

Chapter 1 “Came the Dawn”

Two million years later. Give or take a few.



The sun beat with a dull simmer on a windswept plateau at the edge of never. The worn mountain with a blunted peak had seen no life for eons, only the relentless sand drifting among weathered limestone blocks that might once have served some arcane purpose. Soon they too would crumble into gritty dust that would blow away to nowhere, noticed by no one.

A masked head lurched above the rim and clambered onto a mesa of sand. A young woman staggered ahead with no place to go. She wore a light leather jacket over an incongruous yellow sundress with daisies that covered her knees down to the tops of two dust-caked designer boots. A tear up the side of the dress revealed a dainty slip and white thigh unaccustomed to the rigors of hostile terrain. The green utility mask hastily strapped over her eyes and mouth consisted of goggles and mouthpiece from which two breathing tubes flailed away in the wind as they filtered out toxins. A shock of unkempt auburn hair burnt redder by the sun rimmed the mask. Her hands were taped together at the wrists. Futile efforts to escape had only twisted and pulled the tape into chains of plastic bondage. She was one freaking, gasping mess and knew it.

A buzzing from above caught her attention and the goggles scanned for the menace lost in the blazing sun. A sizzle streaked down and thudded behind her. She jerked round as the desolation erupted in a fountain of green fire and sand at the edge of the southern drop off. Slogging northward brought her to another steep down slope back to where she had come from, back to nowhere. To the west and east similar dead end ridges defined the square mesa.

A second, nearer explosion blew out a deep pit in the sand. Her mask flew off as her legs dropped from under her and flailed for traction in the new slope. A lunge speared the strap but hopelessly mired her in the rapidly flowing sands that widened into a funnel emptying into a vortex below like the neck of an hourglass. Where the seemingly bottomless cavity opened by the blast drained to she had no time to speculate. Her face under the sweat and grime was young, early twenties, but her defiant green eyes flashed a startling wisdom years could scarcely measure. The mask proved impossible to slip back on with two taped hands so she shook her hands in feeble protest at the unseen attacker. The act of defiance lofted her mask in an arc directly into the whirlpool below where it disappeared into some inner abyss.

Great! Air gone. Me too. Down the rabbit....

She slapped hands over her mouth and clamped off her nose as her feet hit the vortex and all five-feet-seven vanished in a twinkling. Flat on her back, she flowed with the sand inward and onward and downward like a water slide run only in Sand Slide Park.

Hold your breath. Concentrate. Who am I? Should know that. I am Dawn, a new day and a new hope. How sorry. Where do I get 'em? No, I'm plain old Dawn, Dawn King.

“Whoo-ee!” escaped her lips and emptied her lungs as the slide dipped up, dropped suddenly and began to slow.

Don't stop. Not here. Like that Disney log ride. Was I really there?

“Ah...!” A giddy drop through space plopped her on a mound of sand that sprawled into silence. “Whuuuu,” she sucked into her aching lungs and didn't die. “A-air. I can breathe. Where there's life there's ...” She coughed up sand and gulped more air until her heaving chest settled. She hoped no one had caught the lame cliché she had almost voiced. She couldn't stand stupid sayings, although she was always coining them fresh into her own philosophy. “Anyone here?” No reply. None expected. “I wish someone had heard me. Hello?”

The weak “Hello” that echoed around in her own voice only reinforced the isolation.

Dawn stretched bones that barely worked, rolled to her knees, leaned on a wall and struggled to her feet, aching all the way. The surprising wall was smooth, gently curving and slightly warm. “And it's pale green,” she unexpectedly said. “How do you know that, asked my new friend, Mr. Wall? Why, don't you know? I have a psychic sense that gives me useless information I don't want, but you are starting to look a bit....”



Her parched mouth clammed shut. The stale air bristled with portent and a low rumbling. Her pointless jabbering to ease nerves had set something creaking back to life. She blinked twice and discerned a shaft of dimness in the center of the chamber that gradually brightened so she could make out that the single wall around her formed a perfect cylinder rising to three times her height. The round room was strangely without doors or any openings except the hole high above that she had fallen through. She stumbled toward the luminous stone shaft on spent legs and circled warily around until she recognized the shape.

