

SOUL SEARCHING



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*To Riley,
For always believing.*

PROLOGUE

Ruth lay on the cold hard tiles, looking straight up at the light. The heavy smell of the blood filled her nostrils as she inhaled short, sharp breaths. The pain had gone, but it would be back. She knew it would.

The rest of her body now let her know of other injuries. Her elbows throbbed. The back of her head ached, and the ringing in her ears was persistently present.

So much blood.

She didn't take her eyes off the light. Somehow it was comforting. Warm. White.

Here it came. Searing through her.

The sound of rushing water engulfed her.

Black...

She realized that she was floating. Floating above the room, blood covered the floor below, surrounding her body in a shimmering crimson. Everything seemed peaceful. Quiet.

The pain had gone, replaced with an ever-present warmth.

Everything's okay now. It's over. A light began to fill the room, giving it a hazy glow. It felt familiar and welcoming. The scene below seemed to get smaller, fainter.

The light moved through her and around her, caressing her soul. Then her attention was gently brought back to the world fading below her, as if something beckoned. The scene became clear once again. Who was calling her? She became aware of another soul speaking to her, "Stay."

Stay?

"Stay," came the response.

"Caleb," she whispered.

The smell of blood, the cool hard floor, and the pain edged back, as she sensed the life of her unborn child.

Life begins.

CHAPTER 1

The woman's breathing could be heard from the other room. Strained but softer now. Hand still shaking, annoying. Why the hell was she so determined to resist? Will have to ask her.

In a few minutes.

A few minutes to calm down, accept what had happened. Then it's her turn to listen to what I have to say. Just listen. That was all. She'd had plenty of time to say what she wanted. Throw abuse, cry, bite, bleed. Now it's my turn.

No noise. Quiet. That's all I want.

Just me and my thoughts. No outside irritations. No disruptions. No noise pollution.

You give someone the opportunity and all they'll do is mouth-off about their problems and "poor me" bullshit. Smile at someone in the checkout queue and they think that gives them the right to talk to you.

"Fuck off about the price of milk. I don't give a shit! See the store manager over there? He doesn't give a shit either, so why the fuck should I?"

Stunned silence. Precious. But that's when they start again. Louder.

The room was quiet now. Dark and quiet.

#

In one goose-bumped instant, Mike's heavysset frame was depleted and fragile, as if a surge of electricity had left his body. A surging tide of nausea rose from deep within him, but a quick, strong breath kept it down. He inhaled again. He didn't have time to look back at the room, at the rest of the squad. The disappointment was thick in the air. Or was that his own?

"She's gone, Ruth," said Mike. "She looks like she's heading straight for Heaven." He drew a deep breath as he continued

to follow the red dot across the Screen. “I think she’ll need it after what she’s been through,” he whispered to himself.

He pressed his earpiece in his ear. No response.

“Hicks,” he said sternly, “did you hear me? She’s gone, damn it. Respond.” Nothing came through his earpiece. “Banks? Do *you* read me, at least?”

“Yeah, Angel,” came the breathless response, “I read you.”

“Where the hell’s Ruth?” snapped Mike.

“She was ahead of me.”

“Ruth Hicks! Come in! It’s over!”

“I think give her a few minutes, Angel.”

“I need a status ASAP, Banks,” replied Mike. “Get back to me in a few then.” He sat down on one of the desks, still monitoring the Screen. That was it. They had come close but not close enough. They’d missed saving the victim and their chance at getting at the killer. He was still out there. Square one: another dead vic, another floating soul, and an elusive green dot out there that they couldn’t latch onto.

He watched the red dot, gathering speed, already out of Hell, and nearly through Purgatory, on its way to Heaven and maybe even to The Beyond; if it was lucky. Mike Haddon, AKA Angel, or Archangel, was Chief of Trackers, and so nicknamed because he guided the trackers, gave them what they needed, and could interpret the Screen faster than anyone in the unit.

Studying all aspects of the afterlife, divination and traditional beliefs that, for centuries, had been deemed occult, had given Mike a range of tools necessary to interpret the symbols and figures on the Screen. Things that a computer’s algorithm couldn’t decipher let alone perceive. His job included inputting that data, after the fact, to improve the system’s performance. It was always learning. And he was still learning. The untapped knowledge on his doorstep in southern Africa was a continual source for honing his skills,

and no amount of online reading and searching could replace face-to-face experiences with the people out in the dry Kalahari or the slippery peaks of the Drakensberg mountains.

The Screen continually moved, changed, transformed and mapped. The Universe on a screen — it always impressed him. The Universe at his fingertips. Others saw the Screen as moving through time. That was limited thinking. He simply saw it as changing. Timeless. Unfortunately, the streaks of grey along his temples argued otherwise.

His breathing deepened, air filled his lungs, and he lost himself in the huge screen: fifteen metres of one-millimetre thick fibre optic suspended from an eight-metre high ceiling. The soft yellow halo around its edges glowed with the energy that it drew from the surrounding air. A pale aura of purple light smoked off from the halo into the dim light of the room, giving the Screen the look of a fluorescent deep-sea creature. Symbols and shapes rippled imperceptibly across the centre of its flat surface. Their meanings darted through his subconscious with lightning-quick intuitions.

From an early age, Mike had been fascinated by the symbols associated with the Zodiac, and further delving into the Vedic-based Nakshatra system in his late teens, making the Screen's centre-piece more personal to him. More connected. Interlinking circles continually rotated, readjusting, changing meaning at every move. The twelve Zodiacs were overlaid with the twenty-eight Nakshatras — the so-called unlucky twenty-eighth, Abhijit, being one many excluded — plus stars, planets, and heavenly bodies all mapped out in a cosmic dance. But then they had to ruin it with the simplistic time-line slapped right across the middle. Easier for the trackers to get their heads around. When Mike immersed himself in the Screen, he uncovered the ingredients for millions of different lives. Lives that, if born at that moment, would be lived like this or that. He observed lives in

a split second of movement, that if not taken by a soul, didn't happen out here, but still played out in his head. Multiple paths all available simultaneously but only one taken.

The Screen represented the soul in the physical world as well as the non-physical dimensions, simultaneously superimposed on the universe. It took someone like Mike to interpret these signs using analysis and intuition.

The three horizontal lines that divided the Screen showed where a soul was and where it was headed. The bottom section, about a third of the height, was the Earth Plane. When a soul came into our world, the material plane or the third dimension, it came into the Earth Plane. When it left the third dimension it went out to the Etheric Plane, the next section up. Half the size of the first section, it was usually a stop-off zone for the souls as they either returned almost immediately to the Earth Plane or moved up to the Soul Plane which took up the other half of the Screen. Every now and again a soul would be seen moving right off the top of the board. According to Mike, that was the place to be. That was Heaven to him, like the name that was taped to the left side of the Screen.

Mike looked across to the three sheets of paper stuck at each of the zones: Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. He had to grin at this. Hell was what his team was going through right now. Tracking the one soul they just couldn't lock onto. All this plus the pressure of navigating public perceptions and politicians continually using them as talking points.

Its development had been even more unstable.

The great global warming threat demanded less fossil fuel consumption and more bio-friendly energy sources, leading engineers and scientists across the globe to revisit basic technologies. In doing so they created some of the first organic technologies that provided their own power sources and which, through further enhancements, tapped into

energy sources that life has been using for eons. Energy sources that constitute life, not consumption. And in looking into those traces of life, scientists were able to track the origins of this world and look through the basic third-dimensional elements into the areas long spoken about in myth and religion. Skeptics questioned the reality of these dimensions, and, not for the first time in history, questioned the blasphemous levels that science had reached.

The true power of what scientists had discovered became something that a handful of governments openly funded and pursued, supported by the people.

By taking these leaps, into what one would have assumed was the void, man emerged with a glimpse of the Divine. The Divine that is in all there is.

Since Zenzele Biyela's revolutionary system had burst onto the scene, and with him now heading up the Tracker Initiative within the South African Police Service, politicians had been at the frontlines of the furor, vying for political leverage, gauging how their constituents reacted to the controversial tech.

Those involved in criminology around the world saw how the developments could aid them in combating some of the violent crimes and mysteries that they had yet to solve. Everyone was watching.

"Angel," came the soft voice in his ear.

"Hicks," said Mike jumping off the table, "you okay?"

"No, but I've finished up here," she replied.

"Can you please respond when I call you next time, damn it?" he responded calmly.

"Sorry, Angel. I found her just after you made the call and I had to be with her. I felt she needed to be guided out."

"Okay, just let the docs come in and record the scene. We need all the clues we can get out of there. Tracker Team?"

"Sir!" came the multiple responses.

“Back to the station, ASAP. And up here in the Room of Hours for the debriefing,” he ordered.

“Sir!” came the responses.

Nearly no sleep for three days dawned on his body all at once. The pain in his shoulders broke through his nervous system and shot a red flag up the back of his neck, a power surge of pain. Bent over the desk, he rubbed weakly at the rhythmic beat in his temples.

He should have been quicker. Five minutes could have made the difference.

The trackers were all trained emergency medical technicians; part of their gear tucked into their cargo pockets were medic tools. They had the means to resuscitate someone on the brink of death.

As he made his way up the incline of the room to the water cooler, he played the day through his hazy mind, trying to shave off seconds, thirty seconds, a minute, anything that could have saved time. Saved a life.

Mindlessly he took a paper cup off the top of the cooler and pressed the ‘Fill’ button.

“Goddamit,” he said to himself.

He downed the ice-cold water, spilling some over his cheeks and neck. His body sagged and fell against the wall. He looked back at the room, at the blur of the Screen through the tears in his eyes.

#

The smells from Maydon Wharf drifted over Ruth, who sat on a horizontal stack of concrete pillars in the abandoned construction site. Dust from the emergency crews and vehicles bustling around her hung in the cooling evening air.

She could still feel the warmth of the other woman’s body dying in her arms from minutes before. Her hands, arms, and shoulders were pulled tense and vibrating in steady pulses.

She had to close her eyes for a few seconds, but not long enough for anyone nearby to be concerned. A sharp intake of the harbour air brought some relaxation to her muscles.

The prolonged bellow of a nearby ship's horn made her lift her gaze to the darkening sky above. She could just make out some of the lights above the surrounding warehouses and stark buildings, twinkling on like a handful of stars.

The odours of oil and salt, diesel and fish — flashes of summer evenings from her childhood, when her parents were still together, eating spring rolls on the yacht mole pier — had a pungent tinge to them. She unclenched her fists, trying to relax, unconsciously rubbing a thumb on the back of her other hand for comfort.

She hadn't spoken to her mother in the past three weeks since this case had taken over her days and nights. She couldn't call her mother now. Not about this. Theirs was a catch up with small talk kind of relationship and not Salomie's daughter chasing a possible serial killer.

Besides, retirement in the old fishing town of Hermanus was quiet and tranquil for her mother and stepfather, far from this kind of city. Right now, she needed to speak to someone who understood what she was going through.

She held back the tears that were damming up behind her eyes as she drew another deep breath. Having grown up around Durban, she knew the tides, and it was probably going out, taking with it all the scum and muck dumped in the harbour that day.

How did they end up in this part of the city?

The chase seemed part of a distant lifetime, yet only half an hour ago they had been driving through the Durban streets, Angel relaying coordinates, frantically trying to reach Liza Chapman in time. They had come so close. To the killer. To Liza.

An ambulance came to a dusty stop a few metres from her.

The two EMTs were a blur as they jumped out and raced to the rear of the van. Someone yelled out to them from behind her as they wheeled the stretcher through the sand and gravel.

They didn't need an ambulance.

The red-handled emergency scissors protruded from one of her thigh compartments of her dark blue cargo pants, sharing space with the splinter forceps and latex gloves. Mirrored on her left thigh were the straight forceps, trauma shears, window punch, and Velcro tourniquet. She hadn't needed those today.

She glanced at the flashing red lights of the ambulance. They didn't need the noise and commotion happening now. It was all too late. They had been too late.

She hunched forward, arms folded on her lap, hands resting at her hips. The small solid bulk of her mobile unit in her right pocket reassured her.

She tore at the Velcro flap, grasped the device and said, breathlessly, "Call Allen."

#

Deep inside the Ornithology department of the Durban Natural Science Museum, the rumble of the afternoon's traffic beat its way through the newly-renovated aluminium window frames, the odd truck reverberating through Allen's thick wooden desk. The rest of the staff had already left the musty wooden offices when Allen returned from the specimens room. He had turned off the neon lights, which he always found too overbearing as evening drew on.

