

Chapter 1: Merely a Dream

Taylor stood facing a solitary, snowcapped mountain. High in the nighttime sky, a full moon lit up the white peak protruding from the surrounding alpine forest. She was just below the tree line, and could smell heavy evergreen scents floating in the air. A chilling wind carved its way through the tall trees, tousling her light-brown hair. Looking upward through the branches, she watched a cloud coil its way around the crest. Suddenly, twenty feet in front of her, huge boulders cradled in the mountain's slope began to rumble, tumble and twist, forming two large arched doors. She took a cautious step backward, and the gateway of rock began to groan open. Warm air rolled out of the entrance and poured over her. Then came the sweet call of voices, and the pounding beat of drums. The sounds pulled at Taylor, pulsed in her. Leaning forward, she peered through the portal. Deep in the hollow of the mountain was a shining city of gold, nestled within a lush, green jungle. In the center of the space, standing tall over the canopy of trees was a glowing, cone-shaped tower. She took a curious step forward, but was rocked back on her heels by a blinding blast of light.

She awakened gasping for breath, wearing a cold sweat and shivering. Her teeth were clattering. Within seconds she began to cry, to weep uncontrollably, because the dream, which had felt so real, was now gone, lost forever. She remained that way, in her small bed, sobbing in the darkness, thinking of her dream, until the annoying buzz of the alarm clock startled her, hours later.

Wiping the tears from her wet cheeks, Taylor pulled herself out of bed, removed her soaked pajamas, and slid open her large closet door. She reached inside and grudgingly pulled out her new school uniform: a pair of self-cleaning, navy blue pants, and white shirt. Taylor wasn't really happy about having to wear a uniform; but then again, she figured that at least she wouldn't have to think

about what to wear everyday. Dressing for school would now be a complete no-brainer. She slipped into her clothes and without combing her long, brown hair, plodded out of her bedroom and made her way down the hallway. When she reached the family room, she nearly collided with the house robot zipping across the floor, carrying a glass of juice for her mother. The full-wall TV screen was blaring as Mom completed her fourth minute on the Quantum Fitness Workout Machine.

"Morning, Taylor!" Mom was in the center of an enormous cylinder made of a thick-coiled tube, climbing a never-ending supply of steps and handles that pulsated into the center of the winding spring. The whole cylinder teetered and tottered this way and that, making Mom's task all that much harder. "You know, you're really going to have to try this machine. You'd be amazed at what four minutes can do."

Taylor looked up at her mother with eyes half closed, and mumbled, "Yeah, and you might as well be doing the commercials for the company that makes the stupid thing."

"TV volume, down!" commanded Mom. "What did you say, honey? I couldn't quite hear you over the set."

"You just had a rebuild done on your butt and thighs. What do you need to be on that thing for?" Taylor hunched her shoulders and shivered.

"But *this* machine will get my body in the most optimum condition possible. And we all know how much of a necessity that is in today's world."

"Whatever," said Taylor, trying to slip away.

"So are you excited about your first day back to school?" The spring-like cylinder continued twisting and turning, giving Mom one challenging step or handle to grab after another. Like a rat scurrying through a sewer, Mom continued lunging, pulling, pushing, right through the center.

"Yeah, sure," said Taylor, without stopping or looking back. A feverish chill ran down her spine. Goosebumps rose up on her skin. And then, a vision of the giant glowing tower inside the mountain blazed in her mind.

When the image passed, Taylor made her way to the kitchen. Her father was there, already dressed for work. Looking dapper with his crisp white shirt, navy pants, and red tie, he was sitting at the table sipping a cup of coffee. Taylor looked at the back of her father's head and realized that it was now completely covered with thick, wavy brown hair. Like Mom, Dad also had made use of recent developments in the new field of cosmetic nanosurgery. But unlike Mom who had used the cell-enhancement process for nearly every one of her perceived physical faults, Dad had simply used the procedure to help restart the growth of hair follicles that had only recently turned off.

"Hey, kiddo!" said Dad while jumping out of his seat. "Are you excited about your first day back to school?" Without giving Taylor a chance to respond, he continued, "I'll have your breakfast ready in just a minute." Turning rapidly to the cabinet to pull out a single self-cleaning plate, Dad opened the glass door of the home food grower, inserted the plate, and punched in the nanomachine's instructions.

While the food was being assembled, Taylor sat down at the table with a huff. She hated it when her dad called her kiddo. And now, there he was, as usual, staring directly at the kitchen counter, which had transformed into a large computer screen. Like every morning, Dad was keeping an eye on the performance of his tech-stocks.

When the HFG dinged, Dad lunged sideways for its door. He grabbed Taylor's breakfast, and without even looking at her, thrust it on the table in front of her, then slid back to the counter.

Taylor looked down at the tube of food that was now squirming on her plate. She thought about telling her dad that she was *way* too old for this stupid active nanofood that was popular with

the little, finicky weenies in elementary school. She looked at Dad leaning on the counter watching his stocks and knew then that he had no idea that she wasn't ten anymore. Taylor stared directly at her father, picked up her fork, stabbed at the fidgeting food, and missed. For a nanosecond she considered asking her father about the dream, but decided against it. So while the food on Taylor's plate wriggled and squirmed, she put down the fork and closed her eyes.

This time, the visions and sensations of her dream came flashing back to her, one right after the other: the mountain and the strange cloud; the cold wind tossing her hair, tickling her cheeks; the smell of the trees; the moving, groaning rocks; the warm air pouring out of the entrance; the voices and pulsing; the golden city in the jungle; her hopeful step forward; the glowing tower; and that amazing blast of light. All of it seemed so real to her that it hardly felt like a dream at all.

Taylor pushed herself up from the table and left Dad, and her breakfast writhing on her plate, and walked down the hallway back toward her mother's office.

Mom was already at her desk staring at the holographic data from her computer's air monitor floating in front of her. A white towel was draped around her sweaty neck. She was busy at work, multitasking to the max. Balanced on her specially designed ergonomic chair, she was also doing leg lifts, tummy tucks, and butt squeezes in rapid succession.

Taylor stood in the doorway unnoticed, trying to decide whether or not to talk to her mom about the dream. But, she wasn't sure that would be a good idea. You see, in Taylor's day and age, dreaming wasn't something that anyone ever talked about. Everyone knew that dreams should never be taken seriously. And to even mention a dream was to risk alienation, persecution, and even worse, ridicule. Taylor knew all of this, of course, but still she *had* to talk to somebody. Somebody who would understand. Somebody she could trust.

Deciding against talking to Mom, Taylor stormed down the hallway, stopped back at her bedroom, grabbed her see-through backpack, and without saying good-bye to either Mom or Dad, bolted out the front door. She paused on her porch to adjust to the harsh difference in temperature, and stared off into a gray haze. The sun wasn't entirely present, but the streetlights were dimming with the growing light of day. A constant humming sound permeated the hot air.

Emerging from their homes and gathering on the sidewalks were all the other kids on the block. Like Taylor, they were all wearing their self-cleaning school uniforms, all toting their trusty clear plastic backpacks. Taylor fell in line with the rest the kids as they began their speedy trek to school. Reaching the corner at the end of her street, Taylor came upon the large Baptist church. The church had been a landmark in the community for decades, but Taylor and her family didn't go there because, as her father once explained, they were a modern family, and modern families didn't do *that* anymore. With a rather contemptuous tone, Dad made it clear that Church was for the old-fashioned, conservative families in the neighborhood. As Taylor approached the corner, she couldn't help but read the new message emblazoned on the church's oversized marquee:

DON'T MAKE
ME COME
DOWN THERE.

– GOD

Taylor stopped and looked skyward. The other kids on the sidewalk adjusted their cadence and made their way around her. Where is God? she wondered. Isn't God down here, too? And what kind of pastor would have the gall to sign his marquee like that, anyway? Unlike the rest of the kids on this first day of school, Taylor wasn't doing a very good job of keeping her mind on the task at hand.

Normally, she would have made her way to school without distraction; but on this first day back, the strange dream—and all these questions it was beginning to raise—weighed on her mind.

While Taylor stood staring at the marquee, an enormous school bus thundered by. The rush of hot air in the giant vehicle's wake pulled her along, putting an end to her ponderings. After turning the corner and passing the church premises, Taylor found herself walking alongside the school's barbed wire fence. Arriving at her assigned controlled entry point, Taylor displayed her eyes to the retinal-recognition camera. After the ID check, Taylor passed through a metal detector.

Finally, Taylor entered the main hallway and was immediately overtaken by a buzz of activity. Aside from the usual oversupply of students, teachers, robot janitors, and parents, this year a whole new crew of white-coated staff were rushing through the hallways, pushing huge, white, metal cabinets. They were all steering their heavy boxes through the main hallway as they followed closely behind Dr. Scotch, the school psychologist. Taylor watched as the procession passed.

"Remember," explained Dr. Scotch while leading his crew, "all of us are nothing more than simple repertoires of behavior. The methods of science have scarcely been applied to human behavior. What we will be doing, then, is to systematically apply various reinforcers to change and mold human behavior."

Taylor turned and started making her way through the hallways in search of her locker. She walked by more of the white-coated clinicians and their white boxes on wheels. They were applying their techniques to a number of interested students. Inside the cabinets was a huge supply of checkbooks, plastic tokens, and a variety of virtual reality games. The clamant clinicians were distributing the checkbooks and occasionally passing out a token or two.

"That's right," one of them bellowed. "Once you earn enough tokens, you can exchange them for anything you see here. This way, you'll be able to trade the tokens you get for the item you want."

Eventually, Taylor found her locker. She tested the combination, found that it did indeed work, and opened the door. On the inside of the door hung the Freedom to Search release form that she and her parents recently signed. Then, as if on cue, a search of the hallways began. Out of what seemed like nowhere, an ominous looking squad of police officers sealed off all the doors and ordered students to drop everything. Taylor dropped her backpack and stood staring into her locker. An officer ran over to her with a portable metal detector and passed it over and around and under and practically through her, and her backpack. Next, an explosive- and drug-sniffing dog nosed its way through the hall, and right over to Taylor and her crotch. Nothing was found. It was just a drill to keep students, officers, and dogs on their toes. Then, as quickly as the school's security force appeared, they were gone.

While still gawking into her empty locker, Taylor could hear someone approaching from behind. Knowing exactly who it was, she refused to turn around.

After he tweaked her gently in the side, he said, "*You're* looking a little weird today."

Taylor glanced over her shoulder. "Hey, Kyle. What are you talking about?"

"Well, when the dogs came by, you seemed, you know, lost in space, staring into your locker."

"What's so weird about that?" asked Taylor defensively as she tried to straighten her messy hair. She turned around to confront Kyle.

"Nothing, really. It's just that, I don't know; it's different for you." Kyle moved around Taylor to lean up against the lockers. "Is everything all right?"

Taylor met Kyle last year when they were both just sophomores. Kyle, who was exactly the same height as Taylor, had an athletic build, messy, short black hair, and penetrating, dark-green eyes. Taylor knew Kyle to be faithfully mischievous. Not in any terrible sort of way, really, but just enough to be on the edge. He always knew the latest gossip circulating at school, somehow knew what was

going on, or going to happen, and always before everyone else. Taylor never figured out how he came to know all these things because Kyle always kept that a secret. Like Taylor, Kyle was a bit of an unknown at school. He wasn't crazy or anything like that, but he was the type to question things. And once in a while, he'd say something really heavy, and it would freak people out. He even dressed a little odd, especially in the past, when he wasn't wearing a uniform. Even now, Taylor noticed that he wore his school uniform in a somewhat altered way, but she couldn't exactly tell how. Because of all this, Kyle wasn't exactly the most well-liked person at Dominion High. In fact, he gave most people the willies.

Taylor opened her mouth to answer Kyle's questions, but then the first bell rang. She shrugged, and said, "Oh well, we better get to class."

"I have Mr. Wright's homeroom first," said Kyle.

"Me too," said Taylor. Both Taylor and Kyle smiled, knowing they would be together for the first period of the day, at least. Taylor closed her locker and began walking with Kyle across the hallway to Mr. Wright's class. "I wonder what the homeroom teachers will have us doing this year."

"Yeah, I wonder," said Kyle. He was grinning fiercely. Taylor knew the look. It was Kyle's *I know something you don't* look.

Upon entering, Taylor glanced up at a black box with mirrored eyes staring down at her from the wall above. Below the conspicuous looking container was the sign:

IT SHOULD BE ASSUMED
THAT THERE IS A WIRELESS CAMERA
INSIDE THIS ENCLOSURE.
IT SHOULD ALSO BE ASSUMED THAT

THIS CAMERA IS RECORDING
BOTH VIDEO AND AUDIO.

Taylor and Kyle found two adjacent desks located in the back row, hung their backpacks on the backs of their chairs, and sat down. While Kyle slouched in his chair, Taylor reached around to her backpack, unzipped it, took out her tiny, hand-held computer, and set it on her desk and plugged in. Taylor knew the ritual only too well. Like putting on the uniform at home, or trekking here to school, or passing through the security checks points, or whatever else she was required to do, she did it all as a total no-brainer. She despised herself for it, but still she'd tow the line, as required, just like the good girl her parents expected her to be.

