went to bed early rather than go out with Alef tonight. He agreed. Probably a good thing. He wasn't in the mood to be a fun dad. He made himself a corn beef sandwich and poured a glass of grape juice. He sat at his kitchen bar and ate his supper. He felt like calling Tav just to talk to somebody about what happened today but didn't want to press his luck with her. Last night's conversation with her made today's challenges a little better. He was getting the same warm feeling when he thought about her now that he did when they first started dating years ago back at USC. He liked it. Really liked it.

His phone buzzed, and he looked at the caller ID. Tav. "Hmm. Hope Nadia's okay," he muttered to himself and put her on.

"How'd your meeting go?" was her greeting.

"Uh, interesting," Alef answered, surprised at her question. Was that the reason for her call? "Uh, is Nadia okay?"

"She's okay. I gave her some decongestant, and she's zonked out. I've been thinking about you and Omnimach. You mind telling me what happened today?"

That was a good sign! Alef relaxed and gave her a blow-by-blow account.

"Doesn't sound like you're very worried about Omnimach's

threat.”

“I don’t think they’ll do anything, but we’ll be prepared. They wouldn’t win, and the price they’d pay in bad publicity and bucks wouldn’t be worth the gamble.”

“Hope you’re right. Sounds like Eli may be your big problem.”

“Yeah. Maybe. There’s some real bad vibes going between him and Rand. Those two have clashed a lot in the past, but they’ve kept their rancor pretty much in check so we could work together and get things done. Hope a little time will take care of it again.”

“You’ve had a couple of stressful days. How are you holding up?”

“Better than I would have a few months ago.”

“That have to do with the changes you alluded to last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Alef hesitated. Was it time? He felt something. Like a nudge. “Yeah, I would,” he said. “Not tonight though. Let’s do it when we’re together sometime. If that’s okay.”

“When?” She laughed. “There I go, being forward again.”

Alef grinned. “How about tomorrow? It’s Friday. Think you could get a sitter for Nadia, and we could go to dinner?”

“I think so. Let’s plan on it.”

“I’ll call you with the time. You pick the place.”

Neither one knew what to say next. Alef cleared his throat. “Thanks. I’ve wanted to...” He didn’t finish his sentence.

“It’ll be fun,” Tav exclaimed. “Call me.”

They clicked off. “That’s two nights in a row you’ve made my day,” he said to the phone. He was beginning to know what a light heart felt like again. He raised his hand to his head. This whole thing must be the cause of the headache he had been having over the last few weeks. No biggie. He took two ibuprofen and cleaned up after his supper.

He went to bed early, and for some reason was expecting another

grandpa dream.

He got it.

Alef gazed at a huge waterfall that extended as far as he could see. In front of him the water dropped from each of three adjoining cliffs with a mesmerizing roar into a gorge nearly 300 feet deep. His grandfather was standing by his side. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said.

“Uh, yeah. Where are we?”

“Iguazu Falls on the Brazil-Argentina border. It’s the largest falls in the world. What you are looking at is called the Devil’s Throat. Interesting name, don’t you think?”

“Uh, yeah. Can I ask why you’re at a different place every time I dream about you?”

“I haven’t seen some of these places before, so I thought I’d check them out.” His grandfather smiled wryly. “And maybe your memory’s being jogged a bit too in our travels. I hope you’re seeing yourself a little more clearly.”

“Uh, oh, sure,” Alef muttered. “Uh, it’s neat you can go wherever you want.” His grandfather looked at him. He wanted something more than that from Alef. Alef shifted with discomfort, and it was as though he were compelled to close his eyes. When he did, each of his previous grandfather dreams flowed one after another through his mind.

The first one, he was meandering through woods without any real direction. He shook his head. *Like my life?* Then he was in his grandfather’s study, and what his grandfather told him was as familiar to him as the rocking chair his grandfather sat in. When he was growing up, the rocker was always there. He was so used to it though, he never paid attention to it. Was that like the truths his grandfather shared with him in that dream and since? Did he already know them but just never thought about them?

And then he saw the storm that arose over the ocean when he was

on the ship with his grandfather. It was like what was beginning to rage in him. A tempest that would unsettle or cleanse. Or both. The last dream pushed that memory aside. Its hazy, unclear, undefined setting was like his mind for the last year. Maybe two. Maybe longer. A self-inflicted fog had kept him from seeing who he really was.

He opened his eyes and pulled in a breath. His grandfather was watching him and nodded an acknowledgement that he knew what Alef had just experienced. And from nowhere the same question came to his mind that arose with every experience he was having with his grandfather. *Is this a dream or is it real?* His answer was now an unqualified, *Yes*.

To both questions.

The roar of water grabbed his attention now, and he gawked at the absorbing Devil's Throat his grandfather had pointed to. There was a strange power to it. Like it was trying to pull him in. To control him.

"There's a force like that, that would tear you away from Light," his grandpa reflected. "Suck you into its darkness."

"What do you mean by Light?" Alef had asked him that question in another dream, but there had been no answer.

"You tell me."

Alef turned away from the Devil's Throat and looked at his grandfather's face. It was aglow. "Whatever it is, you have it, don't you."

His grandfather's eyes confirmed Alef's observation. "What is it?"

"The Mentor?" Alef responded. "It has something to do with the Mentor, huh."

"Why?" his grandfather asked.

"Why? I don't..." Alef stopped. He remembered how he felt when he was trying to be in control of himself and the something extra that seemed to help him. He spoke tentatively. "Maybe because when you need it, you get this boost. You're more in control of yourself than

usual. And your thoughts and words are better than what you can say or think on your own.”

“Why would you call that Light?”

“Because... Because Light helps you raise yourself to a higher level. A better level. Maybe to love better too, huh?”

“To love better too,” his grandfather agreed. He pointed to the Devil’s Throat. “There is another essence that would destroy you, Alef. Suck away your agency. Enslave you.” He let the roar of the massive converging waterfall go uninterrupted for a time. “Like that.”

“Does it have a name, too?” Alef asked.

“I call it the Proscribed.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Bind. Constrict.”

“And the Mentor is Light?”

“The Mentor is a bearer of Light. Light is truth, including all its derivatives. Agency. Peace. Order. All of them bring freedom. The darkness of the Proscribed is at the other end of the stick. Deceit. Lies. Force. Contention. Chains.”

“Agency? You talked about agency before, and I asked you what it was, but you didn’t really say.”

“Freedom. The ability, *the right*, to choose. The more Light you have, the more your choices. The freer you are.”

Alef thought back to his first dream of his grandfather. “Uh, you said that you asked me if I wanted to trade hair, so I’d know it was you and not a deceiver. Uh, was the Proscribed that deceiver?”

“Yes.”

Alef’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand. If he wanted to deceive me, why couldn’t he just say what you said?”

His grandpa winked. “Because he doesn’t have a sense of humor.”

Alef laughed. “I’d know you anyway, Grandpa.” He stared at The Devil’s Throat. “Why does there even have to be Light and Dark.

Why isn't it all Light so everyone can be happy? Happy and free?"

"There is no existence without opposites, Alef. No reality. Without contraries, there could be no choices. No reason to even exist. We simply would not be. Could not be."

His grandfather turned from the Devil's Throat and led Alef into the verdant green expanse that bordered the river. They sat on a log, and Alef was absorbed in the beauty that surrounded him. A red-breasted toucan watched them from a large mahogany tree. Butterflies of every hue flitted around, and begonias and orchids clung to the trees and rocks. He could still hear the roar of the Devil's Throat, but it was just a low background sound now.

As he sat enthralled with the setting, he had a most peculiar feeling. It was as though all that his grandpa told him about not being acted upon and love and the Mentor and the Proscribed, he was somehow very familiar with. It was like his grandpa was just reminding him of things he'd forgotten.

Before he could say anything, his grandfather spoke. "*I am* reminding you, Alef. You have always had this knowledge."

"What do you mean?"

"There's no beginning nor ending to you. To your essence. Awareness of your eternal nature is embedded in you. And so is the knowledge of Light and Dark."

"But how could I forget that?"

"Perhaps not so much forget as ignore. When you don't pay attention to it, that understanding becomes latent."

Alef was overwhelmed with what he was hearing. Almost in a daze. "Why you telling me these things, Grandpa? Why am I even having these dreams?"

"Because I love you."

"But how are you doing this? Why are you doing this?"

"If you listen, if you follow what I say, there will be more."

“Why wouldn’t I?” Alef was confused. “I want to hear what you say. I want to remember. I want to... I want to change.”

“So, I’m still coming. Now, tell me about your experiences since we last talked.”

Alef did, though he was certain his grandfather already knew. His grandpa listened intently, and that pulled detail and feelings and awareness out of Alef that he hadn’t even realized were there. Then with near despair, Alef told him of his overwhelming sorrow for what he’d done to his family. About his confession to Tav and her response. “This love business,” he said as his face drooped in anguish, “is so confusing. So hard.”

“Why?”

Alef teared up. “I don’t know how I could love Nadia or Tav more. But how could Tav love me? And Rand... When I thought he was involved with Tav, I could hardly stand to be around him. That only got better when she told me she wasn’t interested in him.” He grimaced. “And Eli. Right now, I don’t think I even like the guy, let alone love him.”

“Like and love aren’t the same thing, Alef. The highest love is wanting what’s best for another. That doesn’t depend on how they feel about you. We don’t need to *like* how they’re acting or talking. We can love them without ever wanting to be around them.”

Alef grimaced. “Man, that’s hard.”

“Do you want to do it, is the question.”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“The *Tenets*,” his grandfather mused. “The *Tenets* is what they are. To act and not be acted upon, and to love, help define what Light is.” His eyes bore into Alef’s. “To want Light, Alef, is to want to do those things which define Light.”

“The *Tenets*?” Alef asked.

“Yes. The *Tenets*. They are inseparable. They are one.”

Alef looked down at his hands. "I'm not doing a great job with them."

His grandpa cocked his head. "But you *want* to do well, Alef. The wanting to is everything." He smiled. "And remember, Tavia has choices to make also. Just like you. Give her time." He stood up from the log they were sitting on. "Two more questions, Alef. Why are there laws? Do you obey them?"

The dream ended.

Chapter 11

Law

“Got a second?” Rand said as he came into Alef’s office and closed the door behind him. It was after 6:00 pm, and Alef was getting ready to leave to pick up Tav for their date.

“Yeah. What’s up?”

Rand tossed an envelope on Alef’s desk. “That look familiar?”

Alef picked it up. “Yeah. It’s one of our envelopes. So?”

“Open it.”

Alef did and removed the single sheet of paper that was in it.

“Read it aloud.”

Alef’s eyebrows pushed together and he read.

As per the Sawtooth ML, LLC Operating Agreement, I am hereby giving my seven-day written notice of my voluntary membership withdrawal from Sawtooth ML, LLC. I am not in violation of any Operating Agreement stipulations and am entitled to full withdrawal privileges and compensation. (Signed) Elijah Kao.

Alef stared at the paper.

“You notice the date?” Rand asked.

Alef blinked. “Yeah. Yesterday.” He lifted the envelope and turned it over. “You think this is what Eli was fidgeting with when we met before I called Omnimach?”

“I’m sure of it. He was going to give it to us but for some reason changed his mind.”

“Why?” Alef asked, genuinely confused. “I mean why did he want to leave Sawtooth in the first place and then not go through with it?”

“I think he was going to do an end run against us and go directly to Omnimach but for some reason chickened out.”

“He was distraught, but that’s tantamount to betrayal. You think he’d really do it?”

“You bet I do!” Rand appeared upset. “He was going to stab us in the back, and I think he’ll still do it.”

Alef held up the envelope. “Where did you find this?”

“Eli’s gone for the day. I had some things I wanted him to look at so went into his office to drop them on his desk and saw the corner of this envelope sticking out from under his desk mat. I remembered him fiddling around with an envelope yesterday and was curious. So here it is.”

Alef put the sheet back in the envelope and handed it to Rand. “Better put this where you got it but make a copy first.”

“What do you think we should do with the traitor?” Rand’s face was flushed, and his neck cords raised.

“Our Operating Agreement states conditions where LLC membership can be terminated for cause,” Alef said with a serenity that surprised him. “One of them is to be employed by a competitor while still an LLC member. Maybe his intent yesterday was to withdraw his membership and then seek an arrangement with Omnimach so he wouldn’t be in violation with the Agreement.”

“And get full buyout compensation, etc., etc.” Rand’s face tightened with disgust.

“Yeah. But for whatever reason, he didn’t do it,” Alef replied.

“Didn’t do it yesterday, but he sure intended to. So, it’s just a matter of when. I’ll bet he’s got something in mind. So, what do we do? I say, beat him to the punch and terminate him.”

“We can’t unilaterally remove him from the LLC without cause.”

“So, we just sit and wait for him to stick it to us?”

Alef didn't respond immediately. He was thinking about his grandpa and the *Tenets*. He was thinking about his struggle with not being a reactor and about this business of loving but not liking. Then an idea came. “We don't know what Eli's intending to do now. It's possible he's had a change of heart.”

“I don't believe that!” Rand snorted. “And neither do you. Eli wants to be a god, and he sees Omnimach's million qubit computer making him one.”

“Maybe. But it's also possible he wants to stick with us. I think we need to proceed with guarded patience. Try to keep our team intact but prepare ourselves for any eventuality.”

“Guarded patience? What does that mean?” Rand's tone was almost derisive.

Alef continued. “Let's keep our eyes and ears open for potential violations of our Operating Agreement.” He stopped talking as he massaged the pain in his right temple, then looked back at Rand. “Maybe have a plan in place for a Sawtooth without Eli. Just in case.”

Rand snorted. “Whatever. I guess you're saying we just wait for AI Comp Security to turn up something on him so we can *legitimately* can him.”

Alef kept his cool. “I called them this morning. They're coming out next Tuesday.”

Rand waved the envelope. “This changes everything, Alef!” He stormed out.

Alef left his office. It had been raining and the temperature was in the mid-40s. Typical April. He took in a refreshing breath and got in his car. He turned on the windshield wipers and drove to Tav's. Nadia opened the door and jumped on him. He picked her up and held her out. “Looks like you're feeling better.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I wasn’t that sick and are you guys going on a real date?” she cried gleefully.

“Yep. And you’re my date tomorrow if you’re feeling okay.”

“I’m not sick! Where we going?” she squealed.

“How about a movie. And then the aquarium to see all kinds of fish. And then because the weather’s supposed to be nice and sunny, we can walk along the river and then come to my place and play Xbox and have any kind of dessert you want.”

“Yes!” She screamed and kissed Alef on his cheek.

Alef set her down as Tav came into the room. “I’m ready,” she said and kissed Nadia. “Be good for Mandy.”

“I will. Daddy, can Mommy come on our date tomorrow too?”

Alef glanced at Tav then cocked his head. “I’d like that.”

Tav laughed. “We’ll see.” She looked at her watch. “Better get going. Our reservations are in twenty minutes.”

Tav had chosen a cozy atmospheric Italian restaurant and at their request the waitress sat them in a corner booth where they were away from most of the crowd noise. They ordered their food, and she left. Tav turned to Alef. “Well, how was your day?”

Alef smirked. “Three for three. Last three days have been doozies.” He told her about the envelope and what was in it.

“Do you think Eli will leave?”

“I think if it were up to Rand, we’d manufacture a violation to kick him out.”

“He’s that angry?”

“He’s that angry.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I want to give Eli the benefit of the doubt, but he’s sure been acting weird. Even with our personality differences we’ve been a good team, but what I saw today really bothers me.” He took a drink of water and shrugged. “I think we just wait and see and be

prepared either way.” He turned his hand over. “How about you. How’s your school counseling coming?”

“The regular. Yesterday, I had a good one though. I had to talk with a gal who has her hair in a tight braid that comes down to her waist. Someone stuck a “Pull Me” sign on it, and she got it yanked several times before she found out. She was pretty upset, but I got her calmed down.”

Alef grinned. “I would’ve had trouble keeping a straight face.”

“If you saw her face, you’d know that a smiling counselor was the last thing that girl wanted to see.

“That’s why you’re the counselor. Anyway, thanks for listening.”

Their meal came, and they started to eat. Tav looked at Alef’s glass of water. “No wine?” she asked playfully. “We’re at an Italian restaurant and no wine?” Alef’s face reddened. Tav looked at her own chardonnay and back at his water. “It’s the coffee thing, huh?”

He finished chewing his bite of lasagna. “Yeah.”

“Probably a good thing.” She pushed her own glass away “You okay telling me about what’s happening with you? I mean, I don’t want to push, but...” She smiled.

He took a sip of water and sat back. “Do you believe in dreams, Tav?”

She lifted her head, a puzzled look on her face, and for the next hour and between bites he told her about his grandpa. Everything from trading hair to the *Tenets*.

Tav only finished half her dinner and pushed it away. “How many times have you had a dream about your grandfather?”

“Five, counting the first one.”

“And they’re getting more detailed?”

“Yeah. Now, we pretty much have a regular conversation. I ask questions. He answers. He asks questions. I answer.” He gave Tav a sheepish look. “You think I’m losing it?”

She laughed. "If you are, so am I. If what's happening with you is the result of your dreams, how could they not be real?" She lifted a shoulder. "Whatever *real* is."

"I don't have an explanation for them." Alef sighed. "But they sure seem real to me." He gazed up at the ceiling. "And somehow this being, or essence, Grandpa calls the Mentor, may be involved in my life. Just like Grandpa hinted."

Tav became contemplative. "The *Tenets* your grandfather talks about kind of reminds me of someone. Of course, you know the myth or legend about Joshua."

"Yeah. What about him?"

"He's supposed to have been the proverbial perfect person, whatever that is, and with some kind of mystical powers."

"So, why does Grandpa's the *Tenets* remind you of him?"

"There were some attributes like those you talk about that I remember being associated with him. Love. Peace. Self-control. That kind of thing."

"Yeah. I remember. I'll ask Grandpa about him." The corner of his mouth twitched up. "If I have any more dreams."

"From what you've said, it sounds like it's up to you whether you do or not. By the way, what did you say were his final words last night?"

"His exact words were, 'Why are there laws? Do you obey them?'" He looked at Tav. "How would you answer?"

"You think these have something to do with one of his *Tenets*?"

"Maybe. So, how would you answer him?"

Tav fingered her napkin for a moment. "Well, it's obvious why we have laws. If we didn't, there'd be chaos. Everyone would be in it for themselves, and we'd destroy each other."

"What about bad laws?"

Tav lifted her hand. "I guess whether they're good or bad is in

the eye of the beholder. But I think, both for our sakes and for the well-being of the society we're in, we need to abide by the laws we're under. If we don't like them, then we should try to change them or go where the laws are more to our liking."

"You saying we should obey the law, whatever it is, just because it's the law?"

"I don't know," she answered. "But maybe our willingness to obey rather than be our own law says something about who we are. About whether we're concerned with the well-being of others or are mostly focused on our own comforts and wants."

"Hmm. Haven't thought about it like that before." For a while he moved a bread crumb around with his finger on the checkered tablecloth in their booth then looked up at her. "Here's another thought. Maybe there are laws, even higher laws, or better laws, which aren't written but are kind of felt. You just know what they are."

"Like the *Tenets* we've been talking about?" Tav asked.

"Yeah. Like those. And maybe the kind or level of law we're willing to follow, I mean *want* to follow, defines who we are."

Tav reached over and touched the back of his hand. "I like this kind of talk. A lot."

Alef turned his hand over and squeezed hers. "Me too."

She gently pulled her hand away. The waitress came and asked if they wanted anything else. They didn't, and she handed Alef the bill. "Stay as long you want," she said. "We're not that busy tonight."

Alef sat back. "Grandpa told me to listen to you about other universes."

"Me? How does he know anything about me?"

"He knows everything about me, so he knows about you too."

"I'm no cosmologist," she said with a slight eye roll.

"You brought it up when you and I were talking about our essences and where they might come from, if they exist."

“Oh yeah. I read somewhere about possible types of universes that kind of sounded logical.”

“And?”

“It had to do with the levels of intelligence in living beings that might exist. In the theory I read, universes are classified by the level of power and energy living beings in them have access to. At the lowest level universe, like ours, they use energy or power or light directly or indirectly from the sun or star their planet circles. As the theory goes, there are maybe infinite gradations of universes and at the highest level they’ve harnessed and internalized all the energy and power and light contained in their entire universe as well as all other universes.”

“They’re gods?” Alef asked with interest.

“Pretty much. I mean yes, of course. They’d have to be gods. They’re a source of infinite power and light and would be able to organize matter and create life.”

“And you think maybe we, I mean our essences, might have come from some higher universe?”

“I don’t know, but it makes sense to me.”

“Why? What would be the reason we’d be sent to a lower order universe?” he asked skeptically. “And why wouldn’t we know this? I mean, why wouldn’t those in the universe we came from be communicating with us?”

“But you have been communicated with.”

“Huh? No, way.”

“What do you call your conversations with your grandfather? And what about the impressions you’ve had that might be the Mentor that your grandfather’s talked to you about?”

Alef was taken aback, and he stared at Tav.

“Looks like you’ll have more questions to ask your grandfather,” she said with a grin and glanced at her watch. “We’d better go. I told the babysitter we wouldn’t be late. I want to make sure Nadia’s in

bed at a good time. She has to be well rested for the fun day we have planned for tomorrow.”

“We?” Alef asked in surprise.

She gave him a playful look. “Well, you did invite me.”

Chapter 12

The Division

“**H**ad a lousy weekend worrying about Eli,” Rand grouched as he sat in Alef’s office. “How was yours?”

Alef’s was one of the best he had for as long as he could remember. For two days, he, Tav, and Nadia were like a family again. But given the situation at Sawtooth and Rand’s past involvement with Tav, he didn’t say anything. Not now, anyway. “Good,” was all he said.

“What’d you do?”

Alef didn’t look up at him. “I was with Nadia, and Tav joined us for a lot of it.” He handed Rand a sheet of paper. “Here’s the part of our Operating Agreement dealing with membership withdrawal from the LLC.”

Rand took it but kept looking at Alef. “Uh, you and Tav doing things together again?” His taut lips belied the casualness of his tone.

“Yeah. A little. Did you have a chance to read over the Operating Agreement?” Alef wanted to divert Rand’s attention away from Tav.

Rand looked at the paper. “I just glanced at it. What’s your take?”

“Bottomline, any of us can withdraw from our LLC at any time without penalty if we give a seven-day written notice, and we’re not in violation of our agreement. We would get our initial investment back within a year and whatever else the partners wanted to give us.

“Remind me what our initial investment was,” Rand said.

“If we’re talking about the amount each of us put up to get Saw-

tooth going, it'd be around \$25,000 each. If we add to that our unreimbursed personal out-of-pocket costs and missed salary as we got Sawtooth to where it is today, that gets to be sizeable.”

“How can we terminate him for cause?”

“If he violates any stipulation in the Operating Agreement.”

“Like what?”

“Like being employed by a direct competitor or not performing his duties to the best of his ability.”

“We’ve got to find a way to terminate him, Alef. I’ve got this gut feeling he’s going to destroy us if we don’t.”

“Who would we replace him with?”

Rand gave Alef a duh look. “Liz, of course. She’s at least as competent as Eli. She’s been his assistant for the last year and knows our systems backwards and forwards.”

“Would we offer her membership in the LLC?”

“I don’t want to do that but say put her under contract to receive a healthy share of stock when we incorporate if she performs well.”

Alef put his hands behind his head. “I don’t like any of this.”

“Who does?” Rand grumbled.

“Have you seen Eli today?” Alef asked.

“No, and Liz didn’t know where he was. Maybe he’s quit on us already.”

“Hardly. Whatever we do though, we can’t force him to leave. We can’t give him cause to give us big time trouble.”

“Okay, but I’m sure going to look for violations to can him. He’s gonna kill us if we don’t.” Rand stood. “I’ve got work to do. Anything else?”

Alef got up. “Nope. Just keep our eyes and ears open.”

“When’s AI Comp coming in?” Rand asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Maybe they’ll find out something.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’m going to check with Liz to make sure she’s ready for them.”

Alef went to her office and knocked lightly on the open door. She waved him in. Liz Martinez’s appearance, in many ways, was the opposite of Belinda Norton’s and contrasted with the highly efficient and organized person she really was. Her shoulder-length ginger hair looked unbrushed and the t-shirt and jeans she always wore highlighted her 30 to 40 extra pounds. But her complexion was clear and her face even pretty if she bothered to do something with it. Her piercing eyes and obvious confidence, however, hinted at her exceptional mind.

“Gotta minute?” Alef asked.

“Sure.” She pointed to the side chair by her desk.

“Mind if I close the door?” Alef asked.

Liz raised an eyebrow. “Uh, sure. Go ahead.”

Alef did and sat down. “Has Eli told you we’ve got AI Comp coming in tomorrow to do a checkup of our systems?”

Liz’s eyes widened. “No. This’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“They’ll be here around 10:00. We want them to have access to everything, so please facilitate that.”

“Uh, sure.” She didn’t try to hide her concern. “Uh, something wrong? I mean, why’re we doing it, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“With our move here, we just want to make sure everything’s secure.”

“Makes sense.”

Alef could see she wasn’t convinced that was the only reason. He decided to do some probing. “Have you seen Eli today?”

“No.” She looked down at her desk.

“You know if he’ll be in today?”

“Uh, no.” She started shuffling some papers.

Alef was silent for a long time. Liz looked up, lines showing on her

face.

“What’s going on, Liz?” he asked her kindly. “Is it Eli?”