A pile of loose papers lay spread out next to his screen as he transcribed his day's notes into the cold digital world in front of him. It still felt more natural to scrawl down his ideas onto a fresh, clean sheet of lined note paper rather than sitting behind a screen, portable or not. Transcribing allowed time for reflection and adjusting of ideas and facts. More often

than not, it allowed for the rephrasing of a tirade or two.

Like the traffic outside, he clicked and spaced and plodded his way through, pausing every now and again to rethink something or figure out what the hell he'd written at the time. Sometimes it meant tossing out a complete section of meaningless scrawl.

Two broad wooden trays lay across the examining table a few metres from Allen in the centre of the large room. In one of his moments of reflection, Allen glanced up at the metallic blue plumage shimmering in the single overhead spotlight. Twenty neatly folded specimens seemingly asleep on their backs with tiny claws gripping the air.

Alongside the first lay a second tray containing similar specimens, the same to a layman, but distinct in their differences to the first tray to the expert.

Confirming a new species of bird had its ups and downs. For Allen it was like being on a treasure hunt. Although it wouldn't be him who would do the discovering, he was part of it. As if he had been given the treasure map, and all the clues, and all he had to do was prove it was there.

Before the scientists and birders could make a claim, they had to compile reams of data and evidence to prove their theory. And in the birding world, a very microscopic world in the professional sense, everyone wanted to have their day in the spotlight. They wanted their Loch Ness moment: 'Mine has never been spotted before...' And like any 'sighting', there were always the debunkers and naysayers.

But the Ornithology department was there to confirm or disprove, by compiling their own reams of data and facts, proving or disproving theories. He considered himself the only man for the job. A self-confessed cynic, he dared anyone to prove him otherwise.

But it was a slippery slope. 'Bugger the mob,' Allen always said. In the ornithology world, a simple 'rejected' stamp on a

claim practically meant you had a hit out on you. Hate mail from a twitcher could be extreme. Professional dinners could be vindictive, and dead fowl were known to appear in the post.

If it wasn't somebody else's 'find' that he was working on, it was his own theories and investigations that kept Allen rapt in his work. The shape of a feather, the flight of a bird on the horizon. A dead pigeon on the sidewalk meant being frowned at by passersby as he picked at the fractured carcass with his pen. Or finger. A toothpick was also known to do the trick.

Allen's mobile beeped next to his keypad, causing a brief embarrassing shriek. Wide-eyed, he quickly glanced around the empty room just in case he had been seen, then picked up the blue glowing block of plastic.

He pressed his forefinger on the translucent white-blue of the mobile. "Hello, my little kingfisher," he said as he recognised his wife on the small screen.

"Hi, Hon," came the faint response.

Allen stared closer at his mobile screen. Even in the faint light of Ruth's surroundings he could see her brow was sweaty and her cheeks flushed, a chalky dust streak across her olive skin and hair disheveled. And rather than her bright eyes staring back at him, they were heavy-lidded with exhaustion. "Hey, what's up?" he whispered. "Work hectic?"

"Something like that," Ruth replied. "And you?"

"Oh, you know. The usual," he said looking over his desk. "About to get the flock outta here." He thought he was funny.

Ruth, on the small screen, shook her head feebly as she walked through what seemed to Allen to be an industrial part of the city.

"Can you swing by and pick Caleb up for me?" She looked around. "It's going to be a late one. Yuneesha's organised for now, but the sooner you relieve her the better."

"Sure," he said. "Anything an ornithologist can help with?"

“Maybe later,” she said. “Right now, Frank and I are about to head back to the station and check in with Angel.”

She drew a deep breath, scrunching the corner of her mouth. Allen recognised the suppressed emotion that was being held in tightly.

“She died in my arms, Allen.” She stopped and looked directly at him. Allen hunched over the glowing device on his desktop, holding her gaze as a slap of goose pimples hit his neck, arms, and scalp, rippling through every tiny hair on his body. Ruth crouched into the dimness of a car interior, face dimly lit by her screen’s reflection; her hypnotic numbness penetrated his solar plexus.

“Ruth,” he said softly.

She blinked herself to the present. “Hmm?”

“At least it was with you,” he said. “Go and do what you do best, and I’ll see you at home.”

She nodded.

“I love you,” he said.

She suppressed a smile and ended the call.

Allen rested his chin on his fists, gaze drifting to the two trays in the middle of the room. An island of light. Dead bodies on display.

“At least a soul somewhere gets its wings tonight,” he said, with the knowledge that tracking a species was not quite the same as tracking a killer’s soul.

As a child he was fascinated by Peter Pan. At eight years old he’d gone crying to his mother, a point she emphasised when she frequently recounted the story.

“I’m a bad person, Mommy.”

“A what?” she had asked.

“I’m ugly. I don’t think nice things.”

“And why would you think that, Allie?”

“Cos I can’t fly. I’m not flying.” He stamped his feet on the

kitchen floor. "See?"

"What do you mean you're not flying?"

"I don't have any happy thoughts; that's why I'm not flying around the room. And now I'm thinking ugly thoughts so I'm never going to fly, Mommy!"

"Ah." His mother quickly caught onto his eight-year-old mind. "But remember, Allie, that it's not just happy thoughts that you need to make you fly."

His body unslumped and perked up at this. "It's not?"

"No," she continued. "You need a sprinkling of fairy dust as well, silly. Remember?"

"Oh." He'd beamed.

"So, until you find a fairy, you'll have to settle with being on solid ground, my angel."

And that had been the start of his winged and plumed obsession. Every day he felt he was getting closer. Naturally, as he grew older, he figured he'd need to get his pilot's license. He was a practical man.

Even now, at thirty-six, he considered himself a practical man with a spiritual wife. No longer the fist-clenching frustration that made up their early relationship. She had been hell-bent on questioning and probing and planting seeds that had intrigued even him, the practical man. The birth of his son had pushed his agnostic upbringing to new limits.

He had always appreciated that his mother had not preconditioned his mind into a religious one. "The universe is right there in front of you," she had said to him when he had asked about the world around him. "All you need to know, feel, or experience is there waiting for you to dip your feet into. How deep you want to go is up to you, and no-one else."

As a scholar and factual man, he'd concentrated on his work and flight.

"So, your religion is birds," Ruth had stated bluntly one night before they were married.

“My what is what?” He’d blurted horrified.

“Your life, your beliefs, and what makes you who you are is your study of birds. You pretty much eat, sleep, and defecate birds.” She stared back at him with deep green eyes. The challenge had been made.

“That doesn’t constitute a religion.”

“Okay, professor, what’s a religion? Define it from a scientist’s point of view, please?”

Without missing a beat, “An elite group of people sitting at the top, forcing their interpretation of the world around them on the masses below. Frowning on them when they don’t read or know off by heart the Holy Word and forcing them to attend church once a week.”

“So, kinda like some twitcher scientist deciding to name that strange bird an emu and telling me that that one flying over there is a crow and that one pecking over there is a pigeon. And when I disagree and say, ‘No, I think that one’s a dove and that one is the crow,’ he gets all hot and bothered and ends up pulling out a thick bird guide from twenty years ago that his father passed down to him and proceeds to point furiously shouting, ‘it says so in the book!’”

“I’m not even going to dignify an argument to that.”

“You’ve just replaced one set of rules and guides and beliefs and hierarchical systems for another.”

“You don’t get... Shit!”

“Fine. Then explain to me what you feel about birds. And I mean, what is it about feathers that gets you all ruffled?”

Allen never believed that yin and yang crap, but this woman was definitely his polar opposite.

“Watching a bird in flight is like watching the ultimate expression of freedom. That’s always fascinated me. Not restricted to the ground. Go anywhere. No limits.”

“The scientist is a poet.”

Allen had blushed. And a few years later, Ruth had

revealed that at that moment she had softened.

“Okay,” she’d mused, “what about pet birds? How do you feel about that?”

“Well, for one it’s unnatural. Don’t get me wrong, I’m no activist or anything, but the idea is repulsive. Even Leonardo da Vinci couldn’t handle the idea and went so far as to buy caged birds in the markets, only to release them a second later.”

“Probably pissed off some Italians in the process.”

Allen had snorted. “One of the first true scientists. Everyone thinks of him as this way-out artist, but he was really a scientist. He studied everything.”

Ruth had asked, “How about that Mona Lisa smile?”

“She’s not smiling,” Allen had said matter-of-factly.

“And that’s a theory of yours?”

“No, that’s a fact. If you look at many of his portraits, it was how he lit and painted the mouths. Imagine someone clenching their jaw and staring you down as they humour you. The mouth sometimes pulls in at the corners. That’s her expression. The same as his ‘John the Baptist’. Intense concentration, drawing you into their eyes where you can almost see their thoughts and emotions.”

“You’ve obviously thought long and hard about this,” Ruth had said.

“I’m interested in flight and those that tried, sometimes in vain, to achieve it.”

“And Leonardo tried centuries before the Wright brothers.”

Allen had nodded. “But, I’m not sure if achieving it was as important as it was in the studying.”

“Apparently, Leonardo was a pretty spiritual guy. He didn’t like the church much.”

“If I took anything from Leonardo it was that the soul is like a caged bird. It’s limited by this form, the physical body.”

Death is the freedom or release from that cage. Death means total liberation.”

“And your thoughts on what’s on the other side?” She had asked, intrigued by this hidden side of the man in front of her.

“That’s as far as I go with this, thank you.”

#

The body of a woman, aged forty-six, is gently lifted from the cold dusty concrete floor where she died twenty minutes earlier. People move around her, going about their business, making notes and checking details. A semi-transparent bag is brought over, unzipped, and clumsily placed under, over and finally, around her, then gently zipped closed. Her pale features are just noticeable through the frosted surface.

Her body is placed on a soft, cool stretcher, but she doesn’t feel any more. The heat from the quickly erected field spotlights does little to warm the already cooling body. The stretcher is pushed into the back of a red and white van. The rear doors thud closed and the noises from outside are dulled and subdued.

The van starts up, sending soft vibrations through the stretcher and the woman’s body. The two medical officers sit silently on either side, expressionless. The rubber wheels move ever so slightly as the van pulls off; first down a ramp, then bumping out into the night air on a gravel road.

There is no siren. No need. A radio crackles noisily in the driver’s compartment.

The warm glow of sunset fades outside. Streetlights flick by as the van rounds a corner and the noise of the gravel fades away. The city at night comes alive. The sounds of traffic hiss by outside the van. The squeak of brakes at an intersection. And another. Turn.

A quick move to the left and the van goes down a ramp. Rubber squeals on polished cement. The van comes to a

gentle stop. The doors open to the empty echo of the basement. Clinical scents replace the van's ozone electric engine, and the stretcher is flicked and clicked back onto its rubber wheels.

A click and two automatic doors slide apart. Chemicals and squeaky shoes. The stretcher glides noiselessly along and around corners. Overhead neons blink past. The frosted bag seems to have misted up. The features of the woman are less visible underneath. Two more doors slide automatically open. Another corner and into a large square room.

Two men exchange quick muffled words. A tablet device beeps. Notes. Enters.

The woman's body is taken gently off the stretcher and placed on a large steel table. The zip is opened. Nobody notices the faint warm air that is released in the cold of the room. She is lifted up and out of the ice-coloured bag and onto the cold, hard table.

She doesn't feel any more.

#

The entire fourteenth floor, intensifying inside the central Room of Hours, was humming with the energy from the day's activities. The Tracker Unit was spread out in small groups, discussing their experiences in low voices. Ruth sat in the middle of the amphitheatre-style control room, arms folded and feet up on one of the interactive tabletops. She analysed the Screen, moving slowly, watching the patterns change: Mike had been right; she'd headed right off the Screen. A good consolation for what her body had endured. The full picture of what the victim had gone through would be revealed over the next few hours, but she knew what to expect. She had seen it.

Banks, her partner, would be in a group somewhere, watching her from the corner of his eye, checking if she was

doing okay. He always worried how she handled this part of the job, the part she too often took home, yet Frank never brought it up. This was the third person found in the last three weeks. They'd picked up on the pattern within days of the second victim being reported missing, and started doing the background and soul match that would eventually lead to her physical whereabouts. Unfortunately, they couldn't say the same for the criminal behind it. They had nothing to go on, nothing to give them the slightest clue to latch on to a Soul Trace.