Kyle, who neglected to plug in for the day, leaned over and whispered to Taylor. "The new boss of the school district is going to talk to everybody on the big screen today. He's going to tell us what we're all going to do over the next few years."

"How do you know?" asked Taylor.

"I just know," said Kyle with a huff. Taylor shook her head, wondering, once again, where Kyle received his information.

When the tardy bell rang, Mr. Wright got up from his desk and made his way up to the front. The room gradually fell silent by the time he stopped behind his podium and just to the side of the big screen.

Standing there, front and center, with all eyes focused on him, Mr. Wright was in all his glory. He was a short, portly old man. Resting low on his bulbous nose was a pair of rectangular, wire-rim glasses. His receding hairline exposed the pink, pale skin of his enormous forehead, where high up to the right of center, was a small adhesive bandage.

"Please rise," he said.

Everyone stood up, Kyle last of all.

“Put your right hand over your heart.”

Kyle let his remain at his side. Taylor saw him out of the corner of her eye and grew concerned.

In unison, everyone—except for Kyle—stared at the flag and recited the pledge. When they got to the “under God” part, Taylor thought back to the church marquee that she had read on her walk to school. Why always under God? she wondered. Are we really *under* God? And then she stopped herself, figuring that it *had* to be the dream that was making her think all these things.

When everyone settled back in their seats, Mr. Wright scratched his forehead just below the bandage. “Today,” he said, “the entire school district will watch a videoconference of our new superintendent. He’s due to deliver his five-year plan for improving school achievement.”

“You were right,” whispered Taylor, while leaning over to Kyle. “How’d you know?”

“You know I never reveal my sources,” Kyle thrust his chin upward in mock pomposity.

Taylor watched Mr. Wright reach for the touch-screen panel on the podium and with his pudgy fingers, poked out a few directives. An image of a stately, gray-haired man sitting behind a large desk appeared on the big screen and, simultaneously, on all the monitors mounted in the students' desks, as well as on the enlarged, roll-out screens of their hand-helds. He was studying a small stack of papers. Resting the papers on the desk, the superintendent cleared his throat, feigned a smile, and promptly began his speech:

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen, students. Three weeks ago I had the privilege of attending our state's education policy summit. Our governor, business leaders from major corporations throughout our state, and school district

superintendents, talked at length about the direction our schools will take over the next five years."

The superintendent paused, looked down at his stack of papers, shuffled them around a bit, wrinkled the skin on his forehead as if in deep thought, then looked seriously into the camera.

"Education has become the new big industry of our time. In our never-ending quest for economic growth and prosperity, the mission of our schools will be to transform our natural resources into the type of product our businesses will need to further increase corporate profits for the economic growth of our great state and country."

Taylor knew exactly what he meant by "natural resources." That's all we are? she thought. Nothing but... *resources*? Taylor looked around and noticed all the others in the room keeping their eyes glued to the screens. She hated how nobody cared. Nobody ever did. Nobody ever objected to anything. Everyone, always, just kept doing what they were told.

The super continued:

"This is what we will do over the next five years: Our major goal is to ensure that students meet or exceed national averages on achievement tests in..."

Taylor turned toward the window and looked out through the thick security glass and metal grills. Once again, the images and smells, feelings and sounds of the dream came pouring back to her. She remembered them all. Clearly. They all felt so real, so *real*.

After a while, she turned her attention to Kyle and realized that he had been watching her. He looked worried. Saying nothing, Taylor turned back toward the big screen at the front of the room.

Like listening to a weak radio station, she was only capable of catching bits and pieces of the superintendent's droning harangue.

"... students will be expected to learn facts and concepts... and master key skills... there are presently over ten-thousand mandated content standards at each grade level... we have learned how to transmit each and every standard in the shortest time possible..."

Taylor envisioned Mr. Wright standing next to her, prying the top of her head open, cramming thousands of facts, figures, details and data, into her empty skull. As the superintendent continued, her concentration waned as the visions returned to her muddled mind.

When her attention focused, Mr. Wright was standing at the front of the room shaking his big head. With a nasty scowl on his face, he was staring directly at Taylor, pointing vigorously at the screen. Dutifully, Taylor focused on the large screen and tried to pay heed.

"... only with a unified effort will we meet the monumental challenge we have laid before ourselves."

The superintendent stared into the camera until the screen went black. With the superintendent's speech now over, Mr. Wright took his position behind the podium, where he quickly tapped out a few more directives on his touch-screen panel to begin the introduction to his class. "Today we start our first day of Working World. In this class we will be getting ready for the real world—the working world. We will prepare ourselves for life after school. In this class we will learn how to write business letters, craft resumes, create spreadsheets and databaaaaases using the latest technology."

"Did you hear that?" Taylor whispered to Kyle, while leaning closer. "What happened to Mr. Wright's voice? Did you hear how it got, like, deeper right in the middle of the sentence?"

Kyle was smiling. "Just watch. Watch *everything*."

"In our homeroom class," Mr. Wright continued, "we will develop marketable skills to create professional-looking portfolios to sell ourselves to get better jobs."

Kyle chuckled softly.

"There's something wrong with Mr. Wright," Taylor said. "He's slumping. And check out his eyes! There's something wrong with his eyes."

"Yeah. I'll betcha there's something wrong with *his* database," said Kyle.

"His database? What are you talking about?"

At that moment, the intercom system sounded its alarm—three short, high-pitched beeps. It was the principal you never saw but always heard, Mrs. Kirschenbaum, with her daily announcements. "Welcome back to Dominion High." Taylor had to hand it to her, Mrs. Kirschenbaum always sounded like she was trying to be cheerful, even though she failed at it miserably. "By now, in addition to watching our superintendent give his speech on the new goals of our school district, your teacher should have also provided you with a brief, standardized introduction to the homeroom curriculum. As you may have gathered, we are off to another productive year. But, before we begin instruction, we will be implementing a very important drill. Today our school will be carrying out an extraordinarily dramatic exercise to show students, teachers, police, and paramedics what to do in case a gunman were to storm the school. Explorer Scouts dressed in camouflage and carrying rifles loaded with blanks will pretend to shoot various members of our school's administration and take hostages."

Most of the kids in the room were excited by this announcement. Taylor, however, was bored with all the drama. She sighed heavily, crossed her arms over her chest and slouched in her chair. Kyle leaned forward in his chair, placed his elbows on the desk and rested his chin in his hands.

When the staged emergency drill had been properly executed and everyone seemed certain that the school would be prepared for the worst possible disturbance, Mr. Wright concluded the day's instruction by directing his class to use their hand-helds to access the website for his class. By the time everyone finished downloading the study guide, textbook, and homework assignment schedule for the class, the bell rang.

After exiting the room, Taylor had only enough time to say good-bye to Kyle before making her separate way throughout the remainder of the day. Like clockwork, following the ceaseless sounding of bells, Taylor filed in and out of her classes to receive the specified transmission of programmed instruction mandated for each disciplinary area. With the residue of her dream still clouding her mind, Taylor barely managed to keep up with the grueling schedule.



At the end of the day, Kyle met up with Taylor back at her locker. "So, how'd *your* day go?"

"Okay, I guess," she said while opening her locker door. "But doesn't it seem like we've got so much more work to do this year?"

"We always have 'so much more work to do,' Taylor. That's the way it goes now-a-days."

"I'll be up all night. I've never had so much homework in all my life. How 'bout you?"

"Hey, yeah, . . . homework. Maybe I'll get around to it. Maybe I won't."

"Did you get any tokens today?" asked Taylor. "I didn't try to, but every time I turned around one of those guys in the white coats was standing there watching me. They'd reach into their ugly

cabinet and give me one of these stupid tokens." Taylor reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a handful. "See?" She then tossed all the tokens onto the floor of her locker and closed the door.

"I managed to avoid those creeps," said Kyle. "They're not going to get to me. No how, no way. What do I need that crap for? I watched everyone hanging around the boxes, talking with the white-coats, checking out all the junk. 'Oh, I want that one!' 'That one's rad, man!' 'I'm gonna save up all my tokens for that one.' I tell ya Taylor, I hate it. I hate what's going on here."

"Yeah," said Taylor, while hoisting her backpack over her shoulder. "It's all kinda weird, huh? I don't think I'm ever going to get used to this."

"Me neither," said Kyle. "So, what's with you? You haven't been yourself. It looked like you were going to tell me earlier today, but then the bell rang."

She looked at him and realized that he really was sincerely interested. Looking behind her to make sure there wasn't a white-coat within earshot, Taylor took a chance on Kyle and began to explain her dream. "Last night was the most incredible.... I had this dream."

"What kind of dream?"

Kyle's dark-green eyes always seemed to bore a hole right through Taylor's skull into the inner, intimate workings of her mind. She was often both afraid and excited by the intensity of his gaze. She had to look away. "I haven't been able to get it out of my head. It was so real. It felt like I was actually there."

"Where?"

"I mean it, Kyle. I think I was really there." She looked into his eyes, checking once more to see if he was really sincere.

"*Where*, Taylor?"

She decided to talk, for eyes that earnest simply couldn't be lying. "I don't know exactly," Taylor started and then paused, and then opened up. "I was standing in front of a huge mountain that was capped with snow and surrounded by all kinds of trees." She looked closer into Kyle's eyes, as if searching for traces of the same green trees that she saw in the forest around the mountain. "I was standing in the forest, looking at the mountain when all of a sudden this enormous cloud whipped around the peak. It looked just like a flying saucer. Then, right in front of me, this huge opening appeared. That's when I felt the warm air from inside the mountain. And then there were these amazing sounds and a golden city. And then there was this huge blast of light. The whole place was... magical."

"Did you see any people?" Kyle's eyes remained focused on Taylor, making it easier for her to go on.

"I don't think so. But I could tell that someone lived there. All I know is that it was the most incredible dream I've ever had. It felt so real. Like I was actually there."

"Young lady!" came a piercing voice from behind. A white-coated clinician had snuck up behind them. He had been eavesdropping on their conversation. "What you experienced was merely a dream—a simple, frivolous, irrational, and preposterous self-deception. And we have absolutely no time for such foolishness here at Dominion High. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Taylor, while averting her eyes.

"Now, we will have no more of such talk," said the clinician. He shook his skinny finger at both Taylor and Kyle. "And if you both choose to continue this conversation, there will be significant consequences. You *know* that no one is allowed to stop and talk in the hallways." The clinician reached into his rolling, white cabinet and pulled out a hand-held. "And what is your name, young lady?"

“Uh, why?” asked Taylor.

“Never mind, why,” said the clinician, sternly. “Just give me your name.”

“Taylor Thomas... sir.” Taylor looked over at Kyle who was now scowling at the white-coated creep.

The clinician punched her name into his hand-held, and then began pushing his cart away. He stopped just before turning the corner to rearrange some of the items in his rolling white box.

Kyle took hold of Taylor’s arm and pulled her down the hallway, away from the corner, and the conniving clinician.

"Do you think I should ask anyone else?" Taylor spoke under her breath. "Maybe someone could help me to understand."

"Taylor, people don't talk about dreams. There are a few reasons for that, too. Most people think dreams are worthless."

"I know that, Kyle." Taylor was growing frustrated.

"Another is because most people don't dream anymore. They can't. And especially not like you do."

Taylor was bewildered. Did he know something? she wondered. He was keeping his eyes focused on the clinician. "I better get going," said Taylor. "I've got to go home and get started on all this homework. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, take a walk or something. Do some thinking, maybe."

"Okay, then. See you tomorrow." Taylor was hoping that she could've gone on a walk, or something, with Kyle. She was more than a little disappointed.

“Maybe,” said Kyle while taking one last glance back at the corner and the clinician. Without looking back at Taylor, Kyle turned and walked away.

Both Taylor and Kyle were required to take different exit points out of the school. And security would be at each door, making sure everything went according to plan.

On her short walk home, Taylor looked up at the gray sky and sighed. She was sighing often now, thinking about some of the things that Kyle had said. Like, why did he say 'Maybe,' when we were saying good-bye? She worried about Kyle, wondered if he was going to be all right, given his attitude and everything. Kyle had been her friend for a year now. And sometimes Taylor thought she had feelings for Kyle that ventured beyond simple friendship. She knew Kyle was smart. He knew most things before everyone else did. Like when Mr. Wright was talking and his voice changed. He seemed to know that something was up. With all the excitement from the emergency drill, and all the different classes they had to go to, she had forgotten to ask Kyle about it later. She didn't see him at lunchtime, either. In fact, no one did. No one ever did. He was always missing. Taylor figured that he probably snuck off campus somewhere so that he could be by himself. He was most likely sitting up in a tree, watching a bird or squirrel, maybe eating a piece of fruit that he picked. He hated eating from the school cafeteria's menu of prepackaged, nanofood. Said it made his stomach turn every time he was near it.