She rubbed her tongue against her bottom lip and clenched her hands together. “He’s different lately.”

“How so?”

Her eyes were asking Alef if she could trust him. He gave her a warm smile, and she returned it. “We used to talk all the time. Several times a day. I mean, you need to do that to keep things running you know, and we talked about all kinds of other things too. But the last couple of weeks...” She pulled at her lower lip. “I could count on one hand the times we’ve talked and that was about stuff that I brought up, and his answers were clipped like he didn’t want to talk about it. So, I stopped trying to talk to him.”

“What do you think’s happening with him?”

She fixed her eyes on Alef’s. “Don’t know. He’s been so different that I asked straight out if something’s wrong. He waved me away.”

“When was that?”

“Last week. Maybe Wednesday. I haven’t seen him since. He says he’s at home. He texted me Friday and today to say he wouldn’t be in the office.”

Alef held her gaze. “Rand and I want to find out what’s going on. Will you help us?” Alef hoped she saw concern in his face.

“Yeah. Okay. What do you want me to do?”

“Our servers keep track of all incoming and outgoing phone calls, don’t they?”

“Yeah. Just the numbers and length of the call of course, not the conversations.”

“Including company smartphones and their texts?”

“Yeah. Everything.”

“And emails?”

“We have a complete record of those too.”

“Even deleted ones?”

“They’re stored for thirty days then permanently deleted.”

“I’d like you to get both phone and email records for the last month for Rand, Eli, and me.”

“Okay, but I’ll need the code to access that. Only you three have it.”

“I’ll get it for you.” He stood. “I’ll tell Rand what we’re doing, but until we find out what’s going on with Eli, I’m asking you to keep this quiet.”

“Understood.” Liz’s eyes nearly teared up. She looked like she’d lost a good friend. “He’s changed,” she muttered.

“Thanks, Liz. Thanks for everything you do.” She smiled a thank you.

It was hard for Alef to get his mind back on his work, but he had to. He had a pile of financials to go through and to review Rand’s next quarter marketing plan and projections.

His desk phone rang. It was Rand. “Thought you’d like a little good news today.”

“I’ll take it any day, but today especially.”

“Just got weekly reports in from my field sales staff. We have new signed contracts to set up and manage conversational AI systems for two banks, three online retailers, two school districts, a medical clinic, and two automobile agencies.”

“This’s why Omnimach’s offer made no sense,” Alef said. “With this kind of growth, we could be in a good position to start talking to venture capitalists within a couple years.”

“Yeah. And there’ll be two of us who’ll benefit from that, not three.” Rand clicked off.

Alef understood Rand’s antipathy toward Eli, but he wasn’t ready to make a final judgment until all the cards were down. His cellphone rang. Tav.

“Hi, Daddy. Mommy said I could call you.”

“You can call me anytime, sweetheart.”

“Yesterday and Saturday was the funnest I’ve ever had! And Mommy had fun too. Can we do it next week?”

“Maybe in a couple of weeks. We’ll see. Can I talk to your mom?”

“Here Mommy,” she yelled. “Daddy wants to talk to you.”

“Love you,” Alef said.

Tav laughed. “I’m assuming that was for Nadia.”

“It’s for anyone there who’ll accept it.” He grimaced at his response. *Would that turn her off?*

“I had a ball this weekend,” she said. “Thanks for letting me come.”

That was his answer, and he smiled. “Most fun I’ve had in a long time,” he said.

“Me too. I’d like to do it again.”

“Nadia and I will plan on it!” He wanted to say a lot more, but not yet.

“What’s happening with Sawtooth?” she asked. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

He told her, then said, “Rand’s ready to fire Eli, but that’s more than premature. We need to wait until we’re certain it’s justified.”

“You’re a good man, Alef.”

He could tell she meant it, and that pulled the speech right out of him. For her to say that after what he did to her, and Nadia, nearly brought tears. He cleared his throat. “That means a lot.”

“It’s true. Nadia’s dad is getting to be...a good one.”

“Not anywhere near like her mother.” He knew that sounded weak on the back of her compliment, but he meant it.

She laughed. “Good we like each other, huh? Gotta go. Talk to you later.”

Alef didn’t move from his desk for a long time. Was it possible to have his family back? He was aching to talk to his grandfather.

Tonight he got his wish.

Chapter 13

When Ready

“**W**here are we this time?” Alef asked as he gaped at the cliffs he was standing on. They dropped some 700 feet to the ocean below. Looking both ways, they seemed to go on forever and were like folds in a great stone drape. He and his grandfather were walking 30 to 40 feet in from its edge.

“These are the Cliffs of Moher, his grandfather said. “We are on Ireland’s west coast.”

A moist breeze brushed Alef’s face, and he said, “Never heard of them, but they’re beautiful.”

His grandfather pointed to the virgin fields of scurvy grass and wildflowers that graced the tops of the cliffs, then at the puffins and other birds that nested in its crags. “Yes. It’s all beautiful.”

They gazed at their remarkable surroundings for a while then his grandfather spoke. “You’ve had an interesting last few days. What have you learned about laws?”

Alef thought for a moment about his conversation with Tav and said, “I’ve learned they don’t have to be written down. I can feel them as if I had read them.”

“What are they?”

Alef gazed out over the cliffs at the gray ocean below. “Maybe directions,” he mused. “Or maybe paths. I know I can choose whether to follow them or not.”

“Why would you follow them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because they bring order?”

“And?” his grandfather said.

Alef contemplated the *Tenets* his grandfather had taught him, and it was as though he had an epiphany. “Yes! When I follow them, good things can happen. Like protections maybe. And if I don’t, consequences that aren’t so good.” He reached down and plucked a dandelion with a white ball head. He waved it to strip it of its seeds then watched them scatter in the air. “And when I follow laws,” he continued, “I feel like I’m in control of myself.” He felt buoyed with that awareness. “Like I’m free even.” The wind carried the seedlings beyond his sight, and he dropped the dandelion stem.

“What else?” his grandfather asked.

Alef pondered the question for a second then he knew what his grandpa was after, and his heart swelled with gratitude. It was what his grandfather was doing. “When I follow law,” Alef could barely control his emotions, “I’m thinking of others. I’m helping those around me, and... And that helps me.”

“How?”

Alef thought of what it was like around Tav now. When there was synergy between them something serendipitous was added. Peace. Power. Understanding. Maybe even love. Something beyond the sum of their individual contributions. That was what happened when he obeyed laws. He wasn’t just conforming. He was expanding. He was sharing a oneness with others who were obeying. With those who *wanted* to obey. And he understood what his grandfather was asking.

“Because I become more than just myself,” he said. “Much more.”

“And if you choose to be your own law or a law unto yourself, what then?”

Alef winced. “Then I shut off my potential for power and peace.

And freedom, I think. I shrink.” He chewed on his lip. “I shrink into me.” Alef knew he was describing himself. Or at least who he had been.

“I asked you two questions last time, Alef. Why are there laws? Do you obey them? You answered the first.” His grandfather’s look was piercing. “What about the second?”

Alef kept the laws of the land. Or, at least tried to. But the higher laws? The laws he felt? No. He’d been his own law. Selfish. Hurtful. Bound by his inward pull. He stared at his feet and shook his head, then faced his grandfather. “I haven’t, but I think I want to.” And a thought stirred in his mind. “Of course!” he exclaimed. “Obeying law is one of the *Tenets*, isn’t it?”

His grandfather nodded. “You expand in Light and power by abiding ever higher laws. Can you feel that? Can you see how that frees you?”

Alef could feel it, and he looked at his grandpa with awe.

His grandpa held his gaze. “Now, I believe you have questions for me.”

Alef swallowed. “Yeah. Did we come from another universe? I mean, did our essences come from another universe?”

“Yes.”

“Are you in another universe?”

“I am.”

“Uh, is that, uh, the universe I came from?”

“Yes.”

“But how can you... I mean, how are we able to talk like this? I mean, can you just slide from one universe to another?”

“I’m here by assignment and with authorization because... Because I love you.”

“Authorization from who? Do you have a boss?”

“No bosses here, Alef. Just requests and cooperation.”

“Why though? I mean, why aren’t I still in the universe where I came from? Why am I here?”

“To make choices.”

“To make choices? I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

Alef waited, but his grandfather was silent. “Uh, are you going to explain?”

“When you’re ready, you’ll understand.”

“Uh, and I’m not ready now?”

“If you were, you would understand.”

Alef’s frustration was growing. “What do I have to do to be ready?”

“You’ll know.”

This was going nowhere. Alef tried another question. “Is there a god?”

“Lots of them. Just about everybody has their own. Their mind. Their body. Their money. Their clothes. Their fame. Their popularity. Their control over others. Their power and position.”

“I mean, is there *a* God? Tav told me about other universe theories and about a level where gods could exist. Is that real?”

“You’ll know when you’re ready.”

When he was ready? How could he ever be ready when he didn’t even know what ready was? He had one more question. “Tav and I talked about the legend or myth of Joshua. Uh, was he real?”

“He *is* real.” His eyes grabbed Alef’s. “He is the path to *THE ONE*. Learn of him.”

“*THE ONE*? What’s that?” Alef’s grandfather turned away, and Alef knew he would get no more detail. Not until he was ready.

For a while, his grandfather seemed to drink in the beauty that surrounded them, then he turned to Alef. “Do you think these cliffs have always been here?”

Alef gazed at the massive undulating shale and sandstone wonder

of the world beneath them. “Sure looks like it to me.”

His grandpa walked closer to the edge of the cliff “Three-hundred million years or so ago, these did not exist,” he said. “Will they be here three hundred million years from now? Not likely. They are eroding.” He smiled. “Because these cliffs have not always been, and because they will not always be, they are...*temporary*.”

He walked away from the edge and faced Alef. “If these are temporary, what does that say about your clothes, your car, your money, your house, your business, your circumstances? What does that say about earthly power or prestige or popularity?” He shook his head. “Alef, everything you will ever confront in this world is temporary. Remember that. It will pass. It has no bearing on *your* eternity. Only the person you choose to be does. Everything else will be gone.”

His lips curved into a sardonic smile. Or maybe a sorrowful one. “The irony, Alef, the tragedy, is that people make the temporary their gods. Gods that will pass as smoke in the wind. Gods that have no power or meaning or worth because they are temporary.” For a moment he didn’t speak, then he said, “It’s exhaustive, Alef, to seek for happiness where it doesn’t exist. There is no joy in the temporary. Only hollow, momentary pleasure.”

Alef had the strangest feeling that this was the last of his grandpa dreams. “Uh...uh...will I see you again?” he stuttered.

His grandfather’s answer was a non-answer. “If you want joy, Alef, *real* joy, seek to know and live the *Tenets*. All of them. If you want to, you can.”

“If I want to? Why wouldn’t I want to?” Alef exclaimed. He immediately regretted his obvious exasperation.

“I love you,” was his grandfather’s reply. “Remember who you are.” Then, with a sigh, he asked, “What are you doing about your pride? When was the last time you sacrificed to help someone?”

The dream stopped, and Alef awoke, his mind churning. His ego

was bruised by his grandfather's last words and his *when you are ready* qualifier. Alef knew who he was. That's the conversation he had with his grandpa in one of his first dreams. And what did it take to be ready to receive whatever his grandfather wouldn't tell him? What else did he have to do or be?

He grumbled and mentally ticked off his qualifications. Number one in his graduate class in software engineering from USC. President of an up-and-coming next generation machine learning apps company while only in his early 30s. And how many times had he heard others use the word "brilliant" when they described him?

Ready? What did it take if he wasn't already qualified? He let that thought eat at him for a long time. Then one of his grandfather's last questions pushed that gnawing aside. *What are you doing about your pride?*

Alef grouched. "What did he mean by that?" Wasn't he supposed to think well of himself? Okay, he'd been a jerk with Tav and Nadia. He admitted that now, and he was changing. He wanted to change. He wanted to be better. He wanted to follow the laws of Light. Didn't he?

Sure. He knew he couldn't do that without help. Like the help his grandfather had given in the dreams. And had he already experienced the Mentor's help? He mentally shrugged. Wasn't that acknowledgement doing something about his pride? Was there more?

Then an awareness slapped him in the face, and he laughed scornfully at the stupidity of his *prideful* wrestling with his grandfather's statements. He had just given himself ample evidence that there was more. He absolutely reeked with pride.

"Let's see," he said to himself with a voice dripping with sarcasm, "I ticked off reasons why Grandpa needed to tell me everything. Like somehow my brilliance and accomplishments earned me that right. But what if all my so-called abilities are only gifts, and not of my own

creation? Maybe my talents were handed to me when I was born, along with a responsibility to develop them and use them wisely. So, if they're not really mine, what right do I have to tout them or think that people need to pay homage to me just because I've got 'em? It'd be like me bragging about the iPad Mom and Dad gave me for Christmas when I was a teenager. Like I earned it or something."

He laughed bitterly. "And it's all temporary anyway. Not even real!" He felt a sour taste in his mouth. "Talk about pride, Alef. You're a bag of *false* pride." And that begged another question. "If my talents are gifts," and he was now quite sure they were, "who gave them to me? And why? And who am I answerable to?"

Then a stark realization. Humility was one of the *Tenets*! It had to be. Pride was a fetter. It was a barrier to freedom and Light. His pride had been a bigtime stumbling block. For a while he wrestled with this, then his grandfather's last admonition pushed into his mind. "Remember who you are, Alef."

"But who am I, Grandpa?" his mind shouted, and a depressing thought overshadowed him. Would this be the last dream conversation he would ever have with his grandfather?

Chapter 14

Deleted

Alef's phone buzzed. "Liz here. Got a minute?"

"Sure. Want me to come down?"

"No. I'll come up."

In less than a minute, she walked into his office and shut the door behind her. Alef motioned to one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"How's AI Comp doing?" Alef asked.

"They're thorough. And good. They've asked a lot of questions. I've given them access to everything like you directed so they can survey all aspects of our systems. Just a reminder. You'll want to change your universal code when they're through."

"Thanks. Did they give you an idea of how long they'll be here?"

"Mid to late afternoon. They'll have their written report to us by Thursday morning."

"Thanks for accommodating them. Did you get the report on the telephone and email records I asked for?"

She handed him a single sheet. He read down it quickly. "This only covers since late last Saturday, Liz. I asked for the last thirty days."

"That's all there is. Everything before last Saturday at 8:36 pm has been wiped out."

"You sure?" Alef's mouth stayed open.

"It's gone. I've checked it every way I know. What you have there is all we've got."

Alef pushed his cheek out with his tongue and tapped his fingers on the desk.

“Anything I can do to help here?” she asked.

Alef lifted a hand. “Stay tuned. Thanks Liz.” She left. Alef buzzed Rand and asked him to come to his office.

“What’s up?” he said as he sat in front of Alef’s desk. Alef handed him Liz’s report without comment. Rand read it. “Where’s the rest of it? Didn’t you ask for thirty days?”

“That’s it. The records before Saturday are gone.”

“Gone? You mean, like deleted?”

“Yep.”

Rand’s eyes turned steely. “Who would have done this, Alef?”

“Either you or me or Eli. Or someone we gave our special code to. You can’t do it without the code.”

“Could Liz have done it?”

“If she had the code, but I only gave it to her yesterday and the stuff was wiped out Saturday evening. Have you given the code to anyone?”

“Never! Rand exclaimed. “You and Eli are the only ones who interface directly with our systems. If I have a need, I go to Eli or Liz.”

“The code automatically changes every Monday, so if Liz did it, Eli would have had to give her the code last week. But she didn’t do it.”

“Well, Liz didn’t do it, and you didn’t do it, and I didn’t do it. Guess who did? He didn’t want us to see he’s been in contact with Omnimach for who knows how long. That’s cause, Alef. If anything was ever a cause, that’s it. We need to can him.”

“Yeah. Maybe. We need to talk to him about it first. We’ll get the full report from AI Comp Thursday morning. I suggest we wait to do anything before then and go from there.”

“Yeah, but how can we safeguard our systems until then?” Rand exclaimed. “Who knows what that jerk will try to do to us in the next

few days.”

“When AI Comp finishes this afternoon, I’ll go in and change the universal code manually with just you and me having access to it until we get things settled. I’ll have Liz keep her eyes open.”

“We’re just prolonging the inevitable,” Rand muttered. He stood up. “Anything else?”

“Well, the good news is we’re doing well. Your sales team’s humming.”

“Yeah. Helps to have an exclusive product that’s in demand.” He waved and left.

Alef picked up his smartphone. Tav would be at lunch, and he called her. “Have time to talk?” he asked when she answered.

“I do. You see your grandfather last night?”

“I did. Guess where he was this time?”

Tav laughed. “Timbuktu?”

“Not quite. The Cliffs of Moher.”

“No way. I hear they’re the most beautiful cliffs in the world. Some say they should be one of the Seven Natural Wonders. I’d love to go there someday.”

“Just get a grandpa who appears in dreams to you.”

“I wish. How did it go with you last night?”

“Fascinating. According to him, you’re right about other universes.

“What did he say?”

“Well, for one thing, he said he *was* in another universe. And get this. He said it’s the same universe we were in before we came here.”

“Whoa!” Tav exclaimed. “What else?”

He said he’s able to speak with me because he loves me, and he has authorization.”

“Authorization? Who’s his boss?”

Alef shrugged. “He said there were no bosses, just requests and

cooperation. He didn't say what he meant by being authorized to talk to me."

"Alef, please tell me everything he said."

"Don't you have to get back to work?"

"That can wait. I want to hear what your grandpa said."

Alef related his entire conversation including that obeying law was one of the *Tenets*. Then he told her about the questions his grandfather wouldn't answer yet, and with some reluctance, said his grandpa told him he wasn't ready to get those answers.

"What did he mean by being ready?"

"Don't know. But I'm sure it's got something to do with my hang-up with pride."

"Alef, if that's what's keeping you from answers, my pride wouldn't even let me have a conversation with him. You've changed. I can't see how that would keep..."

"It *is* keeping me from being ready," he interrupted. "One of the *Tenets* has to be humility. And that's a huge problem for me." He swallowed. "Anyway, I don't think I'll have any more grandpa-dreams."

"Why do you say that?"

He didn't want to bring up the depressing sensation he had after his dream last night "Maybe he's told me all he's going to." His voice was dispirited.

"And maybe he hasn't," Tav said encouragingly.

"Yeah. Maybe." He pushed himself to sound upbeat. "Uh, by the way, I've been thinking about doing something a little different on my weekend dates with Nadia. You think she would like to maybe help some people who need help?"

"Alef." Tav didn't try to hide her surprise. "That would be wonderful. You can ask her tonight when you pick her up or wait until you come over for dinner Thursday night and the three of us can talk

about it.”

“Dinner?”

“I mean if it’s okay with you. I don’t want to interfere with your night with Nadia, but I’d love to cook dinner for you two.”

“Absolutely! Thanks.”

“I’ll plan on it. By the way, what’s happening at Sawtooth today?”

“More drama.” He told her about the deleted records.

“What are you going to do?”

“Wait for the report from AI Comp, then talk to Eli. He may have a legitimate reason for wiping out those logs...or maybe he didn’t even do it.”

“You think either of those scenarios is likely?”

“Who knows. But we need to give him a chance to explain. If he wants to.”

“Makes sense,” she said. “Gotta go. We’ll eat about 6:00 Thursday night. That okay?”

“I’ll be there. Thanks for listening. Again.”

“Thanks for *wanting* me to listen. Bye.”

Chapter 15

The Headache

Alef and Rand sat in the conference room with Liz. She notified Eli they were meeting today about the AI Comp report, but he declined to attend. He said he would read it later when he came in. Liz had made copies of the 25-page report and handed them out.

“Where’s Eli been all this time?” Rand asked accusingly. “Maybe places he didn’t want us to know about, huh?”

“He’s at his home,” Liz replied evenly.

“Thanks for this, Liz,” Alef said, ignoring Rand’s concern. “Let’s not go over every detail of the report now. We’ll digest it first, then hit you with questions we have. Just give us the highlights we should pay attention to.”

“I think four things,” she said. “One, no malware or noteworthy inconsistencies were found. Two, they’re confident we haven’t illegally used anyone else’s proprietary software or systems, including Omnimach’s. Three, last night, after hours, they did an ultra-scrub on everything to make doubly certain we’re clean. We are. And four... Uh, they reviewed the status of the patent applications for our proprietary software. As you know, we’ve submitted seven over the last ten to eighteen months. Normal waiting time for a patent to be approved is around two years.”

“So, we have roughly a year or less before we obtain any actual patents?” Rand asked.

“That’s what it would be,” she said gravely, “if the applications were still in process. Somebody withdrew them last Thursday.”

Rand exploded. “Withdrew them! Who could have done that?”

“Only one of the three partners. And according to AI Comp, once an application is withdrawn, it can’t be resubmitted.”

“Our exclusive software is left without protection!” Rand almost shouted.

“Not necessarily.” Alef tried to calm the situation. “As long as we can prove we used it first, we’re protected.”

“Good luck with that,” Rand grumbled.

“Anything else you think we should know before we read the report?” Alef asked Liz.

“No, I don’t think so.” She glanced at each of them and stood up. “Sorry.”

“Thanks, Liz. We’ll get to you with any questions we have.”

She left the room, and the two partners sat in silence.

Rand leaned back in his chair. “He’s got to go, Alef. We saw his letter to withdraw from our LLC. He’s wiped out the phone and email records that would have condemned him. He’s pulled our patent applications. He’s intent on selling our proprietary software to Omnimach. He’s out to destroy us!”

“We need to talk with him first,” Alef said in a composed voice. “We need to hear what he’s got to say.”

Rand swore. “What more do you need Alef? You want him to nail boards on our windows and put a vacancy sign on our doors before we do anything?”

“We need to talk to him. That’s the right thing to do.”

Rand stood and shoved his chair under the conference table. “You talk to him. I don’t want to see him again.” He stomped out of the room.

Alef sat and rubbed his right temple. This whole thing was giving

him a headache. He went to his office and took some ibuprofen then went downstairs to see Liz. Her door was open, and he walked in. He signaled he wanted to shut the door, and she nodded. He did and sat down by her desk.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“About?”

“About everything.”

“You mean about Eli, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Eli.”

She looked up and licked her lips. “I don’t know, Alef. He and I used to be real close.” She shrugged. “I don’t mean intimate close. Close co-workers. That kind of thing. Yeah. He’s aggravated me sometimes. Like when he didn’t give me as much credit for what I did as I thought I deserved, but most of the time we worked good together.”

“Except over the last couple of weeks?” Alef asked, referring to what she told him the other day.

“Yeah. That’s been strange. It’s been like he has this big chip on his shoulder. Not like him at all.”

“What do you think’s happened?”

“I don’t know. He mumbled something about Sawtooth going to hell in a handbasket once but didn’t explain. I didn’t ask.”

Alef quietly waited for her to continue.

She rubbed her eyebrows. “What you’re really asking is if I think Eli wiped out the phone and email records and pulled the patent applications, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m asking.”

“Well, it had to be one of you three, and it wasn’t you. I’m sure of that.” “Was it Eli?” She shrugged. “Or was it Rand?”

That got Alef’s attention. “Why would it be Rand?”

“Why would it be Eli?” she responded. “Frankly, as nutso as he’s

been the last few weeks, I can't see him doing anything like that. That's just not Eli. But Rand?" She shrugged again. "Sorry. I'm not much help."

"You've been a big help." Alef stood. "Glad you're here."

That evening Alef went to dinner at Tav's. He cleaned up afterwards and put dishes in the dishwasher while Tav took Nadia to bed. It had been a family evening for a not quite yet family. Alef was in the living room when Tav came back.

"You have a couple of ibuprofens," he asked. "I've had a bit of a headache today."

She eyed him. "Just today?"

"Off and on over the last several weeks. No biggie."

"With all that's been happening with Sawtooth, probably be a miracle if you didn't have one. But if it keeps up, you'd better get it checked."

He nodded. She brought him the ibuprofens and a glass of water and sat by him. He swallowed them down and set the empty glass on the coffee table.

"That's neat how excited Nadia is to go to the Hope Residential Care Center for Children this Saturday," he said. "I don't know much about them, only they came highly recommended."

"I talked with the social worker there," Tav said. "Really nice. You know they're a group home for young children waiting to be placed in a foster home. She said they have anywhere from no children to as many as six or seven at a time. The kids are only there an average of a week or so before placement."

"How old are they?" Alef asked.

"From toddler up to ten. There's a little girl a year older than Nadia who's really having a rough time. She came from a super abusive home and fears adults. Having a girl her age visit her would be very welcomed."

“Would we just stay there, or would they allow us to take her out to eat and maybe to a fun zone?”

“By law, they’re very protective. Normally, visitors are required to stay there, but this time, they’ll have one of their workers available to go with us if we want to take her out.”

“I’d like to do that if you and Nadia agree. I want to do everything we can to make sure that little girl has a super day.”

“Well, I know somebody who’s going to do her part. When I put Nadia to bed, she took Molly out of the doll rocker and said she was going to give her to that girl.”

“Molly? Her doll?”

“Yep. Her doll.”

Alef shook his head. “What kind of a daughter do we have, Tav?”

She blinked a couple of times. “Yeah.” She put her hand on his. “Thank you for doing this, Alef.”

Their eyes locked, and he pulled her to him. They kissed. Again and again. Whatever challenges he was having at Sawtooth melted away, and with her head on his shoulder, they sat in silence. He wanted to speak his heart, but how would she respond? Finally, he steeled himself and, in an almost whisper, pushed it out. “You think we could make it work again?”