“There's a name for you, my friend, a geometric solid with four tapering sides and a pyramid on top. I know, the Washington Monument. I'm in a souvenir shop. No, you are ... an obelisk like they built in ancient Egypt, like we have back ... somewhere I was.” Her pounding heart drowned out the feeble attempt at

normalcy, so she gave it up. She saw her own reflection in the chest-high crystal triangle that formed one of the four facets of the pyramid. Her right hand instinctively raised to touch up her hair, but her limp left hand taped to it bopped her in the chin. “Sharp edge! Just what I need.” She stretched taut the tangled tape binding her wrists and rubbed it against an edge of the pyramid. The tape failed to cut or even dent, but the pyramid brightened at her touch and then blinded her. She lurched backward and threw her hands up to shield her eyes.

A light green beam shot upward, swirled around and congealed into a wispy phantom. The robed figure billowed full length to the ceiling and then sank back until only its waist upward projected above the obelisk. The image of an elderly woman spoke tenuously to the recesses of the room away from Dawn. “Fear not, my child. Your training has only begun. You have journeyed over many lifetimes to face your destiny when the Reckoning returns. Believe and find strength for what must be done.”

The convincing hologram seemed to be alive, at least somewhere. Perhaps she had tripped some program of welcome to play inside the obelisk. On further reflection, the dignified lady gestured nervously, which would not be the sign of the pre-recorded message of a professional greeter. The desperation in the voice suggested the woman had waited so long for an audience that she would be devastated if no one answered. Dawn's irrational empathy for what she imagined to be a lonely ghost compelled her to speak on the remote chance that she could be seen and heard herself. “You don't have a knife, do you, Ma'am?” she blurted out. “Scissors? A sense of humor? I'm sorry, but my jokes are rarely funny. Who are you?”

The phantom turned and gazed down into Dawn's eyes. Its taut mouth softened into a comforting smile of relief. “Ah, there you are, child. They called me Dorian, Ahman Dorian, so long ago. What a quaint first name I have. I haven't spoken it in ever so long.”

“I am not your child. I don't mean to be rude, but it's been a rough day ... Ahman.”

“Or heard it spoken. My thanks.” Dorian's feathery fingers probed a scrape on Dawn's forehead and found a deep memory. “With a few changes you are a child of sorts. What a curious legend of Adam and Eve. Perhaps our link traces back to them.”

“Cut it out! I never believed bible junk.” A delayed chill ran down her back at the utter weirdness of her predicament. Was she in a coma talking to herself, or worse, like in

“You are alive,” the phantom answered the unvoiced question.

Only mildly relieved, Dawn rushed out, “Then, um, how can you speak English?”

“We think together. Seek and the way will open.”

“And the past is yet to come. I've heard those. Do you know anything useful? Is Jeff safe? Is Delia good or bad? When is the 'Friends' reunion show?” She was in trouble and this apparition was her only hope, so she had to quit with the jokes that weren't connecting anyway. At last she thought of a sensible question with an easy answer, or so she hoped. “Um, how do I get out of this place?”

“When you remember with me.”

“Remember?” Dawn drew back and concentrated but nothing came. Most of her life was a blank. She must be on some other planet, as bizarre as that sounded, because of the breathing mask, but how did she get here? Delia? Who is Delia? What mask? She was rapidly forgetting more instead of remembering anything. “I'll try to,” she bravely started. “I did remember something big a few days ago, back on Earth, that I had long forgotten.” Now if she could only remember what she had remembered.

“Tell me about Natasha,” Dorian urged. “Take all the time you need. We have forever.”

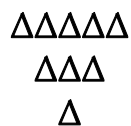
“Thanks, but how did you know?” The silence warned her to save the questions and get on with it, which was one of the maxims she lived by. “Tasha? That's right, it started with Tasha. I haven't thought about her in so long. I wonder why?”

“Who is Tasha?” Dorian asked to spur her along.

“She's my cousin, the daughter of my father's sister, and two years older than me. She lived in Atlanta but came to visit our ranch in Montana every summer. I was, oh, seven or eight and Tasha must have been nine or ten on her last visit.” Talking suddenly felt so right. She didn't realize how much she needed to remember recent events and possibly this time to understand them. “We loved to camp out at night in the range land behind our ranch house, just up a hill. We were fascinated by all those stars so bright and clear and made up adventures on them. We couldn't have been safer because Mom watched out for us all night with binoculars and a walkie-talkie, except this wasn't any old night.”

“You had a real adventure.”

“I'll say. Tasha and me, Tasha and...”



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