All the victims had been clean of anything that could be broken down for DNA matching. There was nothing that even hinted at the killer's identity let alone his Birth Origin. And that was what it all came down to: Birth Origin. The trackers needed at least that to trace a soul to the here and now. It was always weird to her that they needed to go back in time to when somebody was born to find where they were currently, and even possibly where they were headed. That was how you got on the Screen if you were a "baddie"; and once you were on, you were tracked every step of the way. If you were a "goodie" and you were on the Screen, then you were probably headed for a Trauma/Dead as a vic or the need to be monitored post-incident. A person only ever left the Screen if they were caught and rehabbed, and even then they might still be tracked; or if they T/D and the soul went to the Beyond. Trauma/Dead was marked on the Screen by a red dot, and that was when they really had to watch the Screen closely. Where will it go, where will it pop up? T/B — Trauma/Birth — or Soul Rehab?

Coming back to the room, Ruth was aware of everyone talking in quieter voices. They were all anticipating the debriefing. She just wanted time to absorb it. Time alone. But she would have to deal with it in her own time.

She caught the eye of Banks to her right. Just leave me

alone. He made a move in her direction. Just leave me the ...

“Right! Pay attention,” said Mike on his raised platform backed by the huge Screen. “The Unit head is on his way up from the media briefing and wants a few words.” He looked out from his slightly elevated platform over the ten trackers and five assistants present. Everyone began to gravitate to the centre of the room. Ruth stayed where she was. A moment later the doors at the back of the room burst open and a tall, athletic figure strode to the front of the room. Zenzele Biyela wasn’t your typical suit and tie. He had a way of making business attire look casual and relaxed, and his short, steel-grey hair always looked as though he had been working through the world’s problems. He stepped up alongside Mike and loosened his tie.

“Now that all the bullshit is out of the way,” he gave a wry smile and held his hands together, “I want to say *wenze kahle*, well done, to every one of you. It’s small consolation, I know, but for a team that has only been in operation for a few years now, and running on the sniff of an oil rag of a budget, we, you, are providing something that we can all be proud of.” He turned and placed his hand on Mike’s shoulder with a nod. “The next week is going to be hell on earth, but without taking too much notice of the world on our doorstep,” he pointed out the room, “and those *SoulsFirst* and their *S.O.S.* fanatics baying for our blood, particularly mine, we can and will catch this bastard. Maybe then all the naysayers will back right off and the likes our favourite politician, Premier Khayyám,” his tone soured as he uttered the name, “will concede that maybe, just maybe, we are running one of the most important innovations of our time. Eish, of any time for that matter, and something that transcends religious stigmatism. I know I speak for all of us when I say that we have all staked our reputations, our livelihoods, and our family responsibilities on this unit. The faith that you have put into

this endeavour, we, in return, put in you. Know that we back this unit one hundred and ten percent. But let's not allow the political games behind the scenes to stall this process. *Inhlanhla.*" He gave a curt nod to Mike and left the room.

"The Docs have started sending through the data from the scene," Mike said looking down at his glass tablet, "so let's see what comes through as we go." He checked some of the data. "Okay, as before, the vic was found," here he stopped and looked up, trying to find Ruth, "by Tracker Hicks, with her trachea penetrated but the wound showing no signs of infection. Both the breathing pipe and gauze around the wound were in good condition and looking new for the day," Mike put his tablet onto a desk in front of him, leaning his weight over it. "This guy took the time, probably every day, to clean and dress the wound. Now remember," he stood full, arms on his hips, "this guy is neat and precise. We aren't looking for an obviously 'out-there' nutcase. He's methodical and a perfectionist. And according to the ME's report on the previous vics, he doesn't need to have medical experience to perform these home tracheotomies. What they're suggesting is that it's at a degree of perfection that, outside of the other two, he's probably done before. Maybe this means on other people, but because we do our job right, it probably means only on small animals or the Maltese poodle next door." A small murmur lightened the atmosphere.

"As I mentioned," he continued, "all we need is a link to his soul and we can at least track him on the Screen. Then it's just a matter of time."

"So," Mike looked down at his data, "no obvious sexual assault, but the autopsy will tell, and going on the other two vics, there shouldn't be any." He turned to face the centre of the Screen. "I've been scanning the astros for any people born in the last hundred years with any female issues that might emerge in their cycle, but that's a needle in a galaxy. Plus,"

he turned back, continuing with a grumble, “we still don’t even know if it’s current life or past life shit that we’re sifting through, so let’s hope this guy’s paid up on his karma.”

Narrowing down a criminal’s motives meant wading through archive files on previous suspects from pre-tracker days. *Pre-dated crime*. Ruth turned to the back of the vast room, where all the rookies cut their teeth. The glassed-in control room, the Crystal Ball, overlooked the room and Screen, housing two rows of consoles that the latest trackers used to access all available data, globally. Piles of searchable data files that, nine times out of ten, weren’t helpful because most were unsolved, without even a suspect associated that they could latch a Soul Trace to for tracking.

A beeping noise brought Ruth’s attention back to the Screen as a flash of light revealed a square projection of a middle-aged man with a pair of neat optical gear over his eyes, just like an exaggerated geek. Everyone focused on him, as he seemed to straighten himself in his white jumpsuit, preparing to address the room. A namestrip at the bottom of the square read “Documentor Greenburg: 32510”.

“Angel,” he hesitated.

“We’re listening, Doc,” replied Angel facing the Screen, “what you got for us?”

The man on the Screen looked down for a second, pressing something on his glass tablet, “I’m sending you the 3-D mapping of the area, multiple angles,” he looked up for a moment. The left side of the Screen revealed a single rectangle of white, systematically breaking up into smaller sections as visuals of a construction site from various angles appeared in each. “Plus,” he continued, “Based on Hicks’ description of how she found the vic, an approximate modeling of how she would have been in the environment.” With this, a blue semi-translucent 3-D shape of a woman emerged over most of the visuals.

“Similar to the other vics,” Doc continued, looking at his tablet, “she seems to have been placed in the location fairly abruptly, but still with a lot of care in the placement and covering tracks, almost.” He swiped his fingers around his device, simultaneously shifting one of the central visual’s angles bringing a ramp into view. “Footprints have been swept but traces of a trolley’s tracks are visible leading up to this level. These match a two-wheel loading trolley like this model.”

A catalogue image of a rotating trolley appeared on screen.

“What about a wheelchair pulled back onto its back wheels?” asked Angel.

“No,” replied the Doc, “the tread is smooth, flat, and wider than a wheelchair’s. This may have been rushed but they knew what they were doing.”

“And it’s consistent with the previous victim locations. But at least the tracks are something. If he’s slipping, then it could be a matter of time before he slips on his ass.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, Angel,” said the Doc looking down at his screen, “I mean, we’ve done multiples of the area and haven’t found anything out of place other than the swept debris. And even that’s pretty slim on clues.”

“Well, he had the jump on us because we weren’t expecting her to turn up for three more days,” said Angel exasperated.

“She was placed, naked, on what seems to be a new white sheet,” continued the Doc, “in an area that had been swept of any debris.” The view came over the top of the glowing blue figure, zooming out slightly to allow it to fill the frame. “And, according to Hicks, her arms were placed over her abdomen,” the view shifted down the blue waist line, “and her legs neatly together.”

“He must’ve placed her just before we got there and us turning up scared him off”.

“Cause of death will tell us more.”

“There had to have been a reason,” Angel said stroking his chin.

“Well,” said the Doc, “that’s your job. I just shoot ‘em, and log ‘em.” He lowered his tablet, “The vic should be arriving, as we speak, at the ME for the detailed modeling. From there we can patch it into our visuals for a comprehensive, and then you guys can pick the puzzle apart. Questions, suggestions?”

“Nothing for now, Doc,” said Angel as he turned to face the group of puzzled onlookers. “Materials? Where’s Visser?”

“Already checking, Sir,” a head popped up from behind a screen. “I’ve zoomed in on the label visible on the sheet. Checking any recent purchases of white linen in the province in the past month.”

“Good,” replied Angel as he walked slowly through the desks, “Hicks, I want you and Banks at the ME’s ASAP for immediate info.”

#

Located on the north side of the SAPS complex, on the ground level, the stark whiteness of the Medical Examiner’s theatre always jarred with Ruth. A contrast in so many ways to the Room of Hours: bright lights and wall-to-wall whiteness. Quiet. Lifeless. As if life itself had been sterilized.

A middle-aged man with dusty grey hair pulled out an overhead screen above the examination table and with a nod at Ruth and Frank said, “Remember to state your names when wanting to speak.” He punched a few on-screen keys, then added, “And let’s keep to the medical facts rather than Sherlock Holmes ramblings.” Removing a pen-like, digital microscope, umbilically attached to the screen, he leaned over the white sheet hiding the body beneath.

“Recording on Wednesday the eighth day of September, two thousand and thirty-eight. Beginning the autopsy of the identified body of Liza Ann Chapman, as positively

confirmed by the Tracker Squad. Trackers Hicks and Banks present for observation and information gathering in real time. Medical Examiner Dos Santos speaking, I will be performing the post-mortem examination.” He walked over to the head of the table and gently pulled the sheet down, revealing the pale face of a woman. He stopped the sheet at the shoulders and folded it neatly over, placing the microscope on her skin and looked up at the video feed on the screen.

“I can assume that the victim is between forty-five and fifty years of age, and this has been confirmed by the Tracker team’s information in that she was born 18 September nineteen ninety, having died some ten days before her forty-eighth birthday. Her hair is dark brown, slight greying, and shoulder length. Her complexion is fair.”

Ruth approached the table and tilted her head slightly to get a better look at the pale, lifeless body in front of her. Why were you killed so soon? Martha and Mary-Anne were nearly two weeks apart. This was too soon if they were going to look at possible time patterns.

“The hair on the victim’s head is damp,” continued the ME as he clicked on the microscope’s tiny light to illuminate the scalp, “possibly perspiration and water.” With bleeps, data gathered and areas of the screen pulsed on and off. He squinted at the information. “Both.” He moved down to the left arm and did the same, then on to the pubic hair. “Hmm, there also seems to be water on the rest of her body hair, which would indicate that she was fully immersed at some point.”

“Let’s just check something”. He placed the microscope in both the victim’s ears and nose. “There appears to be H₂O residue in the victim’s ears, nose and,” he looked into the mouth, “mouth.”

“Tracker Banks: couldn’t that just be body fluids?”

Without moving his head, the ME looked up at Frank and said coldly, "Not with that much chlorine," and clicked the microscope light off. "And not like this."

"Tracker Hicks: so could she have been drowned?"

"Possible, but," he raised a warning finger, "let's do this systematically so we don't miss anything out."

The ME turned the microscope light back on, adjusted the magnification, and looked into both of the victim's eyes. "Nothing unusual with the eyes," he continued, moving to the mouth again, "The mouth is free of any foreign matter, apart from the H₂O mentioned earlier, and what seems to be white mucus at the back of the throat." The beam of the microscope moved down the chin and down to below the jaw-line where the ME paused.

Ruth came in closer. "What's that reddening around the mouth and neck?"

"We'll get to that, Tracker Hicks," he cut in.

"I didn't notice that when I got to her," she whispered.

"Probably a delayed skin reaction, or because of the low light that you found her in," replied the ME, giving a sigh and without averting his attention. "The skin around the mouth and trachea wound has slight abrasions and some other residue." He took a microscopic reading from the side of the mouth and neck, and continued, "Looks like it could also be a reaction. I'm picking up traces of adhesive on the skin."

"Tracker Banks: adhesive?" asked Banks as he now approached the table.

"Tracker Hicks: Like gum or tape," responded Ruth. "It could've been duct-tape that caused it."

"Possibly," replied the ME noncommittally and looked at the data above. Various products scrolled through.

"Tracker Hicks: Glue?"

"Maybe something was taped into the trachea. A breathing pipe or something. That would cause these types of marks."

“But what about taping the mouth? Sorry. Tracker Banks: how would that help anything?”

“Moving on to the trachea wound,” the ME ignored the question. “The surrounding skin is clean of any infection. The wound itself is fairly neat in its execution. But,” he said looking closer, “there is foaming inside the cavity, consistent with the back of the throat.”

“Tracker Hicks: Foaming?” asked Ruth.

The ME looked up at Ruth, “Looks like it could be drowning.” He scanned the microscope over the opening, and looked the readings over. “A mixture of air, water, and even surfactant, which is made up of lipoprotein that is secreted by the alveolar cells of the lungs.”

“Tracker Banks: So he could have held her head under water.”

“Tracker Hicks: yeah, but it doesn’t fit the other two victims,” said Ruth, “they were just suffocated, and it doesn’t account for the tape on the mouth. Why tape the mouth when you’re trying to drown someone?”