For an unsettling moment she was quiet, then turned and touched his face. “I need more time. Okay?”

He swallowed. At least it wasn’t a no. “Okay.”

The moment was over.

She pulled away a little and took his hand. “Uh, to change the subject, how did the report from your computer people go? Didn’t you say you were getting that today?”

His eyes widened almost in shock at her less than subtle transition. Then he laughed. “Interesting segue.”

She laughed too and squeezed his hand. “That *was* pretty abrupt.

Sorry.”

“Yeah. Well, the report. We got it. The good news is our systems are clean and secure. The not so good, it looks like either Eli or Rand withdrew our proprietary software patent applications.”

“Rand?” She sat up straight.

“I don’t know, Tav. I was convinced it had to be Eli until I talked with Liz today. She doesn’t think it was him.”

“Why?”

“Just doesn’t. She thinks he wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“What do you think?”

“I want to hear what he says. If he didn’t do it...”

“If he didn’t, then what?”

“I don’t even want to go there.”

Chapter 16

Betrayal

“**W**here’s Rand?” Eli demanded as he came into Alef’s office.

“He didn’t want to meet with us,” Alef said.

Eli sprawled into a chair at the small table in the corner where Alef was sitting. “I thought this was supposed to be a meeting of Sawtooth principals to talk about where we’re heading,” he grouched.

“Before we go there, there’s some issues that need to be resolved.” Alef tried to keep his voice neutral. Whatever that meant.

“Look,” Eli shot out, “if you’re looking for an apology for me saying that rejecting Omnimach was south of dumb, you’re not going to get it. But that’s done. I’m ready to move on.”

“Fair enough, but I have some questions.”

“Like?”

“Have you had any unilateral contact with Omnimach in the last thirty days?”

Eli’s eyes widened in anger. “You accusing me of selling out to Omnimach? That’s low, Alef. Really low.”

“Do I take it your answer’s no?”

“N. O.” Eli barked. Then slowly the wrath in his eyes morphed into a look of hurt. “Alef, you know me better than that. We’ve been through hades together getting this company up to where we’re at. Okay. So, I was angry about turning down Omnimach. *Am* angry. But why do you think I’d ever betray you guys?”

Alef studied Eli's face. There was no deceit. He turned over his hand. "Couple things made that question necessary."

"Like what?" Eli now sounded anxious.

"That envelope you were fiddling around with when we talked about Omnimach's offer last week. Was that your written notice of withdrawal from our LLC?"

"How did you know that?" Eli's bluster returned.

"Rand took some things into your office and left them on your desk. He saw the corner of that envelope sticking out from under your desk pad. He opened it and read the withdrawal notice."

"Rand!" Eli's eyes flashed hate, then he crumpled back into his chair like the air had been sucked out of him. "Yeah. That's how angry I was. I was ready to quit. Go somewhere on my own." He looked at Alef. "The cool way you were handling things made me rethink that. I figured me doing something like that was as stupid as turning down Omnimach's offer. I didn't do it."

"You haven't been in for the last few days. Liz's been worried."

"Yeah. I've been stewing at home." His countenance lightened a bit. "Been working on a special project."

"Your god computer?"

"Better."

"Something better?"

"Yep. Not ready to talk about it yet."

"Okay. Uh, there's something else."

Eli looked at him warily.

"Our patent applications on our deep learning models. Somebody just withdrew those from being considered at the patent office."

Eli swore. "Impossible. Who would have done such an asinine thing? Now, we can't even reapply for a patent on that software."

"They were withdrawn."

Eli stared at Alef. "And you think that was me?"

“I don’t know. Was it?”

Eli shook his head. “Alef, the stuff in those applications is virtually one hundred percent me, with a little you and Liz thrown in. Why would I jeopardize the patents on my own work? It’s under Sawtooth’s name *and* my name. We are co-contributors. If I left Sawtooth, I could use it. No sense whatsoever in me not getting it patented.” He hesitated. “Look. Only me, you, and Rand could do this in Sawtooth’s name. I didn’t do it. I’m sure you didn’t. That leaves our buddy, Rand.”

Alef tilted his head. “Why would he do that?”

Eli exhaled. “Who knows? Maybe *he’s* planning on selling us out. Or maybe he just hates my guts and wants to get rid of me.” Eli’s face flushed. “He’s a self-serving jerk, Alef.”

Alef sensed that Eli was right, but he needed to ask one more question. “You know anything about the deletion of the record of our emails and phone calls over the last month?”

“What?” Eli’s eyes were blazing. He clenched his teeth. “When did that happen?”

“Last Saturday, around 8:30 PM.”

Eli sat back in semi-relief. “You can’t do that remotely. You got to be on site, and have the code that only you, Rand, and I have. I was with my mother in Meridian from Saturday around three to Sunday morning. She can verify that.” He glowered at Alef. “So, guess who did that too?”

“Why?” Alef knew, or thought he knew, but wanted to hear Eli’s response.

“Because he didn’t want anyone checking up on who *he’s* been in contact with.” He shook his head in disgust. “Or he’s trying to hang this on me so he can kick me out of Sawtooth.”

Alef fixed his eyes on his hands. Eli looked at him anxiously and cleared his throat a couple of times. “You believe me, don’t you,

Alef?” There was no rancor or challenge in his voice. It was a plea.

Alef closed his eyes and folded his arms. Eli had been a pain, but that was Eli. Liz defended him, and Alef understood where she was coming from. She knew Eli. He thought back to his conversation with Belinda about Rand. What he heard here from Eli was plain, straight-out truth. Alef put his hands back on the table and looked at Eli. “Yeah. I believe you.”

Eli’s face lifted in relief. “Thanks, Alef. Sorry about this Omnimach thing. It’s just that having access to the computer of my dreams was... Well, you know.”

“Yeah. I know. Now what do we do?”

Eli tensed. “I don’t know, but I won’t work with Rand. If you stay with him, I’ll redate my LLC withdrawal notice and be gone.”

“And if I decide I can’t work with Rand either?”

“We could all three go our separate ways. Or you and I could stick together. That’d work for me. I think we’d do just fine.”

Alef drummed his fingers on the table. No options he could see were good. “If we dissolve Sawtooth, we’d have to come to agreement on asset distribution and what we do with our client base. And what do we do about the five-year lease all three of us signed for this building?”

“Yeah.” Eli glanced quickly at the ceiling. “But here’s another thought. You and I could keep Sawtooth and terminate Rand for cause.” His lips broke into a slight grin. “I read in our Operation Agreement about being dismissed from the LLC for cause. What Rand tried to do to me and the damage he’s done to the company justifies that.”

Alef could hear Rand saying almost the same thing about Eli. What a mess. His grandfather’s words about everything being temporary and passing, flashed into his mind. Easy to see in the abstract but a different story when a truck’s about to run you over.

Alef stood. “Let’s think about it. But we’ll need to make some decisions pretty quick.”

“You going to contact Rand?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“I’ll give him an opportunity to explain why he did what he did.”

“What if he won’t admit it?”

“That’d be my answer as to whether or not I could work with him any longer.”

“Yeah.” Eli reached over and shook Alef’s hand. “Hope we can work together. I’d like that.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Alef went to his office and picked up his smartphone. He looked at the time. Tav’s lunch hour would be over, but maybe she could spare a minute. He needed advice. He took two ibuprofens and called her.

“This’s a surprise,” she said. “Anything wrong?”

“Sorry about calling during work hours. I need your counsel.”

“I can give you five minutes. I have a student coming in at the end of third period. What’s up? Did you talk to Eli?”

“Yep.”

“How’d that go?”

“That’s what I’d like your input about.” He briefly described their conversation.

“You believe him?”

“I believe him.”

“What about Rand?”

“I’m going to call him. He isn’t in today.”

“And?”

“And that’s where I need your help.”

“What happens if Rand’s no longer at Sawtooth?” Tav asked.

“I don’t think you know Belinda Norton. She’s our director of

marketing and came on about a year ago. She's done great for us. If she stays with us, we'd be okay."

"Well, here's my input," Tav said. "Remember I called Rand an NGB..."

"Nice Guy But?" Alef interrupted.

"Yeah. But he's not an NGB."

That took Alef aback, and he felt a gut punch coming. "Uh, he's better than an NGB now?"

"He's a creep. Nothing nice about him." She stopped, and Alef could hear her loud breathing. "I hadn't heard from him for a while, and he called me this past Monday. I told him I didn't want to see him anymore. He was horrible. His language... I didn't want to say anything to you earlier in case you and he ended up together in Sawtooth."

Alef felt the blood pulsing in his neck, and he balled his hand into a fist. "You've just given me the counsel I need."

"Don't say anything to him about what I've told you. Please. I don't want him to think I was the reason for you splitting with him. I mean if that's what you decide to do."

"I won't. Love you, Tav." Alef gulped. Where did that come from? How would she react to that? He didn't have to wait long to find out.

"And I..." She paused. "Gotta go. Bye."

Was Tav just about to tell him she loved him? He set his phone down and almost laughed, because in contrast the company he focused his life on for two-plus years was now falling apart. "Talk about opposites," he muttered, and he thought about Rand. His antipathy for him was now off the charts. Rand wanted Alef to call him as soon as he had talked with Eli, and he hoped that whatever or whoever had been helping him keep his cool, wouldn't let him down now. His grandfather's statement that most everything was temporary grabbed him. This whole experience with Eli and Rand

and Sawtooth *was* temporary. It would pass. Of course, it would pass.

And that brought another question. What about his relationship with Tav and Nadia? Was his love for them temporary too? Would that pass? He ached to ask his grandfather about that one.

He'd put off the inevitable for as long as he could and picked up his phone and called Rand.

"How'd it go?" Rand's voice held obvious apprehension.

"He didn't do any of that stuff we suspected him of." Alef controlled his anger.

"That's what he said? And you believe him?"

"That's what he said, and I believe him."

"Interesting." Rand's voice sounded like he was trying to be cool, but it was tight. "Okay. Where do we go from here?"

The implication of Eli's innocence didn't need to be stated. Rand did it, and he had to go. With what Tav said, Alef was not even going to ask him why. "I don't know what to say, Rand." Alef was straining to control his emotions, but his tone was thick with disappointment and anger. "You did all that stuff. You betrayed us. Your friends. You need to go. I'll talk to Eli about what we'll do with severance."

There was a heavy silence. Alef was expecting an argument blast. That would be Rand. But that's not what came. "Yeah. Well, I've gone as far as I can go with you guys anyway." Rand's voice was thick with condescension. "No hard feelings, huh."

That almost triggered a reactive condemnation barrage from Alef, but he kept his cool. "Yeah. Right. I'll call you this afternoon after I talk with Eli." He clicked off and stared at his phone. He slipped it in his pocket and went to Eli's office.

"You get hold of Rand?" Eli asked.

"Yeah. He's out of Sawtooth." Alef related his brief conversation with Rand, then said, "We need to decide what we're going to do about him."

“Can him! With cause!” Eli’s eyes were flaring. “I don’t want to give him anything.”

Alef sat down. “We might be able to do that legally, but it could get into a messy and expensive court battle.”

“You have another idea?” Eli’s question was sincere, not a challenge.

“What if we pay him his salary that’s due, then in January of next year, give him what he originally paid for Sawtooth shares and the prorated partner bonus he would’ve earned this year if he were still with us. He immediately resigns his membership in the LLC and signs a non-disclosure agreement concerning our proprietary software, products, marketing program, and client base.”

“What about a non-compete agreement?” Eli asked.

“Those aren’t really enforceable. Anyway, I don’t think we have to worry about that. He won’t have our products, and Belinda’s the one who has direct interface with our sales force.”

“What about the lease guarantee. He’d still be on it.”

“Not much we can do with that one. Hopefully, that’s a moot point with the success our company’s having. If not, then he’s on the hook with us.”

“When would this take effect?” Eli asked.

“I say, immediately. I’ll call our attorney to draw up the papers if Rand agrees. You need to coordinate with Liz to change our systems universal code right now. Everyone will have to reset their passwords. Also, change the entry code into the building as well.”

“What if he insists on a non-cause withdrawal from the LLC or won’t agree to the non-disclosure?”

“We terminate for cause. He forfeits any cash settlement.”

Eli put his hands behind his head. “You ready for this, Alef?”

“No. But we’ve got to do it.”

“Agreed. I’ll get the codes changed today.”

Alef went to Belinda's office. Her door was open, and when she saw Alef, she waved him in. He closed the door behind him, and she looked at him quizzically.

"Got a minute?" he asked.

"You bet." Her mouth broke into a full smile. "What's up?"

"Just want to thank you again for your work with us. We wouldn't be where we are without you."

"You sound like you're getting ready to fire me," she laughed. "Or bury me."

"Not hardly. There's going to be some changes." He told her Rand was leaving, and marketing and sales were now entirely under her, with her reporting directly to him. He assured her they would make generous adjustments in her compensation package.

The corners of her lips pushed her cheeks into round balls, and she thanked him profusely for his trust. "When does this expanded responsibility begin?" she asked.

"Now."

"As in right now?"

"Yep. You okay with that?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah! Anything special you want me to do?"

"Yes. Make sure everything is secure. You know, potential client lists, contact information for our sales force, marketing plans, etc."

"I'm assuming you don't want anyone other than myself and you and Eli having access to what you want me to secure."

Alef nodded. "Thanks, Belinda."

She got up from behind her desk and came around to him. She took his hand in both of hers, and her look with undisguised affection held him. "I'll enjoy working closely with you. You can count on me."

Alef looked at her radiant face and fetching eyes. Her appeal was undeniable. But his life was focused on Nadia and Tav. Wherever that would take him. That's where it would stay.

“We’ll keep you posted,” he said and left.

He stopped by Eli’s office and stuck his head in. “Belinda’s on board. I told her we’d put together a new compensation package for her.”

“No questions?” Eli asked.

“Nope. She seemed maybe even excited about the change and challenge.”

Alef left and went to his office. Time to hopefully finish up with Rand. He called him.

“What’ve you come up with,” Rand asked.

Alef explained what he and Eli had agreed to. “Any questions?”

“When is, uh, my termination effective.”

“Immediately. We’re changing the entrance code to our building. Eli or I will be here tomorrow morning at 10:00 to let you in to clear out your office. Our attorney should have the termination and non-disclosure agreements the first of next week. I’ll email those to you so you can see them before you come in. I’ll have your one month’s salary for you when you sign the agreements.”

“What if I don’t agree?”

Alef was through trying to be cordial. “Look. Given the circumstances, what we’re proposing is more than generous. You refuse this or violate the agreed upon conditions, we’ll dismiss you with cause. There’ll be no termination package.”

“I’ll be there at 10:00 tomorrow. I’ll look at the contracts when I get them. If they’re in line with what you said, I’ll sign ‘em.”

“We’ll be ready for you tomorrow.” Alef clicked off.

Alef buzzed Eli. “Rand’s agreed. You going to be in the office tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah. Scads of make-up work to do. Be here early and leave late.”

“Rand’s coming in about ten to clear out his stuff. You want to let him in and watch him?”

“Yeah. And I’ll *really* watch him. Liz and I will change the general passcode to our systems before we leave tonight. You’ll need that to reset your own passwords Monday. I’ll remove the company computers from Rand’s office now. If he has any personal stuff on them, he can tell me, and I’ll put it on a stick for him.”

“Be interesting what he’s already pulled from our systems, but no sense giving him any more access.”

“How did he respond to our offer? Any argument?”

“No. Just a feigned reluctance to agree. He’ll come in next week to sign and get his month’s salary.”

“He’s a bad one, Alef. Should’ve terminated him.”

“Yeah. Maybe. But we don’t want to be like him.”

Chapter 17

Gabby

Janet, the social worker at the Hope Residential Care Center for Children, led Gabby Perkins over to Nadia and her parents to introduce her. Gabby, a year older than Nadia, was her physical opposite. Thin and two inches shorter, she had straight, closely cropped flaxen hair and skin that looked like it had rarely been touched by the sun.

Gabby was silent and kept her pale blue eyes fixed on the floor until Nadia gave her Molly, her Raggedy Ann doll. Gabby tentatively reached out her hands to receive it, then clutched it like it was the first thing anyone had ever given her. She stared at Nadia with widened eyes and asked with marked disbelief, “Mine?”

“Yes! Yes!” Nadia cried. “Will you be my friend?”

Gabby held the doll in both arms, and a hint of a smile formed. Her small *thank you* could barely be heard.

“Would you like to go out today with Nadia?” Janet asked Gabby. “They’ve got some fun things planned for you, and I’ll be with you.”

“Please. Please. Please come.” Nadia begged. Please be my friend.”

A little light crept over Gabby’s face, and she gave a slight nod.

It was a perfect spring day. There was a slight breeze, and the scattered clouds rarely hid the sun. Their light sweaters were just right for the almost warm 63-degree weather. The adults let Nadia lead in communicating with Gabby, and over time, as they took her

to Chuck E. Cheese, miniature golfing, and a walk along the river, she became more sociable. When they brought her back to the Care Center in the late afternoon, Janet handed Molly to her. Gabby's face broke into a wide grin as she hugged the doll then held it out to Nadia. "You wanna kiss her goodbye?"

Nadia looked like she was trying to decide whether to smile or cry. Then she turned to Tav. "Can we come and see Gabby and Molly next week?"

"We'll see."

Nadia kissed the doll, and she and Gabby beamed at each other.

Janet was clearly pleased at the change she had seen in her young charge. "Time to say goodbye, Gabby," she said.

Gabby set Molly on a chair and wrapped her arms around Nadia. She watched as Janet escorted Alef, Tav, and Nadia to the door.

"Thank you!" Janet clasped Tav's and Alef's hands. "Thank you. I think Gabby might be ready for placement now."

"When will that happen, and where will she be going?" Tav asked.

Janet spoke in a whisper so Nadia couldn't hear. "She'll be placed the first of next week in a home some distance away. I'm sorry, but because of her abusive family situation, we can't divulge where that is."

Tav gave Nadia a sad look. She would likely not see her new friend again.

That evening, after a little supper, Tav put Nadia to bed. It had been a long day, and Nadia was wound up and worn out. Tav came back to the living room and sat by Alef on the couch. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking, I was the one who was helped today," he said. "Watching that little girl get happy." He tapped his leg. "You know what I mean."

"Yes. And watching Nadia with Gabby." Tav's eyes glistened.

“Wish we could do something with Gabby again.”

Alef didn't think that would happen. “You okay doing something like this again next weekend?”

“I'm okay if we do this every weekend.” She rubbed the side of her neck. “But what's Sawtooth going to do to your time?”

Alef scratched his forehead. “Yeah. Being with you and Nadia almost made me forget about that. I think I'll be okay, though. Liz and Belinda are going to be a huge help.”

Tav glanced at him skeptically.

He sat back. “Look, I've learned my lesson, Tav. Whatever happens, I'm going to be a good dad.” His eyes met hers. “And if I'm given the chance,” his face took on a pleading look, “I want to be the husband I should've been all along. Whatever happens with Sawtooth, happens.” He reached out for her hand. “I'm promising you that, Tav.”

She let him take it, kissed him lightly on his lips, and laid her head on his shoulder. He could almost feel what she was thinking. She knew firsthand how absorbed in his business he could be. To the neglect of everything else. And his anger. So why would she want to chance going through that again?

“I'll prove it to you,” he said softly. “I *see* now.”

She moved away a little so she could face him. “What do you see?”

“I see the difference between permanent and temporary.” He turned his hand face up. “Maybe the difference between what's real and what isn't.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know exactly. But maybe the only thing that's real is what's going to be around when everything in this world's gone. The only thing left after we have our experiences here. Maybe all the rest of this stuff is like props in a play. It's all going to be gone when we leave the stage. Like every experience. Like every challenge. Like every circumstance. Like money and fame and physical possessions. It's all

temporary.” He shook his head. “Guess where my focus has been?” He gave a sour laugh. “On stuff that doesn’t mean diddlysquat. Stuff that isn’t even real.”

“What’s real then?” she asked.

“You and me and Nadia and Gabby and all of us who are forever.” He took Tav’s hand again. “And who we want to become. That’s real. And who and how we want to love. That’s real.”

“Love?”

“Yeah. Love. I’m thinking real love is not an event or a thing or even an emotion. It’s a choice. Maybe even a state of being. It’s a bond between people that helps them be one. And I’m beginning to believe that bond can be forever. So, it’s got to be real.”

Tav squeezed his hand. “Sounds like you’re parroting your grandpa.”

“I hope so.”

“Getting realistic...” She grimaced at her word selection. “I mean, practical. I assume you’re not going to ignore your challenges with Sawtooth now.”

“Wish I could, but I’ll deal with them. I don’t need to let them control me though.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll remember what a neat day it was today. We made a little girl happier than maybe she’s been for who knows how long. Maybe ever.” His eyes held Tav’s. “And it made Nadia happy and you happy and me happy. That’s worth more than I could do at Sawtooth with this Rand thing.”

Tav snuggled under Alef’s arm, and for a long time that’s where she stayed. Then she stood and pulled Alef up. “Been a wonderful day. Thanks.” She yawned. “I’m beat. Bet you are too.”

Alef kissed her, she touched his cheek, and he left.

He tried to hold his buoyant feeling on his drive home, but it

slipped away. It was one thing to be on a high when he was in the middle of an experience like he had today or having a conversation like he had with Tav. But now that he was by himself, not so easy.

Tav obviously had unspoken anxieties about him with his new Sawtooth problems. She had to. His neglect and bouts of anger and aloofness in the past had to be a jarring warning that she couldn't ignore. What did he expect? So, he said he'd changed. So, he's done some things that might indicate that. But why should that convince her he was permanently different? Why would she chance facing the same infernal betrayal he'd foisted on her before?

A dark uncertainty enshrouded him. A stark contrast to the light he felt the entire day. Had he forever blown it with Tav? Was it even worth trying? Could he even trust himself to stay on his grandpa's course with the *Tenets*? And Sawtooth. He'd have to do what was necessary to keep it going. What if that meant he'd need to cut down his time with Nadia? With Tav?

A despair threatened to engulf him. He tried to force it away with thoughts about all that happened today, but its grip only seemed to intensify. A sense of his incapability and inconsistency overpowered him, and he pulled his car over to the side of the road. Then, as if to reinforce his despondency and worthlessness, a memory forced its way into his mind.



“**Y**ou promised, Daddy! You promised! You promised! You promised!”

Alef tried to put his arm around Nadia, but she pulled away and ran to Tav and sobbed.

“You promised her,” Tav said as she glared at him.

“Hey. C'mon. No big deal,” he said. “Look. We can go to the zoo

any day. Rand and Eli and me are finally going to take some time off and have some fun. We get to spend the day whitewater rafting on the Payette. They're usually full up, and we got lucky. Hey. I'll make it up to her."

"Yeah. Just like you always *don't*." Tav bent over and kissed Nadia. "You and I'll go to the zoo today, sweetheart. It'll be a mommy-daughter thing okay?"

Nadia wiped her eyes. "Why doesn't Daddy ever want to go with us?" she pleaded. They both stared at Alef, and Nadia started crying again.

"Right. Gimme the guilt trip," he grunted angrily, and left.



“**A**nd you think Tav and Nadia want to come back to that?” he groaned to himself. Then from somewhere, his dream about his grandfather at Iguazu Falls and the irresistible compelling of the Devil’s Throat gripped him while an overwhelming blackness surrounded him. Heavy. Oppressive. Stifling. Controlling. He felt as if he were being sucked into a nonexistence that might even be a welcome relief from the unbearable weight he felt he was carrying.

Then a voice. Was it his grandfather’s? Or maybe it was more a feeling or a sense than anything. “Who are you, Alef?” it seemed to say. “Who are you *choosing* to be?”

And slowly the darkness lifted as he pushed his mind to focus on what his grandfather taught him. To remember the feelings of peace and freedom and Light that enveloped him as he tried to follow his counsel. That’s what he wanted. That’s who he wanted to be. The memory he just experienced was of another Alef. Not the Alef he was today. And one-by-one he recommitted himself to follow his grandfather’s *Tenets*.

“I choose to act and not be acted upon,” he resolved. “I choose to love. I choose to abide by law.” Then for a moment he dwelt on the next one, and the special challenge it was for him. Finally, with conviction and determination he said, “And I *will* be humble.” His lips lifted at the corners, as he acknowledged he was getting an abundance of experience to help him with that one.

With those thoughts, the darkness dissipated, and he was lifted by the realization that no one nor anything could ever take his choices from him. He *knew* who he was. He *knew* who he wanted to be.

He started his car and headed home. Was the darkness he just experienced the force or essence his grandfather called the Proscribed? Was it the Mentor who brought his choices to mind and the Light to him?

Whatever or whoever was involved here, he knew who he was. The *Tenets* would be his path. But still, a burrowing question dug into his mind. *Am I even capable of doing this?* Self-doubt was not through with him. And as he would soon discover, his lessons in humility had just begun.

Chapter 18

The Enemy

“**R**and get his stuff?” Alef said as he came into Eli’s office.

“Yeah. Should have sacked him.”

“What happened?”

“When he saw I’d removed our company computers from his office he went ballistic. I gave him a printout of the directory on each computer and told him to mark which files he wanted, and I’d get those to him on a flash drive.”

“And?”

“And he told me what I could do with the flash drive, and that would not have been comfortable.”

Alef almost laughed. “Anything else?”