Chapter 2: Prophetic Learning Systems

When Taylor reached home she flashed her eyes at the hidden camera in the front door and it clicked open. After tossing her backpack on the floor in her bedroom, she walked to the kitchen, pulled out a glass from the cabinet, and inserted it into the HFG. In less than a minute, she pulled out a cold glass of orange juice. Sauntering into the family room, she plopped down on the couch and spilled some juice on her white shirt. Immediately, the nanobots embedded within the fabric went to work attacking the stain. Seconds later, the shirt was clean and dry. While taking a sip of the juice and trying to work up the motivation to start her homework, the self-adjusting contour nanotech couch began to change shape to accommodate Taylor's body. All day long, she had found it difficult to focus on her studies; and now, here at home, things were no different. She couldn't stop thinking about the dream.

Frustrated with herself for not being able to focus, she pushed the dream out of her mind. Picking herself up from the couch, she made her way into her bedroom, took off her school uniform, and hung it back up in the closet. After throwing on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, she sat down on the floor with her back against the edge of her bed, grabbed her backpack, and pulled out her handheld. She had tons of homework: Trigonometry, Chemistry, Quantum Physics, Bioengineering, and English—over an hour in each subject.

Hours later, both Mom and Dad arrived home from work. Sticking their heads through Taylor's bedroom door, they leaned in, and asked, in unison, "How's your homework going?"

Taylor was now slouching, clutching her handheld and staring off into space. Normally, Mom and Dad would have found her in her room clicking away, tapping out directives, completing her required homework with relative ease. But today Taylor's work habits were completely out of

sync. She scrunched her eyes up, shook her head, and then looked up at her parents. "Huh?" she asked.

"We *said*," said Dad with his snap-to-it-and-pay-attention tone, "how's your homework coming along?"

Taylor sat up straight. "Okay I guess. I just don't understand why we have so much of it."

"Your teachers are only trying to prepare you for the world of work when you get older," said Mom.

"That's right," said Dad. "As a matter of fact, both your mother and I have a few hours of work to do for our companies before we go to our offices in the morning. It's the way of the world, honey. Everyone has to do it. You want to keep up, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Taylor nodding and frowning. She hated how her parents always sounded so typical and synthetic. Just like everybody at school, Taylor thought. They go along with everything.

"That a girl," said Dad. "We're very proud of you, you know."

"Your father and I are going to get dinner ready," Mom explained. "So don't you worry about a thing. When it's done in a few minutes, we'll give you a call."

Mom closed the bedroom door. Two minutes later, she was calling Taylor to dinner. After Taylor arrived in the kitchen, Mom handed her a plate with her nanofood perfectly arranged. Dad grabbed his plate and made his way to the living room. Taylor followed. While sitting down in his nanotech recliner, Dad commanded the television to turn on. Immediately, the living room wall turned into a screen.

"Wait till you see our new commercial," Dad said with delight. "It's the best I've ever seen. Our marketing team has done it again!" By now, Taylor was sick and tired of hearing how great

Dad and his team were at creating within consumers a total dissatisfaction with their lives and an insatiable craving for yet another of his company's *amazing* products. "And we're not just advertising on television. Oh, no, no, no! Our ads are everywhere and our corporate logo is one of the most recognizable symbols in the world today."

Taylor rolled her eyes and settled into the sofa. Dad was *always* talking about his company and all of their commercials. Taylor couldn't stand commercials, or having to listen to Dad and Mom talking about the commercials; or imitating the actors on the commercials; or repeating all their stupid jingles.

"You know," said Mom as she made her way into the family room, "I read somewhere that before children enter first grade, they will have soaked in over a million advertisements. And the time our teenagers spend watching these ads is more than their total stay in school."

Yeah, Taylor thought, and if you've got parents who work in advertising, you'll spend... your whole life, doing nothing but school and commercials. While picking at the food on her plate, Taylor watched her parents and occasionally glanced toward the screen. But mostly, she kept staring off into space, wondering about her dream.

Between forkfuls, Dad spent most of the time surfing channels, not because he wasn't interested in the programming, but because he wanted to check out all the commercials. Mom's eyes were glued to the screen. As usual, Taylor was totally bored. She hated commercials.

Near the end of dinner, the phone rang. Dad told the TV to turn down its volume and grabbed the phone. Like their retro-styled home, Mom and Dad preferred a hand-held telephone to the newer holophones that were currently in style and selling like crazy. They said that they liked the privacy that the old audio only phone afforded.

After a cheery hello, Dad's tone became serious. He looked over at Taylor and stared at her. Taylor could tell he was angry. Between nods and an occasional "Uh huh," Dad reached for the end table's drawer, opened it, and pulled out a pad of paper and pencil. He rested the pad on the recliner's arm and jotted down a few notes. Taylor and Mom exchanged looks and then Dad said, "Thank you very much for your call, Dr. Scotch. I know you're a busy man. Rest assured that we will take care of this problem immediately."

Upon hearing the school psychologist's name, Taylor slouched further into the sofa. She knew something was up, and from the tone of Dad's voice, and the anger in his eyes, whatever it was couldn't be good.

Dad hung up the phone and immediately dialed a number. After a moment he said, "Hello, this is Mr.—," and was cut off. He began to ask, "How did you know—," but was cut off again. "And what time would you like us there?" Dad wrote on the notepad again. "Thank you very much, Mr. Flynn."

Dad hung up the phone and gazed sternly at Taylor. "Sounds like you've been having some trouble at school."

"I haven't had any trouble at school." Taylor knew what was coming next. She knew exactly what Dad was going to say. He was so predictable.

"You know," said Dad, while turning to Mom, "I told you we should have gone to the fertilization lab to have...." Dad stopped himself short and shook his head. "If we had, we wouldn't be having these problems right now. She's having dreams, hon. Dreams! And they're getting in the way of her studies at school. I told you we should've used the HGE just like everybody else."

Taylor had heard it all before. She could still remember how horrible she felt the first time she overheard Mom and Dad talking about her with another couple who had been invited over for dinner and drinks. She was much younger then, and supposed to be in her bedroom, asleep. But for some reason, that night her curiosity got the best of her, so she snuck out of her room, and hid just out of sight, to listen in on their adult conversation.

Turns out that while Mom and Dad were still unmarried and in college, on a hot night of romance and passion, they tore into one another with reckless abandon. Mom discovered she was pregnant three weeks later. Before the pregnancy, Mom and Dad had every intention of getting married and had talked at length about how they would have their first child. They had decided that after college, they would go to the local fertility clinic to conceive their first child in an in vitro fertilization lab. And then they would use human germline engineering—HGE—to create the exact designer baby they were looking for. But such was not the case for Taylor. Instead, her conception was left up to the messy, unpredictable process of natural procreation. Dad had originally wanted Mom to abort the pregnancy, but at the time, Mom was all aglow, being with child, and all. Her unusually bright disposition convinced her reluctant fiancé that the pregnancy should continue.

Now, in Taylor's day and age, with parents living within an upper-middle class neighborhood, to be a standard-issue natural child was indeed an anomaly. Taylor knew all of this, of course. In fact, except for Kyle, she didn't know anyone else at school, or her neighborhood, who *wasn't* a designer baby. Because of this, Taylor had always felt out of place everywhere she went. Never, not once in all of her sixteen years did she ever feel like she fit in. Well, almost never. When she was with Kyle, she did.

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After prying Mom and Taylor up from their seats in the living room, Dad hauled the small family in his new car to the local mall. Complete with programmed sound and conditioned air, every store imaginable was right there under one vast roof. And it was the most popular place in town.

Everyone went to the mall. After all, it had every thing one could ever hope to acquire.

Once the car's cybernetic chauffeur squeezed the vehicle into a space in the colossal parking lot, Dad, Mom, and Taylor took the speedy elevator up to the tenth floor. Like a lightning bolt in a thunderstorm, Dad led the way through the meandering crowd. Mom and Taylor struggled to keep up, until Dad finally stopped in front of the newest store in the mall: Prophetic Learning Systems.

When Dad and Mom charged side by side through the entrance of the store, Taylor could have sworn they had forgotten all about her. She was pissed about that, so in protest, and really because she was scared of what lay inside, she lingered by the entrance. As Kyle had told her to do during her first class of the day, Taylor watched everything.

Around the periphery of the brightly lit store, resting on shelves and meticulously arranged on the floor were a variety of educational games, manipulative toys, models, maps and globes. Creatively displayed in the middle of the store were an assortment of colorful plastic and cardboard packages containing a collection of newly released, technologically advanced, neural implants.

Side by side, Mom and Dad charged directly *into* the first display they saw: a giant-sized rubber ear. As they moved into the ear's canal, Taylor finally walked into the store and stood just outside the ear, next to the lobe. Mom and Dad's heavy footsteps, rapid heartbeats, and shallow breathing were acutely amplified. The sound was especially clear. A number of Cochlear Implants said to improve overall auditory perception rested in ear-shaped packages, on a number of ear-stirrup shelves. When Mom and Dad finished surveying the packages they stepped outside.

Immediately, the large lobe of the automated ear display wiggled. In response, Mom and Dad let out a hushed giggle.

Taylor then followed Mom and Dad over to an enormous blue eye. Comfortably nestled within little slits in the rubbery retina were a variety of blue packages containing Image Processing Implants. When Mom pulled a blue, eye-shaped package from a slit to read the back of the box, the lid of the giant eye blinked. Mom was standing so close that the long eyelash tickled her nose.

From his position one step back, Dad's eye caught the movement of the twisting brow overhead. "It gives the impression of a searching, thinking eye."

"Yeah," said Mom. "The marketing team really *caught my eye* with this display."

"Yes, you're right honey," said Dad dryly, missing the pun altogether.

How she hated listening to her parents! They were driving Taylor nuts. Could they *possibly* sound more plastic?

Finished with their survey of the giant eye, Taylor followed Mom and Dad over to a huge, soft, gray brain. Cautiously, Dad pulled a brain-shaped package from one of the giant brain's folds and then stepped back quickly to read the text on the back of the Memory Implant box. After slipping the package back into the brain's fold, Mom and Dad were next drawn to an enormous, pulsating heart. Again, Taylor followed. When Mom reached the heart, she paused for a moment to caress the beating heart before looking at any of the implant packages. Within the four heart chambers, a variety of heart-shaped boxes were displayed. The consumer could choose between Humor, Pleasure, Well-Being, and Relaxation Implants. Mom also read the text on the back of the package. Done with perusing the packages, they left the heart display and walked to the center of the store.

At that instant, a salesman converged on the browsing couple. "Hello, are you finding everything to your satisfaction?"

Taylor's stomach instantly began to churn. Her skin started to crawl. It felt as if daddy long legs himself had crept up on her.

"Yes," said Dad. "We called earlier and set up an appointment."

At first, Taylor couldn't take her eyes off him. He had long legs, long arms, and very long fingers. He was also very tall and *very* skinny. His taut, sunken face exposed sharp cheekbones, a strong chin, and a long, straight nose. His hair was short, black, and perfectly parted. He wore a well-fitted dark suit, white shirt, and bright yellow tie. This guy was made to order, she thought. He must have had rebuilds done on everything. And he gave Taylor the creeps. To Taylor, he looked exactly like a spider: a big, scary daddy long legs spider. Slowly, she started backing up toward the entrance.

"You must be Taylor's parents. My name is Flynn. Ted Flynn. We spoke on the phone."

"That's correct, we are Taylor's parents," said Dad, precisely. Taylor knew that her Dad wasn't the type to offer too much information to any salesman. As he had explained to her during prior shopping sprees, it was always important for potential buyers to use their negotiation skills as wisely as possible. Before this trip to the mall, Taylor never dreamed that she would be the one up for negotiation. She took a few more stealthy steps backward.

"Well, perhaps we should go into my office where we can sit down and get comfortable."

"That would be lovely," said Mom. Taylor thought she noticed a slight quiver in her mother's voice. It was so unlike her regular confident tone. Taylor took another two, quick big steps back. She was almost gone. Nearly out of the store.

"And you *did* bring Taylor with you, didn't you?" asked Flynn.

“Oh yes, Taylor,” said Dad. “Of course.”

By now Taylor had backed up all the way to the store’s entrance. She considered turning and running, but she knew that if she tried to escape all the surveillance cameras inside and outside the mall would track her every move. She wouldn’t make it very far before the authorities would pick her up. So instead of running, she stood there and watched as Mom and Dad turned around and struggled to find her. Mom spotted her standing near the exit of the store. “Honey, why don’t you come on over here and join us.” Taylor didn’t say a word, didn’t budge an inch, so Mom huffed, then marched over to her, put an arm around her shoulder, and hauled her right up in front of Flynn. Taylor cringed. She was afraid that his spindly spider arms were to going reach out and snatch her.

But they didn’t. Instead, he lured Mom, Taylor, and Dad to his office at the back of the store. Offering the chairs in front of his desk, he poured the couple two cups of black coffee, then slinked into a black leather chair behind a glass-top desk. As soon as he sat down, Mr. Flynn started to spin his web. "What we must all remember here is that a normally functioning child is one who is capable of accurately mirroring the objective world. Our mental functions are limited to taking in information from our sensory organs, storing it in our mental computer banks, and then, on occasion, recombining that sensory data to create something new. Any significant departure from this perception must be dismissed as the product of a mental disorder."