“The tape doesn’t necessarily have to connect to the cause of death,” said the ME.

“Tracker Banks: to keep her quiet?”

“No need, considering she’s incommunicado with a tracheotomy,” said the ME pointing at the neck wound.

The information was swirling in Ruth’s head. We need to know the motives behind what he’s doing in order to profile his soul. Everything is intricately connected to everything else.

“Tracker Banks: but could she have drowned? She was still dying when we found her.”

“She could have been clinically dead, but something jolted her back to life. A heavy impact that could get her heart pumping again.”

“We could’ve saved her?” hissed Ruth.

“That depends on how long she was out for and the fact that her lungs still contained water. There’s a high probability she drowned again. No hope of resuscitation.”

“It couldn’t have helped trying to breathe through that damn small hole,” said Frank, “like choking on a soda, and no matter how much you open your mouth you just can’t get it open enough to breathe properly.”

“But, there were no signs of water sources nearby or any water for that matter, so the killer would have had to lug the body here while she was dying instead of waiting to see if she was actually dead,” said Banks. “Also, the dirt around the vic was only slightly disturbed. Not like someone struggling for their life.”

“And, why not drown her properly?” asked Ruth, “Why didn’t he just finish the job?”

Just then the overhead screen beeped and flickered some information across it. The ME studied it for a moment.

“Blood tox results,” he mumbled to himself. “The same sedative that was found in the other two vics.”

“The proliferation of the drug through her systems indicates that it was in her system for at least half an hour before death.”

“He drugged her then drowned her?” asked Ruth.

“Are you saying that the drowning was accidental?” asked Banks surprised, “How do you accidentally drown your victim? The other two were drowned outright. Why would this be any different?”

“If she took in even a mouthful of water then the cavity would have made it difficult to eject the water completely. The water would have been trying to come out her mouth *and* trachea puncture wound simultaneously. There wouldn’t have been enough force to push it out the mouth because the throat was counteracting it. And while the wound is expelling water, it’s coming back down from the mouth as she

desperately gasps for air.”

“And without being resuscitated she would have—” he began just as Ruth interrupted him.

“Wait, check her mouth for DNA from saliva. Maybe he did try to resuscitate her.”

The ME looked up at Ruth sympathetically, “You know this device would’ve picked up any other DNA. But I will be doing a manual swab of all cavities and surface areas before I wrap up.” He looked back down at the body on the table. “As I was going to say, without being resuscitated she would have gone into a coma. The killer may have assumed she was dead or close to it. And without the natural motion of the lungs being able to bring in sufficient air because the fluid couldn’t be released properly, she would have drowned or suffocated very slowly. Being drugged may not have helped the situation.”

“Shit,” said Banks, “that’s nasty. Now we’ve got an accidental serial killer? I don’t think so.”

“It’s just that it looks like she died before he planned,” she turned to Frank, “he wasn’t expecting her to die. And if his intention wasn’t to drown her or even kill her, yet,” said Ruth, “then that would explain why the placement of the body was rushed.”

“He thumps her down on the ground, she starts spluttering and coming to; the killer does a ‘What the holy hell’, realizes it’s too late with the sound of sirens in the air, and bolts, leaving a tread mark in the process.”

This raised more questions about what the killer was doing, and they still hadn’t come any closer to figuring out the reason for the tracheotomies.

“Placing the victim on a clean white sheet, even under pressure, indicates care, Frank. It could be remorse or some emotional connection to the victim. They aren’t just a piece of waste discarded. But this is odd.”

“I need to carry on here,” interrupted the ME. “If you’re okay with that?”

The ME moved his attention to the wrists of the victim. “Similar markings to those found on the other two victims, indicating restraints.”

Ruth moved away from the table, deep in thought. Frank turned to follow her.

“What’re you thinking, Hicks?” he asked.

“This is a weird setup.” She looked at him intently. “Why drug her if he’s going to drown her? And drowning is not his thing, so it has to be accidental.”

“Ok, we’ve got all we need for now,” said Banks turning to the ME.

“Oh joy. Peace and quiet,” replied the ME, “I will upload the full report as soon as I’m done here. I’ll check stomach contents etcetera just to clarify what he’d given her to eat, if anything.”

“Thanks,” said Ruth, “and if there’s anything that stands out, let us know as soon as.”

They both turned and walked through the theatre door.

“Frank, Mary-Anne, victim number two, was only reported missing two days after the first body turned up.”

“That means that people took two days to miss her.”

“But we found that out when it was too late. Only when Mary-Anne turned up dead did we realise that Missing Persons had been too busy looking at Martha White’s family and work colleagues as suspects, never guessing she was the first of a serial murder.”

The automatic doors leading into the foyer of the high-rise hissed open.

“Okay,” said Frank leading them towards the elevator doors and pressing the up button. “And we only locked onto Liza Chapman’s Soul Trace last week, a few days after Mary-Anne, when we had sifted through over a hundred missing

persons fitting the age of Martha and Mary-Anne. And even then we were lucky by checking age-related cases.”

“Martha White had been missing for approximately two weeks before she died, and so was Mary-Anne. But it was eight days for Liza. So the timing on her is out and definitely wasn’t intentional.”

The elevator dinged and the large double doors opened.

“Yeah,” said Frank as they stepped in side by side while Ruth thumbed the ‘14’ button. “We could either have a really pissed off killer or someone who feels really crap about what happened and is going to over-compensate in some freaky act of remorse.”

“So watch this space.”

#

“You *are* kidding, right?” said Angel turning his attention away from the Screen.

“It goes a far way in explaining the way we found Liza,” replied Ruth, “plus cause of death.”

“If she was accidentally drowned, that would also mean that he was trying some weird shit with water,” said Banks. “I mean if he was dunking her head in water, it would imply that he was either trying to drown her or just mess with her.”

“What about water-boarding?”

“That would cover the face, not necessarily the throat as well, and not in that concentration,” said Frank.

Angel took a deep breath. “Let’s check backgrounds relating to water. That includes Pisces,” he turned to look at the Screen, “Ardra, Scorpio, Aquarius and Cancer. Maybe even an astro that has too much water with a rising water sign as well like Cancer-Cancer, Punarvasu or Gemini sun with rising Cancer. We aren’t looking at the rosy, positive sides to the signs or signs that seem negative; it’s their dark side being revealed that is of prime importance. A water’s negative pole

is like an emotional vampire who can drain the life of even those closest to them. In the emotional sense.” He turned back to Ruth and Frank. “This is more than we had before. Good work guys.” He looked over their heads and addressed the room, “I need minute by minute uploads of missing persons reported today, as they come in,” he boomed, “let’s hope the next vic comes from a functional family who wants to know her every move. Look out for the age, but don’t rule anything out at this stage.”

#

The smell of that night’s dinner lingered through the dimly lit lounge where Ruth lay wide-eyed and exhausted on the sofa. The day had taken up too much of her energy, and although Allen fetching Caleb had helped, she didn’t like breaking her son’s routine, let alone her own routines. It just keeps everything in balance, she believed. She didn’t like Caleb being out of her control, where she didn’t have immediate access to him. Even Allen, her own husband, taking Caleb wasn’t the same thing.

Almost six years ago she’d nearly lost him, and she was neurotic about losing him now. The pang of guilt fluttered through her solar plexus, just in case she forgot. The last few months were taking their toll on her, and today hadn’t helped.

Liza Chapman had been dying in her arms only hours earlier. She had felt the life slowly leave her body and could do nothing about it. All she could do was to hold her and speak to her. Telling her it was okay. Telling her that it was all over and that it was okay to leave.

Caleb had taught her that. Lying on the kitchen floor all those years ago, she had felt her son and her life seeping out of her body like the warm blood she was lying in. She had asked in quiet desperation, What would happen to him? Would he know what had happened? Would he know where to go? Too

many questions at the wrong time.

Recovering in the hospital, she'd had his incubator kept alongside her bed, watching him every day, listening to the heart monitor. She had vowed to find out about lost souls, souls whose bodies die suddenly, who remain here in our world, confused, alone, and unaware that they'd actually died; refusing to believe it.

She had followed her inner voice, guiding her to say what she felt necessary to victims of crimes and accidents. She made sure she was the first one on the scene, and she had coached many trackers to do the same.

"It's all over, Liza," she had said to the delicate lifeless figure in her arms, "we've found you. The pain has finished; your family will know where you are and what has happened. They will all be okay. You don't have to worry about them." She had felt the back of her neck tingling, energy rushing through her, bringing tears streaming down her face. "It's okay to leave now. Feel the light drawing you to it. Feel the beauty and the peace and the Love that is there." She had looked up, "It's time to go now, Liza. You've done what you needed to do." She had lowered her head and sobbed with joy and sadness and whispered in her ear, "I'll find who did this to you," and knew that in the end it was okay for her to let go as well.

The sound of soft padding footsteps brought her back from her thoughts. Allen emerged from the dark hallway leading from the bedrooms.

"Cay's finally asleep," he said softly as he made his way to the kitchen. He took a glass off a shelf and poured water from a jug on the counter.

"I think he picked up on your energy from the day at dinner," he said coming round the sofa. "Yuneesha did say that he was a bit confused about what was happening." He lifted her feet off the couch, sat down, and put them across his lap.

“Shitty day at work, huh?” he asked as he started rubbing her feet.

“Hmm,” she groaned as the relief tingled up her legs.

Allen was her grounding rod, her skeptic, and her realist. When her head was stuck in the clouds, in Soul Land as he called it, he’d always bring her back down to earth. She needed that a lot lately. She would go mad without him. He always gave her a different spin on things, something that flicked a switch or something that just snapped her out of herself.

They had met through a mutual friend, her partner Frank. They had been at one of his rowdy house parties and had somehow ended up on the enclosed patio in a huge argument about religion, spirituality and, according to Allen, the “God-like” theory of tracking souls. Some of the other guests had just stared at them with mild drunken amusement as they battled it out. Frank made light of the situation by standing in between them, nervously sipping his beer.

A year later they were married, with a very amusing send-off by Frank, the best man slash maid of honour, to which they sheepishly chuckled along. Being Allen’s college friend, Frank had always pulled the piss out of the ‘realist’, who he had constantly asked the question “What if...,” to which Allen would reply “But it’s not...”. The final joke for the day was Frank commenting on the fact that Allen had finally seen the light and married “one of us: an idealist.”

And that was why she loved him so much. They were not trying to change each other. They had their views, which sometimes gave them a new perspective on something or just got them thinking. It was never boring, maybe heated, but that led to other things. He was the first person that she felt truly connected to. They were so open about their differences that she seemed to trust him more for it.

Frank had asked her early on in their relationship, how

she could stand to be around Allen if he annoyed her. And they disagreed on some pretty important shit. She had simply replied, “Imagine being around someone who always agreed with you. I don’t want a ‘yes-man’, Frankie.”

“Anybody home?” asked Allen.

“Hi, I’m back,” she said startled. “Sorry about that. Thanks for picking up Cay today.”

“No problem, but I think that you need to chat with him in the morning and let him know that you’re okay. He’s sensitive to your moods.” He stopped, then said, “You are okay, aren’t you? I heard the latest over the radio on the way home. Whose bright idea was it to give the killer that name? They said that the Tracker Unit had named him.”

“Well, somebody had to.” She smiled wryly.

“The Ventriloquist? I mean come on,” said Allen poking her side.

“Hey, it was better than Tracheotomy Man from Rob Collins!” she shoved his hand away. “He is such a jerk.”

“Why the Ventriloquist, though?” he asked seriously.

“Look, we still haven’t got the faintest idea for the killer performing tracheotomies, and before we dismiss it as some freakish fetish, we have to consider the possibility that it’s the key to the killer’s motives.”

“Okay, but it’s not as if it’s what kills the victims,” said Allen.

“Sure, but it gives us something to latch onto in order to profile the killer and his soul,” replied Ruth, “and something as significant as a trache is either just a calling card or it has a real purpose.”

“And you don’t think that it’s just a calling card, do you?”

“Not after what happened this evening,” replied Ruth closing her eyes for a moment. She took in a deep breath then exhaled.

He placed his hand on her thigh. "Tell me about it."

She bit her lip, then began, "We were wrapping up the debriefing in the Room of Hours, having just come back from the ME's. I'm sitting there reliving the last few moments of Liza lying in my arms. I had held her for a while after I had taken her through the release process, and all I kept repeating to her lifeless body was if only we had arrived sooner we could have saved her. She could have at least had the chance to tell us what had happened to her."

"It would definitely make catching the killer a lot easier," said Allen.