“Not much. I had my friend Ted with me Saturday just in case. He tops Rand by four inches and fifty pounds. We stood outside Rand’s office to make sure that’s where he stayed.”

“Did he try to go anywhere else?”

“No. But he obviously tried to get into our systems with his phone. He swore when he couldn’t.”

“How long was he here?”

“Not more than thirty minutes. He had some choice words for all of us when he left.”

“Did he say anything about our termination agreement with him?”

“Only that getting out of Sawtooth now was the best thing that

could've happened to him. He said we'd see what he meant shortly."

"You think that was a threat?"

Eli shrugged. "Could've been. Or it might've just been Rand."

"Whatever he's planning, he's got to do it according to the non-disclosure agreement, or he gets nothing from us."

"When's our attorney supposed to have that ready?" Eli asked.

"I told her it was a rush job. She said it was a simple agreement, and she'd have it for me first thing this afternoon."

Eli sat back in his chair. "You ready for this, Alef?"

"Not much choice is there. Been a rollercoaster couple of weeks, but I think we're going to be okay."

Eli gave him an inscrutable look. "Yeah. I think we'll be more than okay. I've been working on something with Liz's help that we'll talk to you about when we're ready."

"Something new?"

"Yes and no." Eli left it there.

Alef headed for the door. "Well, you got my curiosity up. I'm going to check in with Belinda." He rubbed his right temple. His head pain had been there with no let up for the last week.

Belinda's door was open, and she greeted him warmly. "I heard from Rand this morning."

"Oh? Interesting. He came in Saturday and cleared out his things. What did he want?"

"He sort of offered me a job."

Alef frowned. "A job?"

"He was overly friendly and complimentary and said he was looking out for me and would have something, quote, very appealing for me to look at in the very near future." Alef's face showed his concern, and she winked. "I told him I wasn't interested and hung up on him."

Alef didn't try to hide his relief. "You'll end up being here for at least as long as I am. Uh, did he ask for access to client lists, sales force

information, that kind of thing?”

“No. But knowing Rand, he’s already got what he wants.”

“I think you’re right. Did he tell you where he’s going?”

“No. Just made the possible offer, and I hung up on him.”

“I don’t know what I’d... What we’d do without you.”

“Thanks. And I’ve been thinking. We should get something out now to our clients, our sales force, and the potential clients we’ve approached.” She handed him three sheets. “Here are my suggestions.”

Alef read them. “Perfect. Let’s do it! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” She fastened her eyes on his.

He smiled but didn’t let his gaze linger and went to his office. She would more than excel in filling the hole Rand left. Whatever Rand was planning to do now was worrisome, though.

That afternoon, their attorney emailed a copy of the severance and non-disclosure agreement. Alef read it over. It was acceptable, and he called Rand.

“Yeah, Alef, what’s up?” Rand answered with affected indifference.

“I have our agreement here, and I’ll email it to you. Would you be available tomorrow to come in and sign it? I’ll have a check here for you.”

“Don’t bother. I won’t be signing anything.” His voice took on a scoffing tone. “You think a third-rate like Belinda can take my place?” He snorted. “Get set for some real competition. I’m going with Omnimach. We’re going to destroy you.” He clicked off.

Alef was getting a little tired of being kicked in the stomach. He went to Eli’s office. “Just got off the phone with, Rand,” he said angrily. “He’s not signing any non-disclosure agreement and is going with Omnimach. Said he’s going to destroy us.”

Eli swore. “How’d we ever end up teaming with that piece of crud. What d’you think he’ll do?”

“I don’t know, but you can bet he’s got our client lists, info on our sales force, and our proprietary software, and he’ll use it.”

“Can he do that? Aren’t there laws against that?”

“We need to check with our attorney, but legally he may have as much claim on our proprietary stuff as we do since he was a partner. We’ll terminate him for cause, but he’ll claim it was his choice to leave and has a right to everything he was involved in creating. A lawsuit would be messy and cost us time and money I don’t think we can afford. One we probably wouldn’t win.”

Eli sat back as though he had a secret. “Well, there’s something he didn’t have access to.” He gave a wry smile. “The code to reset the master AI system every three months.”

Alef’s brows furrowed. “Explain.”

“Liz and I implanted an anti-piracy feature that requires this code for our conversational system software to continue operating. Every three months it asks for it, and you have fifteen minutes or three tries to insert it. If the correct code isn’t entered the system not only shuts down, it’s scrambled eggs.” Eli’s face broke into a self-satisfied grin. “And all Omnimach conversational app clients who are using our bootlegged software are out of business.”

Alef tightened his lips. “I should have known you’d protect us. When was it last reset?”

“I’d have to check with Liz, but I think a month or so ago.”

“What if Omnimach uses our software as a model and creates their own AI models?”

“Why would they do that? All they need to do is test the software to see if it works and doesn’t have any bugs or viruses. But even if they did recreate it, the code requirement will still be there. It has to be. It’s linked to every AI trigger. If it’s changed or removed, the system won’t operate.”

“Does Rand know about this?”

Eli raised an eyebrow. “Did you?”

“No. But what kind of damage will they do to us before their system crashes? And with their quantum computer, can’t they get around it anyway?”

“I don’t know how much they can hurt us in the interim, but not even a quantum computer will have time to do anything before that software destroys itself.”

“They might annihilate us in two months with Omnimach’s name and resources. Their start up time will be virtually nil. Especially if Rand can convince some of our sales force to join him.” Alef grunted. “Obviously, Rand’s had an arrangement with Omnimach in mind or in place probably at least since we rejected their offer. Who knows what he’s already given them? They could already be set to take us on now.”

“Maybe, but whatever happens to us, they’re out of business in two months. I think we can survive until that happens.”

“Okay, but if we don’t insert the right code in our software here does the same thing happen to us?”

“Course not. We have a built-in failsafe for us here. If we don’t submit the correct code in a timely manner, the associated programs stop operating, but that’s as far as it goes. We have as much time as we need to reset a new code.”

“And no one else can do that?”

“No. For one thing, they won’t know how. For another, it has to go through a gate that’s unique to our servers and is outside of the software itself. Only we can reset it. And only with our servers.”

“Amazing.” Alef gazed at Eli with deep respect. “Glad you’re here and not where Rand’s going.”

“I’m where I wanna be.”

Chapter 19

Speculating

Alef didn't get home until late. He fixed a bowl of soup but pushed it away after eating only a couple of spoonfuls. He needed to talk to Tav. He touched her name on his phone.

"How's your day been?" she asked. He told her what Rand said he was going to do. "Sounds like you've had better days."

"Yeah. I've had better."

"So, Rand's with Omnimach? Why was he against their offer to buy you guys out? Was he just putting on a show?"

"I don't know. Been trying to figure that one out. I thought his erasing email and phone records and stopping our patent proceedings was to frame Eli. Get him out of Sawtooth so there'd just be him and me."

"Wasn't Rand Omnimach's first contact with Sawtooth?" Tav asked.

"Yeah. Elaine Pritchard called him. That's Deepa Coates executive assistant. Rand had some personal involvement with her in the past. Knowing Rand, maybe really personal."

"You think Rand and Omnimach had this whole thing planned from the start?"

"No. Omnimach's offer to buy us out was legit. Deepa Coates is a hard-nosed businesswoman, but I think she's honest. At least that's her reputation. She dealt fairly with us when we worked for her

before and was completely upfront with her offer. But Rand..." Alef sighed. "Should've seen this coming, Tav. Rand's always operating on the edge. Don't know how many times Eli and I have had to rein him in. He's a self-serving..." He stopped talking, and his own misjudgment of Eli bore down on him.

"You okay?" Tav asked.

"Just thinking how stupid I am. Eli's as straight-arrow as they come." Then his own past treatment of Tav and Nadia pushed into his mind and everything from him being a hypocrite to incompetent and an egotist and a fool bounced around his brain.

After a prolonged silence, Tav softly said, "Alef. You're a good man."

Her statement both lifted and depressed him. "I'm a lousy man, Tav."

"You calling me a liar?" She laughed.

Alef wiped his brow. "Thanks for seeing who I want to be, anyway." He took an audible breath. "Getting back to Rand. The jerk's apparently worked out some kind a deal with Omnimach and intends to flush Eli and me down the toilet. I mean, we all knew he had an off-the-charts ego, but to stab us in the back? Stab us in the back after all we've done together?" Alef cleared his throat. "Sorry for the rant."

"This whole thing doesn't make sense to me," she said, "unless..."

"Unless?"

"This's crazy, but here's what I'm thinking. Eli's mad at you two for not accepting the offer, and Rand sees a way for him to really score here. He contacts Omnimach, tells them to be patient, and he'll bring them what they want. He deletes the emails and phone calls to protect himself and stops the patent process to clear the way for him to take the software with him when he leaves. But he also sees that by blaming Eli for this, he gets him out of Sawtooth. Eli's letter to leave

your LLC, that Rand found, was just blind luck for Rand.”

“Why get Eli out of Sawtooth if Rand’s leaving anyway?”

“Good question, but here’s an idea. Eli’s canned, and that leaves just you and Rand at Sawtooth. Then at the right time, Rand leaves with the software and all his marketing stuff. With just you there, he thinks Sawtooth’s a shell and won’t be any competition for him when he goes to Omnimach.”

“Hmm. Yeah. And when we found out it’s Rand who’s behind all this stuff, and Eli and I are sticking together, Rand tells Omnimach he’s ready to come with them. He’s covered his bases one way or another.”

“But you may never know what his plan really was,” she added. “What do you think he’s going to do now?”

“You mean besides try to destroy us? Whatever it is, it won’t be good. If we’re competing on a level field, we’ll hold our own. We have a proven track record and satisfied clients. Hope they’re loyal.”

“What about your salespeople. Were they close to Rand?”

“Not really. Belinda’s who they have constant contact with, and she has a good relationship with virtually all of them. At least I think she does.”

“How many salespeople do you have?”

“Five full time. Belinda has an assistant who helps her with proposals and referring potential clients to the salespeople.”

“Is servicing your clients primarily under Eli?”

“Yeah, and software refinement and development of new products. Liz is more than his righthand in all this. Eli and I can help backup any of those areas as needed but waiting to see what Rand does is like waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Sounds like you’ll be ready for whatever he does.”

“Hope so, but who knows. In any case, if what Eli says is accurate, Omnimach could be out of the picture in two months. Maybe all

we have to do is figure out how to hold out until then.” Alef didn’t sound convinced.

“Out of the picture in two months?” She sounded surprised.

Alef explained what Eli told him and asked her to keep it confidential.

“You really think that’ll happen?”

“I wouldn’t bet against Eli. My only question is how much it’ll affect Omnimach and how much they’ll be able to compete after that.”

“This gets weirder and weirder. Anything I can do to help? You know I’m a good word processor. Be glad to help with any secretarial things you need.”

“Thanks. I may take you up on that.”

“Is that Daddy?” Alef heard Nadia yell.

“Yep. Come ‘n tell him goodnight, then it’s off to bed.”

“What are we doing tomorrow night?” Nadia shouted into the phone.

“I’ll tell you then,” Alef said. “It’ll be a surprise.” It’d be a surprise to him too. He didn’t know what they’d be doing. His mind had been on other things. “Night, sweetheart. Love you.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“To bed with you,” Tav said to her, and then to Alef, “I’ll call you when I get her down. I’ve got something I want to talk to you about.”

Chapter 20

Joshua

Alef took another spoonful of soup. He'd let it sit too long, and it was lukewarm. He dumped it into the sink and put the bowl in the dishwasher. He went up to his bedroom and pushed his hand against the pain in his head. He took some ibuprofen then sat up on his bed. His phone buzzed. It was Tav. "That didn't take you long," he said.

"Nadia was ready for bed. Would you and Nadia like to spend your tomorrow night date with me at my place for dinner again?"

"You bet. And how about you two come over to my house for dinner Thursday. I'm getting to be a pretty good cook." He thought about his blah soup tonight and smirked.

Tav laughed. "That I've got to see. It's a date. What can I bring?"

"Just come. Spaghetti and a salad is no biggie."

"Okay. Uh, do you have anything in mind for this weekend?" She laughed. "Uh, not that I'm inviting myself, but *am* I invited?"

"Absolutely. You ever heard of Help House?"

"Isn't that a homeless shelter downtown?"

"That's it. They could use us Saturday late afternoon to serve dinner to their guests. How about it?"

"Yeah, but what could Nadia do?"

"Pass out paper plates and cups and visit with any children there. I also have a little project she could help me with." He didn't elaborate.

“How’s your head pain?” Tav asked,

“Ibuprofens are saving me.”

“I’m getting concerned about those, Alef. Don’t you think you should see a doctor?”

“Nah. It’s just some stress. It’ll go away. Incidentally, did I tell you what my grandfather said when I asked him about that Joshua we discussed?”

“That’s who I wanted to talk to you about. I’ve been doing some research on him.”

“Yeah? Well, Grandpa said he’s real.”

“From what I’ve read, he sure sounds real. Did he say anything else?”

“Yeah. He said kind of a strange thing. He said Joshua is the path to *THE ONE* and that I should find out about him.”

“*THE ONE*? What’s that?”

“He didn’t say, but I got the feeling I won’t know what that is until... Well, you know. Not until I’m ready. Whatever that means. So, what’d you find out?”

“He’s fascinating. What I read sounded like what your grandpa has been telling you.”

“Interesting.”

“There’s a lot about him and what he was supposed to have said, so your grandpa saying he’s real, makes sense.”

“But there’s no verifiable historical record of him?” Alef asked.

“No. That’s why in the past I haven’t been interested in learning much about him.” She laughed. “Maybe for some, they brush him off as a myth because they’re uncomfortable with the so called perfect life he was supposed to have lived and the moral ideas that he was said to have taught.”

“Moral ideas? You mean like the *Tenets* kind of things?”

“Yeah. And he claimed to be the course people should follow. Isn’t

that what your grandpa said?”

“Yeah. Basically. He said he was the path to *THE ONE*.”

“Anyway, he’s supposed to have not just told people how to be happy, but there was also something mystical about him. About the powers legend says he had.”

“Mystical powers?”

“Uh huh, and using your grandpa’s term, he sounded like he was a super or supreme essence. Like us, only beyond us. And he said he could help us become like he is.”

“An enhanced essence?”

“Basically. I think that’s what I’ve read says he was implying anyway. But the information we have about him is sketchy, and who knows how that’s been changed over the centuries.”

“What else did you find about him?” Alef asked.

“Well, he was also thought of as kind of a keeper. A keeper of knowledge. I read a definition of truth that he was supposed to have given. He said truth was the knowledge of things as they were, as they are, and as they are to come.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah. And knowledge translates to power, so, theoretically, if you have all the knowledge, you have all the power.”

Alef thought about Eli and his god computer but didn’t say anything.

“Something else he said,” Tav continued, “apparently over and over again. He invited and encouraged his followers to be one.”

“One? What do you think he meant?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but it obviously had to do with how they thought and acted. I mean, they needed to support one another because what the accounts say, this Joshua and his followers were always under heavy persecution.”

“Interesting. Grandpa said Joshua was the way to *THE ONE* so

I'm wondering if THE ONE kind of means seeing others as part of yourself. Like they're an extension of you and vice versa. So when another hurts, you hurt. When they're happy, you're happy. That kind of thing."

"Yeah. And with a relationship like that you'd have a pretty good idea what the others are thinking. What they need. And they know that about you so being one like that helps everybody."

"But how do you do that?" he asked. "How do you become one?"

She was silent for a moment then said, "What about the *Tenets*? Could following the *Tenets* help you be one like that?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I wish I could talk to Grandpa about who Joshua is, but that's not going to..." He shrugged.

"I'll send you the links where I got my information so you can find out more about him," she said. "Can I ask you a question?"

"You mean besides that one?" Alef said and laughed. "That's what Grandpa said to me when I asked him the same thing. Sure. Go ahead."

"What a neat man. I wish I could've known him."

"You would've liked him."

"I know I would. Here's my question. You said that humility was one of the *Tenets* and how that was a big challenge for you." She paused. "What's been happening to you, I... Well, I need to make some changes, Alef. I'd like to know why humility has been such a challenge?"

Alef was silent for a moment, and when he spoke it was subdued. "I'm an expert on pride, Tav. I can tell you what not to be. Just look at me. Not quite like Rand maybe, but still I got miles to go." He heaved a sigh. "My focus's been on me, and I've had this big-fish thing. I had to elevate myself in the eyes of everybody. Whatever that took." He pushed out a cynical laugh. "And I've got really good at ignoring my faults and weaknesses. That's simple. Just pretend they don't exist or

don't matter." He gave a little grunt. "That's pride, Tav. I couldn't change because I wouldn't recognize what needed to change in my life, and it brought me misery. It kept me from the people I love." He swallowed down a gulp. "You. Nadia."

"You're not like that now," she said. "Not anything like that."

"I wish. I hope. But I know I don't want to be like that."

Alef combed a hand through his hair. "Humility. I can tell you humility can really hurt because it means you're recognizing your pride." He forced a laugh. "You're seeing what an idiot you really are." Then with a barely audible voice he added, "But it brings a great release too. You're not trying to live a lie anymore. You start to get this real joy because you see others happy. Maybe even because you're doing something to bring that about."

Alef's emotions were rising, and he pushed them down. "When my grandfather talked to me about pride, he asked me when the last time was that I sacrificed for anybody. There wasn't a last time, Tav. I don't ever remember a time that I did something like that."

He wiped his eyes with his fingers. "You want to know the sweetest act of sacrifice I've seen lately? Maybe ever?" He choked and swallowed. "Nadia giving her Molly to Gabby." He brushed his eyes again. "That's sacrificing. That's humility. Giving your most special possession to help somebody else." He cleared his throat. "Maybe humility's just another word for love."

Alef's dam broke, and he quietly wept. He wept because of Nadia and her sacrifice. He wept because of who he had been. He wept because of who he wanted to be and how almost impossible it seemed for him to get there. He wept because he loved Tav and didn't know whether she would ever let him be one with her like this Joshua was talking about.

After a time, Tav spoke. She seemed to be fighting tears herself. "Alef." She waited for him to respond.

“Yes?” he finally stammered.

“I love you.”

Chapter 21

The Other Shoe

“**M**aybe there won’t be a bomb,” Eli said. “It’s been, what, a week and a half since you talked with Rand, and everything seems copacetic.”

Alef didn’t reply but rubbed his right temple.

Eli looked at him. “You need to get that checked. It’s not normal to have that kind of head pain for as long as you’ve had it.”

“Yeah. That’s what Tav keeps telling me. I have an appointment with my doctor after our meeting today.” He brushed a hand across his mouth. “Who knows how long it’ll take Rand and Omnimach to get up and going. One piece of good news. All our sales reps and almost all our clients responded very positively to Belinda’s emails and texts about Rand leaving.”

“If we can hold out for another six weeks and two days, to be exact, we should be home free,” Eli said.

“You still okay to offer Liz and Belinda today what we’ve talked about?”

“Absolutely!” Eli said. “We wouldn’t be where we are without those two.”

You’re right, and they’re already kind of partners anyway. We’re not making any moves now without their input and involvement.”

Eli nodded his agreement. “Speaking of partners, has our attorney contacted the traitor about terminating him from our LLC for

cause?”

“Yeah. She’s sent Rand both a text and email and has a confirmed acknowledgment of receipt. She’s also sent him a registered letter. Looks like Rand let his house here go and has an apartment in the Bay area now. She’s sent in the appropriate LLC change forms to the state, so, Rand is legally no longer affiliated with us.”

Eli huffed. “Too bad she doesn’t think it’s feasible to go after Rand and Omnimach if they start using our proprietary stuff.”

“With what you did to our software, hopefully that’ll be a moot point.”

“Not to worry. It’ll work. By the way, what Tav said her thoughts were regarding Rand’s deserter moves makes sense to me. Thanks for sharing. But I think there’s something else too.” He gave Alef a knowing look. “Rand saw a way for him to be the big cheese with Omnimach instead of you, and he took it. That’s Rand.”

Alef shrugged. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“You ready for us?” Belinda said as she and Liz came into the conference room. Alef and Eli stood, and Alef pointed to the empty chairs at the table. They took their seats and looked at Alef in anticipation.

“Couple of things,” he said. “First, thank you. Big time. You’ve both been huge contributors to Sawtooth before and after Rand left. We’ve increased your compensation packages, but we want to do something more.”

That brought puzzled looks to both women, and Liz spoke. “You two are great to work for.”

Belinda agreed.

Alef’s mouth bent up slightly. “Eli and I have decided you need to have appropriate titles. We’ll likely end up in a real battle here with Omnimach, and we need total commitment from all of us. So, if you’ll accept it, we’d like Belinda to serve as vice president of

marketing, and Liz as vice president of research and development. Liz, you'll still work under Eli who now carries the title of executive vice president of operations. Belinda, you'll report directly to me." He looked at the women whose mouths were agape. "You okay with that?"

They glanced at each other then back at Alef. Belinda spoke first. "Thank you. You can absolutely count on me."

"I've never had a title of any kind before," Liz gushed. "Thanks. You got me a hundred and ten percent."

"You two are making us better than we've ever been," Eli said.

"We need to get out a press release and let our employees and clients know about these changes," Alef added. "I'll take care of that. From now on, please include your titles on correspondence you send out in your own names."

With full-face grins, Liz and Belinda scooted their chairs back and stood.

Alef held up a hand to keep them from leaving. "One other thing," he said. They fixed their eyes on him. "With Rand gone, we have one-third ownership in our LLC that's sitting there. We'd like to give each of you one-half of that. You'll be voting partners in Sawtooth and share in all future profits dispersed to the partners. You'll pay the same per share cost that Eli and I did when we formed the company, but you won't pay anything out-of-pocket. That cost will be taken out of your share of the profits at the end of the year. Our attorney will draw up the appropriate paperwork. You okay with that?"

Liz and Belinda were stunned and just moved their heads up and down. Alef and Eli stood and shook their hands.

"You're now officially co-owners of Sawtooth," Alef said. "Welcome partners."

They all went back to their offices, and Alef shut down his computers. He removed his jacket from the oak hall tree at the side of his

credenza and was putting it on when Belinda came in.

“Looks like you’re heading off somewhere,” she said.

“Yeah. Got an errand to run. What’s up.”

She looked at him with obvious concern. “You okay, Alef?”

“Yeah. Sure. Fine.”

She raised an eyebrow. “We’re all worried about your headaches. Hope you’re going to check on that sometime.”

“I thought I’d set everyone’s mind at ease.” His look was forced playful. “Especially Tav’s. I’m headed to the doctor’s now. I’m sure my head pain’s stress related. Maybe he’ll give me something a little stronger than the over-the-counter stuff I’ve been taking. That’ll take care of it.”

“Sounds like you and your former wife are trying to make a go of it again.” She sounded surprised.

“Yeah. I was stupid to let her go in the first place.”

Something like disappointment registered on her face, but she quickly erased that. “Well, I’m afraid my news won’t do your headaches any good.”

“Rand?” He sat down.

“Yep. It looks like he and Omnimach are making their move. We just lost Blake Riley, one of our salesmen. He called to apologize but said he couldn’t turn down their offer.”

“Which was?” Alef asked.

“A \$30,000 signing bonus and a twenty percent raise in base salary and commissions.”

Alef went ashen, and his head throbbed. “You think they made the same offer to all our salespeople?”

“Blake said they did. He also said that Rand called them all directly and told them he left us because we were dishonest and overcharging our clients. Blake said he didn’t buy that, but the \$30,000 and the commission increase...he wasn’t going to turn that down. Rand told

him he could go to his personal Sawtooth clients and tell them that Omnimach would give them the same product with no set up cost. Their monthly subscription fee would only be half of what Sawtooth was charging and be guaranteed for two years. He said Blake would get full commission for each company that switched.”

Alef put his hand to his head. “Those companies are all on yearly contracts with us. They can’t leave without a hefty cancellation fee.”

“Right, but apparently Omnimach will pay those fees as well.”

“What about our other salespeople? Any idea where they stand?”

“I’ll call them this afternoon.”

The other shoe had dropped. And it shattered the floor.

Alef zipped up his jacket. “I have to go. Tell Eli and Liz what you’ve told me. The four of us’ll get together tomorrow to figure all this out.” He put his hand on her arm. “Thanks for sticking with us.”

Her eyes sparkled defiantly. “You know what Winston Churchill said. ‘If you’re going through hell, keep going.’ We’re going to win this thing, Alef. I know we will.”

Alef gave her a tight smile. He just hoped that sometime in the weeks ahead, he could tell her she was right.

Chapter 22

The News

Alef's visit with the doctor was not what he expected. He came home, fixed himself a sandwich, and called Tav. Nadia answered the phone.

"Hi Daddy. I had a good day."

"What did you do?"

"I ate peanut butter cookies at school and made paper dolls and Mommy and me played Xbox and guess who called me?" Before Alef could answer she yelled, "Gabby! She has a new home and she likes it and Molly likes it too."

"Wow! You did have a really good day. Is your mommy there?"

"Yep. Here she is. Love you, Daddy."

"Love you too."

"Sounds like you got all the latest news," Tav said.

"Gabby?" Alef said. "That's a surprise."

"Yeah. A neat one. Janet, the counselor, thought it would be okay for Gabby to call Nadia since Gabby was asking about her all the time. We don't know where she lives, and we won't call her. But she can call us."

"That's super."

"How was your doctor's visit." Tav's voice carried concern.

"Uh, okay. He said he wanted to do some make-sure-you're-alright tests."