"Are you saying that Taylor has a mental disorder?" Dad was already getting defensive.

Mr. Flynn took a long, deep breath and leaned forward, placing his razor-sharp elbows on the glass. Taylor watched him interlace his thin, spindly fingers. "What I'm saying is that consciousness—mind—is a byproduct of the neurophysiological and biochemical processes taking

place within the human brain. And likewise, dreams are a simple, frivolous byproduct of brain activity during sleep; their fragmented contents do not contain any meaning whatsoever.”

How could anything as powerful and as beautiful as that dream not mean anything? thought Taylor. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and imagined the mountain. In her mind she heard the same sounds that came from inside, but then Mr. Flynn’s scratchy voice interrupted her.

“It’s true, humans, standing separate from all the other creatures of the earth—what’s left of them anyway—have a highly evolved intelligence provided by the biological computers embedded inside their skulls. But, now we here at PLS have the capacity to take intelligence a step or two further. Due to the stringent efforts of our esteemed research and development crew, we’ve been able to advance technology far faster than anyone expected. We here at PLS, *the* leading force in the field of molecular nanotechnology, *can* help your daughter. Taylor *can* be returned to living a normal life once again.”

“*Returned* to living a normal life?” Taylor practically screeched. She couldn’t believe her voice sounded that shrill. She vowed to sound more mature. “What was so abnormal about the life I was living? One little dream! Just one day of this and now I’m all a mess?”

Dad cleared his throat. “You’ve caused quite enough trouble for one day, young lady. I think it would be best if you just sat there and listened.”

Taylor folded her arms over her chest and slouched in her chair. What was normal? she wondered. For Mom and Dad, normal meant, this place: Bot Head City. Normal meant, no dreams. And that meant no mountain, no warm air rushing over her, no soothing light filling up her entire body. To Mom, Dad and Mr. Flynn there was no meaning to any of that. It meant nothing at all.

Mom interjected with a whine. “Well, with this awful dream thing getting in the way, she has been having a difficult time focusing on her studies at school.”

Taylor wanted to yell, *It's not awful!* but she remained quiet as her father had commanded. Mom continued, "Dr. Scotch explained to us—or, I mean, my husband—how serious this situation is. And we respect him and his work immensely." Mom slumped in her chair and placed her hands in her lap. Dad reached out stiffly for her hand. Mom whimpered and then continued. "He did refer us here. He told us you could help Taylor. Can you? Can you help her?"

Taylor wanted to say, OK! I'll stop dreaming, I promise, I won't do it again, but she realized it was too late. She was here, with Mom and Dad stuck in Flynn's sticky web.

"I believe so," said Mr. Flynn making no attempt to appear sympathetic. "Would you like me to explain how?"

"Certainly," said Dad while jerking his hand away from Mom.

Taylor listened in horror while Flynn launched into his pitch. "We have two routes that we can take. The first is a step-by-step process utilizing a variety of neural implants. Downloading knowledge is one of the benefits of neural implant technology. We have implants that will improve Taylor's capacity for retaining knowledge and for enhancing memory. With these neural implants we will be able to feed strains of data directly into her brain."

Taylor reached up and grabbed the sides of her head with both hands, as if to shield her brain, the brain she was born with; the only one she had; the one that made her Taylor.

"Let me make sure I understand you correctly," said Dad. "What I think you're saying is that with this technique you'll be able to download all the information that Taylor needs. So everything she's required to learn at school can easily be transmitted through this neural implant technology?"

"That's correct!" said Mr. Flynn while pointing his bony finger at Dad. "And soon, once this new technology really takes off—and we are certain it will—children who do not have such

implants will be unable to participate in a meaningful conversation with those who do. They simply will not have the information needed to communicate effectively."

Taylor brought her hands down and watched Mom look at Dad in an obvious search for support. Dad reached over and patted Mom on the arm. There they were, as always, trying to comfort each other. But what about her? They weren't trying to console her at all. It was then that Taylor realized what a disappointment she must be. Her dream, while it had brought so much hope to her, had offered nothing but shame to her parents. She was a complete embarrassment to them.

Mr. Flynn continued. "Of course, for the really serious buyers, we have a more advanced technology. This is our second route. The all-at-once process."

"Well, I think we're pretty serious here," said Dad, while shifting forward in his seat.

By now Taylor could tell that there was nothing she could do. She would be changed forever. Suddenly her throat constricted and she felt as though all the air in her body was being squeezed out of her. She felt weak. But at the same time, she knew that she had to do something. Maybe if she told them that she would stop dreaming, and that she would pay more attention at school, it would be okay. She would have to convince Dad, though. If she could just get some air back in her lungs, she'd be able to change his mind. But for some reason it felt as though Mr. Flynn's spindly spider arms and legs were wrapped around her chest squeezing the life out of her.

His spider eyes opened wide, almost bugging out of his long, skinny head. "Rather than implementing change one step at a time, we can do it all at once. With our most advanced technology, you'll have the option of scanning Taylor's entire brain, to disassemble it atom by atom, and then fully upload it to a new more efficient computational medium."

Taylor felt as though she was in a nightmare itself. But no! A nightmare was a type of dream, wasn't it? And it was a dream that had gotten her here in the first place. How was she going to convince her Dad to leave her brain the way it was if she was still thinking about dreams?

"I am still *so* amazed with the capabilities of this new molecular nanotechnology," Dad offered, turning to Mom. "It's incredible what these tiny assemblers with their submicroscopic arms are able to do. I still find it difficult to imagine what those little bots are capable of doing."

"Yes, it really does boggle the human brain, doesn't it?" said Mr. Flynn, raising his eyebrows at Dad.

Dad squinted at Mr. Flynn as if trying to figure out what he was *really* trying to say.

"And this is what we'd do with, or, for Taylor?" asked Mom. Taylor looked at her mother. Surely, she would not go along with this.

"Yes," answered Flynn. "The entire organization of Taylor's brain and nervous system will be *recreated, reconstructed, and replaced* with electronic circuits of far greater capacity, speed, and reliability."

"Wow!" said Dad almost jumping out of his seat. "That's the one we want. I mean... the route we'll take. Or, what we'll do for Taylor. Right dear?" Dad looked over at Mom. His eyes were wild with desire.

So much for Dad's negotiating skills, thought Taylor. All at once, she felt like running. She looked at the door, and was about to launch herself out of her chair, but then she remembered all the surveillance cameras. To attempt an escape now would be futile. Security forces would be on her in seconds.

"Well, has this been done before?" Mom asked.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Flynn. "Lots of people are having it done. People have been experimenting on themselves... I mean... transforming themselves, for quite some time."

"That's comforting," said Dad. "Don't you think so, honey?" Taylor figured that by now her technogeek father was probably thinking about getting the procedure done on himself, too.

"I guess so," said Mom with another sigh.

Mom made Taylor sick. Look at her, she thought. Another passive female being saved by two strong males. "Hmph!" she huffed.

She noticed Dad giving her another one of his looks.

"It's so exciting just thinking of all the possibilities," said Mr. Flynn. "There's no limit to what we can do."

"I'll say," said Dad. "So when can all of this be done? Is it a long procedure?"

"Luckily for you, we have an opening available tonight. And it won't take long at all. Before bedtime, Taylor should be fully uploaded. The new and improved Taylor will be at school tomorrow, functioning *better* than normal. And I'm sure you'll be amazed at the difference. No longer will Taylor have just that gray cheesy lump inside her skull."

By now, Taylor wanted to reach over and give that freaky Flynn a few lumps of his own. Then, she wanted to flee. Run. Fly right out of this place. Disappear.

"And how much will the advanced route cost," asked Dad, trying to get serious again.

"Perhaps you'd like to see our price list," said Mr. Flynn.

Dad, Mom, and Mr. Flynn looked over at Taylor. She was now staring at a strange globe on Mr. Flynn's desk. Unlike most globes that display the continents, countries and major bodies of water, this globe was covered with a never-ending series of ones and zeros. She hated the look of

the thing, and was thinking of picking it up, smashing it over Mr. Flynn's head, ripping herself free of his spindly spider arms and wretched web, and darting out the door.

"Ah, I see you've taken a liking to our globe, here," said Mr. Flynn as he reached over and gave it a whirl. The globe's white background and clear black numbers blurred to a dull gray. "It's not your typical globe, you know. We call it our Bit-Ball. It's a binary world, really—a world of yes-no units of information. And they're selling quite nicely. Perhaps, Taylor, you'd like to take a look at the other globes that we have out on our floor while your parents and I negotiate the terms of our agreement."

"That would be a good idea," said Dad.

While still staring at the spinning, gray Bit-Ball, Taylor rose from her chair, and without uttering a single word, made her way for the door.

Flynn swiveled around in his chair, punched out a few directives on his glass desktop and a holographic air screen appeared in the center of the office. As Mom and Dad focused their attention on the colorful display, Flynn looked up at Taylor who was just beginning to close the door. "You'll find the globes, Taylor, in the far back corner of the store. There are even some old-fashioned globes there, complete with all the usual continents and oceans." Flynn turned his chair in the direction of the floating screen. As Taylor peered back through the small crack in the door to take one last look at Flynn, he folded his skinny arms over his chest, frowned and shook his head. Then he mumbled, barely loud enough for her to hear. "They're not selling very well, though."



Taylor shut the door and bolted to the back corner of the store. Ignoring all of the black-and-white, binary Bit-Balls with their never-ending series of zeros and ones, she found an old-fashioned globe of the planet Earth.

More than anything now she wanted to get out of there. She wanted to escape this place, that freak-a-zoid Flynn, and even her own parents. She wanted to go back to that place in her dream, but this time to go in, to find out what it was like inside the mountain. "I wonder where it is," she said to herself out loud as she stood staring at the globe. She reached out, gave it a whirl, then closed her eyes, pointed her finger, and placed it on the globe. The spinning sphere skidded to a stop. She opened her left eye only, as if sneaking a peek. Then, after opening her right eye to focus better on the tiny words written on the globe, she blurted out, "Mount Shasta?!"

"Ah! Sweet synchronicity!" said a deep, resonant voice from behind her.

Startled, Taylor swirled around to see who was there, invading her private moment. Someone or *something* was there, but whatever or whoever it was, was translucent and not at all a physical body. It was tall and violet with a little bit of yellow and green mixed in, as well. Each color in the figure blended together, yet stood apart. It looked like a man's physique, she thought, yet the color of it was more like light or energy. It certainly wasn't one of those nanobot swarm projections that created images of people, or some kind of holographic image coming from some hidden camera. Taylor was familiar with those. "Wh... who... wh... what... are you?" she stammered, while taking a step backward, straining to see whatever it was.

"I am Zanadaaaarr the Avataaaaarrrr," the colorful personage boomed.

"You don't look like any avatar I've ever seen." Taylor continued backing up. She was beginning to freak-out. With all the virtual reality games she had ever played, she had never seen an avatar quite like this one. Her eyes were open wide and searching.

"I am the *master* of the mythological realm, *keeper* of secret ways, *speaker* of words of potency. I am the one who appears and points to the shining sword that will slay the dragon. I am the helpful crone, the fairy godmother, the wise wizard, the merciful magician, and the valorous sorcerer." The voice paused for a moment, and then with great affect belted out, "*I am the benign protecting power of destiny!*"

Taylor caught herself and stopped backing up. "Yeah, right. Whatever." Getting her composure back, she folded her arms over her chest and huffed. This guy wasn't about to go away. "So, where do you come from?" She glanced this way and that, noticing the customers standing nearby turning and hurrying away. She realized that they couldn't see or hear what she was talking to. Oh no, she thought, maybe I *am* nuts.

"Come from? I come... from out there," said the strange figure, as what appeared to be a mushy arm pointed skyward.

"Aw, come on!" she snarled. "I don't have time for this."

"All right. OK. I'm not one of those little bot swarm projections, if that's what you were thinking. I come from the Pleiades."

"The Pleiades?" asked Taylor.

"What *are* they teaching you in school these days? Haven't you heard of the Pleiades? The constellation? You know, the Seven Sisters? Stars? And I don't mean celebrities. Those bright shiny things in the sky that you see occasionally through all your smog and pollution."

"I know what stars are!" snapped Taylor. "And I know of the Pleiades! Look, you moron, if you think that you can make fun of me..."

"I am sorry my dear, you're right. Look..."

"Wait a minute!" Taylor wasn't going to let any goofy, purplish guy, pull one on her. "If you're some kind of extraterrestrial, then, what about SETI? You know, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence? How come they haven't found you?"

"Well, we simply don't want to be found. Remember, SETI is a human project; motivated by the idea that exposure to intelligent entities that evolved elsewhere in your *universe* will provide a vast resource for advancing scientific understanding. Your people are always looking for resources. Always seeking to use something, or someone, all in the name of perpetual progress. Having our advanced technology fall into the wrong hands would be disastrous."

By now, this Zanadar character was beginning to look more and more like a person. His physical body was taking form. He was a tall, old man with a long, gray beard. He was wearing a wizardly outfit: a long, purple robe and tall, pointed purple hat. The hat had a wide brim that formed a long tail in the back. The hat's tail draped down the big man's back. On his feet was a tall pair of enormous black boots.