"It's not just about that, Allen," she turned to him.

"Sorry, I know," he said.

"It makes their release a lot easier," she said softly, "it means they can let go of this world without the sense of unfinished business. Anyway," she continued, "we're about to leave for the ME's and Angel says that we need to name the killer before the media come up with something stupid. After three victims they know that we're dealing with a serial and they can't resist being the first to give the people something catchy to talk about. It makes our job a lot more difficult when the name assumes a lot of crap about the killer's motives.

"So, Angel says he's got to bring Biyela up to speed; what with that snake politician gunning for him, us, he has to be on top of everything that goes out to the public."

"Yes."

"Anyway," she shook her head and continued, "he's asking for suggestions. And I'm thinking about the cavity in Liza's throat, in Martha's throat and in Mary-Anne's throat. The rest of the crew start mumbling and acting like idiots and that's when Collins comes up with his gem, being completely serious about it, and all the guys start jibing him. So Angel booms, 'Shuddup!' and that's when my hair on my head goes

all prickly and itchy.”

“Ah,” said Allen with a smirk, “intuition kicking in.”

“Quieten down, skeptic,” said Ruth nudging her heel in his crotch.

“Ungh, sorry,” grunted Allen protecting himself. He held her gaze. “What do you think it is?”

“I don’t think, I know,” she said still looking at him, but through him, “he’s doing the talking.”

Allen cocked his head, “How do you mean?”

She looked away, feeling her face getting hot. She swallowed hard. “Whatever the incident was that makes the killer do what he’s doing, the fact is that if you have a tracheotomy, you can’t talk because the air’s not passing through the vocal cords. That means that they’re not talking, they’re listening.”

“Why would they have to listen? Who says he’s even talking?”

“Hey, I’m just telling you what I got,” she said, retrieving her legs and sitting up on the sofa. “He might have had someone in his life that never gave him the opportunity to talk, or they did too much talking. Whatever.”

“I think the hair on my head’s just stood on end. And, that’s not intuition, that’s because it’s creepy. So why not just gag them with a rag and some duct tape?”

“Exactly, a ventriloquist’s dummy can still move its mouth, but can’t talk. It has to sit there and listen.”

“And you don’t see a ventriloquist’s lips moving, but he’s using the dummy to vent his frustrations on the world.”

“Ja, so we’re looking for someone who fits right into society. Not the regular serial type.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Most serial killers either come across as slightly off or they are recluses. If they hold a nine to five then they tend to stay indoors at night, and that’s when they do their thing.”

“So you think the killer’s a party animal?”

“Not quite, but if they’re able to release their frustrations then there’s no reason why they shouldn’t be able to interact on a social level. Keeping the victims for a prolonged period would show that he doesn’t feel the need to go and kill all the time. His nocturnal habits could be quite normal.”

“I didn’t hear all this on the news.”

“I didn’t go into this with the Unit. It’s just my feelings on it. What did the media have to say anyway?”

“Oh, other than the nickname, just vague references to the victim. No name released or cause of death just yet. You know, blowing a lot of hot air around. I thought we’d relax tonight. Get it out of your system for a few hours.”

“Sorry, hon. It’s all still flying through my head at a mile a minute.”

“How about I run you a hot bath?”

“I’d like that,” she said and tilted her head. “Maybe you can join me.”

He twitched an eyebrow, “*Hey.*”

“Hey, nothing,” she smacked his chest, “just a hot bath.”

#

Steam clung to the ceiling like a thick fog, looking down at her lying in the bath. The white wall tiles and paintwork always reminded her of the hospital. It looked like it smelled. Cold. She could smell the white linen. She could smell the drips. She could smell the chromed bed frame. The cold hands. The cold needles. The cold cotton swabs cleaning, disinfecting.

She closed her eyes and shuddered in the steaming water. The noises from outside intruded. She glanced up at the ceiling again. Music filtered through the closed glass window. She reached a steaming foot out of the water and awkwardly opened the hot tap, cool for a moment, then boiling hot. She

breathed in the damp air, and shut the tap off with her other foot.

She took in a deep breath and then under she went. Silence. Warm, womb-like silence. Her eyes closed out the light from above. A dark, quiet redness enveloped her. She could hear a gentle beating — her heart soothing and calming her. She could sense it slowing down as it reacted to the lack of oxygen. Slowing more. Calming her. Quiet. If only for a minute.

Then, a tinkle; someone in the block dropping a coin on a hard floor. It could have been a floor above her, or a floor below her, but it sounded like it was right in the bath with her. Her heart picked up pace. A chair grated along a floor, and a fucking toilet flushed.

She screamed a loud, frothing, bubbling scream, that no-one else could hear, “SHUT THE FUCK UP,” and burst out the water.



FILE: Ma'at Cast
Transmitted 22:00 UTC
ce 2038, September 8

```
mkdir audiobot//  
if (!audio.content.startsWith(ma-at))  
{!serverQueue} {  
'download started: 22:01 UTC'  
if (audio.content.startsWith(`${ma-at}play`));
```

Now, world, what would you have me do?

The soul tracking system is taking root around the globe, and the world willingly watches on as the flagship unit in South Africa continues to fumble in the darkness. And though they wish to be the faint light that pushes back the dark, what would the world be without shadows? After all, shadows are cast by objects and people. As the goddess Ma'at, I seek the balance.

```
'download interrupted: 22:03...'  
'redirecting server: download resumed: 22:04'
```

What is the purpose of my addressing you, yet again?
What is the nature of my undertakings, seen or unseen?

Awakening of your selves and your freedoms. And as such, I play guide for humanity, whether liked or not.

```
'Corruption/Fragmentation... Data loss.'
```

My loving people, call me Elizabeth, Emmeline,
Hatshepsut, Maya, Sojourner, Virginia or any other name

you like. It doesn't matter. I have burnt like a beacon, as so many have, in all the worlds from the beginning of time. I was never the slave of man who would force a ring upon my finger, a yoke around my neck. I stand for those of you who have been, and I do not place the same around your necks. I do not distrust the people of the world so much as to wish to control them. No. Rather, let the tyrants fear.

```

function stop(audio, serverQueue) {
  if (!audio.voiceChannel) return
  message.channel.send('Illegal Audio Stream');
  serverQueue.audio = [];
  serverQueue.connection.dispatcher.end();
}
'Download terminated: 22:28'
'illegal broadcast blocked'
'initiate IP scramble'
'disconnect server'
'search-string: ma'at_cast_08_2038...'

```

CHAPTER 2

I think I was walking into the main intersection when I started noticing that I had already removed my jacket, tie, and shirt and was beginning to undo my belt. The fact that the belt was now hooked in one of my pants loops had obviously caused me some confusion and irritation, enough for my subconscious mind to say, “Hey, what the hell?” and I began to realize what I was doing.

I could taste blood. The inside of my lips were all pulpy and, from what my senses allowed through, were stinging a tad.

By now the ringing noise in my right ear had started to get annoying and I found that sticking my finger in my ear and wiggling it, for some reason, aggravated my teeth.

Looking up for a moment from the tarred road under my feet, I found myself bang in the middle of the intersection. The fact that no cars had hit me was less perplexing than that there were cars everywhere except in the intersection.

I looked from traffic light to traffic light — green to red, red to green — but still no cars bothered to go. That’s when the ringing in my ear seemed to get louder and louder. I looked to my left as two or three cars moved apart, revealing flashing red and white lights. If I hadn’t yet registered what it was, I was kindly told by a blur of person and voice flashing past me. “...AMBULANCE, DICK!”

I watched, totally bewildered, as the back of the ambulance stuttered and swerved into the yawning wall of cars in its path. What is it about a siren? It just draws you to it. You can’t help but wonder, in the back of your mind, what just happened?

#

“And that’s what I’ve dreamed since I was a kid,” finished

Allen matter-of-factly.

Ruth sat for a moment, and stared wide eyed across the breakfast table at him.

“What,” he asked her self-consciously and bit into his toast.

She swallowed her mouthful of cereal. “Why haven’t you ever told me about this before?” She sounded irritated and wiped her mouth.

Allen shifted in his seat, “Well, I haven’t had it for a while. Not since Caleb was born. Come to think of it, it was while you two were still in the hospital. I forgot about it and considering what was going on at the time I just didn’t remember to tell you.”

“So how many times have you had this dream?” she asked, sitting back and folding her arms.

“I dunno.” A toy car rounded the corner of the kitchen doorway and bumped into Allen’s chair. He bent down to push it back through the doorway. “Sheeow,” he sounded and looked up at Ruth. “Maybe five or six times.”

“And each time it’s the same thing?”

“Ja, pretty much. But as I’ve gotten older I’ve been able to clearly see and describe some of the details. So it’s not like anything new comes up or that it changes in anyway.” The sound of Caleb imitating a car made them both turn to the doorway as he emerged, crawling on the floor and pushing the toy on the tiled surface.

“Any ideas on what it means?” she asked turning back to Allen.

“Not a clue.”

“But if you’ve had it since you’re a kid, haven’t you changed in the dream? You know, aged or anything?”

“Well, that’s the funny thing,” pondered Allen, “the person is me and it isn’t me. If you know what I mean.”

“Not at all.”

“I’m the person. I’m seeing everything through their eyes

and all that, and feeling everything, but, I don't know," he looked up at the ceiling. "I know that I'm about twenty-eight, and my hair is lighter than mine and straight, not curly."

"So you're someone else? But you're still you?"

Caleb sat under the table and pushed the car around himself, hand over hand it zoomed.

"That sounds a bit out there, but that seems about right," Allen turned to look at her.

"Shit, Allen! Do I just talk and things float through your bloody head and off into oblivion?"

Caleb stopped pushing his car and looked up at Ruth.

"Pardon?" Allen asked surprised. She stood up and took her plate to the sink.

"That's probably a past life that you're reliving."

"Oh come on. It's a flipping dream, and that's all."

"Crap!" she turned on her feet. "A recurring dream has variations of it, and you're saying that in all the time that you've had yours nothing has changed." She walked over to him and picked up his plate. He quickly grabbed the remaining toast off it. "A past life vision will change only in that it reveals more detail or more of the story, but not in its basic flow." She ran the tap over the dishes, her hand feeling the water begin to warm up.

"You sound like one of those TV shrinks. 'I'm going to take you back, back to your lives before this one...,'" whispered Allen in a hypnotic voice.

"Hey, Pal. Don't knock what you don't understand," said Ruth, flicking water across the room. "Besides, those guys are doing it for the effect. That doesn't make it crap." She picked up the dishcloth from beside the toaster.

"All I'm saying is that you're making too much out of nothing. I'll stick to Jung's theories on dream analysis," he raised his hand, "and that's as far as I'll go. And let's face it..."

"At least be open to asking yourself some questions about

it,” she flicked the cloth over her shoulder and stood looking down at Allen. “See if there’s anything more.”

“Meaning?” he asked looking up at her.

“Meaning, if you run through it while you’re awake and ask some basic questions like: what happened before; what happened after; those questions will be floating around your subconscious when you’re sleeping and may trigger the dream again and maybe some answers as well.”

“Ah,” Allen said and tapped his chin. “Points to ponder: why is my wife such a nut, and will she end up institutionalized or on TV?”

Smack. Ruth snapped the cloth across Allen’s shoulder.

“Shit!” he moaned as he nursed his injury.

“That’s for being a smartass,” she said, tossed the cloth in his face, and headed out the kitchen.

Caleb quietly chuckled under the table. “Daddy got smacked.”

“Time for school, Caleb,” called Ruth.

Caleb’s smile disappeared.

“You were saying, kid,” said Allen, peering under the table.

#

“We may have invented emission-free cars, but damn it if we can’t invent gridlock-free roads,” said Ruth to Caleb in the back seat gazing out at the buzz of the early morning city.

Even with the auto-drive, the stopping and starting still frustrated her. Her twenty-thirty-two model transporter was still fairly up to date with the latest updates installed and functioning.

When she was growing up, her stepfather had been convinced that by 2030 people would be flying around in their cars, either magnetically hovering or antigravity, like many of the science fiction stories that he read. To her amazement, when she was a teenager, it was looking like

it was all a possibility. Until one of the heads of state had pointed out that, recently, his energy source on his brand new eco-car had died, literally. It wasn't drawing any energy, and the entire system would have to be replaced because of the intricacies of the device.

The implication was, as he pointed out on live broadcast, that if this should happen to flying vehicles, you would simply have them falling out of the sky. No pull over to the curb to put in petrol, or recharge or any of that antedated stuff.