“What kind of tests?”

“Well, just the regular. He said they’d start off with a contrasting CT scan of my head.”

“A contrasting CT? That is not a regular test, Alef. What exactly did the doctor say?”

“He was a little apprehensive about how long my head pain’s been going on, and that it was always in one spot. That’s all. It’s just routine.”

“Right. When and where’s your CT scan. I’ll take you.”

“It’s Friday. Thanks, but he didn’t say I needed to have a driver.”

“I’m sure he assumed you knew. They’ll probably give you a sedative, and they’ll be shooting serum into your arm. You need a driver.”

“Okay, but it’s at three in the afternoon. You’ll be working.”

“That’s no problem. I’ll take the time off and get a babysitter for Nadia. Should I pick you up at your home?”

“Yeah. Thanks. Sorry to put you through this.”

“You’ve got me worried. I’d like to be with you through this thing if you’ll let me.”

That sent warmth flooding through him. He had never had a CT scan before. His doctor said that other than possibly causing some claustrophobia and being a little uncomfortable, it wouldn’t be too bad.

“I’m sure I’m okay, Tav. Be good to find out what it isn’t, huh?”

“Or what it is.”

“Yeah, well, overall, this’s been an interesting day.” He told her what they had done for Liz and Belinda and then what Belinda reported about Rand.

“What a scumbag!” she spat out. “In just about every way.” Her laugh was harsh. “All our conversations about loving everybody. I’m sorry, Alef. There’s not one stick of love in me for the likes of that low life.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what it means to love someone who’s trying to destroy you, but I don’t think it means you sit back and accept or tolerate wrong.”

Tav groaned. “I’m not going to waste my time trying to figure that one out.”

“I don’t know. Maybe love here means we don’t react to him. Just do what we need to do to protect us, and maybe that’ll be best for him in the long run.” He hesitated. “I’ve been reading a bit about this Joshua and what he’s said. He talked about loving enemies and somehow tied that to having patience. Even peace. Like that was being in control of yourself and not letting others control you. I can see where he’s going there, but man...”

“Rand’s still a lowlife!” she said.

“Yeah. Maybe. Anyway, the partners are meeting tomorrow to try to figure out how to handle this. We just have to survive six weeks or so. We can do that.”

“Which reminds me,” Tav said, “how many ten-dollar bills did you have Nadia hand out at the homeless shelter the other day?”

“I don’t know. Fifty. Maybe sixty.”

“That was super neat, but given what’s happening with Sawtooth, maybe...” She didn’t finish.

Alef understood where she was going. “I hear you, but it was the right thing to do. The faces on those men and women were more than worth what that cost. I’d do it again.” He gave a short laugh. “Well, maybe not until Sawtooth’s over this hump.”

Tav sighed loudly. “I’m sorry. Sorry for my rant against Rand. “And your grandpa says this is temporary and not real? Sure feels real and permanent when you’re smack in the middle of it.”

The ensuing silence brought a surprising, almost overwhelming, sense of peace to Alef. When he spoke again, it was with calm assurance. “Thanks for being there, Tav. I don’t know what lies ahead for

me, but it'll be okay.”

Tav sounded like she might be crying, then she quietly said, “I want to be there for you, Alef. I want to be with you.” Alef heard her catch her breath. “The Alef I fell in love with and married was a good man. A really good man. Then a couple of years ago, something happened to him. His body was still there, but the man I knew and loved was gone. So was the father that Nadia knew and loved.” There was a long pause, then she said, “I think he’s back now. And maybe we can...” She didn’t finish.

Chapter 23

The Plan

The Sawtooth team gathered in the conference room. “Well,” Alef said, “let’s see where we’re at and what we’re going to do about it.” He faced Belinda. “Eli and Liz told you about what’s likely going to happen to the software that Rand commandeered. Any questions?”

“No.” She looked at Eli and Liz with obvious respect. “We need to be prepared for the fallout from that though. It’ll be interesting what the clients who leave us do when their systems crash.”

“I suspect we’ll have at least some of them knocking on our door again,” Alef said, “but we’ll see. Any more of our salespeople turn on us?”

“Three more,” Belinda said. “Mandy Jensen called me this morning to tell me she’s sticking with us. She had a few choice words for Rand and the four salespeople who quit on us. She even said she’d work overtime with no increase in salary.”

Alef looked down at the table, then up at Belinda. “When we’re able to, I’d like to give her a bonus that’s \$5000 more than what those four deserters got from Omnimach. And maybe give her a permanent twenty-five percent raise in her commission rate too. What do you think?”

They all emphatically agreed. Alef looked at Belinda. “Please let her know that. And let’s send her a letter signed by all of us, thanking

her for her loyalty and include a \$200 gift certificate to a high-class restaurant.”

“She’ll be happy with that. By the way, she’s given me six salesperson referrals that I’m following up on.”

Alef pumped a fist. “What’s our status with contract cancellations, Eli?”

“Well, it’s a little early to know where this’s all heading, but so far, we have twelve notifications. Seven of them have paid their early cancellation fees.”

“Any projections of potential losses in income from fees and existing contracts over the next two months?” Alef asked.

“It’s a real unknown,” Eli answered. “One extreme is that we could see a loss of something over \$150,000 before business starts to regenerate after Omnimach implodes.”

“What if we four went without income during that time?” Liz asked.

“Good idea. I’m willing to do that.” Belinda responded immediately.

Alef and Eli gave each other a consenting look, and Alef sat back. “Thank you. We’ll do it.”

“We’re not dead in the water with future sales,” Belinda said, “and I’d be surprised if we lost anywhere near that much business. Most of our clients are very satisfied with our service and should be reluctant to move away from a proven thing. Why don’t we send a letter to our consumers thanking them for being a valued client? Then in a cool way counteract the lies Rand is telling and explain Omnimach’s attempt to wipe us out with unsustainable low prices. I think they’d ask themselves, ‘How will a company that behaves like this, treat me down the road?’”

“Let’s do it,” Alef said. “Go ahead and draft that letter and run it by the rest of us.”

“We could also follow up with a phone call from one of us to answer any questions,” Belinda added.

Everyone agreed. Alef leaned forward. “Anything else we should be doing?”

“Question.” Liz said. “How do we handle clients who accept Omnimach’s offer to leave us, then want to come back after Omnimach can’t service them?”

“Welcome them back with open arms,” Alef offered, “but go by standard policy in our treatment of returning clients, including charging a startup fee. I don’t think we should give them any additional perks. That’d send the wrong signal to those who stuck with us.” They all concurred.

“There’ll be four of our former salespeople who will likely be out of work then too,” Belinda added. “What if they ask to come back?”

“What do you think?” Alef asked her.

“I don’t want them!” she declared. The others concurred.

Eli cleared his throat. “Okay, Liz and I have something to share. We’ve been working on a project for a while.”

“Your computer god?” Alef’s voice had a not-this-again tone.

Eli shot Alef a defensive glance. “I don’t know if you remember the conversation that you, Rand, and I had a while back about computer gods, but I’ve been thinking about that ever since.”

“I remember.” How could he forget? That conversation led Alef to recognize the existence of essences, other universes, and the possibility that *we* are the aliens on this planet.

“Yeah. Well, what you and Rand said about the potential devastating power of that kind of beast has been weighing on me.” He gave a bitter laugh. “And Rand’s actions just reinforced that. What if somebody like a Rand had that kind of power?” He gave an angry groan. “With access to mega-quantum computing, somebody may develop that potential sooner rather than later, but it’s not going to

be me. Talk about self-worship. That's all it is. Making yourself more powerful, richer, bigger, and better than everybody else. And why?

"We're all going to die, Alef. It's all temporary. And to have that kind of obsession is stupid and a one-way ticket to misery. 'Specially when it ends up hurting others." He let out a mirthless snigger. "Here's the irony. *You* become a slave. *You* let something else control you. And not just the computer. Your gratification depends on everybody viewing you as top dog. As a god. And if anyone doesn't see you that way, then you're not. You let what everyone else on this planet does or think control your contentment." He snorted. "Your obsession is nothing less than a chain around your neck."

Alef gazed at him with fresh respect. Had his grandpa been talking to Eli? He smiled to himself at that thought. "So, what *are* you working on?"

"What've I been working on for two years you mean," Eli said. "Tell them, Liz."

"It's mostly Eli's brain, but we've adapted and refined our ML Conversational Assistant to be used in the home as a personal assistant.

"Like a Siri or Alexa?" Belinda interjected.

"Sort of," Liz said, "but on mega steroids. Does everything they do, and better, but it also acts on behalf of its owner. It answers phone calls, texts, and emails and decides whether to forward them for you to respond directly. It makes your appointments and can contact whoever you want it to, then carry on an intelligent conversation with them. It doesn't just understand the words it hears or reads but considers the context and nuance of every situation, so it always communicates rationally." She lifted her lips slightly. "Maybe even better than who it represents could.

"Then what's really cool, it can do all your Google searches for you. It can find information you want or the best values for whatever

you're interested in. And it makes recommendations based on costs, availability, quality, and on and on." She gave a smug look. "Pretty neat stuff, and I've just scratched the surface of what it can potentially do."

"Wow!" Belinda exclaimed. "You're talking expanding our market potential from millions to billions of users. What about affordability though?"

"Just about everybody can pay for it," Liz emphasized. "Our system is an app that can be installed on a phone, computer, and tablet. With Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, it communicates between whatever devices it's set up on."

"Will there be recurring income from it?" Alef asked.

"Absolutely. There's an initial cost to purchase the app, then a mandatory and affordable subscription fee that can be paid annually or monthly."

"Mind boggling!" Alef said. "How far are we from getting this out?"

"We're ready to submit our system to the patent office right now," Eli answered. "I think we'll be ready to field test in a month, and within three to six months, be ready to sell it. We've been fiddling around with this on our own devices." He pointed his hands at Alef and Belinda. "Next step is for you to try it out."

"That'll be fun!" Belinda exclaimed. "What will you call it?"

"Maybe the Sawtooth Personal Conversational Assistant or the Sawtooth PCA," Eli said, "but marketing's your bag."

"Man, what potential! I've got a flood of marketing ideas already pouring through my head." Then Belinda's enthusiasm dampened. "Gonna take a gob of money though." She shrugged.

"We'll figure it out," Alef said confidently. He looked at Eli and then at Liz. "You guys've just shined a huge sun on a pretty dismal day."

He said nothing about the CT scan he would have this afternoon.

Chapter 24

Bad and Good

“Hi Tav,” Alef said. “Sorry to call you at work. Got a minute?”

“That’s all I’ve got. I have a student waiting to see me. What’s up.”

“My doctor just called with results from the CT scan.”

“Already? It’s only Monday. I didn’t think you’d hear back so...”

She stopped. “Uh, what is it?”

Alef could hear the quiver in her voice, and his mind stuck.

“Alef? You there?”

“Cancer. It’s cancer.”

“Oh no! Hold on. I need to close my door.” She was back quickly.

“Tell me everything. Please.”

“The doctor told me there’s a small hollowed-out hole in my skull near my right temple. He said it could be a solitary occurrence but not likely. If this was the only one, he said it’s a plasmacytoma. I’m not sure if I’m pronouncing that right, but I had him spell it out for me.”

“Alef, what’s that? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a tumor. Apparently, abnormal plasma cells are destroying the bone.”

“And it’s cancer?”

“Yeah. The doctor said if it’s solitary its likely self-contained. But he thinks it’s...”

“Thinks it’s what, Alef?” Tav’s voice was shaky now.

“He thinks it’s multiple myeloma.”

“Oh my.... All I know about multiple myeloma is it’s serious. What is it?”

“Cancer in the plasma cells. Starts in your bone marrow then spreads to bones throughout your body. He said it’s pretty rare but at my age really rare.”

“Can they treat it?” Her words were slow and deliberate as if fear had replaced her anxiousness.

“Yeah, but I don’t know any details. My doctor’s sending me to an oncologist this afternoon. I’ll call you when I find out more.”

“I want to talk to you about it in person. I want to be with you, Alef. Please. Come over tonight for dinner, and I’ll put Nadia to bed early. Please.”

“I’ll be there. Thank you, Tav. I love you.”

“I can hardly stand this, Alef. See you tonight.”

Alef didn’t say anything to those in the office about his CT scan, but he was sure they could tell he was having a difficult time concentrating on anything. Eli and Liz reported that another seven clients were cancelling their contracts. Nineteen, so far, were leaving. At this rate, Sawtooth’s loss of clients would not come close to Eli’s worst-case scenario although a loss of even 19 hurt. The letters they sent out and phone calls they made last week were clearly helping. Belinda said she had a video conference with two of the potential salespeople who were recommended to her, and that went well. Everyone was feeling a bit up today, which made Alef’s concentration challenge more noticeable than it would have been.

Eli asked him if he was okay. Alef answered that it was just his headache. That he was following up with his doctor on it.

Late that afternoon, he met with the oncologist. He liked her and felt comfortable with both her manner and competency. That

evening, he went over to Tav's. She asked him to put Nadia to bed while she did the dishes. When they finished, they sat on the sofa, and Tav's pinched lips showed her concern.

"This doctor's good," Alef said. "Thorough. She clearly laid out where we're going with this."

"What did she say?" Tav did not repress her anxiety.

"It's at least a plasmacytoma, but likely multiple myeloma. If it's not multiple myeloma, she said it can be treated with just radiation."

"But she thinks it's multiple myeloma?"

"Yeah. She put me through a bunch of test this afternoon, and they drew enough of my blood that I thought I'd need a transfusion."

Tav didn't laugh at his attempted humor but grabbed his hand. "Where do you go from here?"

"She put a rush on analyzing my blood and urine work, and I'll meet with her tomorrow afternoon to discuss the results."

"Will that tell her what you have?"

"Not exactly. But it'll give a pretty good indication of what it is or isn't."

"What are they looking for?"

"Some of the things I remember is they're checking for types of protein and their levels, and if my red cell count is low. She also said something about light chain levels and ratios. I don't know what those are, but she said if the ratio between the two light chain types is a lot greater or lesser than one, then that's not good."

"What if these tests indicate multiple myeloma?"

"Then I get a bone marrow biopsy at her clinic late Wednesday, and she'll go over the results with me Friday morning."

"Will the biopsy tell her for certain whether or not it's multiple myeloma?"

"Yes."

"And if it is?"

“They’ll do a full body contrasting CT scan to see if I have other bone lesions. She said it’s likely there would be.”

Tav stiffened her grip on his hand. “Then what?”

“She couldn’t give me any details about treatment until they find out exactly what it is. If it’s solitary, then basically they kill it with radiation. If it’s multiple myeloma...” He twisted his mouth slightly. “She spent a lot of time assuring me that they’ve made a lot of progress in the last few years in treatments. When I see her tomorrow, she’ll be able to give me a better picture of where we are and where we’re going.”

“If you have the bone marrow biopsy, I’ll take you. They must give you an anesthetic for that.”

“Yeah. The doctor said they would. Thank you. I’m sorry to be such a pain here.”

“A pain?” She didn’t keep the emotion out of her voice. “What would *you* do if this were happening to me, Alef?”

Alef swallowed and nodded.

“Multiple myeloma. I’ve been reading up on...” That’s all Tav could get out before she had a tear-flood. She stood and brought back a box of tissues.

Alef sat helpless watching her as she cried. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. He thought about his grandfather’s emphasis on everything being temporary. “Right.” he muttered to himself. He had also read up on multiple myeloma. The word that kept appearing in the descriptions he was reading was *terminal*. He pulled Tav’s head over to his lips and kissed her forehead.

“Probably shouldn’t be getting so concerned about this until we find out for sure what it is.” He knew he was speaking as much to himself as to Tav. He wanted to comfort her somehow. But he couldn’t even comfort himself.

“Do you love me, Alef?” Tav’s voice was unsteady.

“I’ve never stopped loving you.” He held her tight.

“Will you marry me then?” Tav’s question was a begging.

That shock stiffened Alef’s muscles, and he sat away from her, grabbed her shoulders, and his eyes held fast to hers. His heart was leaping from his chest as he kissed her, long and tenderly. When he sat back, his eyes were glistening.

“You can’t know how much I want to be one with you.” Then he slumped and closed his eyes and mumbled, “After all I’ve done. And you want to...”

Her response was another sweet, gentle kiss.

He let out a long breath. “Tav. I need to find out what the deal is with me here. I could never ask you to tie yourself to a man who’s dying.” Just saying that word raised a pall for both of them.

Then Tav took his chin in her hand and turned his face to hers. “I don’t care if it’s only for a month, or ten years, or until we both get old and feeble. I want to be one with you for as long as I can.” She kissed him again. “Will you marry me, Alef Welch?” Her eyes sparkled through her tears, and she forced a laugh “I’ll be glad to get on my knees if you want?”

Alef slid off the sofa onto his knees. “That’s *my* cue.” He took her hand in both of his. “I don’t know why you want to marry me, Tavia, but I sure want to marry you. You and Nadia will be the focus and love of my life. I promise!”

She smiled impishly. “Do I take it that’s a yes to my proposal?”

“Count on it!” They stood and embraced. And wept.

It was midnight before Alef got home. He and Tav had talked about everything from what was happening to his business to when they would get married and where they would live. His effort to convince her to wait on their marriage, at least until he found out exactly what his future would be, didn’t get to first base.

“I want to make a statement,” Tav declared. “I’m marrying the man

I love with no contingencies or conditions. I want to get married this week.”

With that settled, they made quick plans. They will get their marriage license at the county recorder’s office tomorrow and be married by a district court magistrate Friday, after Alef’s possible doctor’s visit. Only Nadia would be invited, and no one would be told what was happening until after they were married. They would take a second honeymoon as circumstances allowed.

The new united family would live in Tav’s house. It was the home Nadia would be most comfortable being in. The six-month lease on Alef’s home would be up shortly, and he would let it lapse. They’d have to figure out what to do with his furniture, but not paying his \$3,600 a month rent would help big time, given him going without salary for a while with Sawtooth.

Alef lay on his bed, so wound up he couldn’t sleep. Where was his grandfather now? Yet, he had introduced Alef to the *Tenets* that were becoming part of Alef’s life. No. They were *becoming* his life. He didn’t completely understand them. Would he ever? But following them was what he wanted to do. Following them brought Tav and Nadia back into his life. Following them *was* Alef.

Then a consuming awareness absorbed him. The person who visited his grandfather when he was dying was his grandfather’s grandfather. Was that a harbinger of what was happening to Alef now? Was that what Alef’s grandfather visiting him in his dreams meant? “Are you dying?” was the question he had asked Alef. Alef had assumed that only had to do with his not following the *Tenets*. But was it also a foretelling of what would happen to him physically as well?

He would likely find the answer to that question this week.

Chapter 25

Life-changing

Tav glanced at the plaques on the wall as they waited for Dr. Amy Shinoda. The list of her accomplishments and recognitions was impressive. She nudged Alef and pointed to one of them. *Best Doctors in America*. Before Alef could comment, Dr. Shinoda came into the office. Her graying black hair was cut into a pageboy and her round face broke into a smile.

“Dr. Shinoda, this is my fiancé, Tav,” Alef said. “I’d like her to hear firsthand what’s happening.”

“She’s welcome to.” The doctor shook Tav’s hand then faced Alef. “If you don’t mind me asking, have you set a wedding date yet?”

“Actually, the date, the time, and the place. We’ll be married this afternoon at 3:45 at the county courthouse by a district court magistrate.”

Dr. Shinoda didn’t try to hide her surprise and cleared her throat. She glanced at Tav, and her eyes carried the obvious question: *Do you know what you’re getting into?*

Tav looked at her confidently. “Alef and I were married to each other before and have a five-year-old daughter. We were divorced and are getting back together again.”

“Congratulations,” the doctor said warmly and invited them to sit down while she sat on a rolling stool in front of a small desk that held a computer. She addressed Tav. “I’m assuming that Alef has kept you

abreast of the results of the tests I've discussed with him so far."

"Sort of." She gave him a wry glance. "He's been pretty cryptic. I would like to know why his blood and urine tests convinced you to have him get the bone marrow biopsy."

"Sure." She typed something on her keyboard and looked at the computer screen. "I'm assuming you know about the original CT scan and the cancer diagnosis."

"Yes," Tav said. "Weren't these additional tests to determine if what he has is multiple myeloma?"

"That's correct. His blood and urine tests showed that is what he likely has, so we did the much more invasive bone marrow biopsy to verify that and determine the extent of the cancer."

She typed on the keyboard and read her screen. "The results of the biopsy are also online for you to look at, and I won't go into detail here." She wheeled away from her computer and faced Alef. "The final word, Alef, is that you *do* have multiple myeloma, which at your age is extremely rare. Your particular type is also aggressive and well advanced."

Tav gasped. "What does all that mean?"

"Alef has what we call lambda light chain myeloma. There are three stages that describe the growth or spread of the disease. It looks like Alef is well into stage two." She turned to him. "As I told you, Alef, you almost certainly have additional lesions like the one on your skull. We will do a full body CT scan to determine where they might be."

Alef took Tav's hand. Her hand was shaking. "Where do we go from here?" he asked the doctor.

"Before we talk about treatments, I want to give you a little history and some assurances. A few decades ago, Stage II multiple myeloma meant you had a life expectancy of a couple of years or less. We still have no known cure for this, but there have been advancements made

in the treatment to get it more quickly into remission and keep it there.”

Alef’s and Tav’s faces were drawn, and Tav was near tears.

The doctor continued. “Now, for a bit of a silver lining.” Her eyes carried some hope. “Alef, you appear otherwise to be in good health and are very young. Those factors count.” She wheeled back to her computer. “We need to go with very intense chemotherapy with you, and we’re going to shoot for remission within three months. The median five-year survival rate for stage two myeloma today is around 50%. But given your age and health, I think we can do better than that. You should be able to live a relatively normal life as well.”

She tightened her lips. “Please remember, though, that everyone is unique. There are unknown factors that could affect these projections one way or another.” Her eyes grabbed Alef’s. “And my optimistic projections depend on you doing your part. You need to be completely faithful in following the diet, exercise, chemotherapy, and drug regimen that I’ll put you on. And you need to have a stem cell transplantation down the road.”

“Uh, what will the treatment involve, and when will it start?” Alef asked with obvious concern. Tav slid close to him and slipped her arm through his.

“I want to sit down with you next week and go through everything, but here is how we’ll begin it. By the way, we’ll order all the drugs for you and bill your insurance company directly. There will be drugs you’ll take to abate side effects of the chemotherapy, but the therapy itself is straight forward, and you will administer it to yourself at home.

“I’ll put you on a high-dose treatment that will involve three drugs. During a three week cycle you will be taking your medical doses on just a few days scattered through that time. You may not feel too great those days, but you should be able to function mostly as usual the

other days. You will want to avoid crowds and situations where you could pick up germs, as your immune system will be compromised during that time. When you have to go out where there's lots of people, you should wear a face mask.

"We'll repeat the three-week cycle four times and test where we're at, at the end of each cycle. Hopefully, by the conclusion of the fourth cycle you will be in complete remission. That's our goal."

"What if you find more spots like the one in his skull," Tav asked. "Does the chemotherapy dissolve those?"

"No. Not entirely. He'll be receiving radiation treatment as well and possibly surgery. We'll schedule the full body CT scan for next Tuesday, and Alef will meet directly with our radiation oncologist when we get those results. I will have your drugs available to pick up by next Friday."

"You said something about stem cells," Alef said. "What's that?"

"Our chemotherapy treatment will be hard-hitting and do significant damage to the stem cells in your bone marrow. Functioning stem cells are necessary for your body to produce red and white blood cells and to fight infection. Before you begin your chemotherapy, we'll collect stem cells from your body, freeze them, then reinsert them after therapy." Her eyes carried encouragement. "You're going to have a busy week."

She stood. "My assistant will be in shortly and set up your appointments for next week. She'll check with you by phone weekly during this first cycle to see how you're doing." She looked at Tav. "Alef will need transportation next week for the CT scan and stem cell extractions, and it would be helpful if you could be with him when we go over the therapy administration."

Tav's eyes glistened, and she swallowed. "I'll be with him."

The doctor took both of their hands. "I don't want to minimize the challenges that lay ahead for you here, Alef." She glanced at Tav.

“Or for you. You will both be making some significant adjustments initially. But I have confidence that together we’re going to control this thing so Alef can have a happy, meaningful life. See you next week.”

That evening, Alef and Tav put Nadia to bed together. They didn’t tell her about Alef’s health challenge. When they took her to the courthouse earlier and told her they were going to get married again, her grin was so wide and fixed they thought her cheek muscles would give out. After their short wedding ceremony, they went out to eat with Nadia to celebrate. She hardly talked at all. She kept looking back and forth at Alef and Tav with her mouth stretched to her ears.

But tonight, she was all questions.

“And Daddy’s not going to go to his home tonight?” she said as she got into her bed.

Alef kissed her on her cheek. “This is my home now.”

She put her arms around his neck. “And you’ll be with me and Mommy forever and ever?”

“Forever and ever.” He laid Nadia’s head on her pillow and pulled her covers up to her shoulders.

“And we’re a family again?” Her grin was huge.

Tav bent over and kissed her forehead. “Yes. Again.” She leaned into Alef. “And always.”

Nadia kept asking questions like she would never get another chance, repeating some over and over for assurance. Finally, Tav said, “Time to go to sleep, sweetheart,” and turned out the light.

“You’re not going home, Daddy?” she yelled as they walked to the door.

“No, Nadia. This *is* my home. See you in the morning. Love you.”