"Hey!" Taylor shouted and then started pacing back and forth. "Now that I think about it, I'm not aware of a planet in the Pleiades. How can you come from there, if there's no planet to *come from*?" Still pacing, Taylor looked up at all the people who were now standing around, staring. They probably think something's wrong with me, she thought. All of them. I'm sick of everybody always thinking something's wrong with me!

"Ah, but there is a planet in the Pleiades. It's just hidden. We're a pretty secretive lot. We call our planet Zerra. But enough of all of this! Let's get back to our task at hand: The reason for my visit. I am here, my dear, to take you back to the beautiful place you visited last night in your dream."

Taylor froze. "How do you know about that?" she asked, looking visibly shaken. She took a small, hopeful step toward Zanadar. "You mean that was real? I was really there?" By now, Taylor had given up worrying about the people standing around, still staring.

"The possibility has you intrigued, hasn't it? Of course you were there! What did you...?" Zanadar paused for a moment and reached under his pointed hat to scratch his big head. "I'm telling you, they're giving me way too much to do these days. They expect me to go traveling around the multiverse, helping everyone, everywhere, and I'm supposed to remember every detail, about every mission." He pulled his hat back down tight on his head. "I just... *well*. I'm sorry. Last night, you did have a *very* special dream. You actually did visit the mountain. And now, I'm here to take you back. If you want to go, that is."

"Now? You mean right now? *Now*?" Taylor glanced back through the crowd at the door to Mr. Flynn's office. It was still closed.

"It's imperative that you leave now. Whether you're aware of it or not, you are in grave danger."

"You mean this brain uploading thing is dangerous?"

"If you stay, your life will be changed, forever. You will never be the same. In ways that your parents, your scientists and technologists do not understand, your very existence will be altered. Who you are will be ruined. What you are capable of will be destroyed." For the first time, Zanadar took a step toward Taylor. "You are about to be subjected to a procedure that will deny you the opportunity to ever dream again. Never again will you be able to access the vital and rich messages that transcend ordinary human knowledge and experience. You will be reduced to a materialistic, objective, information-processing machine."

"So what do you care?" asked Taylor. "Why should it matter to you, or anyone else for that matter?"

"Because you had the dream! Because you stumbled onto something that most people never do! Because there is no turning back! Because you are the one! Because your world and *the entire human race* depends on it!"

"Boy, you sure do go on, don't you?" Taylor shook her head in disbelief.

Zanadar folded his arms over his chest and smiled. "Well, what do you say?"

Taylor stood with her hands on her hips looking around the store. By now the crowd that had gathered round her started to disperse. If I stay, she thought, they're gonna stick a bunch of bots in my head and turn me into a lousy machine. But what's all this stuff about my being *the one*, and saving the entire human race? What's that all about? Then, an image from the dream flashed through her mind. It was of when the mountain doors had opened and the indescribable feeling of sound and light poured over her. When the vision passed, she gazed up at the tall purple guy and nodded. "Okay, I'll go."

Zanadar stared deeply into Taylor's eyes, and very seriously asked, "Are you certain?"

"I'm certain. Yes."

He leaned forward. "Are you absolutely certain this is something you wish to do? Because if you go, you won't be able to change your mind. Once you decide there will be no turning back."

She thought only of Kyle. He was her only friend. The only one she felt close to. The only other kid she knew who was also a natural, like her. Then from the corner of her eye, she noticed the door to Mr. Flynn's office crack open. She could hear the voices of her parents. They were laughing. When the door had opened wide, her father was standing there, grinning from ear to ear,

vigorously shaking Mr. Flynn's skinny hand. Mom was looking directly at Taylor, smiling that perfect, bot enhanced smile of hers.

Taylor turned back toward Zanadar, looked up at his now clear, compassionate face and said, "Absolutely certain."

Zanadar took one step toward Taylor, placed his big hands on her shoulders, and in a great flash of light, they were gone.

Chapter 3: The Mountain

"Whoa!" Taylor jumped, spread her legs wide and squatted to get a stronger base of support. The sudden change in environment threw her balance out of whack. She spread her arms, stood upright, and looked out into the dark until her eyes adjusted.

She was with Zanadar at the base of the mountain. It was nearly the same as she remembered, but the flying saucer-shaped cloud was missing and now the mountain's snow-capped peak was fully exposed. But the clean, fresh air, evergreen smells, and cold winds were still present. The moon, waning from full, hung low on the horizon to the west, challenging the stars to shine. And standing in clear view, high in the sky, was Zanadar's home, the Pleiades.

"How'd you do that?" asked Taylor.

Zanadar, who had been gazing toward home, turned and faced her. "I brought you to the mountain, but now you will be the one who decides whether you pass beyond the veil of the known into the unknown. The door won't be opening for you like it did last time. In your dream, you received

a rare gift. You had a chance to see what awaits you inside. This time, you'll have to follow your heart and the signs, if you are to get in."

"What signs?" asked Taylor, turning around a bit, looking for some kind of sign.

"I can't tell you."

Taylor walked right up to Zanadar and tilted her head back to get a good look at his face. "Oh, come on. You can tell me."

Zanadar turned and stepped away. "Now, as I was saying, if you are to get in, your intentions must be honorable, and your heart must be pure. For crossing the threshold is the first step into the Sacred Zone."

"The *Sacred Zone*?" Taylor folded her arms across her chest.

Zanadar turned back quickly to face Taylor. "Well!" he huffed. "If you don't like Sacred Zone, then call it something else. But you *do* remember the feelings you had when the doors opened, and the light poured over you, don't you?"

"Very much," said Taylor, calming down a bit.

"Well, out of the darkness within will come many hidden treasures. Out of the deep will emerge the Divine."

"The *Divine*?" Taylor raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, Divine," said a somewhat frustrated Zanadar. "Call it what you want." He sighed heavily and became quite stern. "And, another thing. This is the last thing I can tell you, so pay close attention." Taylor moved closer. "You must be very aware of the guardians that protect the threshold of the interior mountain sanctuary. Dealing with them will be risky. If you are weak, cowardly, or worse yet, evil, their ways will drive you away in fear. But, if you are strong, courageous, and most of all good, then their ways will lure you to one of the many secret portals leading into the mountain. Be

careful about how you approach this mystical Shrine of the Divine.” Zanadar smiled at Taylor. “We will see which it is for you, Taylor.”

"*Shrine of the...*," started Taylor. But then she stopped herself short, for Zanadar was giving her quite a perturbed look. “What else you can tell me about the signs?”

"There is one last thing," said Zanadar. “But it isn’t about the signs.”

“What then?” Taylor figured he was going to launch into a huge covenant making speech or something.

"I just wanted to let you know that the only power that I will be able to offer you, is the ability to take you places, to travel. You, too, have the power to travel, but you aren’t fully aware of it, yet. You will learn, though."

“Did I travel here in my dream? Was that my power? My doing?”

“You decide. Was it?”

“You’re not going to make this easy for me are you?”

“You are the last of your kind to possess the gift of nonlocality.” The smile on Zanadar’s face was a proud one.

She had learned about the concept of nonlocality in her Quantum Physics class. Nonlocality had to do with quantum events, which are not hindered by distance. Either quantum events can exceed the speed of light—which is supposed to be impossible—or they are nonlocal. Which basically means that something can happen in two locations at once. Or *someone* can be in two places at once? Is that what Zanadar was saying?

A dim light from the core of Zanadar’s body grew until it consumed him completely. “As I see it, you may be the only chance your people have left. And it’s a slim one.” Then, in a great flash, he was gone.

It was already late. Taylor knew that there would be no searching for the night, so she began looking around for a place curl up in, to sleep. But as she started to look, she became scared, unexpectedly. Turning around rapidly to look for Zanadar, thinking that he might be near, watching, she called out his name. "Zanadar? Zanadar, are you there?" Her question was left unanswered.

Taylor sat down heavily on the hard ground. She looked upward through the darkness at the mountain. A great horned owl hooted, far in the distance. Tired and still scared, Taylor found an opening under an overhanging rock and crawled into it, sealing herself inside a protective sheath of cold dirt and rock. With nothing more than her sweatshirt and jeans to warm her, she lay there for a long time in the darkness, listening to the owl. From her position under the rock, she could still see through the trees to the wilderness of stars in the sky. On the lonely mountain the stars were radiant, nothing at all like they were back home. Out here she soon realized that, underlying the occasional scurrying of a wild animal or the soft sounds of the wind swishing through the trees, was a still, tender silence. Here, unencumbered by the white noise of the city's soundscape, the internal wanderings of Taylor's mind became amplified to such a degree that she found them difficult to ignore.

She wondered where Zanadar had gone. Maybe he was visiting another far off corner of the galaxy. Or, maybe he returned home to his Pleiades? She thought about her parents. How were they handling her being gone? Did this trip create a major crisis back home? Would she ever see them again? She thought about Kyle. Would he ever know what happened to her? Would he be okay? Would she see him again? Realizing only now for the first time what she had left behind, Taylor wanted to cry. But something inside her wouldn't allow it. To begin crying now would mean that she had given in to her weaknesses and fears. And this was something that she definitely must not do. Not now.

Pushing back her tears, feelings of exhaustion overcame her, and try as she might, Taylor couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. At last, in spite of the cold, as she pondered all that Zanadar had told her while in the store in the mall, about why she was here, why she was chosen, and how everyone in the world was depending on *her* and her gift, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.



The next morning, Taylor was awakened by the buzz of a noisy hummingbird hovering directly over the opening of her little cave. At first, she thought it was her alarm clock back home. She opened her eyes half expecting to see her bedroom, but then realized that that wasn't the case at all. She was freezing and shivering so hard that she found it difficult to breathe. After a few forced inhalations, she climbed out from under the rock, stood up stiffly, and stretched. While trying to rub some heat into her cold muscles and bones, she looked around at her surroundings.

Last night she didn't have much of a chance to survey the area; but this morning, with the aid of the sun's light, Taylor could see that the mountain was full of life. All around her were a number of cute chipmunks, darting about searching for food. Higher up the mountain she could hear a woodpecker hammering on a tree. Directly overhead, a bird with a brilliant blue body and charcoal-colored, crested head was flying from tree to tree. Higher in the sky, circling above the trees looking for a meal below, a hawk displayed its regal wingspan. And, with no warning at all, an aggressive bird, sporting a fat white belly, white forehead and face, and dark gray back and tail, swooped directly over Taylor's right shoulder, coming within inches from her ear.

With the morning sun beginning to warm her body, Taylor started out with the full intent of following Zanadar's instructions. She was going to follow her heart and watch for the signs. She

didn't exactly know what that meant, but figured she'd give it a try anyway. Knowing that her wilderness survival skills were severely lacking, and that the cold nights would wear on her, she didn't wish to remain on the surface of the mountain for very long. She remembered the warm air and light that poured out from the inside during her dream, and therefore yearned to get into this so called Shrine of the Divine, all that much sooner.

By noon she had climbed much higher on the mountain. The alpine forest had thinned and Taylor was now in a lush meadow near the timberline. The meadow's soft, moist ground was laced with trickling streams that were partially hidden by the tall grass leaning over them. The rich, saturated soil provided a stable home for a variety of herbs, rushes, grasses, and flowers. Taylor enjoyed walking on the spongy grasses so much that she took off her shoes and socks and bounced around a bit. The cool grasses tickled her now hot, steaming toes. She was careful, however, not to step on any of the prettier mountain heather, alpine laurel, and arnica shrubs growing nearby. She admired the delicate purple, yellow, and red flowers they offered and wanted to make certain that she did nothing to disturb them.

The sun was high in the sky and the temperature was getting warm, so Taylor decided she would stop for a while to rest, cool down, and enjoy her surroundings. By now she was extremely thirsty, so she knelt down at the edge of a thin, gurgling stream, and cupped her hands together. When she dipped them in the icy water, a strange, energizing current passed through her arms and into her body. "Yah!" she said out loud, as a tingling sensation ran up her spine.

Abuzz with the electrifying feeling overtaking her, Taylor jumped up and looked around. Directly behind her stood a handsome young man who, at first glance, seemed to be someone on a hike. He was wearing the typical hiker's clothing: boots, shorts and wool sweater. But after looking

more intently, at his eyes in particular, Taylor realized that this was no ordinary man. He smiled and said, "If you like, I can give you an even more refreshing drink."

"What could possibly be better than this water?" asked Taylor skeptically, noticing the vitalizing feeling within her continuing to grow as the man drew nearer.

"I suggest you try this." The man held out a crystal chalice, adorned with rubies and diamonds. Curiously enough, it was filled with a rich, creamy liquid.

Taylor gazed at the young man in astonishment, but slowly reached for the chalice. Thinking, however, that this guy might be attempting to trick her into drinking some type of terrible drug, Taylor was hesitant at first. But then she remembered Zanadar's directions to follow her heart. And, if only just for the moment, her heart, unlike her skeptical thinking, was telling her to proceed. Bringing the crystal chalice to her lips, Taylor sipped slowly. The taste was delicious. "Mmm, this is pretty good," she said, after lowering her drink. As she drank again, this time with full abandon, the mysterious liquid made Taylor gasp, and giggle, with delightful surprise.