Needless to say, the political satirists had a field day, not all painting the said head of state in a positive light.

And soon the vehicle manufacturers were putting their money into more efficient energy, and the novelty officially wore off.

Even just to hover two metres off the ground. Just enough to get out of this monotony.

A spittle-filled gush brought her back to the moment: Caleb, in the rearview, whooshing his toy car around his head.

"You and me both," she said.

He glanced at her, mid-flight. "Are we there yet, Mommy?"

Ruth looked into the distance over the cars lining Simelane Street running north, the sixty-metre high SAPS Durban Central building barely visible, and sighed. She reluctantly took her hands off the steering console. Letting something else be in control of where she was going in life was not something she did too easily. Five years later and auto-drive technology still wasn't something she trusted. It was bad enough having Allen drive them on the weekends. And he insisted on no auto-anything.

"Cay," she said, repositioning herself so that her back wasn't so badly contorted. "I need to explain why I wasn't able to take you home yesterday."

He stopped his flying car simulation and looked up at Ruth wide-eyed.

“Well,” she continued, “I had to work late. Something happened to a lady, and we need to find out what happened to her.”

“Something bad?”

“Yeah,” she said and gritted her teeth. “Bad. But, also good for her. She went to the light.”

“Light,” his eyes sparkled.

She nodded, feeling the energy well up inside her. She felt her face redden. She took a deep breath.

“I bet you Mommy talked to the lady?”

“Yes, Cay. I talked to the lady.”

“I think she’ll be okay if Mommy talked to her,” he said casually picking up his car.

“Are we okay then?”

He thought, then replied, “We’re better than okay, Mommy.”

#

The People Mover, Durban’s inner-city bus, glided quietly east along Kaseme Street. The air-conditioning and sealed windows muted out the city’s sounds and, thankfully, its scents.

Boarding the bus outside his apartment block twenty minutes earlier, the thick smell of the sea hung over the entire city, the one thing Geoff detested about Durban. He could deal with the sickly sweet molasses of the sugar terminals in the harbour, even the harbour’s swampy mud at low tide, but the fish-tinged onshore breeze was his worst.

Cocooned in the glass bubble of the bus, and hunched over on the window-length seat to guard against squashing his laptop backpack, he paused the voice playing from his mobile through his earbuds.

Geoff couldn’t remember a time before the twenty-first century. The infodump of events the androgynous AI voice in

his ear had just finished describing were history, legend, and conspiracy theories he knew all too well. But, like most of the Ma'at legends, there were too many to pin down and track. The internet had morphed into a black hole of bullshit. The Second Net had been a congested disaster.

Cycling through his mobile apps to the *Durban Metro Transport*, he launched it and clicked the menu to find its red “My Stop” button. Geoff very much took for granted the technology pulsing through his palm and the airwaves around him. Whether it was really the mysterious Ma'at, the goddess or the secret organization, Geoff understood enough about technology to know that AI would be replicating the voice of the latest diatribe to match the earliest recordings in 1888 of the four-thousand-year-old persona.

What AI could not replicate, and what the internet could not fake, was the past annals of the “immortal” character of Ma'at. He used “immortal” very lightly.

But in this age of multiple dimensions, energy sources and tracking souls, immortal wasn't too far fetched.

Geoff swiped back to the video app and dragged his finger left along the timeline, the onscreen text rapidly flickering then slowing as he cued it near the start of the file. He hit the play icon for the fifth time that morning.

For just as humankind evolved, so too did your tribes and your ancestors; elders became leaders, became sovereigns, and those were soon replaced by the duly elected, by the people. And, as is the nature of man, those entrusted with the power of the people moved in and out of the shadows.

I have witnessed it all. I have witnessed it all repeated. I have followed the patterns and mapped the cycles. Birth to Death. Destruction and Renewal. The rise and fall. Mehen. Ouroboros. Humankind. Serpents devouring their own tails. Wisdom is gained, then ignored. Knowledge is buried and godlike

abilities stifled for a collective control. Superior beings, superior sovereigns, are willingly handed the keys to your souls. Omnipotent gods. Omnipresent rulers. They are all things to no one; all ambivalent to their people. Their people controlled by long dead, impotent gods; controlled by immune leaders.

Blocked by most servers and streaming sites, Geoff had eventually tracked down a glitchy version of the file within half an hour of it being uploaded at 12AM Central African Time this morning. He had got the gist of the overall speech and, rather than scouring the net further and being completely exhausted for his first day at the Museum, waited until he woke for the day to grab a transcribed video version. He knew that transcripts, commentaries, and even fake edits would be making their way onto various message boards and chats. It would be dissected like a sacred specimen: conspiracy theories growing like viruses and the sycophants preaching their interpretations to their flocks of followers.

Geoff looked over his shoulder, confirming the passing post office building, signifying his approaching stop and pressed the “My Stop” button on his mobile. Thirty seconds before the bus would come to a halt, he paused the video, freezing the frame on “*What revolution of civilization—*” text and swiped through his screen to his CCTV app. Four thumbnails appeared in a square grid, with stats and information autoscrolling beneath, each labeled according to location around the city. *City Hall, Juma Masjid Mosque, Elangeni-Maharani Hotel, and Moses Mabhida Stadium.*

He swiped back to the previous app, pressed play on the video player and turned the device off and stood. Geoff grabbed the overhead bar, getting his balance with his free hand, and pocketed his device.

What revolution of civilization, what renaissance, what crusade, will humanity use to justify your self-

imposed chains? The more you progress the more you are enslaved, by your own hand and those you elect to protect you.

Again, I share with you the knowledge, the truths and the guidance for a better world. But, I know too well that it will be filtered, blocked and fragmented. Hatshepsut dedicated a temple to me, and she was almost erased. We will not be silenced.

I stand today, as I have done for millennia, at the ready and asking my eternal question: Now, world, what would you have me do?

The bus stopped and Geoff stepped down through the opening doors onto the pavement and headed towards the crosswalk. The familiar morning air hit his face, momentarily mixed with the fresh curry smells of the Churchwalk flea market to the side. The bustling noise of the city was barely muted behind the voice still in his ears.

I walk among you, and fight beside you, not for my own power and prestige or veneration as a goddess, but to live and die with you all; to lay down for our common beliefs, for our world and our peoples. You don't think you want me, but you need me.

Geoff came up alongside the yellow traffic pole with the flashing red "do not cross" figure and paused the video.

Back at the videofeeds screen, he tapped the "City Hall" block, and then gazing up, looked diagonally across the war memorial gardens to Anton Lembede Street and the stretch of squat high-rises of the Royal Hotel, Assurance House and Aqua Sky Towers. The last, on the corner of Lembede and Nyembe streets, provided the ideal location for one of Geoff's falcon nest boxes. Many of the city's pest birds — mynas, feral pigeons and Eurasian starlings — congregated around the park he was about to cut through.

As part of his thesis he'd received permission to set up four

bird's nests around the city to help contain the growing flocks of pest species. Here, his falcons were top of the food chain, keeping the masses under control. But, as with any project attempting to control nature, it didn't always work like that. Others had tried and failed to implement various solutions, including peregrine falcons, so there were no guarantees that this project of Geoff's would work in the long run. Territorial battles, rogue raptors coming into the city and even diseases from the targeted pests could easily overcome the smaller raptor.

He looked up at the grey, blue sky. A few pigeons fluttered overhead and he heard the distinct whistle of a starling before it came to rest on the opposite traffic light.

"Where are you?" he whispered to himself and scanned the skyline.

The squeak of vehicle brakes brought him back to the crosswalk and the now glowing green man. He pressed play and proceeded over street, heading onto the City Hall block, the large concrete-coloured building to his left.

Though your souls, for now, reside in an imperfect body, on a mortal plane, you too can embody the power, determination and might of a powerful goddess. For are you not a goddess, a woman, a man? You have as much muscle as anyone. Do not look to me as your savior but as your guide. A reluctant guide; a necessary guide; an unwavering guide. You are your own saviours. Those in power are afraid to give you your rights for fear you will take too much. But they cannot take what they cannot hold. Your soul. Fight, with all of it.

Geoff checked the trees and palms lining the memorial gardens, then back at the sky.

Then, something to his right. He took out the earbud to get a better listen and waited. There it was again.

He heard her before he saw her.

The distinct small, dark shape of the peregrine falcon became visible fifty metres above the City Hall's dome. Geoff smiled. Technology was great for monitoring, but seeing her in action was what made field work worthwhile.

He pivoted and walked backwards, eyes peeled on the starling still perched on the traffic pole. He counted down in his head: *Three, two* – The bird squawked and took off, low to the ground heading for the nearby building's entrance. A flock of about fifteen pigeons burst from the pavement, scattering in all directions.

He sniggered to himself and replaced his earbud, the voice continuing:

You should not have to rely on me. All acts, evolutions, varieties and possibilities reside on this single planet. All knowledge lies above, before and beneath you. All that has, is and shall be, remain at your fingertips. The DNA of the Earth is present as humankind's repository. But, in a world that should cultivate omniscience, knowledge, as the source of the world, humanity regurgitates rather than originates. Acts of terror, acts of war, acts of nature, all bring you to your knees as you readily hand over your freedoms, won with your ancestors' blood, for perceived omnipotent protection, salvation and freedoms.

Omnipotence is your impotence. Rather put your lives in your own hands.

Warnings come from experience. Knowledge is shared with you out of love. Your computer simulations extrapolate, and yet you do not deviate. Tolerance meets ignorance.

Through the park and turning left, Geoff took in the expanse of the 120-year-old Neo-Baroque building rising before him. As a kid, City Hall's elaborate front entrance and

decorative side entrances had intimidated him: always closed and imposing. And yet, the entrance to the Museum, a hundred metres further on, thrilled him with the fascinations within. A passerby nudged past him, and he sidestepped onto the secondary sidewalk among the palm trees.

Humankind trundles along without much self-awareness. By separating yourselves into generations, differentiating from those who came before you, the young are so eager to outdo, outperform, one-up and out-moralise the previous generation that you search and find but do not learn or implement. And if you do, you simply build on the bones and rubble of those who came before.

After a few metres, he was out onto the concrete stairway and away from the milieu of people heading to work. Two wrought-iron balustrades drew the eye up to the imposing archway and ornate wooden doors standing open, leading into an interior as dramatic as the facade. Quirky chandeliers departed from the formal colonial air, decorated with various bird feathers and crystals.

Your myopic vision of histories blinds you to the empires that have gone before you. Cataracts of creeping ego blot out the truth and the light as you refuse to seek out and learn, of your own accord, from the civilisations long hidden from view: the plethora of African dynasties and empires, that rose and fell, transcending the tribal notions of the West; the realms of the Aztecs or Incans relegated to barbarism; or the seagoing, Asian empires discovering worlds long before others — as if a handful of neat narratives sufficed. Hubris is a volatile thing.

How did you get here? At one time you, the individual listening now, were free. When did you hand over your freedoms, take them back and hand them over yet again?

Heading towards the wide carpeted stairway at the far end of the foyer, Geoff swiped across his device to pause the voice again, wanting to fully take in the atmosphere.

Let me shed a flicker of light.

Some of you may be old enough to recall the turn of the twenty-first century when—

#

“Hey, Yuneesha,” Ruth said to a woman standing at the entrance to the daycare.

Situated in the single floor annex at the back of the SAPS Durban Central complex, the daycare rooms and grassed quad were almost permanently in the cool shadow cast by the seventeen-story blue-clad, grey concrete structure.

Yuneesha turned with a beaming smile as she saw Caleb running and diving at her.

“Cay!” she said with a grunt as she caught and lifted him. Almost immediately he got distracted by the other kids down below and squirmed his way out of her arms into the noise and chaos.

Both women shook their heads and laughed.

Having your kids at the squad’s daycare was one of the perks of being a Tracker. Unless of course you didn’t have children. But considering the environment, it was the best place for a child. Still in its infancy, it was attracting some of the top psychologists, coaches, teachers, and caregivers from around the world.

Other than glorified daycare for the squad children, its main purpose was to rehabilitate souls. This was one of the more unsettling, grey areas, especially if your child was one being rehabbed. Many heated discussions in the media had parents arguing that they would rather put their children up for adoption than face the prospects of whose souls their

children had inherited. Despite the ideal scenario repeatedly explained by the head of the Tracker Unit and various spokespeople, the public was divided. Despite her own reservations, Ruth was hopeful. For the first six years of their lives, the kids were given all they needed to develop their true potential.