Nadia watched them as they closed the door. “I love you, Daddy,” she whispered. “I love you, Mommy.”

Tav and Alef each showered and got into bed. Their initial feelings

of awkwardness soon vanished. It was as though being together like this was how it had always been. Tav rested her head on his arm, and he pulled her close. They lay there quiet, then Tav spoke. "You okay if we talk?"

"Sure."

"Were you expecting what the doctor told you this morning?" she asked.

"Sort of. I wouldn't have been surprised if she told me I only had a year or two to live, though."

"That's what I was expecting. I'm so grateful." She was near tears.

"I don't want to be a burden, Tav. To you or to Nadia."

She sat up a little. "A burden is doing something you don't want to do. Whatever Nadia and I can do to make it better for you, we *want* to do. That'll make us happy." She set her head on his arm again. "Can you ever forget the face of that angel tonight saying we're a family again?" Tav was struggling to talk. "That's what I want. That's what I've always wanted."

Alef felt her tears drop onto his shoulder. "I'll never do anything to make you or Nadia regret we're together." He swallowed. "Never."

Tav wiped her eyes with the sheet. "Your grandpa says we came from another universe to this one and will go back. If that's right, why are we even here in the first place?"

"I asked him that. He said we're here to make choices."

"That's it? That's all he said?"

"That's all he said. When I told him I didn't understand, he said I would when I was ready, and I got angry because he said I wasn't ready." Alef grimaced "Which just proved I lacked humility. I *wasn't* ready."

"You think you're ready now?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't think I'll have another conversation with my grandpa if that's what you mean. I think he meant I'd find my own

answers when I was ready.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

He did.

“Maybe it’s only in this universe we can have the experiences we need. You know, experiences to become who we can become I guess. But I don’t have a clue what that is.”

“Do you think, somehow, we’re given the experiences we have here so we can make the choices we need to make?” she asked. “I mean, to grow like we need to grow?”

“I don’t know, but I think our experiences just come. Stuff affects us that doesn’t have anything to do with what we’ve done. It just happens.” He half laughed. “Like... Well, you know.” He didn’t need to say that he was referring to his cancer.

Tav gulped. “Yeah. Like that.” She moved closer to him. “What we say and think and do sure affects what happens around us, though. So, probably doesn’t matter much how our experiences come.”

“Yeah. That’s what Grandpa said. Choose to act or let yourself be acted upon. That’s the bottom line, I guess. One way or another, I think, we get to define all our experiences. Doesn’t matter where they came from or what they are. We choose how they affect us.”

“And all this stuff’s temporary,” Tav said quietly. “Except us. Except who we’re choosing to be.” She touched his cheek. “I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t know some of these experiences would have an end.”

“Like multiple myeloma,” Alef murmured.

“Like multiple myeloma.”

Alef kissed her. “Are you about through talking?”

“I’m through.” She stroked his face and put her arms around him.

Chapter 26

The Team

“**W**hat’s happening, Alef?” Eli asked. The worry on his and Belinda’s and Liz’s faces was unmistakable as the four of them sat around the conference table. It was Monday, and all Alef had told his partners about his absences last week, was that his doctor was doing some tests.

Their concern for him nearly overwhelmed Alef. “I’ll bring you up to date on that, but first, where we sitting with business fallout?”

Eli held his gaze. “Not a bad week given what we expected. Since we last met, just two more clients have pulled out. What’s heartening is seventeen have called Liz and me to say they’re staying with us. Some of them had pretty colorful words for Rand and Omnimach.” He grinned. “I don’t think we’ll come close to my worst-case projections before things get real nasty for our friends there.” He glanced at Liz. “Anything else?”

“Just that we’ll have the beta version of our Personal Conversational Assistant ready for Alef and Belinda to try out in a couple of days.”

“I’m excited!” Belinda exclaimed. “And I’ll add to the good news. Mandy Jensen’s on fire. She signed up four more clients and thinks she’ll have at least that many more in the next week or two. She’s contacted all her present clients, and except for one who’s a little ambivalent, they say they’re very satisfied with our service and are sticking.”

“Where do we stand on adding to our sales force?” Alef asked.

“I want to hire the two salespeople I told you about last week. They’re anxious to work for us, and I like them. I have three more interviews this week and two the next. I think we can be back to our five person sales staff within the next couple of weeks. With that, we’ll be set to be super aggressive going after resigning the clients who left us after they see Rand and company fall off the table.” She smiled at Alef. “We’re in good shape.”

Everyone looked with anticipation at Alef. He shifted a little. “My turn, huh?” A corner of his mouth lifted. “Well, for one thing, I’m no longer single.” That brought a gasp or two. Belinda’s face dropped, but she recovered rapidly. “Tav and I remarried Friday,” he continued. “I won’t renew the lease on my house, and we’ll be living in her home for the foreseeable future.” His whole face smiled. “We’re a family again.”

Everyone, including Belinda, stood and with enthusiasm congratulated him. They sat down, and Alef’s face turned serious. “Yeah. Well, about my headaches. You know my doctor’s had me go through tests to see what’s going on there. He referred me to Dr. Shinoda. She’s an oncologist, and she ran more tests. Like a bone marrow biopsy. And... Well, I have cancer. Stage II multiple myeloma. She says that means it’s well advanced, and I’ll be doing intense chemotherapy and radiation treatments for the next three months. So, I’m asking for your patience here.”

A light switched off in the faces of his partners, and they stared at the table as though looking at him would make him, or them, uncomfortable. Or emotional. Alef attempted to lighten the mood. “That’s the bad news. Here’s the good news. Given the circumstances, the doctor’s prognosis is relatively positive. She thinks that with high-level therapy, I stand a reasonable chance to be in complete remission within three months. That’s what we’re shooting for.”

One by one his partners' eyes focused on him, and he tightened his lips. "I don't mean to imply I won't have challenges. I'll miss most of this week getting ready for my chemo regimen. But on an ongoing basis, I'm told that other than three or four days out of each three-week cycle, I should be able to come into the office and work as usual."

He shoved out a laugh. "So, other than getting married and being told I have cancer, last week was pretty dull."

No one else laughed, and after a heavy silence, Alef knew all of them had the same didn't-want-to-ask-it question. So, he spoke. "Is what I have terminal? The answer's yes. Anything can happen, but my doctor thinks I have a very good chance of living at least five years with a mostly normal everyday life." His eyes brightened. "And I could live even longer."

He gazed at each one around the table. Liz's eyes were moist, and Belinda was crying. Eli swallowed. All their faces carried unmistakable love and respect for him. He felt his own emotions rising. These were his friends. He loved them. They loved him. And the tears flowed.

After a moment, Eli broke the silence. "You're going to have major bucks out of your pocket to cover your insurance deductibles and co-pays. I vote you don't go without your salary like we planned. The rest of us'll handle that." Alef shook his head adamantly. Eli looked at Belinda and Liz. They nodded vigorously. "That's majority vote, Alef. You take your full salary." Alef was still shaking his head.

"Okay, here's a question." Eli said. "What if it was me who had what you have? What would you want to do? What would you *insist* on me doing?"

Alef held Eli's eyes, and his words came out in a quiet sigh. "Thank you."

"How is your chemo going to be administered?" Liz asked. "One

of us can take you to get that or to any of your appointments.”

Alef let out a short breath. “They’re self-inflicted. I mean, I give it to myself at home, and Tav will take me to my appointments. But if she can’t, I’ll ask one of you. I promise.” He looked at each one with tenderness as tears again welled up. “Thank you. For being my friends.”

“Why don’t you let me temporarily take over your day-to-day CEO duties,” Eli said. “You don’t need that on your plate when you’re taking your chemo. Then when you feel up to it, you can take those back.”

Alef’s eyes sent him a thank you. “Let’s see how I feel when I start this. According to my doctor, I’m supposed to function almost normally.” He raised an eyebrow. “But maybe my normal behavior would be a good reason for you to take over as CEO.”

They all laughed, and that brought some relief. The unity the four of them felt was real. They were a team.

That evening, Alef and Tav prepared dinner while Nadia set the table. Nadia’s grin seemed permanently affixed as she gawked at them. “We’re like magnets now!” She burst out.

Alef and Tav laughed, and they embraced Nadia. “We *are* like magnets now,” Alef said. “And we’re never, ever going to let each other go, huh.”

Then Nadia wiggled free. “I gotta eat.”

Alef and Tav laughed again, and they sat down for their dinner. When they finished, Nadia got up and squealed, “What we gonna do fun this week?”

Alef and Tav glanced at each other. Alef starting chemo Friday would keep him homebound over the weekend. “We’re going to have fun at home!” Tav said enthusiastically. “We’ll play games and tell stories and eat fun food. How’s that sound?”

“Xbox?” Nadia asked.

“You bet. Xbox and whatever other games you want.”

“*Go Fish? Old Maid?*” Nadia asked without much excitement.

“Sure, if you want.”

Nadia shrugged. “Okay.” She started to walk away.

“Where you going, sweetheart,” Tav called.

“Read. *How to Catch a Mermaid.*”

“Get ready for bed, and we’ll be up to say goodnight in a few minutes.”

Tav and Alef cleared the table. “You set to take me to my CT scan tomorrow,” he asked.

“The principal’s given me almost carte blanche in taking off to help you. I just have to try to let them know a day ahead and schedule my appointments accordingly.”

“Some really nice people, huh?” Alef said as he put dishes in the dishwasher. “I’ve been thinking about Grandpa’s the *Tenets* today. Especially after my experience with my friends at work.” He looked at her. “And with what’s been happening to us.”

“I have a question,” she said as she wiped off the table. “Maybe two. I get that our essences are here in this universe to have experiences they can only have here. Then to make choices. But why? What’s the ultimate purpose? If our essences can’t ever die, why are they even stuck in bodies that do die?” She embraced him with her eyes. “Like my husband getting...” She lowered her head and swallowed.

Alef finished loading the dishwasher. “I don’t know. Grandpa never talked about what happens to our essences after our bodies die. Just about choices we’re making while we’re in them.”

“You think maybe here we’re kind of practicing using a body to see what we’ll do with it before we get put in one that won’t ever die? If I remember right, Joshua said something like that.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Alef started the dishwasher, then sat at the table. “But why? Is our essence happier in a physical body? Does it have

greater abilities or is it more powerful or something? And if that's the case, why not just be connected to a permanent body right out of the chute? Why even go through this temporary stuff?"

Tav sat across the table from him, and he reached for her hand. "Guess that's something all of us'll find out." He forced a laugh. "For some of us, sooner rather than later." Tav's face darkened, and he realized what a stupid thing he just said. He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "Sorry."

She attempted a smile. "No problem. You up for another question?"

"Shoot. Let's see if I can do better this time."

"What did your grandpa mean by Light? I mean, does it have substance? Or is it alive like an essence? Or is it just an idea or a concept?" She shrugged. "You know what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah, but I don't know if I can put in words what I think it is. I *feel* it though. I *know* it. And it's real because I know Darkness is real. I've felt it too. Grandpa said that for something to exist, it has to have its opposite. Maybe that's what choosing's all about. We're faced with these opposites, and we can choose between them. And our choices shape us. We're choosing who we *want* to be." He gazed off for a second. "Maybe we're just *defining* who we are."

"Could Light and Darkness be a state of being then?" Tav asked.

"Yeah. I think that could be it. What I remember is Grandpa used words like truth and agency and peace and order and freedom when he talked about Light."

"Then Darkness would be the opposite," Tav replied. "Like lies and letting circumstances and other people control you. And maybe you trying to control other people. And maybe violence and contention and deceiving and chaos and oppression come from that too."

"Yeah. And Grandpa also said that Light helps you raise yourself

to a higher level. To increase your understanding. So, maybe Light's kind of independent of us and has some type of innate power." He lifted a hand. "Whatever that means. I don't know how I'd define it exactly, but when I'm trying to live Grandpa's *Tenets*, I feel something like power in me. Something beyond what I think I'm capable of."

"That's how I've felt!" Tav's voice mirrored her excitement. "And hearing about the *Tenets* from you has been almost like being reminded of something I already knew." Her eyes were aglow. "I'm seeing me, Alef. I'm seeing the person I'm becoming."

He squeezed her hand and sat back. "Wonder how or if I'll ever find out if there are any more *Tenets*."

Tav shook her head. "I'm having a hard enough time with those you've told me about. Especially, humility. Admitting my weaknesses so I can change them is like asking somebody to slap me in the face."

"Yeah. I know."

Her face turned sober. "What I do know is I want to live them. I just need mega help."

"Yeah, mega help," he muttered. He closed his eyes, then glanced up. "Grandpa said the *Tenets* were all one. That means they're tied together." He drummed his fingers on the table. "Light can't be complete without *all* the *Tenets*. And we can't be complete without choosing to live them. So, are there any others?"

Chapter 27

Telling Nadia

Alef began his chemotherapy in Dr. Shinoda's office. She warned him of fatigue and upset stomach among other potential side effects and gave him supplemental medicines to help reduce their severity. He would certainly lose his hair though, she said. Alef deadpanned to Tav that without hair to trade, his grandpa would probably lose interest in him. She didn't laugh.

His stem cell procedure had gone well, but his complete body CT scan turned up three more bone lesions. Two on his spine and one on his rib. He will see the radiation oncologist next week. Doctor Shinoda was non-committal on what that might mean for his life expectancy, but it couldn't be good.

There was nothing Alef could do to hide his obvious lethargy and wan complexion, and that evening at dinner Nadia kept looking at him. Alef and Tav gave each other a glance. It was time to tell Nadia about her father. After dinner they took her into the living room and the three sat on the couch.

Nadia snuggled up against Alef. "You're sick, aren't you Daddy." Alef put his arm around her and kissed her. "Yeah. I'm sick. But I'll feel better tomorrow."

She pulled back and stared at him. "Are you a lot sick?"

All Alef could do was nod. The thought that he might not be able to see Nadia grow up kept him from talking, and he fought to keep

tears from forming that would upset her even more.

Nadia turned to Tav with a pleading look. Tav tried to show an assuring face then stopped. Nadia would see right through that. Instead, she took both of Nadia's hands and hugged her with her eyes. "Your daddy is very sick, sweetheart. He has cancer."

"Daddy's going to die?" Nadia blurted, and her eyes swam in tears.

Tav was a rock. She tenderly put her hands on Nadia's cheeks and kissed her forehead. "Yes. Daddy's going to die but probably not for a long time. He's going to be very sick sometimes though, and we need to take care of him. Okay? You and me. We'll take care of him. Okay?"

Nadia didn't answer. She pulled away from Tav and threw her arms around Alef and sobbed. Alef no longer held back his tears. Neither did Tav. She put her arms around her husband and daughter and for the longest time they wept together.

Tav lightly pulled Nadia away from Alef and held her tight. "We need to let Daddy go to bed so he can feel better. Okay?" Nadia reached out for Alef again and Tav let her go. She put her arms around Alef's neck and kissed him. Again, and again. Alef kissed her and whispered, "Love you, Nadia," then handed her to Tav and went to his bedroom.

He was too weak to shower or shave. He glanced in the mirror at his gray complexion. It was like he was looking at a corpse. He quickly brushed his teeth and slumped into bed. Dr. Shinoda had given him sleeping pills, but he didn't take them. Not yet. He had anticipated a physical downer from the chemo this morning, but what hit him now was completely unexpected. An overpowering depression pulled the Light right out of him. Nadia's reaction to his cancer had triggered it.

They had become a family again, and the unimaginable thought of being forever separated from her and from Tav was too much. Then

the memory of his callous disregard for them as he started up his company became an agonizing weight on his heart and threatened to crush it.

He was going to die. The only question was when. How long did he have to make up to those he loved for his unconscionable neglect? What could he do to recompense them for what he had done? Now there was nothing. He would be dead.

Darkness enveloped him. Suffocated him. And blackness shoved out all hope. "I should never have existed," he moaned. And for the longest time he lay still as death as his misery pushed out great drops of sweat.

"You awake?" Tav asked in a low voice. He hadn't seen her come in.

He was awake. How could he sleep? He gazed at her. She was so beautiful. He quietly cried.

She lay on the bed by him and leaned over and kissed his lips. "Thank you for marrying me."

The talk they had about Light and Darkness the other day came to his mind. He reached over and took her hand. "You are Light," he whispered.

"You okay if I sleep with you tonight?" she asked. "Or I could go on the couch."

"Stay here. Please."

She squeezed his hand. "Dr. Shinoda said the worst should be over by morning."

His tears persisted. "It's not the side effects." He gulped down a sob. "Oh, Tav. I'm so sorry for how I treated you." His body shook. "Who's going to be Nadia's father? Who's going to be your..." That's as far as he got, and Tav slid her arm under his neck and pulled him to her.

"Alef, I believe you. I believe all you've told me your grandfather

said. All you've taught me about temporary and real. I believe you."

Her words wrapped him in warmth, and he felt his body relax.

"I love you, Alef. Nadia loves you. That's real. There's nothing temporary about that. It's forever."

He closed his eyes, and they both lay in silence.

"I'm learning something." His voice was low and controlled. "It's so easy to forget what I know. Forget what's real and what's not. Forget who I am. Forget who I want to be." He stopped, and Tav waited for him. He continued. "Why do you think that is?"

Tav didn't answer immediately. When she did, her response surprised him. "Do you think that's why your grandfather stopped visiting you?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Maybe part of deciding who we really want to be is being left alone. Maybe that's when our true self comes out. And if we aren't trying constantly to remember what we know, we'll forget. And maybe the trying to remember or not trying to remember is a sign of who we really want to be."

"Yes!" It was as though a light turned on in Alef's mind. "And the only way I can make choices that are really mine is when I'm on my own. And I'll stay with those choices because... Because those choices are me."

He and Tav sat up in bed, and the darkness that had nearly overcome him had dissipated. His love for Tav and Nadia and Light, and the peace that brought, the *freedom* that brought, was now as overwhelming as his depression had been. His eyes embraced Tav's and carried his gratitude for her love for him and who she was.

For a long time, they silently savored the feeling that surrounded them. Then Alef took her hand. "I know what another Tenet is now. Maybe the one that embraces them all." Tav looked at him enquiringly. "It's what's been happening to me and to you and to

Nadia. We're becoming one. It's what I sort of felt with my three partners the other day. It's what I sense with my grandfather." His lips curved up. "It is becoming one, Tav. *Wanting* to become one with all who want to be one. And all the other *Tenets* point to this. Are necessary for this. It's the surrendering of ourselves to the whole. The offering ourselves for the good of all."

"Do you mean we cease to be unique?" Tav's question carried concern.

"I don't think so. I think you are always you. But you're more than you. You expand in power and knowledge and love because you're the sum of all who you're one with." He turned to her. "Does that make sense?"

Tav's face was drawn. "Kind of. I can understand that in a marriage and in a family. But with others? How can you be that way with others? And why?"

Alef's head shook weakly. "I don't know. All I know is, it's the ultimate Tenet. The overarching Tenet."

"What do any of our choices ultimately mean though, Alef? We're defining ourselves here. But why?"

Alef slid down into the bed, and Tav stood up and put the covers around him.

"You need to go to sleep." She started to walk away when he reached for her.

"Tav."

She took his hand and placed it on his chest. "You need to sleep. Let's talk in the morning."

"I don't know the answer to your 'why' questions, Tav." He closed his eyes for a second then opened them. "It's almost like we're strangers here on earth, isn't it? Like we don't belong here." He held her gaze. "Do you know what our last name means?"

"Welch?" She chuckled. "That's kind of out of the blue. It's just a

surname isn't it?"

"It means foreigner. That's what we are, I think. Strangers and foreigners here."

She bent over and kissed his forehead. "If we are, I'm glad were foreigners together. Go to sleep."

He reached for her hand again, and she took it. "Tav. What I do know... I like the person I'm becoming." He paused. "And humility? I think I see what it really is now."

She looked at him expectantly.

"It's knowing that by myself, I am nothing. But becoming one... One with you and Nadia and... And those who want to be one... Then I become everything."

Chapter 28

The Phone Call

The four partners met in the conference room, and Eli asked, “How’s the chemo going?”

“Completed my first three-week cycle last week.” Alef said drily. “Only three more to go.” His complexion was nearly normal. The almost pewter cast to his skin had mostly turned natural, but his hair was sparse and stringy. He thought about wearing a wig, but everyone knew why he was bald, and his hair would grow back. What he couldn’t disguise was his constant battle with fatigue. While he was able to mostly carry his weight at Sawtooth within a day or two after his chemo treatment, he could never get up to more than 70% to 80% of his normal energy. He finally agreed to let Eli take some of his load.

“How about your radiation therapy?” Belinda asked kindly.

“That’s going pretty good. I’ll finish that next week. They’ll do another body CT scan in a month or so to see what’s happening.”

“Are you on track for remission when your series completes?” Liz asked.

“Too early to tell, but my doctor says so far, the tests show acceptable progress. Whatever that means.” He looked at Eli. “To change the subject, is this the day?”

“Yep.” Eli looked at his watch. “In two hours and six minutes, Omnimach’s conversational system tanks.”

“And we’re prepared,” Belinda declared. “We haven’t lost a client in three weeks, and we hired our fifth salesperson last week. Beginning tomorrow, all of them will be contacting our twenty-one former clients that went over to Omnimach to, uh, supposedly see how they’re doing.”

“Do all our people know that they don’t badmouth Omnimach, and any client re-signing with us pays the same up-front start-up fees as if they were a new client?” Alef asked.

“Yes. Absolutely. Be interesting how many come back and how many move to another competitor, even though no one else has a product that can do what ours can do. At least not yet.” She lifted an eyebrow. “By the way, Alef, I’m still curious why we haven’t trumpeted to the world what Omnimach tried to do to us.”

Alef shrugged. “We’re not them. We don’t want to be like them. And who knows what garbage Rand fed them about leaving us. Anyway, when their systems go down, they’ll pay a huge price for what they did. In money and reputation. And I’m guessing most of our former clients will be back.” His chin pushed out. “Maybe we’ll even pick up some of Omnimach’s original clients too.”

He made eye contact with each of his partners. “I can’t thank you guys enough for how considerate...” He lifted his hands a little. “For being my friends! Thank you!” His conversations with Tav about the last Tenet came to mind. His partners were more than just a team. “It’s time you three begin taking regular salaries now,” he said, “and we’ll make up for back salaries as quickly as we can. That’ll be a priority.” He pointed a hand at Eli. “That’s doable, don’t you think?”

Eli nodded. “We didn’t lose anywhere near as many clients as we feared, and the cancellation fees of those we lost equate to several months’ regular fees. Our revenue from new sales since Rand left is nearly ninety percent of what we lost. Bottom line, we’re in pretty good shape. I’m okay taking salary now.” He looked at Liz and Be-

linda. They agreed.

“Any more feedback on our PCA (Personal Conversational Assistant) app?” Liz asked Belinda.

“Just another, wow!” I’ve told you about the few little bugs I’ve found, but they’re minor. I’ve been using it for online shopping, my hair and doctor’s appointments, and bill paying. I haven’t answered my phone directly for the last week or so. Most of my callers don’t feel like they’re talking to a machine at all, and it’s saved me mega time.”

“How about Tav?” Liz asked Alef. “Hasn’t she been using it?”

“Yeah. We’ve both been using it. Me, mainly for my phone. This thing is perfect for people in my condition. Making doctors’ appointments, asking all the questions I have for their assistants, and taking care of calls I don’t have to respond directly to. Tav uses it for everything you’ve suggested. She’s hooked.” He laughed. “She said it reminded her of when she got her first smartphone. Within a week, she didn’t know how she lived without it.”

Eli smiled at that. “Yesterday, we got notification from the patent office that they’d received our applications for patenting the PCA’s underlying software. That’s a good feeling.”

“What’s the latest on when you think it’ll be ready for market testing?” Belinda asked.

“We’re nearly there,” Liz said. “Funding it will be our main hold up.”

“How much are we talking about, do you think?” Alef asked.

Liz and Eli glanced at each other. “We’re thinking between fifty and a hundred thousand to start,” she said.

“Well, it looks like it’ll be a little while before we can do that,” Alef said. “Anything else?”

“You think Rand will call today to try to get the password?” Eli asked as he stood.

The others arose, and Alef said, “I think we can count on it.”

It happened.

Late that afternoon, Eli came into Alef's office. "So, he called you too, huh?"

"Yep. I didn't talk to him either," Alef said. "Just had my PCA app do the talking. Interesting response."

Eli chuckled. "Whatever happens with our PCA, it was worth having it for this. I'm glad Liz got them to recognize Rand's voice before he called."

"Why don't you play his conversation with your PCA, then I'll play mine," Alef said.

Eli set his phone on the small stand on Alef's desk and turned it on.

PCA: "Good afternoon. Thanks for calling Eli. This is Myrtle, Eli's personal assistant. How can I help you today?"

Alef motioned for him to pause his phone. "Myrtle?"

"I figured no one else would give their PCA that name," Eli said with a straight face.

"Good bet," Alef laughed, and motioned for him to continue.

Rand: (Pause) "Personal assistant? Let me talk to Eli."

PCA: "Oh, hi, Rand. What can we do for you today?"

Rand: (Surprised) "How do you know who this is? I've never talked to you before!" (Sharp tone) "I told you I want to talk to Eli. Now! Put me through immediately!"

PCA: "There appears to be some urgency to your call, Rand. Please let me know what this is about, and I'll see if he's available."

Rand: "(Expletive) He knows what this's about! Put him on! Now!"