"That which you drank," the young man explained, "comes directly from the Cosmic Source. It is as pure and bright as life itself. In fact, it is life—omnipresent, omnipotent life—for it exists everywhere about us."

"Where did you get it? Where is this Cosmic Source thingy that exists everywhere around us?" Taylor was grinning, hoping to elicit some kind of response.

But the strange man ignored her comment. "I have but to hold out my hand, and, if I imagine diamonds—a diamond is there." In his palm was an enormous diamond about the size of a racket ball.

Taylor's insolent smile disappeared. "Wow! How'd you do that?"

"Whatever I desire manifests itself, when I imagine in the spirit of love. I held out the crystal chalice, and that which I desired for you appeared." The strange man stepped closer to Taylor.

"I see within you a certain inner understanding of this great law, but you are not outwardly aware of it." He stared intently into Taylor's eyes and, again, stepped toward her. "If *you* had desired to see something like this so intensely, so determinedly, it could not be withheld from you. You, too, can produce that which you desire. And it will come directly from the omnipresent Cosmic Source."

"You mean I can do that, too?" asked Taylor, while beginning to back away from the peculiar man. She was not at all accustomed to people talking in such a way. First came the bizarre Zanadar, and now this weird guy.

"Of course," continued the man, "producing something such as the drink, or this diamond, is one of the least important activities of the Cosmic Source. If desire is not free from selfishness and fascination with simple material phenomena, such an experience will not be allowed. But you've already proven your abilities to do just this. In coming to this mountain, you followed the purest of loving urges of your inner self. This alone is what led you to where you are now."

Taylor looked at him in surprise and disbelief. "I'm here because this is what I lovingly desired? I was able to do this? I thought Zanadar brought me here."

"Of course you were assisted in coming here!" For the first time the stranger showed some sign of frustration. "But, you are the one who made this happen. Your love of this sacred place, matched with the intense desire to be here, is what brought you here. However, if you were foolish enough to desire something that would have injured another, or any other part of creation, then eventually you would have paid the penalty somewhere else in the totality of your life experience."

The strange man turned away from Taylor, looked up into the sky, and raised his hands. "It is very important to realize fully that the cosmos is abundant with every good and perfect thing." He then lowered his arms and turned back again to Taylor. "And you—each of us—are endowed with

this ability to create and maintain perfect cooperation with Earth and all within the universe. The only reason why most do not is because they are unaware of their union with the Source.”

Taylor sat down on a large rock adjacent to the stream. "Tell me something, do you do this sort of thing often? Do you go around, walking up and down the mountain, talking about this stuff all the time?"

"I've been known to, from time to time. There have been others.”

"Yeah? Like who?"

"That is not important right now," he answered.

"Because, you know, no one ever talks about this kind of stuff—the cosmos, divine stuff, and love, and all that—back home," said Taylor. "Everybody is busy working, making money, paying bills, talking about what they see on TV. You know, normal stuff."

"Yes, I know.”

"So, who are you? Why are you here talking to me?"

"If you remain still for a moment, I will reveal to you my true identity."

"You mean you're not really who I'm looking at?" said Taylor. Remembering the news reports of the child molesters and perverts found around schoolyards back home exposing their privates, Taylor wondered if this guy was going to do the same.

Such was not the case, however. In perhaps a full minute, Taylor watched as the man's face, body, and clothing gradually and completely changed. When the transformation was complete, he stood before her with a full beard, wearing a flowing, white-jeweled robe. He looked like a magnificent god-like figure with an abundant, bright light surrounding his entire body.

"My name is Saint Germain," he explained with a slightly deeper and more melodious voice.

"I am an Ascended Master, a messenger here to assist humankind. This is the embodiment I take when

working with the interests of humans. Of course, if the work I am doing requires closer contact with the outer world of affairs, I make my body and my clothes look like the people with whom I am involved. That is why I looked like the simple hiker whom you met just a while ago."

Taylor watched and listened to Saint Germain as if in a trance. She was mesmerized, totally relaxed, and peaceful.

"But now I must leave you," continued the illumined being, "for I have much work to do. I am being called elsewhere. However, our time together is not yet complete. Early tomorrow morning I would like for you to return to this area, our secret meeting place, here on the mountain."

"Why? What are we going to do? Can't we continue today?" asked Taylor, now eager to prolong the conversation.

"My you are a spirited one! That is good, but now you must draw upon your patience. Gather your strength. Take time for the drink to take effect. And think about what you have heard here today. Question what I have said. Do not accept anything without thinking about it for yourself. For there will come a time when you will need to rely upon the strength that will develop from decisions you make based upon your own convictions."

In less than a blink of the eye, Saint Germain was gone. Taylor was once again alone on the mysterious mountain. And now she had an entire day to think about what had just happened. At first she wondered what she was going to do about the food she would need to nourish her body. But then, she realized that she really wasn't hungry or thirsty. Something about the milky liquid was beginning to satisfy her completely.

Looking about, Taylor turned and started walking with no particular destination in mind. Realizing that she had been asked by Saint Germain to be at their secret meeting place the following morning she decided to meander in the meadow for the remainder of the day. This would give her an

opportunity to relax and think. And how often did she get the chance to listen to gently trickling streams back home?

After an entire day of relaxing and resting and, then, after a cold, sleepless night, the following morning Taylor arose and began walking to the meeting site. She was determined not to miss any opportunity to ask questions, if allowed. As she came within eyesight of the spot, her body started to feel lighter. It felt as if her feet were barely touching the ground. What is it about this guy and the liquid I drank? she wondered.

With no one in sight, Taylor sat down next to a small stream to wait. Sitting there, considering the recent strange course of events, she heard a rustling sound behind her. She turned quickly, expecting to see Saint Germain but, instead, was completely surprised by an approaching panther.

The hair on the back of Taylor's neck stood on end. She wanted to get up and run, to scream, but it would have been useless to move, for with one jump the panther would have been upon her. Taylor's mind reeled in fear, but suddenly, clearly, another dominating feeling swept over her. At that very moment, she remembered what Zanadar had told her about following her heart, and also about what Saint Germain had told her about following pure, loving urges.

She gazed upon the beautiful panther, looked deeply into its dark eyes, and became overwhelmed with the desire to curl up with the cat on a soft patch of grass in the calm, quiet meadow.

The panther stopped. Taylor stood up and began moving toward it. The panther's eyes softened, and he started walking again. When they met, the panther rubbed its face against her leg. Taylor reached down and stroked its soft head. The panther looked up into her eyes for a moment, and then lay down and rolled over like a playful kitten. Admiring the panther's dark reddish-brown fur and

its long, supple body, Taylor squatted and began scratching its belly. Sensing that someone else was near, she looked up and noticed Saint Germain.

"Taylor," said Saint Germain as he began walking closer, "I saw a mighty power within you or I would not have permitted so great a test. Because of this strength, you have conquered your fear, and skepticism, and replaced it with love. Had you not conquered your fears..."

"He would've...?" Taylor looked down at the panther that was now belly-up, wriggling on the ground scratching its back. "He's wild?" She stood up as if to put some distance between her face and the big cat's teeth and claws. She looked to Saint Germain for some sense of reassurance.

Saint Germain purred and the panther picked himself up and pranced over to him. When they met, Saint Germain squatted and grabbed the cat by the jowl and brought their foreheads together. "Yes," he said calmly while looking up at Taylor, "you were given the opportunity to sit here to contemplate and to let the liquid take its full effect. And now that you have passed this test of patience, trust and courage, each day you will become stronger. This you must know and remember. Because now our time together—however brief—has come to an end."

"What do you mean, it's come to an end?" Taylor asked, showing her disappointment. "I thought we... I wanted to..."

Saint Germain stood up and walked closer to Taylor. The giant cat turned and followed alongside. "I am not to be your teacher, Taylor." Saint Germain spread his arms and opened up his hands exposing his palms to the sky. "We were given this opportunity to visit for a very brief time. And I do know that you have many questions. But there will be others to provide the answers." Saint Germain reached Taylor and took her by the hands. The cuddly panther squeezed its way between their legs. "As you know, you must venture forth and find your way into the underworld of this great

mountain. For many challenges await you there. But, as you make your way, leave knowing that you have done well on this, your first test of courage and love."

Saint Germain let go of Taylor's hands, turned, and began walking away with the panther beside him. Taylor watched, as their bodies seemed to gradually fade and blend into the expanding landscape. Taylor rubbed her eyes in disbelief, figuring that it had to be the milky liquid deceiving her.



With Saint Germain and the panther gone, Taylor began circumnavigating the mountain. She moved in a counterclockwise direction, sometimes above, other times below the timberline. While hiking her way to the east side of the mountain, she sent whole packs of black-tailed jackrabbits, snowshoe hares, and golden mantle squirrels, scurrying into the bush. She even saw a lone coyote, one swift-moving fox, and a family of mule deer.

After hiking for hours, Taylor looked up in the pale blue sky and saw the sun directly above her. It was high noon. She knew this only because recently she had become much more aware of the sun. The sun, the moon, the stars, the clouds, the wind, the birds, the animals, the bees were the things that Taylor watched now. In a very short time, she had become much more sensitive to the subtleties of her environment. Back home, she spent most of her time indoors, sitting, gazing into a computer monitor.

She became especially fond of smelling the cool, sweet mountain air. And she enjoyed listening, too. The songs and calls of sparrows, warblers, mountain chickadees, finches and nutcrackers surrounded her everywhere she went. At times, it would be so quiet that she'd even hear the wings of a bird slicing through the calm air. She'd look up expecting it to be directly overhead and

realize that it was a bald eagle flying nearly a hundred yards away. Insects, too, could be heard buzzing through the air, even at a great distance. Except when the wind was blowing. Then the sounds of the wind were overwhelming, and she could hear little else. In fact, she didn't try to hear anything else. She loved the sounds of the wind as it curled and whipped around the hearty mountain.

Nighttime came again, and with it came more listening. In addition to the hooting of the great horned owl—which Taylor had grown accustomed to—she heard other *strange* sounds. She was lying on a patch of dirt next to a huge rock, in the dark, when suddenly she heard the sounding of bells. She wanted to get up, but because she was scared of the strangeness of it all, decided against it. Instead, she remained next to the hard rock, listening all night long.

She wanted to sleep, to recover from her day of searching for the doors, but the bells wouldn't allow it. Now, Taylor had heard bells coming from the local church tower at home before, but she couldn't figure out why these bells stirred her. They actually moved her. She tried to stay curled up on the ground, but her body, on its own really, rose up off the ground. Her apprehension kept her close to her campsite, however, but she was unable to keep herself from pacing back and forth, all night, listening.

With the morning came yet another full day of searching and hiking. And as the uneventful day came to an end, an extremely tired and hungry Taylor tried to find a place to bed down for another cold night. The last time she had any nourishment at all was when she drank from Saint Germain's chalice. She had plenty of water along the way, but now the energizing effects of the mysterious drink were beginning to wear off. She found a nice soft place under a tree and fell asleep with the growing dark. Moments later, she was stirred by the sounds of the bells. This time, so strong was the allure of the bells that Taylor jumped up and took off toward the sounds.

Following the tolling all through the night, it felt as though someone were playing with her, teasing her, making her go this way and that, around and up and over and down the mountain. It was as though she were walking the winding path of a giant, mountain-sized maze. She would hear the bells chiming ever so faintly in one direction, follow that sound, and when she arrived at the spot which she guessed was the source, the bells would toll in another location, far away. It went on like that, all through the night. In spite of how exhausted she was, Taylor came to appreciate walking in the night. It was as though the pursuit of the fascinating sounds was transforming her in some way.

After a full night of chasing the sounds of the bells, she found herself on the east side of the mountain at midday, with her back up against a rock. The sun was warming her tired body. She had been walking up and down the moderate slopes, through the shallow creeks, around the springs, over and under fallen trees, and sometimes pushing through the thick growths of manzanita bushes and antelope brush. She was now much too tired to go on walking. And she was afraid that if she went to sleep, it would be such a deep sleep that the bells would start sounding, and she wouldn't hear the tolling. Taylor tried to stay awake. She sat that way, all afternoon, occasionally dosing off, but catching herself always just before falling deeply into sleep. Finally, the sun went to rest, and the air grew cold. Luckily, the strong rays of the sun had warmed the rock she had been leaning against during the day. But even with the heat emanating from the rock providing some degree of comfort, because she had no food for days, her body temperature began to lower rapidly. She fell asleep, but her slumber was ended, however, as soon as the twilight had been snuffed out by the darkness of night. It was then that the sounding of bells commenced. Unable to resist the pull of the bells, Taylor pushed herself up off the ground and followed the fascinating sounds.

The bells were a long way off. But Taylor kept placing one foot in front of the other, plodding along toward the sound. When she reached the origin of the sounding bells, as before, they stopped.

She stood still, frustrated, but expectant. Based on experience, she knew the bells would start again in another location.