Unlike the fortified clinics inland, which catered for captured and convicted criminals, this clinic was for those that died on attempted arrest or died while still being tracked. Some, many years later.

Based on the fourteenth floor of the old C.R. Swart building, the true purpose of the Soul Trackers, other than stopping a criminal in his tracks, was to track the souls of killers that, if not captured and rehabilitated, would later die and be reborn usually to repeat or relearn what the soul had intended to learn on the earth plane.

It had long been proven that there was no such thing as bad or evil souls, let alone a heaven or hell destination as a threat hanging over a person. The Universe, Source, or godhead was the only destination. That collective mass of energy permeating through all matter. The body/mind/ego/person, or whatever you want to label it, decides how their life is experienced and acted out. Therefore, good and bad only exist on earth. Good and Bad are what we label an action or experience. Our human judgment placed on a human action.

Learning specific lessons on the Earth Plane allows the soul to attain a higher level on the Soul Plane. Becoming, in essence, closer to God. The ultimate state of bliss. Those souls that experience negative deeds, or don't fully experience what they set out to experience, come back to relive them until they fully experience the soul's lesson.

For the Trackers, it meant keeping a close eye on the tracked soul when it moved from the Earth Plane, on the Screen, to the Etheric Plane. It was hypothesized that if a soul

went on to the Soul Plane, it would be cleansed and renewed. If it came back to the Earth Plane, it was considered 'safe', and removed from all tracking systems.

The rehab children leaving the facility, back to their natural parents or foster care after age six, would continue to be monitored into early adulthood. But no children had reached the release age yet.

The rebirth of a soul had many ramifications. It meant the State taking away your newborn child, without question. Lots of drama. Lots of debate. But it was as sure and final as any criminal sentencing.

Placed in the Facility, the child was nurtured and encouraged, overcoming the possibilities of criminal behaviour as the only means to learn its lessons. The past life and actions were analysed and broken down into possible life lessons. Those lessons were then integrated into the particular child's program — from caregiver characteristics, to the basic activities and daily functions of the program.

Though never encountered by the team, Walk-ins were another murky part of the soul's journey. Angel had, on only two occasions that she could recall, mentioned the Walk-in theory: usually a traumatic event or death could mean a soul would attach to the real world, or a living being. The level of trauma, plus the soul's desire to complete its purpose before transitioning, factored into this becoming a reality. His concerns had been shut down as superstitious.

Ruth always wondered how Caleb would be if he was at a regular school; how would he grow up and what he would be like as a young adult. But with him here, she never worried about the future. And with him being so close by, she often considered the new mothers who had to leave their children in strange hands for the day. Here she could come and go, and watch Caleb from a distance.

A flutter of butterflies hit her gut as she realized it was

coming to an end soon. Caleb would be turning six the following year, meaning Grade R was his next phase of schooling. He would no longer be in Yuneesha's trusted hands, and no longer close by. She knew he would be fine, though.

"Sorry about having to get Allen to pick him up yesterday."

"No worries, Ruth," she replied.

"I spoke to Cay on the way here. He seems okay, but just chat with him and make sure he's okay about the break in the routine."

"Sure, he's probably fine if you've spoken about it," she turned to the open play area. Some of the caregivers hovered around the play-gyms while others kept to the edges, watching and monitoring.

"Say," Yuneesha turned back to Ruth, "how are you doing? I heard you had a rough one."

Ruth lifted a suspicious eyebrow, "Frank been visiting again?"

Yuneesha shrugged her shoulders innocently.

"I'm okay, I guess," she said and shoved her hands in her pockets. "We just gotta find this guy, Yuneesha."

"I know you will," she pulled Ruth in for a hug. "After all, they've got a woman on the case."

They both laughed in each other's arms. It was a brief break from what Ruth was about to go back into in a few minutes.

After Ruth and Caleb were discharged from hospital, and with Allen working from home, she spent six months recuperating with her son at her side. On returning to work, Yuneesha was the one person she would entrust her son to at the Facility. Being able to come over during lunch breaks and the quick update on Caleb's progress, at drop-off and pick-up, brought the two women closer together. They shared more than just her son's well-being. She was the closest person to

her, other than Allen. Sometimes she felt like Yuneesha was more her caregiver than Caleb's.

#

As Curator of Birds for the past seven years, Allen had seen his share of interns and assistants pass through the Museum doors. But, the short, already balding, ponytailed twenty-two-year-old who had just ambled into the department offices with a wave, slid his backpack onto a desk, and plonked himself down in an empty chair was, Allen was certain, a higher being's idea of 'trial by fire'.

Lecturing at the University of KwaZulu-Natal over the past three years had tested Allen's calm resolve, with constant reminders to himself that he was passing on valuable information to the next batch of zoologists and ornithologists in South Africa. Geoffrey Niranjan epitomized that new student. Geoff was everything that Allen wasn't. Although, sometimes he tried to convince himself that the brains side of that rationale didn't enter into it. If quick-wittedness could hide stupidity, Allen doubted it. He had to concede that Geoff *was* sharp. The dopey hats and shorts that didn't match his stained shirts, or sandals, deftly hid the buzzing mind beneath the disheveled exterior. Whether he recorded them or had a mind like a sponge, none of Allen's lectures at the university were lost on Geoff. He was one of the brightest and most single-minded, and Geoff knew it.

"Geoff," said Allen.

His student was transfixed by something he was watching on his portable screen in his hands.

One of the reasons he had enlisted the young man's help for the next few days wasn't as his student intern but as a favour to Allen.

"Geoff!" Allen's voice echoed around the high ceilings.

"Uh?" grunted Geoff blankly.

“Did you bring your updated software?” he said.

“Sorry, what?” asked Geoff and removed an earbud.

“Am I disturbing your entertainment?” asked Allen with a raised eyebrow.

Geoff swiped a finger around his screen, removed the other earbud then looked up at Allen and said, “Sorry. Non-feathered research, prof.”

“And what research is so captivating?” Allen asked reluctantly. His student tended to veer off on dark internet tangents during lecture Q and As, and Allen would have to reel him back in.

“Na,” he held up the screen, “reading the annotated transcript while I listen to the reversioned September eighth Ma’at live stream.”

“Annotated? Reversioned?” Allen cocked his head.

“Sure,” Geoff stood up and walked blindly towards Allen’s desk, pushing at his screen.

Allen caught a glimpse of the faded, white encircled feather symbol on Geoff’s black t-shirt. An ostrich feather.

“This one vlogger,” said Geoff, “takes the Ma’at streams and adds his research and facts to the original.” He placed the screen in front of Allen on the desk. “As usual, many of the streams are blocked and corrupted or fragmented by government viruses. Anyway, this vlogger pieces it all together and then makes sense of the usual infodumps, allegations and insinuations.”

“Oh,” remarked Allen, “by infodumps you mean,” he finger-hooked the air, “‘her’ one-sided history lessons?”

“Yeah.” He gave a smirk. “Something like that, oh nonbeliever.”

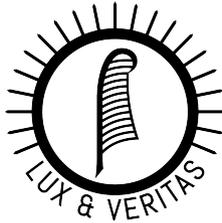
“Before we get into a metaphysical debate about the chances of your Ma’at actually being 3000 years old, let alone responsible for civilisation’s progress as we know it,” Allen picked up Geoff’s device and continued, “can you please pause

your busy research and let's get started on the displays. We'll need the cabinets that were delivered earlier. Are you able to fetch the male as well as the juvenile samples of the malachites from the archives down the hall first?" he paused for effect. "Kingfisher. If you need to know which species I'm referring to. Bird, in case you've forgotten what subject we study here on planet Earth."

Geoff rolled his eyes, replaced each earbud, and leaned over the desk to press something on the side of his device screen. Something resembling a guitar whine tinned out of Geoff's ears.

"Banging on the door, let me in!" squealed Geoff as he strolled off towards the archives room, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Looking back at the device, Allen straightened the screen to take a closer look at a strip of text scrolling along the bottom. A striking crest sat in the top centre of the screen on a dark purple background, lines radiating from the centre and the words *'Lux et Veritas'* in a simple font beneath it.



Allen now recognized the iconic feather, similar to the one adorning Geoff's shirt, the emblem used to represent Ma'at, the elusive and mysterious persona that had cropped up throughout history. The audio and text was familiar to him. It had been in the news segments summarised this morning, segments downloaded by millions of people around the world, he assumed. As much as he hated what Ma'at claimed, immortality, he had to agree with the truths and philosophical mumbo jumbo that she spewed forth.

For over 4000 years, the name Ma'at had appeared at crucial moments in the world's history, usually claiming to be exposing some truth or revealing what was, until then, a secret unseen to the world.

"Research?"

Allen jumped back with an involuntary squeal. Geoff stood smugly holding two specimen trays.

"In fact," Allen raised a shaky finger, "I was studying the crest. The ostrich feather to be precise."

"Whatever," replied Geoff placing the trays on one of the empty examination tables and slapping on a pair of blue latex gloves from a dispenser.

Allen turned off the device as he stood from behind his desk. "So," he said walking over to the trays and handing it to Geoff, "you're obviously a fan of the immortal goddess, Ma'at."

"Obviously," replied Geoff taking the screen from Allen and slipping it into a pocket, "she's a legend."

"Self-proclaimed, apparently."

"Hell, prof," Geoff whispered as he gently picked up a specimen and slowly turned it over in his hand. The metallic-blue head, back and wings glistened in the overhead light to then reveal the rust-coloured undersides. "Even you have to admit that she's put the churches and religious practitioners of the world in their place." He held out the bird in his palm, the near translucent orange bill pointed out like a spear in Allen's direction.

"And in so doing has created a new religion, by default," said Allen. "We need one a bit larger for an adult example."

Geoff scanned over the second tray. "Speaking the truth doesn't automatically make her a wannabe messiah."

"Sure, but putting people in their place with so called truths about the world we live in, on the one hand, and on the other, she skulks around in secret claiming immortality. A

bit rich don't you think?" Allen pointed out an ideal specimen and Geoff nodded.

"So you think she's a hypocrite? Just for having a bit of poetic license. Four thousand years can get a bit boring for the ou."

"I wouldn't necessarily call her a hypocrite."

Geoff placed the new specimen on the table and said, "So what would you call her," and folded his arms.

"A liar."

Geoff chuckled. "Alright, prof, maybe. But she hasn't claimed immortality for over a thousand years." He pointed out a smaller juvenile bird.

"Implied immortality," Allen said and nodded to the other man, "and coming right out and saying it is the same thing."

"Research done on the voice patterns from the mid nineteen hundreds and the most recent cast has shown a ninety-nine percent similarity," said Geoff.

"And these same computers are used to mimic that very voice pattern," said Allen folding his arms. "Come now, Geoffrey. Try another one."

"Fine," Geoff said, rolling his eyes, "enigma aside. She does make sense."

"Agreed, but as I said before, all that happens is that we replace one messiah for another. One hero worship for another."

"As you know, she shuns worship of any kind and asks for no followers."

"Spoken like a true disciple," said Allen. "And how do you know it's not a group of old white guys in smoking jackets guffawing in some darkened hall?"

"Touché, prof," pointed Geoff. "I admit that I like her. Real or imagined. Woman or man. She's got charisma for an old fart. But it feels good having Big Sister watching," he touched his nose suspiciously, "Big Brother."

Allen smiled. "Speaking of Big Brother, how's your falcon project?"

Geoff's face lit up at the mention of his fieldwork project. "I'll show you the CCTV links later when the birds are back at the nests. But, it's going well. The pest populations are down to more manageable numbers."

Allen sighed and leaned against the table. "I still want to twist your arm into coming on the boat with us. I'm about to do my one hundred and forty-eighth excursion on the navy's Namacurra II."

"Prof." Geoff raised his hands. "You're the self-confessed petrelhead. Me? I'm a land-loving city boy. You won't get me on your boat to count any seabirds."

"Well, someone should airdrop *you* on Marion Island and leave you there for over a year. The failed 2020 poison-drop that nearly wiped out all the birds, let alone any mice, would have been the embarrassing legacy of that team's contributions had it not been for the Great Pandemic. The unique isolation provided by that tiny island in the sub-Antarctic Indian Ocean gave them the perfect environment to successfully develop the vaccine the following year."

"Wasn't that the first and only team forced to extend their stay beyond the thirteen months? Nearly two years or something? Rumour has it that some of them didn't cope with the quarantine."

Allen shook himself out of the memories, then said, "The birds had barely recovered by the time we were back ten years later, but I guarantee you'd at least solve the rodent problem." He gave Geoff a smile.