PCA: "It sounds like you're upset, Rand. I apologize if anything I have said is the cause. I will check to see if Eli's available." (30-second pause) "Thank you for holding, Rand. I'm sorry but Eli is indisposed. May I take a message? I will ask him to return your call if you would like."

Rand: “(Expletive)” (Clicked off)

Alef gave a half smile. “Here’s his call to me.”

PCA: “Hello. This is Nadia, Alef’s personal assistant. What can I do for you?”

Rand: (Angry) “Personal assistant (expletive)! Just put Alef on the phone! Now!”

PCA: “Why, hello Rand. It’s been a while. Just tell me what this is about, and I’ll contact him.”

Rand: (Panicked) “Nadia or whoever (expletive) you are, put Alef on this second! Stop your (expletive) talking and put him on!”

PCA: “Sounds like you have been having a bad day, Rand. Let’s see if we can make it better. Let me check to see if Alef is available.” (30-second pause) “I’m sorry, Rand, Alef has stepped away from his phone. Would you like to leave a message or call back?”

Rand: (Rattled) “(Expletive) Alef! You can take your password and (expletive)! You’ve just (expletive) killed me! You and Eli can (expletive)!” (Clicked off)

“Your PCA’s a godsend,” Alef said. He sat back. “I can’t help but feel sorry for Rand, though. Wonder what Omnimach will do to him?”

Eli shook his head. “You’re something else. In my book, whatever happens to him, won’t be bad enough.”

“Yeah. Maybe. How long before their system goes down,”

Eli looked at his watch. “It’s already down. In three minutes, the system’s software is toast.” He slipped his phone into his pocket. “What d’you think they’ll do now?”

“At least twenty-one of their clients just lost their service, and it can’t be restored. How long that news takes to get to Deepa Coates, I don’t know. But when it does she’s not going to be happy.”

“Who knows what cock and bull story Rand told her about leaving us,” Eli said, “and how complicit she personally was in what Rand

did.” He headed for the door. “Gonna be interesting.”

“Yeah. Whatever happens to him, I don’t wish on anybody.”

“Yeah?” Eli grunted. “I guess.” He left.

Alef took a long drink from his bottle of water. The chemo had left him chronically dehydrated. He looked at his phone. “On. Call Tav.”

Alef’s PCA: “Will do.” The phone rang.

Tav’s PCA: “Tav wants me to tell you she loves you. Hold on. She’ll be right here.”

Tav came on immediately. “What’s up?”

“Uh, like your PCA’s new greeting. Hope that’s not for everyone who calls you.”

Tav laughed. “Only you. How you feeling?”

“Okay. Been an interesting day. Omnimach’s conversational systems went down, and Rand called both Eli and me.”

“Wow! What did he say?”

“We just let our PCA’s do the talking.”

“You mind if I hear the conversation?”

“Uh, his language is pretty crude. Not much there. He’s really shook up.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

Alef played it.

“Horrible. Can I listen to his call to Eli?”

“I don’t have that. It was basically the same.”

“What happens now?”

“Who knows what Omnimach will do, but tomorrow our people will start contacting our former clients who went over to Omnimach.”

“You think Omnimach will try to get back at you legally?”

“If anyone has a legitimate damage claim, it’s us.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. But you won’t pursue it, huh?”

“No. We’ve survived this, and things look pretty good now. When

we get some cash on hand, we'll get going on our PCA. I think we've really got something there."

"I can't believe how much I depend on mine already, and it's only the beta version. I was showing it around to a bunch of the teachers and faculty here today. Everyone wanted to know when they can get it. Do I get a commission?"

Alef laughed. "This thing goes like we think it will, you won't ever need a commission."

"Just so you and Nadia are around," she said. "That's all I want." They both went silent.

"Gotta go," she said. "By the way, Janet from the Hope Residential Care Center for Children called me today about Gabby. She'd like to talk to us."

Chapter 29

Deepa Coates

Alef tapped on his desk with his fingers. His Sawtooth receptionist had just buzzed him. Deepa Coates was on the line. “Too bad she didn’t call my personal phone so the PCA could handle her,” he muttered. It had been three days since the Omnimach conversational system crashed. He thought he would hear from her before this. “Oh well. May as well get it over.” He flipped on the recorder and answered the phone. “Alef here.”

“Good morning, Alef. Deepa Coates from Omnimach. Do you have some time to talk?” Her voice sounded almost conciliatory, and that threw Alef.

“Hello, Deepa. Sure.”

“You already know what’s happened here. You mind if I ask you a question or two?”

He cleared his throat. “Sure. Uh, just so you know, I’m recording this.”

“Understood. Of course, we have Rand’s version of how and why he left your company several months ago. Would you mind telling me what *actually* happened to cause him to leave?”

That sucked the words right out of Alef. Obviously, Deepa didn’t believe Rand now. He decided to tell her the straight story and gave it to her with detail.

“That is substantially different than what we were led to believe

and makes sense given what's happened. Please tell me about the conversational software Rand brought with him. Did Rand develop it?"

Alef almost laughed. "His involvement was minimal. He reviewed it at its various stages. That was about it. I had much more to do with its development than he did, but the whole system was at least 80% Eli's baby. The patents we applied for listed Sawtooth and Eli jointly, and Rand covertly yanked the application before his going to Omnimach, making it impossible for us to reapply."

"You can document all this?"

"Absolutely."

"That adds up." Her voice was unmistakably cynical. "Rand didn't even know the system required a password periodically to continue running. Or keep from self-destructing. By the way, I've just learned that he apparently tried to defame Sawtooth with your former clients."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you come to me with any of this?" Her tone was not at all accusing.

Alef hesitated. "Because we thought Omnimach was involved in what was happening."

"I can see that. So why didn't you take us to court?"

Alef would be candid. "It isn't that we didn't think about it. We didn't have the resources for a lengthy battle, and who knows how it would have ended up." He paused. "Anyway, we knew what was going to happen to the software in a couple of months and felt pretty sure we could survive 'til then."

Deepa was silent. When she spoke, Alef could tell she was sincere. "You are a man of integrity, Alef. I'm sorry we couldn't land you and your company. You're far better off without Rand, and I wish you the best."

Alef didn't hide his surprise. "Uh, thanks."

"Now, I'm a businesswoman. I want to win as much as the next person. We made a mistake here. A big one. Our success has come because of our products, our technical skill, and our management acumen. But none of that stuff works in the long run if you can't be trusted. Respect for us in the industry is unexcelled. What occurred here has the potential to put a black mark on our name. I don't want that to happen. I have a couple of things to propose that would protect us and hopefully make things right for you."

Alef was glad she couldn't see his mouth drop.

"We will go to every client who was formerly yours and urge them to go back to you. We will pay them any reasonable costs they've incurred because of this situation. We will also do the same for our other conversational assistant clients who were not originally with Sawtooth. In addition, we won't be your competitors. We will stay out of the conversational assistant market indefinitely and refer any leads for your product type directly to you. That so few of your clients came over to us, given the over-the-top incentives Rand gave them, is a tribute to you and the quality of your service."

Alef was speechless. "Uh, that would really help," was all he could get out.

"One more thing," she said. "We don't want a court battle or the publicity that would go with it. If you agree to not pursue any legal claims against Omnimach, and not broadcast what Rand did in Omnimach's name, we will pay Sawtooth three million dollars. No strings attached. You would sign a hold-harmless contract to that effect that would stipulate you would be liable to return that amount in full if you violate any of the conditions of the settlement. Would that be acceptable?"

Alef was dumbstruck and fought to keep from stuttering. "Uh, I'll need to take this up with the partners."

“When could you get back to me?”

“Probably this afternoon.”

“Good. We would love to work with Sawtooth in the future in any way that would be mutually beneficial. Now a favor. We fired Rand. Would you please send me verification of your terminating Rand for cause. That will substantiate our position in voiding Rand’s very lucrative contract with us because of misrepresentation. Look forward to hearing from you.” She clicked off.

Alef sat dazed. Did this conversation happen? He took a drink from his water bottle to clear his head, then buzzed his partners to come to his office. “Just got off the phone with Deepa Coates,” he told them. “I’ll play back our conversation.” Other than several gulps, everyone listened quietly to the recording, then sat in shock as it concluded. “Well, what do you think?” he asked almost matter-of-factly. He had recovered from his initial jolt.

Eli shook his head. “Maybe there *is* a humane bone in that woman’s body after all.”

Alef put his hands behind his head. “She’s covering her bases and trying to protect Omnimach from a lawsuit and publicity that could put a sizable dent in their bottom line. The big question is would we be better off refusing the offer and taking Omnimach to court?”

Eli smirked. “To quote me a few months ago, we’d be stupid to turn Omnimach’s offer down. This payment, without the stock, is exactly what she offered to buy us out with then, but we keep our company.” He looked at Alef. “None of us has the stomach for an expensive, bitter court battle that might only benefit a handful of attorneys.”

Alef faced the other two partners. “Your thoughts?”

Belinda laughed. “We’ve already had positive responses from seventeen of our clients who went with Omnimach, and four of them have agreed to come back even without this. Now, we could get them all and more. We should take it.”

“Three million dollars!” Liz gasped. “What we could do now with our PCA.”

“How soon can we get the money?” Eli asked.

“She didn’t say,” Alef answered, “but I’m assuming it’s virtually immediate.” He glanced at each of them. “Should we do it?” There was unanimous, enthusiastic assent. He snapped his fingers. “Just like that everything’s changed. Who knows, maybe we’ll end up partnering with them in some way in the future. I’ll get back to her now.” He grinned. “We’ve got some planning to do.”

That afternoon, Alef and Tav got out of the car in the parking lot of the Hope Residential Care Center for Children. “I’m still trying to get my head around what Omnimach says they’re going to do,” Tav exclaimed. “You think it’ll really happen?”

“It’ll happen. Deepa’s already sent me the hold-harmless agreement with a confirming statement. We’ve all gone over it, and it looks good. I’ve sent it to our attorney.”

“When would everything start?”

“She said that as soon as they have the signed contract, they would begin contacting their conversational clients. The full payment would come to Sawtooth via bank transfer within two weeks.” Alef gave a low whistle. “Is this even real?”

Tav shook her head. “Remember all the conversations we’ve had about real and temporary?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “But some temporary’s are a lot better than others!”

She laughed, and they walked into the Center for Children and asked for Janet. She greeted them warmly and escorted them back to her office.

“Obviously, we’re curious about Gabby, and why you wanted to see us,” Tav said.

“Gabby’s been a huge concern for us,” Janet said. “Where she’s

staying now, the family's good, but there's no young children there besides her, and Gabby's been a bit depressed. She says she talks to your Nadia a lot. She says Nadia's her best friend."

Tav nodded. "Lately, Gabby's been calling almost every day." She took Alef's hand. "We've both talked to her quite a bit. She's a sweet girl."

"She's a lovely girl," Janet said, "and has so much potential if we could find the right place for her."

"What's the situation with her own family?" Alef asked.

"Given the abusive condition there, we'd never send her back. In fact, her parents don't want her. They've given the agency a written full release. Neither one of them have siblings or parents who are living, so, Gabby's eligible for adoption."

Tav and Alef looked at each other, trying to read each other's face. Tav turned to Janet. "Is that why you wanted to see us? To see if we would adopt Gabby?"

"I can't think of a better family for her. She loves Nadia, and she loves you two. What I would suggest, if you're willing to try it out, is that we get you approved and designate you as foster parents to see how it works. Then, if everyone wants that, we'll proceed with the adoption."

Tav looked at Alef again, then back at Janet. "Since we last talked to you, Alef has been diagnosed with multiple myeloma. He's on intense chemotherapy now."

Janet was crestfallen. "I'm so sorry, Alef. I would never have approached you with this if I'd known."

Alef thought about Nadia and Molly, her doll. He thought about love and sacrifice and becoming one. He thought about the extraordinary turn for Sawtooth today and the unselfishness of his three partners. And especially he thought about the kind of mother and wife Tav was.

Then he thought about Gabby. This beautiful little blond whose parents didn't love her, and who was being shuttled around. He remembered how happy she was to be with them when they first met her and how happy she sounded on the phone when she talked to them.

He squeezed Tav's hand and looked at Janet. "I'm doing okay with the chemo. I don't think that should stand in the way of us doing something here." He turned to Tav. "I think we should go home and talk this over with Nadia. What do you think?"

Tav beamed.

Janet was speechless, then she looked at Tav. "If you decide to do this, you probably know there's a process here to become foster parents. The state needs to do background checks, inspect your home, and you will need to take some state mandated classes."

"How long does the process take?" Alef asked.

"Depends, but with you two, Gabby's association with you, and given that Tav's a school counselor, I think we can do this relatively fast. It's still going to take two months, plus or minus."

"What about the adoption?" Tav asked. "What are we talking about there?"

"A year. Maybe more. But Gabby would be with you during that time anyway."

Alef took Tav's hand. "You ready for another child?"

She pulled his head over and kissed him. That was her answer.

Chapter 30

Rand

“**W**hat does that mean, Alef?” Eli asked as the four partners sat at the conference table.

Alef tried to look optimistic, but it was a poor lie. He looked tired. “My chemo continues. We were hoping for remission after this three-month cycle, but there’s still substantial myeloma cells there. So... So I don’t know.”

“Will you continue with the same chemo?” Belinda asked.

“Basically. They’re putting off my stem cell transplant for another two months. Hopefully, I’ll be in remission then. And in the meantime, I’ll have to be extra careful about getting infections and stuff.

“Aren’t the effects of chemo cumulative?” Eli asked. “I’ve heard the longer you’re on it, the more pronounced the side effects.”

“That’s what they tell me. That’s why they’ll try a new chemo regimen, and if that doesn’t work well, maybe have me go with a clinical trial.

Eli looked at the other two, then back at Alef. “You haven’t given us much chance to help you carry your load here. Liz has put together some ideas. Would you at least look at what she’s suggesting?”

Alef’s eyes carried unmistakable love and respect for each of them. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Well, let me see if I can brighten everyone’s day here,” Belinda said “We continue to get Omnimach’s conversational assistant clients

and all but two of ours have come back now. Our new sales team is fantastic. Eli can tell you what that means income wise for us.”

Alef nodded at Eli.

Eli came as close to smiling as he ever did. “Best month in sales and gross income we’ve had. Ever.” He handed each a copy of the month’s figures. “And here’s our next quarter projected income based solely on our clients to date.”

“Who would have thought four or five months ago we’d be looking at a report like this now?” Alef marveled. “It’s time for you three to be reimbursed for the income you went without several months ago. I didn’t agree with your not taking it after we got the three million from Omnimach, but with these reports, you have no excuse now. Please? As a favor to me?”

Eli glanced briefly at Belinda and Liz. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I know you’re all busting buttons with our PCA progress. Where do we stand?” Alef asked.

Eli pointed to Liz. “Market testing’s completed,” she said, “and we’ve made our final tweaks. It’s ready for packaging. We’ll be ready to fulfill orders within thirty days. I’ll let Belinda report on marketing.”

Belinda handed each of them a folder. “We’re all set with advertising and promotion. You can read the details.” Her eyebrows raised. “We could never have done this without Omnimach’s contribution.”

“I’m lucky to be with you three,” Alef said. “To be working with friends is pretty unheard of these days.” He stood, warmly embraced each of them, and went to his office.

As he sat at his desk, his office door banged open, and Rand barged in.

Alef did a double take. He hardly recognized him. His hair was long and stringy and his beard untrimmed. His baggy pants were wrinkled, and his T-shirt pushed out from a developing paunch. His

face looked weathered, and his eyes were mirthless and dull.

“Rand. Uh, this is a surprise.” Alef motioned to a chair in front of his desk. Rand slammed the door behind him and sat down. He glared at Alef.

“Uh, how are you doing?” Alef asked, swallowing his nervousness. The answer to his question was obvious.

“As if you (expletive) cared,” Rand exclaimed.

Alef didn’t reply but held Rand’s gaze.

“You know why I’m here?” Rand’s voice was thick with hate.

“No,” Alef replied evenly and continued to hold Rand’s eyes.

Rand reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a Berretta pocket pistol. “I’m gonna kill you!”

Alef’s reaction was a non-reaction, and he stayed silent.

Rand’s eyes widened. “I said, I’m going to kill you!” His voice was raised, and he spoke slowly. “What’s the matter? Can’t you hear?”

Alef sat back and twisted his mouth to one side a little. “That would probably be a blessing.”

Rand was flummoxed. “You crazy?”

“No. I’m sick. Very sick. I have multiple myeloma, and so far, the chemo isn’t doing what we hoped. It’s likely I’ll have a long, painful, miserable death. I’d rather get it over with.” He shrugged. “So, if that’s what you’re here to do, do it.”

That knocked the belligerence right out of Rand, and he lowered the gun a little but still pointed it in Alef’s direction. “You’re lying!” he accused. But Alef’s pale skin and quiet voice appeared to confirm his condition. “How long have you had it then?” Rand demanded, his voice not quite so tough.

“You remember I was having headaches when you were here?” Alef asked.

Rand stared at him. “Yeah.”

“That was multiple myeloma eating a hole in my skull.”

“And you’re going to die from this?”

“Yes. I don’t know when, but it’s my death sentence. So, if you want to speed that up, go ahead.”

Confusion replaced the hate in Rand eyes. He swallowed. Then swallowed again. His hand that held the gun dropped to his side, and tears welled up in his eyes. “You guys’ve destroyed me,” he moaned.

Alef let him cry, then kindly said, “Tell me what’s happening with you.”

“You know what’s happening!” he said with renewed hostility. “Omnimach canned me. Negated my contract. Made sure everybody knew I was a bad risk.” He was breathing rapidly. “Know how long I been outta work?” He began to shake. “I used my last bucks to come here to...” He tried to force back his sobs, but they spilled out.

Alef felt an impulse to put his arm around him and tell him everything would be okay. But wouldn’t that be a lie? Rand was where he was because of what he had done. He deserved it. Alef’s mind wrestled with itself. *Deserved it? Who are you to say who deserves what? How do you know who Rand will ultimately choose to be? What he’ll do with this experience?* Alef quietly drew in a breath to calm himself and waited.

Rand’s sobs became more pronounced, and then abruptly ceased. He looked at Alef, his eyes brimming and red. “I know why I’m where I am,” he choked. “I’m not worth (expletive).” He raised the gun to his own head.

Alef gulped down a gasp. He spoke quickly and in as controlled a voice as he could manage. “Would you let me help you out?”

Rand’s hand froze, then slowly lowered. “You crazy?” he muttered. “I was going to kill you.”

Alef lifted a hand. “You left Sawtooth without being compensated for your partnership share. We’d like to give you what you paid for it. Twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Rand's face twitched in bewilderment. "But the way I left, I..."

"Doesn't matter," Alef interrupted. "Water under the bridge."

Something like hope showed in Rand's eyes, and he started to cry again.

"I'll have a cashier's check for you here in my office in two days. "Where you staying?" Rand's non-answer told him he was likely on the street. "You mind if I make a reservation for you at the Mountains Motel? I'll pay for it."

Rand nodded. His tears didn't stop.

Alef called and made the reservation using his personal credit card. "You know where the motel is?" he asked. It was a short two blocks from Sawtooth. Rand nodded again. Alef reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of twenty-dollar bills. He peeled off ten and handed them to Rand.

"This should help you out until you pick up your check. I'll have it first thing that morning."

"Why?" Rand's voice cracked. "Why, Alef?"

"Because you need it." Alef stood up and walked around his desk to where Rand was sitting. "What happened here today, didn't happen. I won't speak of it to anyone."

"Not even Tav?" His voice carried a plea.

"Not even Tav. And you can use me as a job reference. I will be referring the Rand I knew who was key in getting Sawtooth to where it is now." He pointed at the gun. "How about letting me take that. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

Rand set the gun on Alef's desk, then stood up. He was trembling. He gazed at Alef with something akin to wonder, then embraced him and briefly wept on his shoulder. He pushed himself away with a look of embarrassment and left.

Alef sat behind his desk, mesmerized by the gun. "What just happened?" he marveled. He put the gun in a desk drawer. Perspiration

beaded on his forehead, and he sat as if in shock. The whole scene didn't last longer than 30 minutes. He should be dead now. How did he maintain his cool?

He knew.

Was he ready to die? The immediacy of that possibility with Rand made that question real to him now. It was going to happen. In a year? Two? Five? Ten? Is anyone ever ready to die? Maybe if you're old and your body is worn out it would be different. He thought about Tav and how they had become one. Nadia was a constant light and lifted him in his weariness. And Gabby, who had only been with them a short time, was already an always-member of their family. Her sweetness and lapping in the love that was showered on her was energizing to him.

Was he ready to die? Was he ready to give up the likely 50-plus more years with those he loved because of his disease? Did he even have a choice? The thought of leaving Tav and Nadia and Gabby was a ton-weight on his heart. But was love real and not temporary? And was his essence *really* eternal?

He would find out.

He sighed deeply, and the memory of his pain those years ago when his grandpa died nearly overwhelmed him. If Rand had gone through with his intent, what ache would Tav, and Nadia, and Gabby have had to endure? And what would have been his partners' feelings at his death? He slowly moved his head back and forth. In this whole multiple myeloma thing, he had only been thinking about his own misery at being separated from those he loved. But what about *their* misery? And the future hurt he saw in them brought the tears.

For the longest time he sat at his desk commiserating about these things. And about Rand. About the sorrow and hopelessness and hate he saw in his eyes. Then he thought of his own struggles with depression and darkness and nothingness. "The Proscribed?" he

murmured. Of course. The Proscribed. He could almost feel its presence in the room when Rand was here. But then it left. Relief and gratitude and promise replaced it. “It has no power over us,” he realized. “Only if we invite it. Only if we let it.”

And then he remembered his conversation with Tav a while ago. Light is real because Darkness is real. Just like his grandpa said. Opposition must be. That’s the only way *we* can be.

Was Rand a good man? Wasn’t he really the man who did so much to make the three that built Sawtooth a team? “I want to believe that,” Alef muttered. And he thought about his own changing. Choices. Part of making the choices that defined him was not just discovering what he wanted, but experiencing what he saw he didn’t want. And how many chances has he had to change? Didn’t Rand deserve those kinds of chances too?

He buzzed the partners and asked them to come into his office. When they gathered, he told them that Rand had just been there.

“He’s a mess,” Alef explained. “He apparently is living on the street and can’t get a job because of what happened at Omnimach.”

He looked at Eli. “He didn’t demand anything, but I told him we would like to compensate him for what he paid for the shares in Sawtooth he forfeited. I told him I’d have a cashier’s check for twenty-five thousand for him in two days.” He glanced at each of their faces. “Would you agree for Sawtooth to loan me that so I can pay him? I’ll reimburse the company out of my share of the profits at the end of the year.”

The faces of the partners were like stone. Then Eli cleared his throat. “With all due respect, Alef, I don’t agree to that.” He turned his eyes to Liz and Belinda. “What Rand did to us is inexcusable.” His mouth turned up slightly, “But, I must admit, if it weren’t for Rand, we wouldn’t be having the jump in business we have right now. And we sure as hades wouldn’t have three million bucks in the bank. I

think twenty-five thousand is a small price to pay for all that, don't you?" The expressions on their faces said yes.

He turned back to Alef. "We vote that not you, but the company pays that to Rand. That's a pittance compared to what we've received because of him. I'll get the cashier's check from the bank."

That evening, Alef and Tav looked down at the two beaming faces of their daughters and pulled the covers up to their chins. Nadia with her light brown features, framed by black ringlets, lay on one twin bed, and Gabby with her pale skin and straight blond hair was on the other. At the girls' insistence, the beds were only a foot apart, and Molly, the doll Nadia gave to Gabby when they first met, sat on the floor between them.

When Gabby came to live with them, they were going to get a larger bed for them to sleep in but were told by Janet that Gabby would need her own bed. They bought identical twin beds, each with a white wrought iron head and footer and Raggedy Ann pink comforters. When lights went out, laughing and talking could be heard from their bedroom at least a half hour after they were put down. Two or three trips a night to quiet them was becoming standard.

Alef and Tav kissed the girls on their foreheads and started to leave. Before Tav could turn off the light, Nadia burst out, "I got my daddy, and now I got my sister!" The girls looked at each other and giggled.

Alef and Tav had heard that before. Every night since Gabby came, in fact. "You two squirts get to sleep, or you know what'll happen." Tav's faux threat was always ignored. The girls knew exactly what would happen. They would be left to giggle until they did fall asleep.

Alef was weary and went to their bedroom. Tav followed. "Tell me about Rand if you're not too tired. Why would he even come today?"

"Maybe just to show me what he said we did to him."

"Unbelievable," Tav groaned. "That jerk was trying to put Sawtooth under. Whatever's happened to him now, he deserves."

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Paid for a motel room for him, gave him some eating money, and told him we’d pay him for the ownership in Sawtooth he forfeited.”

Tav was silent, but she looked aghast. “How much?”

“The twenty-five thousand dollars he paid into the company when we started Sawtooth.”

Tav sat on the bed and shook her head.

“When I told him what we would do for him, he wept.” Alef joined her and slid his arm around her shoulder. “I think he’s a good man, Tav, and deserves the chance to find that out.” He kissed her on her hair. “Like me, huh?”

Tav turned so she was facing him and put her hand on his cheek. “To think I get to be married to you.” She kissed him softly on his lips and stood. “Looks like the chemo’s getting to you a bit today.”

“Yeah. A bit.”