By now, her entire body was becoming limp and lifeless. With shoulders slumped, head hanging low, and eyes nearly closed and barely able to focus, Taylor heard the bells again, this time in a location at a lower altitude. Relieved that the downhill walk would be an easier pursuit, Taylor called on a reserve of energy that she didn't know she had, and trudged step by step, toward the sounds.

The bell tolling lasted through the night. Miraculously, Taylor continued her pursuit. Then she faltered. She had reached the source of one bell's tolling, and in her advanced state of exhaustion, stumbled and fell to the ground. Her legs simply failed her. They were like rubber now, almost incapable of sustaining her weight. She sat there on the ground, barely able to keep her head up, nearly unconscious. Then, away in the distance, another bell was sounded. Taylor must have heard it because, with her eyes closed, she lifted her head and turned it ever so slightly, lending an ear. But she didn't get up. Didn't even try. She just sat there, head hanging, body limp, swaying like an injured animal unable to flee an approaching foe. But then, as if some voice deep within her spoke, urging her on, she pulled herself up and practically fell forward, barely keeping her legs and feet under her.

She staggered for a short distance and then fell again. She remained on the ground, lying on her belly for a long time. She pushed herself up and stood. But then, once more, she fell. She tried to get up but was unsuccessful. So she stayed there on her hands and knees. After a while, she started to crawl. Her pants were torn at the knees from one or both of her falls, exposing her skin to the sharp rocks, but she ignored the pain and kept on moving. She crawled for a while with now bloody knees, and then her body gave way, and she fell hard on the cold ground.

Taylor lay there with her face in the dirt. When almost all hope was lost, she lifted her head, opened her eyes, moved her arms into place, and pushed her body up to her knees. She then started to crawl once again.

From a distance off to the north, on the slope of the mountain, through the trees and bushes, Taylor saw a strange light. It was coming from the same place as the sounds. Never had she seen a light like that before on the mountain. She took a closer look and realized that it was an opening.

All of the hope that had left her body came rushing back. And with this hope, her strength returned. She picked herself up and started walking, and then running, through the chaparral shrubs that tore at the skin on her arms. She tripped on the roots of a tree and fell. But she picked herself up and carried herself toward the light. While running, she realized that the single rock door of the great entrance was beginning to close. Taylor's eyes widened in shock. She didn't know if she could make it before the portal slammed shut. In a panic, her body took on a life of its own and started sprinting toward the opening. Just as the rock door was about to close, she dove through the narrowing gap, falling to the ground. Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked over her shoulder and watched the huge rock door slide into place with a loud boom. A thin wisp of dust spurted out from the seam.

Gathering her wits, Taylor looked around and noticed that she was now in a long, cavernous tunnel. She stared back at where the door had been. Picking herself up, she walked over to the wall and ran her hands on the rocky surface. There was no sign of a seam, or opening, or handle, or hinge of any sort. She was completely sealed in. She turned in the opposite direction and looked down the length of a long, dimly lit passageway. This obviously wasn't the entrance that she remembered from her dream. If it were, she would have been given a view of the kingdom within.

With nowhere else to go, Taylor started off on her descent into the depths of the mountain. It was quiet inside the tunnel. She could hear her steps on the rocky flooring echoing against the walls.

Taking a closer look at the walls of the cavern, Taylor noticed that they were covered with multicolored fluted columns. She thought that they looked like drapes—magnificent stone draperies. As the tunnel widened, she looked upward and viewed the icicle-shaped stalactite formations studded with brilliant crystals hanging from the ceiling. Growing up from the floor of the cavern directly below each of the stalactites were nearly identical stalagmite formations. In various locations on both the walls and ceiling she saw flowstone deposits that formed miniature, milky-white waterfalls. When she listened closely enough, she could hear the pitter-patter of the tiny cascades dripping steadily on the stony ground.

As she made her way through the cavern, satisfied with herself for making it into the mountain, she noticed that her spirit was rising. It was as if the surge of feelings that she had experienced in her dream when gazing upon the golden city within was now gradually building up within her again. Yet she proceeded cautiously through the long tunnel.

Taylor had been walking for a good while when she rounded a sharp turn. Directly in front of her was a large, gaping opening. For the first time since the dream, here it was: the subterranean city, comfortably concealed under an enormous golden dome. The glowing tower, which reached from the base of the great room to within a few feet of the ceiling of the dome, was emitting a constant and steady beam of golden light. The gold shaft splashed against the ceiling, and like a cascading waterfall of light, poured down the vaulted walls of the vast vessel.

She sauntered into the aquarium-like habitat, gazing upward in awe, spinning round, taking it all in. When she looked closely at the arched ceiling, she realized that she was really in a large atrium of some sort. The sloped, golden roof was striated by a multitude of levels. She could see people walking on balconies, protected from falling by a chest-high railing. Within the walls beyond the crowds of people walking on the balconies were various-sized doors. There were also larger openings

without doors, exposing different-sized chambers or tunnels that emanated from the atrium outward into the mountain.

And it was full of life. The bottom floor was a thick jungle. Huge, leafy plants and tall, woody trees blanketed the floor. Colorful birds were flying everywhere. Small gurgling streams flowed lazily into crystal clear pools of water.

So mesmerized was Taylor by the beautiful sight of the mysterious city, that she didn't even notice that someone had walked up behind her.

"Hello," said a tall, elegant woman with fine, delicate features.

Taylor stumbled backward and fell first on her buttocks and then onto her back. Raising her head off the hard ground, she looked upward, directly at the longhaired woman. Then, her sight blurred, and she immediately passed out.

Chapter 4: The Living Pod of Love

Taylor woke up in total darkness. She was lying on a straw-filled pallet. Pushing herself into a sitting position, she felt around and discovered that the oval-shaped pad was resting on a rocky floor. The air around her was damp, yet warm. And—wherever she was—it was completely silent. No noise of any kind penetrated the darkness. She stood up slowly, making sure that she didn't hit her head, and stepped off the thin mattress. Reaching out with her hands, she felt her way through the darkness. Within a few, short, hesitant steps, she encountered a wall. Feeling her way along the wall, Taylor learned that she was in a small, oval room. Eventually, she found her way back to her bed, lay down, and quickly fell back to sleep.

Taylor remained alone in the room, falling in and out of wakefulness, for a long time. But she had no idea how long, because she was denied any real sense of time. With the darkness, there was no morning, day, or night, no days, weeks, or months to count. She was lost in a chamber, deep in the belly of the mountain with no way out.

Once, she woke up after a long, deep sleep and smelled food in the room. Taylor pushed herself up and began crawling through the darkness toward the scent. She discovered that a wooden bowl full of food had indeed been left for her. No eating utensils were provided, so she dug in with her hands, eagerly pushing the unidentifiable, mushy stew into her mouth. It tasted bland, yet was deeply satisfying. When done, she set the bowl down on the floor and nearly knocked over a large wooden cup. She moved her hands along the ground, found the cup, and picked it up. Hearing liquid swishing around inside, she brought the cup to her mouth and without hesitation drank the entire contents. It tasted much like the milky-white liquid that Saint Germain had given her while on the outside of the mountain.

During her stay within this strange dark room, Taylor became self-absorbed and depressed. In spite of this unexpected isolation, she really had no desire to get out of the room. She wasn't eager to see anyone at all. She gladly accepted the food and drink that were offered her, but she wasn't a bit curious as to who was providing the meals. Even with her need for seclusion, however, Taylor also felt deeply abandoned. Regardless of the fact that *she* had deserted her parents and friends, she was angry with her parents for what they were planning to have done to her. She was disgusted with them, actually; but most of all, she felt abandoned. Abandoned because her mother and father were going to take her self away. Most of the time, she sat there curled up in a ball on her oval pallet crying.

On one occasion, without knowing why, she got up off her bed and crawled to the border of her room. Surprisingly, she found a small recess that had been carved into the wall. While sitting

there, in the little alcove with her back up against the wall, rocking gently, with arms hugging her knees, she wiggled the toes of her bare feet and discovered that the floor was made of dirt. This was the first time that she had ever felt dirt in her dark, silent chamber.

The dirt quickly became her friend. She could run her hands, fingers, feet, and toes over and into the cool, damp, musky loam. Soon, she found herself digging. She'd dig a hole and then fill it back up, pound the soil down hard again with her hands and bare feet, and then dig another, larger hole. Sometimes she'd sit down in the hole, and then pull the earth around her, covering herself partially, as if planting herself in the ground. It was as though the digging and wallowing were helping Taylor to find a way back to her self. And they were. This was the beginning of a dawning that allowed Taylor to submerge more deeply, more fully into self. Within this small room, this chamber, this pod of love, she was able to remove herself from the realm of the exterior world, to begin orienting herself to her body, her emotions, her intuition.



After what had to be days of digging, a gentle voice called out. “Looks like you’ve been reacquainting yourself with the earth.”

Taylor was sitting on one leg, the other folded with the knee providing a shelf for her chin to rest on. Her scraggly hair was hanging in her face, and she was completely covered with dirt. It was everywhere: in her hair, under her nails on her hands and toes, deep in the pores of her skin. She was calm now, her breathing regular and deep. While swirling the dirt around with her hands, she raised her head and revealed a filthy face. She opened her eyes and discovered that the room was now dimly lit. A recent stream of tears had washed away a trail of dirt from her cheeks. Her eyes were red, her

nose plugged with slimy, muddy snots. She sniffled, swallowed, and wiped her nose with a dirty forearm.

Straining her eyes, she could see the silhouette of a female form standing on the other side of the room. After a prolonged gaze at the woman intruding on her space, Taylor responded, "Are you the one I saw when I first came into the mountain?"

"I am," said the soft voice. The woman walked forward with a slow, graceful step. Tall, slim, and attractive, she wore a white robe lined with purple. Her hair was long, wavy, and brown. "My name is Monka and I am here to help you." She knelt down next to Taylor and asked, "What's your name?"

"Taylor," she said.

Monka extended a hand and said, "Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

Taylor lifted her soiled hand and Monka held it and caressed it at first. Immediately, Taylor became aware of a very subtle, tingling sensation entering her hand and crawling up her arm. Monka then helped Taylor to stand. She put her arm around Taylor's shoulders, making sure she was steady, and then led her through an oval-shaped door. Curiously enough, Taylor felt the same strange tingling on her shoulders, as well.

Together, they entered a bathing room. A large bath had already been drawn and the water was emitting a steady flow of steam. An assortment of colored candles lit the room, green and silver foliage plants were scattered throughout. On a shelf along the back wall were a combination of seashells, crystal bowls, silver trays, exotic bottles, and a pile of pampering tools such as sponges, pumice stones and brushes. On another shelf in the far corner were a number of brown and cobalt blue jars, vials, and vases.

"Why don't you take off your old clothes and let the hot water from a shower rinse off all the dirt you're wearing," suggested Monka. "The shower is around the corner, so you'll have plenty of privacy. On a ledge inside you'll find some soaps, oils and conditioners. Just wrap yourself in one of the towels hanging there when you're done."

Taylor walked around the corner and found a small waterfall streaming out of a barely discernible crack, high on the rock wall. Below, the water seemed to disappear through another series of small cracks in the floor. After taking off her torn, filthy clothes, she stepped into the hot water and then peered around the corner to watch Monka. Taylor noticed that she was exceedingly calm and tender. Every one of her movements seemed deliberate and measured. She watched her walk over to the shelf in the corner, reach for an empty vial, and pour several oils into the vial. Then she closed the vial's cap and swished it around to blend the oils. Monka poured the blend into the bath, then squatted and dipped her graceful hand into the water and stirred. Finally, she stood up, reached for a large shell on the shelf and with her nimble fingers began sprinkling yellow rose petals from inside the shell, onto the surface of the water.

When Taylor emerged from the shower smelling fresh and clean, Monka was there at the bath to greet her. She offered Taylor a glass of spring water. After Taylor drank it, Monka took the glass from her, placed it on the shelf, helped Taylor out of her towel, and gently guided her into the bath. Once Taylor was resting comfortably, Monka reached into a small cabinet for a soft neck pillow, placed it under Taylor's head and then left the room.

Taylor watched the rose petals bobbing on the water and smiled. She had never had a bath with rose petals before. She took in deep breath of the healing, flowery fragrance emanating from the bath and sighed. Taylor was happy with herself for making it into the mountain. She had reached the Shrine of the Divine as Zanadar had called it, and now here she was enjoying the fruits of her labor.

But she also couldn't help but wonder who these strange people were. And where did they come from? And now that she was inside, what did they have in store for her? And what did all of this have to do with her saving the entire human race? And why did *she* have to be the last chance her people had left? And what did everyone have to worry about, anyway? Zanadar sure had said some pretty peculiar things.

Monka returned some time later with another glass of spring water. Taylor was sitting at the edge of the bath, feet still in the water. She was wrapped in a soft, white robe that she found hanging on the wall. While Taylor sipped at the water, Monka gently combed her hair. After taking the glass from Taylor, Monka assisted her to a standing position, and then led her to another door.