She brushed a finger across her eyes. “What do you think’s going to happen with us?”

“I don’t know, Tav. What I know is I’m going to make the most of whatever time I have left with you and the girls.”

“Temporary, huh?” Tav mumbled. She took his hand. “I sure hope your grandpa’s right about that.”

Chapter 31

The Gift

Alef didn't feel like coming to work today, but he had told Rand he would have a check for him this morning. He should have given him a specific time, but when someone just said he was going to kill you, you're not thinking much about that kind of detail. It had been nearly a week since Alef had his last chemo regimen, but he was still a little nauseous and pulled a saltine cracker out of his desk drawer to chew on.

Eli came in and set an envelope on Alef's desk. He looked at the cracker Alef was eating and the corner of his mouth lifted a little. "That your breakfast?"

"This's about all I can handle this morning. That the check?"

"Yep. When's he coming?"

Alef shrugged. "I told him I'd have it this morning."

Eli looked at him. "You okay? You look a little peaked. I'd be glad to give it to him."

"Thanks, but I wanna do it. Probably head home after he leaves though."

"Alright, but don't push it okay?" Eli rapped Alef's desk with his knuckles and left.

Alef watched him go, then slipped a small stack of \$20 bills and a debit card into the envelope with the check and brought out another envelope from his desk. He turned to his computer and pulled up

last month's finances to go over while he waited for Rand. He didn't wait long.

Rand quietly knocked on Alef's open door. "Okay if I come in?"

Alef turned around to see a transformed Rand. There was still a drawn, haggard look to him, but his hair and beard were cut, and he was wearing jeans and a red pullover that were clean and maybe new. Alef motioned for him to close the door and pointed to a chair in front of his desk. He picked up the two envelopes and went around to the chair next to where Rand would sit.

"How's the motel?" Alef asked.

Rand gave a positive nod and lowered his eyes. "Good. Real good. Thanks. Again."

"Where will you head from here?" Alef asked.

Rand glanced at the envelopes Alef held and shrugged. "Depends." He gazed around the office with what could have been a longing look. "Been thinking maybe Phoenix or Austin. Maybe Silicon Slopes south of Salt Lake." He looked at the envelopes again. "Guess we'll see."

Alef handed him the one with the cashier's check. "This should get you started."

Rand took it and opened it. He slowly pulled out the check, the money, and the debit card. His lips quivered, and his eyes darted to Alef.

"The cash and the card are to get you by until you set up your bank account. There's \$2,000 on the card, then you can toss it. I've covered your motel costs for one more night. Let me know if you want to stay longer."

Rand's eyes filled, and all he could do was mouth the word, "Thanks."

"By the way, this isn't just from me. Eli insisted the check come from the company." What Alef didn't say, is Eli did not know about

the debit card and the cash. They were from him.

Rand shot Alef an obvious concerned look. Alef returned an assuring smile. "Eli knows nothing about what happened here two days ago. That's between you and me. When I told him your personal situation, he was as anxious about you as I was."

Rand rubbed his sleeve across his eyes. Alef handed him the other envelope, and Rand opened it.

"That's my version of your vitae," Alef explained. "It includes your schooling, your original employment with Omnimach, your time with Sawtooth, and my unqualified recommendation. You can use it however you want. You already know my cellphone and email address, but I've listed them for you there to give to whoever you want to get hold of me."

Rand read it silently then slid it back into the envelope. "Somebody might even hire me with this." Then he frowned. "Except they'll know about my latest stint with Omnimach."

"Why should they?" Alef countered. "I didn't include that here because you're not the same guy that Omnimach let go. As far as I'm concerned, you left Sawtooth to seek a better opportunity. Nothing wrong with that."

Rand slumped in his chair, near tears again. "I don't understand, Alef. Why you doing all this?"

Alef could almost hear his grandfather ask him, "Have you ever felt the hurt when someone else hurts? Are you ever happy because someone else is happy?" That was love. A Tenet that Alef was determined would ultimately define him. He held Rand's eyes, his own filled with his grandpa's love.

"I've been given so many chances to change." Alef's voice broke slightly. "It's time for me to do a little pay back." He let a smile play on his face. "Who knows, I may be knocking on your door someday to get help. Maybe I'm just hedging my future bets."

Rand's look at Alef was gripping, and he pointed his index finger toward him, rocking it up and down. "Whatever and whenever you need *anything* from me, you got it." He stood and reached his hand out.

Alef got up and took it. "Keep in touch."

"Uh, tell Eli thanks." It was as though Rand stood an inch or two taller than when he came in. "I'll stay the one more night at the motel, if it's okay." He rubbed a finger across his eyes and left.

Alef sat on the corner of his desk. For some reason, he thought about how he felt the day they first met Gabby as he watched her change almost in front of his eyes. Become happy. How long had it been since Rand had been happy? *Really* happy.

Love.

Was that what his grandfather felt as he witnessed his grandson changing? Alef knew that feeling now. But how do you describe the release it gives you? How do you define the expansion, the swelling within you when you give it? A single word came to his mind.

Free. He was *free*.

He straightened the chairs in front of his desk, grabbed another cracker, turned out his office lights, and went to tell Eli he was leaving for the day.

"Rand come?" Eli asked.

"He came. Looked a hundred percent better."

"How'd it go?"

"I think he's changed, Eli. He asked me to tell you thank you."

"Rand said that?" Eli's face mirrored disbelief.

"He said that. He meant it."

"What's he going to do?"

Alef shrugged. "He doesn't know yet, but at least now he has some alternatives." He held up his cracker. "Think I'll head home and get something a little more substantial."

Eli leaned his chair back. “You’ve got to know that you’re the reason Sawtooth’s still here and that we’re not just humming financially. There’s a great atmosphere for work and cooperation. It’s a pleasure to be here with you, Alef.”

Alef brushed off the compliment. “We are where we are because of you, Liz, and Belinda, as much or more than me. I’m just grateful to be with friends.”

Eli sat forward and put his hands on his desk. “We’ve all changed, but you were the catalyst. Back when I was ready to pack it all in, you’re the reason I stayed. Something happened with you that... I mean you’ve always been, you know, more than competent. But something about you was different. I don’t know what I’m trying to say, but something happened to you back then that everybody saw. It was like you were a light or something that kind of let me see further than I ever had before.”

“The *Tenets*,” Alef said softly.

Eli cocked his head. “The *Tenets*? What are they?”

“I’ll tell you about them sometime.”

Chapter 32

Five Years Later

“**W**hat can I get you,” Tav said as she raised Alef’s bed into a sitting position and fluffed his pillows. He was in their guest bedroom that Tav had turned into an in-home hospital room. She had the room painted in Alef’s favorite color, spruce green, and drapes, imprinted with a panoramic image of the Sawtooth mountains, hung over the large lattice window that overlooked the mini forest that was their backyard.

He didn’t answer, but his eyes said thank you. The last years had been a ride for him. From remission to relapse. From optimistic prognosis to where he was today, in the final stage of multiple myeloma with chronic pneumonia and failing kidneys. Every known means to stem his disease had been exhausted. Five weeks ago, he and Tav made the decision to limit his treatment to alleviating his disease symptoms and reducing pain. He was given the option of staying in the hospital or coming home. Tav insisted he come home, and she was on indefinite leave from her school to take care of him.

He reached for her hand. To him she was always beautiful, even when she looked tired and slightly worn like she did this morning. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it.

“Sorry to be such...a burden,” he stammered. It was a little difficult for him to talk because of the cannula that delivered oxygen to him through his nose.

She kissed his hand again. "Can I get you something?"

"Do we have any cold ginger ale left?"

"I think so. I'll see. By the way, Eli called to check up on you. He said everyone was doing great, and Deepa Coates asked about you. Eli said Belinda and Rand were still an item, though Rand's new position of director of marketing in his company in Texas might put their long-distance relationship on hold for a while."

She started to go, but he held onto her hand. "Didn't turn out quite like we thought it would, did it?" He squeezed it. "Couple years ago, we were on a roll. We got Gabby. A new home. Omnimach partners with Sawtooth and buys me out with more money than I knew existed." He put a tissue to his mouth and coughed. "And Dr. Shinoda." He pushed out a tight laugh. "Could use some practice in her predictions, huh? Not going to come close to me living as long as she thought I would back then."

"Don't talk like that, Alef." She squeezed his hand. "I'll get your ginger ale."

Nadia and Gabby passed her as they came into the room to tell him goodbye before going to school. Alef brightened and looked at Nadia with mock seriousness. "If Gabby was a year younger and two inches taller...and had black hair and tan skin and brown eyes...then you and she would be twins." It took him two and a half breaths to say all that.

"Dad, that's dumb!" was Nadia's response as she kissed his forehead. Gabby bent over and kissed him too.

"What beauties I've got for daughters."

"You just say that because we're your daughters," Gabby said.

Alef coughed into his tissue. "Have you ever known me to lie?"

"Yeah! About this!" Nadia said. She and Gabby giggled.

The corner of Alef's mouth turned up slightly. "Gonna miss your bus. Better get going."

“It’s only school,” Nadia exclaimed. “We wanna be with you.”

“Scoot, you two,” Tav said as she came in. “Don’t forget your backpacks.”

They both looked at Alef, and Gabby’s face drooped. “See ya,” she said, and kissed Alef on his forehead. Nadia put a hand on his cheek while she brushed the tears that had formed in her eyes with the other. They left.

Tav handed Alef a straw and a glass with the ginger ale in it. He took a long sip and handed the glass back. “At least I saw them get to this age,” he murmured.

Tav blinked several times. Alef knew the sallow, wrinkled skin that hung on his bones could bring tears to anyone. Or revulsion. She moved a chair by his bed and reached for his hand as she sat down. He felt her sadness, and remorse settled in his heart. His suffering and imminent death was bringing her misery. His emotions lately were always near the surface, and they spilled out now.

“Forgive me, Tav. I’ve brought you...pain.” He swallowed.

She stood so her lips could reach his face and kissed and kissed him through her tears. “You’re my Light,” she whispered. She caressed his head. “I saw a poem yesterday I loved. Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure.”

She sat down, opened her notebook, and read.

*What was real
to me before,□
became a dream.
Now, I’ve just swapped□
dreams again,□
it seems.
So, what is real?□
Does it matter*

*since I am
changing?*

She sat back. "Your thoughts?"

"Maybe us choosing and changing *is* what's real, huh? And it *is* all a dream, isn't it."

"Do you think we wake up from it when... When we die?"

He smiled weakly. "I'll let you know."

"What a dumb thing for me to say," she groaned. "I'm sorry."

He reached for her hand. "Maybe we think so negatively about death because we don't comprehend it. But maybe it's a gateway. Like when we were born and came to this earth. A gateway to..." He glanced up at the ceiling as he searched for the words he wanted. Then he looked at Tav, his eyes bright with awareness. "Maybe a gateway to more understanding. More truth. Even more aliveness."

Tav's eyes lighted. "You think so?" For a while they were both silent, then she asked softly, "You think we'll continue to change after we die then?"

Alef gave a slight nod. "If our knowledge of truth changed or expanded, wouldn't we want to change? Just like here?"

Tav chewed on her lip. "There's something liberating about that thought. I mean, knowing more truth would free us. Like from restrictions we give ourselves because we don't know what's real and true."

Alef started coughing, and she handed him tissues. When he stopped, she gave him his water bottle. He took a sip and relaxed.

"You up for another question?" she asked cautiously.

"I want to talk while I can." He sounded weak.

"What if I know truth but won't live it?" she said. "Will I be punished for that? I mean when I die? You know what I mean."

Alef gave his head a little shake. "Good laws bring freedom, so

breaking them has to bring restriction or confining. I mean, we're not able then to do what we can do when we follow the laws. But is that... Is that reward or punishment? I don't know. I think we... We get what we choose and all that comes with it."

"You're talking about laws like the *Tenets*?" Tav asked.

"Yes!" He was as emphatic as he could be with his condition. "Look where they take you. What they do. Freedom."

"But how does the kind of love we've talked about before, make you free?" she asked.

Alef closed his eyes, and his fingers worked the edge of his blanket. "I know it takes you out of yourself." He thought about Rand in his office a few years ago. "Love frees you from its opposites. Hate. Envy. Fear. His chest moved up and down sporadically. "Those things control you. Beat you down." His lips struggled to curve up. "Love expands you. Elation, huh?"

Tav's brow furrowed. "I need to let you rest, sweetheart." She began to rise.

Alef lifted a shaky hand. "Please. Let's talk."

She sat down and put her hand on his.

"Water please."

She held the bottle for him. He took a swallow, then pushed it away. "Higher laws. Opportunities, huh? Free..." His breathing became a pant, and he was silent. Then, as if he had an epiphany, he suddenly exclaimed, "Directions! They're directions, Tav. Laws are directions! They lead us. We master ourselves. We're free."

Tav's face scrunched with concern. "You need to rest. I'll stay here, but please relax. Please."

"Let me...speak." It was a plea. "We're the sum of all...we are one with, Tav." His voice was raspy, and he spoke very slow. "We see and...feel and know...way beyond...what we can do...by ourselves. Our mind and body don't limit us...anymore."

“But you’ve been doing everything to live the *Tenets*.” Tav’s voice carried frustration. Questions. “You’ve suffered and you’re going to...” She stopped, obviously reticence to say the word *die* again. “I don’t understand,” she whispered as if she’d been defeated. “Why you, why we, do these things, not even knowing why we should do them.”

Alef’s eyebrow raised slightly, and his eyes smiled. He reached for her hand, and she took it. His grip was mostly non-existent. “I know why I do...what I do. All the...why I need to know...for now.” With evident effort, he faced her and forced his eyes open as wide as he could. “I *want* to live the *Tenets*. I *want* to love. Because... Because I’m becoming the person... The person I *want* to be.”

His lungs begged for air, but he had to speak. “That’s why I do what I do and can only... Can only...” He stopped talking.

“Alef! Alef! I don’t like the sound...”

“So, maybe...” Alef gasped. “My grandpa dreams...”

“Don’t talk, Alef! I’m calling the nurse!”

“Dreams stopped...” he mumbled. “To be left...to choose...” His mouth turned up ever so slightly. “Huh? Is that...” He tried to catch his breath. It wouldn’t come, and his eyes closed.

Chapter 33

Not the End

How long Alef had been asleep, he didn't know. Or was he asleep? He had been struggling for breath the last he remembered. The setting where he found himself now seemed to have a backlight to everything. He could almost make out some buildings, trees, and maybe a grassy expanse. And there was a transcendent feeling of peace. His grandfather drew near, a welcoming smile on his face, and he embraced Alef. That was different. In his previous dreams, Alef had no recollection of a tangible contact with him, yet his grandpa looked the same as he had before. Or did he?

His grandfather gripped Alef's shoulders, and his eyes reached into Alef's. "Thank you."

"Thank you?" Alef was puzzled.

"For your choices, Alef."

"My choices? I don't understand."

"You will." His grandpa led him to a bench that seemed to glow warmth. "Your choices affect me because I love you." He motioned for Alef to sit down. "And they will affect all who come through you and Tav as well. Nadia and Gabby and their children and their children's children." He faced Alef and smiled. "And your choices are making you ready."

"Ready? Ready for what?" Then like it was just yesterday, Alef's last dream of his grandfather years ago came into his thoughts. His

grandfather's requirement for him to receive greater knowledge that had burned his pride then, now flashed before him: *When you are ready.*

"And I'm ready now?" Alef asked meekly.

His grandfather's look was full of Light. "Almost," he said, and pointed his hand at Alef. "You have some questions for me."

Alef gazed around. "Yeah. Where am I?" He stopped. There was something familiar about what he was seeing. Feeling. Had he been here before? What was this place? "Uh, where am I?" he asked again.

"With me."

Alef stared at his grandfather. He wasn't joking. Then Alef understood. "I'm dead too?" he whispered.

"Too?" His grandfather's face crinkled mischievously. "Do I look dead?"

Alef was shocked at this realization. "Uh, no, but you know what I mean."

"Yes. I know what you mean." It was as if his grandfather was reading Alef's thoughts. "And yes, you have been here before." He patted Alef's arm. "You left here to be born."

"To be born?" Alef's eyes widened. "I don't understand."

"Watch."

A scene played out before Alef's eyes. Or was it in his mind? Or deeper? It was more real than real and was over almost before it began. He saw himself as he appeared now, then felt himself enter a tiny body in his mother's womb before his birth. He experienced his whole existence on earth again, or sensed it, and in detail. He saw that his choices defined who he was. Or, rather, who he was, defined his choices. Defined the eternal being he was becoming.

And he understood.

He looked at his grandfather. "I've been in a temporary world so I could choose. So, I could see what I wanted before coming into a

permanent world.”

“Yes,” his grandfather replied. “And to be taught. What did you learn?”

Memories of how he treated Tav and Nadia for a time and a thousand other instances flooded him with dejection.

“I learned who I didn’t want to be. I learned how to cry.”

“And?” his grandfather pursued.

“The *Tenets*,” Alef said softly. “I want to follow the *Tenets*.”

“All of them?” his grandpa asked.

“All of them.”

“And what about your body?”

“My body?” Alef glanced at his hands and down at his legs and feet. They weren’t the yellow skin stretched on his bones that they had been moments before.

“My body was temporary,” he exclaimed. “Why?”

“Why do you think?”

Alef raised his arms and moved his fingers. Then he nodded. “So, I could learn how to use it.”

“Yes, and to see what you would do with it. How you would treat it.” His grandfather held out his hand. “And for you to determine if you would control it. Or let it control you.”

“Why?” Alef asked.

“You were in training, Alef. You *are* in training.”

“For what? I mean, so I can be what?”

“Tavia is right. There are infinite universes, each with the degree or order of Light that is defined by the level of law the essences who inhabit them choose to follow. The amount of *Intelligence* they are willing to possess.”

“*Intelligence*?” Alef asked.

“Yes. Light. Truth. Love. Power. Freedom.”

Alef gaped with a realization. “The earth. It’s, uh, of a lower order,

isn't it?"

"Yes. Among the lowest."

Alef held his hand out. "And this one?"

"It is a higher order."

"The highest?" Alef asked.

His grandfather shook his head. "No. But you know that don't you?"

Alef gaped at his grandpa as comprehension flooded him. He did know that.

"I've had to experience them all so I could choose, haven't I? To see it all."

"Yes. You have been in the highest and in the lowest. Here, you are in the in-between. The gateway to them all." His grandfather touched Alef's arm. "Look."

Another scene burst forth. A light beyond anything Alef had ever experienced, or could even fathom, flooded over him. And in the center of that light stood two beings. A man and a woman. They appeared to be the source of that exquisite light. Their beauty and their power were indescribable. Overwhelming.

Alef gasped. "The highest!"

"Yes. And who you see here, embody all the *Tenets*." His grandfather paused. "They are *THE ONE*."

Alef was stunned. "A long time ago, you mentioned *THE ONE* to me, but you said nothing about who that was. This is *THE ONE*?"

"Yes." He put his hand on Alef's shoulder. "Who you see were once like you and Tavia."

"Like Tav and me? But... But aren't they gods?"

"Yes."

"Are you saying that Tav and me... That we could be..."

His grandfather smiled.

For a long moment, he stared at his grandfather, then hung his

head. “Impossible!” he groaned. “Look at me. I’m not capable and... And I’m not qualified.”

“Of course, you’re not. But recognizing weakness unlocks the door to become as *THE ONE*. To see that you, by yourself, are infinitely limited, is the key to expanding into everything.”

“How?” Alef wondered. “I don’t understand.”

“The only thing that is really yours, Alef, is you. Your essence. You exist. Always have. Always will. And you have, innate within you, the ability to *choose*. Everything else, resources, opportunities, experiences, talents, and your mind and body, have been given to you by *THE ONE*. Without them, you are as if you were nothing. To choose to become one with other essences, to receive from them and give to them, opens the door for you to become free. Limitless in knowledge and power and Light.”

“How?” Alef marveled.

“Because what you do have, Alef, what your essence has always had, is capacity. The potential to hold and to use Light and truth and power and freedom. *Intelligence*. When you become one with others, and ultimately with *THE ONE*, *Intelligence* is without bounds in you as well. It is *infinite*.”

Alef sat in amazement. “I can possess this without limit?”

“Yes. It is a gift from *THE ONE*. *If you choose to offer yourself. If you choose to follow the Tenets. If you choose to be one with THE ONE.*

Alef couldn’t speak as he tried to comprehend what his grandfather was revealing to him. Then the overriding truth of what he just witnessed grasped him. “*THE ONE!*” he exclaimed. “*THE ONE* is a man *and* a woman!”

“Yes. Gender is eternal, Alef. Male and female define the essences. Each gender has unique innate abilities. And roles. Only when a man and woman together choose to become one eternally are their unique

abilities complemented and magnified. They become a whole. A whole that is infinitely greater, than the sum of their individual essences. And together, and only together, they can become as *THE ONE*.”

“What is an essence then?” Alef asked. “Where do we come from? I mean, who am I?”

“You are a consciousness without form that is and always was. A consciousness that can choose and is capable of great enlargement. And through *THE ONE*, you can *forever* expand.”

Alef held up his hand and turned it around. “Uh, why the body?”

“To progress without end, you *must* have a body. You must be fused to matter with form and substance. Your body amplifies your potential for power and Light and love and truth and freedom. And for darkness and deceit as well. You will receive an immortal body with its possibilities and its potential governed by the amount of Light you desire to embrace. By the level of law you want to live.”

“And all essences follow this course?”

“They follow *a* course,” his grandfather clarified. “They follow the path they *want* to follow. They will be who and where and what they want to be.”

“Then all do not choose to be as *THE ONE*?” Alef asked.

“No. But most choose to be *influenced* by *THE ONE*. To have some Light. They will be in a universe that has as much Light and law and potential as they desire. They will be happy.”

“What if an essence chooses not to follow any law?”

“Their choice is darkness. No Light. They are their own law. Single. Separate. Without order. They are confined in an isolated universe with the Proscribed and all who are like him.” He lifted an eyebrow. “*Not* a very happy place.”

Alef pondered what he had been seeing and hearing. “And all of this because of *THE ONE*,” he marveled.

“Yes. *THE ONE*.”

“Why? Why would *THE ONE*... Why would they want to do this?”

“Love, Alef. Their work, their glory, their desire, is to lift conscious, living beings to the level of law they want to live. To give them the degree of happiness and freedom and Light that comes with their choice. And *THE ONE*, in turn, expands endlessly. *THE ONE* has a *fullness*.”

Alef's eyes were riveted on his grandfather. The love he described was radiating from him. Palpable. Powerful. Light. And Alef thought about Tav and Nadia and Gabby. And Eli and Liz and Belinda and Rand. And he *understood*. He was saturated with the most extraordinary sensation. It was as though he were on fire. Not a heat, but an enlightening power that extended his awareness to a level he could never have imagined. It was... Joy. Sublime existence.

Then it dissipated.

His strength waned with its loss, and his brows gathered. What just left him, he wanted. And he wanted it for Tav and for Nadia and for Gabby and for his friends. He reached over and touched his grandfather's arm. “I was given the chance to know about choosing, about love, because you came to me in a dream and taught me. Tav and Nadia and Gabby didn't have that kind of experience. Why?”

“They had you.”

“Yes, but most people don't have my kind of experience, and they don't know someone who did. How are they going to know so they can choose?” Alef's voice was entreating. “And what about bodies? Babies that die and people who are physically or mentally handicapped. How will they have the experiences they need to choose? To know about love?”

“They will know, Alef. The when or where or how is unimportant. They *will* have all the understanding and experience needed for them

to choose. To become who they *want* to be.” He fastened his eyes on his grandson. “Just like you, Alef. Just like me. Just like... *THE ONE*.”

“*THE ONE*,” Alef repeated with awe, and looked at his grandfather. “The only time you spoke of *THE ONE* in my dreams was when I asked you about someone named Joshua. You said he was the path to *THE ONE*. Who is he, Grandpa? Who is...” He felt a strange pull and began to tremble. He looked down at his legs. Were they fading?

His grandfather stood. “You will get to know him well, Alef, but for now you must go back.”

“Back? Back? I’m not... I’m not dead?”

His grandfather smiled. “You have some daughters to raise. You have a wife to bless. Share with Tavia, Alef.”

“How long will I be with Tavia...and with my daughters?” Alef whispered.

His grandfather didn’t answer but put his hand on Alef’s shoulder and bent over and kissed his forehead.

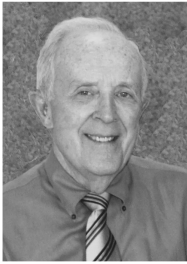
An undefinable, overpowering warmth flooded through Alef as he felt himself re-enter his weak body. And a thought caused him to smile.

“It looks like Dr. Shinoda *was* right after all. I *will* live a longer life.”

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Steve was raised in places that grew him including a small Idaho farm town and a ragged neighborhood in St. Louis. He and his wife, Joyce, currently live on a scenic hill in northeast Washington.

He graduated from BYU in economics and received an MA degree in political behavior from Arizona State. He served a church mission as a young man in Australia and later, with Joyce, in Romania. He is a community and church volunteer including serving as a chaplain in the Orange County jails for many years. He enjoys landscape photography and is the author of articles, poetry, hymns, novels, plays, and books on self-improvement and spiritual enlightenment.

He has a hopper full of singular involvements including flying with a major party US presidential candidate in his small plane when an engine conked out. He often uses his unique experiences to give life and meaning to his writing.

He says if he could use just one word to describe his life, it would be *grateful*.