Exiting the bathing room, Taylor was escorted into a kitchen. Because her eyes were still adjusting to the new influx of light, all Taylor could focus on at this point was a chair set next to a large wooden table. Monka urged Taylor to sit in the chair. A new source of light warmed the freshly cleaned and nurtured skin on Taylor's face, but practically burned her eyes when she kept them open for too long. While Taylor sat at the table shielding her eyes from the light, Monka provided a nourishing meal and herbal tea. Taylor sat silently for a long time, eating her food, sipping her tea, looking only at her plate.

Eventually, once the food began making its way into her muscles, and after her eyes became comfortable with the light, Taylor looked up. She was amazed at what she could actually see. It was the blue sky. And the Sun was shining, right in front of her. "How come I can see out of the mountain? Can people see in?"

"No, they can't see in. It's just something we are able to do," answered Monka. "We gently move things around a bit. And this enables us to see through the mountain."

"Move things around?" asked Taylor incredulously.

“Yes, we just move the really small things around a bit.”

“Small things?”

“Yes. You call them atoms, or *something* like that. To us, they’re beings. But it makes it easier for you if I call them things, because that’s probably how you think of them—right now, at least.”

Stopping to consider Monka’s explanation, Taylor decided that, for *now*, it would be best to be polite and shelve the issue. She’d ask about it later. There was no way she was going to let all this get by her. So she sat there, ate the good food, and enjoyed the beautiful view. And what a view it was! From where she sat at Monka’s table, Taylor could see the Sacramento River Canyon winding its way southward into the Central Valley for a distance of at least a hundred miles.

While finishing her meal, Taylor noticed that the air inside the kitchen was warm and comforting. Unlike her old home, where the walls were strictly vertical and set at right angles to a flat, horizontal ceiling, here the walls and ceiling were arched, shaped like a miniature rainbow. And just like in the huge dome, but only dimmer, the same golden light, poured down the walls.

The entire home looked as if it had been carved out of the mountain. It was as though the counter and the cabinets, the sink, the table and chairs, each piece of furniture, each object, had somehow grown out of the substance, shape, and structure that the mountain provided. The kitchen was alive and breathing; even the table and chair where Taylor was sitting bent and moved, as if shaped by her body and presence.

While Taylor watched Monka, she began comparing her to her own mother, back home. Monka was different from Mom. Unlike Mom, Monka had very gentle ways. She didn't appear at all rushed like her mother did. Mom didn't know how to relax, how to nurture herself, or anyone else for that matter. She never learned how to enjoy life, it seemed. Taylor remembered telling her often that

she was a workaholic, but Mom would always respond by saying that she couldn't help it, that that was just how she was.

Shaking thoughts of her mother from her mind, Taylor gazed out the window again. "So where exactly am I?" she asked.

"You're inside the mountain, of course, in our city which we call Telos. But for now, you're inside of my home. You've been in my home since I first discovered you."

"Who are you people? And where did you come from? And how did you get here?" Taylor's mind was already beginning to race with thoughts.

"We are Lemurians. We come from the long ago lost continent of Lemuria."

"That's funny; I don't remember learning anything about Lemuria," said Taylor with her usual flair of skepticism.

"Yes, that's true," began Monka. "In your world it's believed that civilization began in the Fertile Crescent, namely Sumeria. Your scientists explain that this civilization existed not more than seven thousand years ago. Before that, men were thought to have been ignorant cave dwellers, surviving on mere instincts, without a real culture or higher philosophy to guide them. But there are legends from almost every culture in the world proclaiming that, in their past, grand civilizations existed. These traditions explain that these civilizations were either ruined through domestic or internal conflict, or as a result of some cataclysmic event. These myths and stories are in your Bible, Mayan texts, the Ramayana, Tibetan manuscripts, Chinese mythology, African tribal legends, Hopi Indian legends, Welsh and Scandinavian lore, Egyptian history, and Greek writings, to name just a few. Such is the case with our civilization. We, too, experienced a great deluge—a great flooding of the planet."

"Where did you live then?" asked Taylor.

"Our civilization began on Lemuria," said Monka, "a continent situated nearly in the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

"But if your civilization experienced a big flood, then what are you doing here, living inside of this mountain?" asked Taylor.

"Fortunately," Monka explained, "we were able to make our way across the expanding waters here to Mount Shasta; and because of our way of existence in the world we were able to make our home within this mountain. We had to, you see. That has been our responsibility: to see to the continued existence of our people. We are the last remaining survivors of Lemuria."

"You mean you've survived here inside of this mountain all this time until the present?" Taylor asked.

"We Lemurians have, yes," answered Monka. While Taylor stared out the window at the pink, purple and blue sky, considering this new information, Monka took a seat at the table. Changing the topic abruptly, Monka asked, "So, do you think you'd be interested in doing some gardening?"

Staring at the table, without lifting her eyes, Taylor nodded.

"Good," said Monka. "Because I actually need to do some rearranging." Monka stood up and walked over to the window. Below the slanted window was a garden, an interior greenhouse. And growing in the garden was a variety of herbs. The herbs were all planted on a linear path, closest to the edge of a planter. "You see these herbs? They've been planted here on this straight path that runs the whole length of my home. When I'm cooking in the kitchen, I have to walk a long way—further than I want—just to pick one. What I'd rather do is to have all of the herbs right here close to me in the cooking area of our kitchen. So I thought we could replant these herbs in a new spiral-shaped planter."

"But if you do it that way," Taylor said, "won't you find it difficult to reach the center of the spiral to pick the herbs?"

"Oh, you're a thinker, aren't you," replied Monka. "Well, I thought of that, too. That's why I thought of creating an ascending herb spiral. Basically, we'll just reconstruct the entire greenhouse planter so that here, where I do my cooking, we'll create a mound of earth, approximately one meter high, with a two-meter-wide base. We'll be able to walk around it, and all the basic culinary herbs will be within easy reach."

Taylor picked herself up from the table and walked closer to the existing planter and slanted window. The window ran the length of the entire home. "Why are your windows slanted backward, leaning into your home in that way?"

"Well, we've purposely located our homes on the south side of the mountain," explained Monka. "The sun shines best on this side, especially in the winter. The windows are slanted at the perfect angle to receive the full benefit of the winter sun. We want the sun's rays to hit the windows at a ninety-degree angle. This way, the sun penetrates the home and the garden optimally."

"Hmm. That's interesting," said Taylor. "I've never seen any houses back home that have slanted windows."

Monka grinned, appreciating Taylor's perceptiveness. Then she turned back toward the garden and continued speaking. "The planter should also provide for adequate drainage, with the sunny, dry sites reserved for the oil-rich herbs such as thyme, sage, and rosemary. We'll plant those herbs on the side facing the window. The moist or shaded sites, facing away from the window, will be reserved for green foliage such as mint, parsley, chives, and coriander. And on the inside of the spiral we'll plant marigold, chamomile, violets, tarragon, and oregano. And finally, at the base we'll create a small watercress pond."

Taylor noticed Monka's delight as she visualized and explained her new spiral herb planter. In turn, she, too, became excited. This was a project she was going to enjoy.

"So, this will be your first task here in our mountain," said Monka, while sitting down again at the table. "With this project you'll start to learn how to communicate with nature."

With a puzzled look on her face, Taylor returned to her chair at the table. "You want me to communicate to nature? *Talk* to it? *Me*?"

"Yes, you. Of course, you'll be a little clumsy at first. Hard of hearing you might say. But don't worry, the plant and earth you'll be working with will be quite patient and forgiving. They've given me permission. They know what you'll be like. I've informed them thoroughly."

Taylor cocked her head and looked at Monka all funny like.

"I can see you're a little skeptical," said Monka.

"It's just that no one ever told me I'd be learning to talk with... nature, plants, and all that... *dirt*."

"Yes, I see. So I can imagine it must sound a little strange," said Monka. "But in our world, we have come to know that matter is aware and sensitive. It has a capacity for feeling. It has subjectivity and consciousness. It is intrinsically sentient."

"You're saying that *dirt* can feel? It can literally talk to you?" asked Taylor, in an almost aggressive tone.

"In a way, yes," said Monka calmly. "Matter *is* capable of feeling or moving forward toward ever-increasing complexity and higher levels of order and organization. It's adventurous, too. It is inherently and thoroughly meaningful, purposeful, and valuable, in and of itself."

"*Matter has purpose?!*" shouted Taylor.

"Yes," said Monka, calmly. "And I realize that this is very much unlike your world, where it is believed that matter is dead."

"Yes, we learn that in our science classes," said Taylor.

"Well, here we know differently," explained Monka finally. "Here in Telos, nature, matter, plants, all of that, is sacred. In our mountain, we know that divinity is immanent, within matter, of matter. And since matter, and all beings, bear consciousness, and we do too, we have learned to communicate with it. In your world, perhaps before your time, you'd hear people talk about communing with nature. Well, here, we really do it. And we do it by... *talking* to it, you could say. Some of us sing, others, like myself, communicate through our powers of touch; we all have different ways. Since we, and matter, have consciousness, we learn to feel at one with nature and with the powers acting within it. Nature divulges its secrets to us. And only with its cooperation do we transform it, shape it, work with it, further its purpose, assist it in its self-organization. Yes, plants, animals, stones, the wind, clouds, they are alive and speak to us."

Taylor walked over to the planter and picked up a small rock. "So you mean to tell me that this rock has consciousness?"

"Well, no, not the rock, really," said Monka as she got up from the table, walked over to Taylor, and playfully snatched it from her hand. "The rock itself doesn't have consciousness." Monka backed away from Taylor and stood next to the planter while gently cupping the rock in her soft hands. "But its parts do. The rock is really an aggregate, or dense cluster, of smaller parts." She began caressing the rock. "You call them atoms or quanta, I think." Her yielding palms and long, nimble fingers continued moving smoothly around the rock. "But this clustering doesn't cohere together as an individual consciousness. It's a mass of distinct and varied things." Monka raised the rock to her

bosom. "Those smaller things, those *beings*, no matter how small, no matter how slight, possess the light of consciousness, however dim."

Taylor watched Monka's hands lower to the planter and then open to reveal a rock that had dissolved into dust. The small pile of earth then poured out of her hand into the soil of the planter. And the soil itself appeared to rise, as if welcoming the new beings as they descended into the planter.

"Whoa!" said Taylor, as she stared into the soil.

Monka walked along the planter occasionally reaching out to touch a plant. "Rocks are not solid little bits of matter, but whirling dances and fluxes of energy exchanges. What you perceive as solidity is, in fact, merely the stability of energetic patterns that endure for some time. When the patterns of energy break down, as when I coaxed the rock's molecular bonds apart, the structures that we perceive lose their former stability and solidity."

Taylor now stared at Monka. She was dumbfounded.

"You see, Taylor," said Monka as she walked back to Taylor, "unlike your people, we Lemurians view reality a little differently. We don't think of rocks as mere material substances. They're not things. They're events or processes. And, all events—which you and I also are—are mutually co-creating. That means we're all connected. So it's untrue to speak of anything as an isolated, self-contained entity. That's why I was able to do that with the rock. That was a simple example of one event effecting another."



Hence, began the process of Taylor's communion with nature. While barefoot and wearing the new sage colored, Lemurian robe that Monka had provided for her, Taylor gardened, with full abandon.

She loved every minute of it. Even though this was something that she had never done before, now, in the beginning of her stay within the mountain, it became the only thing she wanted to do, could do. Here, in this quiet pod of solitude, under Monka's amiable tutelage, she was learning to love the earth, especially the soil. She loved to dig her hands into the damp loam, pull a handful of the cool dirt up to her nose, and breathe in the musky aroma.

Sometimes, during those rare moments when she became lost within her work, it even felt as though the dirt *was* talking to her. It seemed to cherish her passionate prodding, the way she shaped it, cuddled it, and cupped it in her firm, warm hands as she labored to create the spiral herb planter. Sometimes, it even felt as though the dirt had jumped up to greet *her*.

Eventually, Taylor and Monka completed the planter. And when the herbs were fully grown, they celebrated the achievement with a huge meal. For this feast all six tastes—sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent—would be experienced. This assured the meal to be nutritionally balanced and completely satisfying. They started off first with a pumpkin soup. Next they prepared a lentil-rice salad and dressing; for the entrée, carrot croquettes with currant sauce with a leeks and limas side dish; for bread, oatmeal and ginger molasses muffins; and for dessert, baked apples. Simple refreshing spring water was also made available. And to finish off the meal, a sweet milky substance was provided. Monka said its purpose was to aid in the digestion of the meal.

When they were finished with all the preparations—including the ritualistic setting of the table, complete with all the proper candles—they sat down at the table. Taylor was starving. This was feeding time. During the meal, Taylor and Monka ate in a quiet, settled atmosphere, at a moderate pace. No rushing was required. Every morsel of food was savored. The food was also enjoying the meal. *Food's* satisfaction was in the sacrifice of its energy and life—the transformation of its

consciousness into that of the consumer. And for this, *food* was grateful; great bursts of nourishment were exploding in Taylor's mouth with every delicious bite.

When finished eating, Taylor and Monka sat quietly for a few moments, still mindful of the ongoing transformations, and also to pay silent reverence for the food, and the divine acts of preparation and ingestion. Taylor broke the silence with a question. "So, when do I get to go out into Telos?"

"As soon as you're ready," said Monka.