"If not the falcons," Geoff sidled up to Allen and whispered, "a well-executed drone strike."

Allen laughed and pushed himself off the table. "Don't let Big Brother hear you say that, Geoff."

Geoff thought a moment as something dawned on him.

“You were on the island when it all changed, weren’t you?”

Allen made his way back to his desk and sat down.

“That’s right,” Geoff’s eyes seemed to sparkle. “You were part of the last overwintering team to be allowed on Marion Island.”

“Marion87,” Allen said and tented his fingers in thought. “We left Durban harbour in April, 2030. Back the following May in 2031. I was just a field assistant birder back then, seabirds.” He shook himself out of his past. “Jesus, everything changed when I got back.”

“There’s so many rumours about that place now.”

“I’m sure some have truth to them,” said Allen and leaned on his desk. “From where we were leaving from the meteorological station at Transvaal Cove on the northeast side of Marion,” he circled a spot on his desk with his finger, “we could see the massive Oryx M3 helicopters dropping off crates on Prince Edward Island.” He drew a smaller circle to the top right. “Three ships docked as close to McNish Bay on the south side as they could.”

“Didn’t the government say something about it being part of the 2017 radio probe programme?”

Allen thought for a moment then nodded and said, “You’re right. The South African National Antarctic Programme launched that year. Prism or something.”

“P-R-I-Z-M,” Geoff spelled out the acronym as he swiped his mobile screen. “*Probing Radio Intensity at high-Z from Marion*, supposedly searching for signatures of the hydrogen line in the early universe.”

“Talk about Big Brother,” Allen said. “And who’s to say that Big Brother isn’t Big Sister? Ma’at.”

“Exact-fuckin-ly,” blurted out Geoff.

“Excuse me?” said Allen.

“That’s exactly what Ma’at wants us to assume. Is it the government? Is it Ma’at and her Org? We need to make up our

own minds, and never make up our minds. Always go with our guts.”

“Make up our own minds? But she always goes over the same history lessons trying to show her view of the world and how *she* evolved it. As if her truths suddenly brought on something she compares to the renaissance? Then, we know how man’s search for new energy evolved from theories into revelations and how the Soul Tracker technology emerged from those findings. We don’t need summaries.”

“Some of us weren’t there, remember. Some of us haven’t been around since the ark. But dusting off the mystic concepts of déjà vu, karma, heaven and hell, and past lives all aided those great minds in getting us where we are today. But I do wonder sometimes how the tracker technology popped out onto the scene so suddenly.”

“You mean you buy into Ma’at’s ramblings on that and not that good hardworking scientists came up with the results?”

“It was too quick. The jump was too fast, prof.”

“Oh, little green men came down and graciously imparted us with their wisdom, did they? Us humans could never evolve by ourselves without some greater power nudging us along?”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Geoff.

“Your Ma’at, for all her freethinking, is pretty closed-minded to the tracker system. You’d think she’d back off on the fear-mongering. She can take her fear-mongering to another planet.”

“I thought you weren’t a hundred percent behind your wife’s occupation?”

“And I thought you were studying ornithology, Geoff, a very scientific subject that requires research and theories and solutions to questions? Definite answers.”

“But even you’ve said that we must never assume something, even when it’s staring us in the face. Theories are

there to be screwed with until you have concrete proof. And even that proof is subjective, depending on who's doing the proving."

"Why is it that it sounds like sense when it comes out my mouth but when it comes from a raving nut-job it has some bizarre meaning to it?"

"Every now and then," whispered Geoff, "when I've filtered out all the technical jargon, you do speak some sense, prof."

Allen looked surprised.

"It's almost like you've found your own beliefs in the world that you study."

"That's why I say," said Allen proudly, "your life is your church. Your soul is your God. And your actions are your miracles that you perform every day. Anyone else tells you different is imposing their beliefs onto you."

"Love your work!" exclaimed Geoff. "Sure you aren't Ma'at?"

"Not a chance," said Allen. "Far too anarchistic for my taste. I'm not into politics and world domination."

"Like I said," said Geoff, "charisma. No one with that much charisma could be in politics or work for an inefficient government like those of this planet."

Allen shook his head, looked down at the samples on the tables and said, "Son, playtime is over."

"Whatever," said Geoff and blasted the music from his earbuds.

#

Angel stood in the middle of the deathly quiet room, hypnotised by the flickering data on the Screen. Each line of text, in a column scrolling down the left side, was a registered date of birth. The centre-most line lingered for a second, highlighting, then moved on to the next. Angel's eyes flicked

from the column to the matching astrological symbols revolving around their respective dials in the central diagram.

If he could just get an astrology reading that would fit the killer's motives. Water. Speech. But most had common threads that made sorting through births from the past hundred years a tiresome notion.

He had been standing for almost two hours, a jug of water on the desk alongside him. Ruth stepped up alongside him on his platform and stared at the chaos in front of her.

"Anything?" she asked quietly.

With the steady shake of his head she stood quietly for a moment and then moved away.

A few more head movements then, "Pause," he said abruptly and sat down on his stool with a groan. He caught his breath as he reached for the jug of water and slowly poured the cool liquid out into a tall glass. The noises picked up in the room as everyone seemed to exhale for him.

Frank wheeled a chair over to Angel and sat down. Angel cast a suspicious eye down at his new visitor.

"Nothing yet from Missing Persons," he indicated to the Screen. "What you got? You look like you're sweating faster than you're taking in."

"All I've got is a damn fine headache," he said rubbing his face.

"I keep telling you that you need glasses in your old age," he joked.

"Quieten down, Pretty Boy. I can still see you're ugly, and that's in bad light." He chuckled.

"The lead on the sheet manufacturer's label is probably a dead-end; Visser said there were a few stores that stocked that brand, but some still accept cash."

"Cash," he made a face, "in this day and age?"

"Tell me about it. But it's mainly the stores nearer the low-cost locations. He's still going through the accounts of those

that used plastic to purchase. Holding thumbs but—”

“How’s Hicks doing?”

“Hicks just went over to the Crystal Ball to see if the rookies have found anything relating to past crimes.”

“Gentlemen,” said a stern voice behind them. Angel spilled some water on his shirt.

“Sir,” replied Frank while Angel occupied himself with his liquids.

“Any new developments?” asked Biyela with a scrutinizing look at the right side of the screen where a visual of the last crime scene moved in and out of different angles. “I hope we nail this nutjob.”

“Nothing concrete, sir,” grumbled Frank.

“Eliminate them all and deal with them from birth. That’s what I say,” said Biyela proudly.

“Yeah? Pretty crap if you’re the kid being taken away from your parents and all that,” said Frank looking up at the other man.

“Details. All for the greater good.”

“And how do you know that for sure, sir?” asked Frank leaning forward. “How do you know it is doing them any good?”

Biyela frowned at Frank. “It’s been documented, Banks. Relax.”

“How about the parents?” He stood up. “Have they been documented after their kids have been taken away?”

Angel stepped down between the two men. “Can you two keep it down to a riot, please?”

“Sure.” Frank looked at Biyela. “I’m going for a walk.”

#

Frank sat at the viewing area looking out at the daycare playground, his left hand absently feeling for the necklace he had discarded since being in the Tracker Unit.

The six-metre length single sheet of glass stretched to his left, marked off by observation benches. He was watching a four-year-old boy and a caregiver off to the one side of the grounds. The boy was sitting quite still, apart from occasionally speaking to the caregiver when something was asked of him. Despite the chaos of the playground, he concentrated only on the person in front of him.

Funny how the old cases just never quite go away. When Frank had been in the squad for about two years, in 2034, they had discovered, the hard way, that one of the leading Trackers was a Christian fundamentalist. Although not uncommon for many of the Trackers to hold religious beliefs, even strongly held beliefs, the fundamentalist movements of many of the religions of the world had an outright hatred of the Trackers and what they stood for.

The Catholic Church, in particular, relegated to being a fringe cult as it did to so many systems of belief, still had wealth and support from some sectors of society. It continued to hold on to its borrowed Egyptian regalia and sun worship as if it were its own and crediting it to a militant messiah king who was killed at the hands of Rome, the very centre of its faith. The contradictions and ironies of a system based on faith, and little else, that borrowed, hijacked, persecuted, annihilated, compromised and chameleoned their way through history in order to survive.

From a totally organic and flexible entity to a rigid and stagnant militant regime in the age of darkness, to an old man forced to bend into all manner of yogic positions, in the age of enlightenment, in order to answer the basic questions of its now enlightened masses. And so began its haphazard fall from grace. Like the myths that it created in the Garden of Eden. How can anyone see original sin in the eyes of a newborn baby, the dawn of life, as the soul breathes life into God's creation? Deliver us from evil.

Every now and then he would find himself praying, praying to God. And that was all the religion that he needed. As many of the Trackers put it, they were spiritual, not religious. The crucifix he had proudly worn on a chain as a young boy attending catechism, was tossed in a drawer at home.

Infiltrating was not as easy as it seemed. They would have had to have a considerable amount of self-restraint in order not to crack at the mere mention of a soul coming back to the Earth Plane, let alone choosing to come back. But only three months into his appointment, Warren Bester, one of the new rookies from Johannesburg — one of the toughest colleges in the world — had dropped a few remarks that hadn't gelled for Angel. But Angel, forever taking things in his stride, blew them off as a rookie testing his boundaries in a team full of wise-crackers.

Frank couldn't remember what the subtleties were in the beginning, but he started to notice the God remarks directed at Angel, as did some of the squad. It was a matter of days before Angel confronted him. It wasn't long before Bester was trying to shout Angel down, but noticing what was happening, Angel had begun to withdraw. This enraged Bester even more. By then, the room was quiet as the rest of the squad present started taking notice. From his position one table behind Bester and Angel, Frank had the best seat in the house. Or so he had thought, with mild amusement, until he noticed Bester touching his back right hip. At first, he assumed Bester was adjusting his shirt, then it appeared to be a nervous habit.

With no weapons allowed in the Room of Hours, the last thing Frank considered was it being a twenty-year-old handgun that Bester brought out from under his shirt.

Frank now looked at the boy sitting on the red plastic chair. His hair blew gently in a breeze, distracting him from

the lady feverishly taking notes in front of him. He cocked his head slightly, and slowly turned to look in Frank's direction. Right at Frank. Frank clenched his jaw as a cold shiver ran down his back. He took a sharp breath, forced a smile and waved eagerly at the boy. The boy smiled and waved back. This met with a bemused look on the caregiver's face, followed by more note taking.

Frank closed his eyes, seeing himself jump over the desk, shouting "Weapon!" It had been so slow and so quick at the same time. Bester had been distracted by the shout, but had managed to get off two rounds — one had hit Angel in his right shoulder, the other just below the Screen — before Frank had slammed on top of him, onto the desk. They had landed, belly down, on the floor, Bester trying to get the weapon leveled at Frank's head on his back. A shot had blasted past Frank's face, sending powder burning across his forehead. He had managed to grip Bester's hand with his left, but not with enough strength to stop Bester from bringing the firearm up to his own chin.

"Track this!" he had said through clenched teeth, and pulled the trigger.

Frank opened his eyes. He could almost hear the sounds of the children through the soundproof glass.

It hadn't taken long for Angel to bring Bester's Soul Trace up onto the Screen. It had lingered there for half an hour. The squad had been deathly quiet. Except for the Documenters and Mortuary crew doing what they needed, the Room of Hours had been deathly quiet. Angel had been stitched on site, never taking his attention from the Screen. He had scanned the data of hospitals locally, nationally, and internationally. On his insistence, Robert Collins, Bester's partner, and Sakhile 'SK' Mkhize had been dispatched to a mining town 800 kilometres away. A day later the baby, Reagan Solomons, had arrived.

Frank still couldn't shake it.

#

Geoff wheeled the final glass display case into the research room. He could feel the sweat lining his face, staining the back of his shirt, and under his armpits. He wheezed and stepped back. To an onlooker it would have appeared as if he were about to faint but turned into someone proudly surveying their handiwork.

"Nice work, Geoff," said Professor Hicks from his desk.

Surprise was quickly replaced by recognition and a glimmer of delight across his face.

"There are ten more to come."

His smile evaporated.

"Ha!" the professor added and got up from behind his desk. "Just kidding."

"Nice one, prof," he said relieved. "I nearly shat my pants."

The professor hesitated mid-stride at the remark then continued on to the six cases. The rectangular glass units were a metre-and-a-half high with solid wood bases raised an inch off the ground by eight small cushioned feet. All would house the specimens that the professor had been selecting and preparing over the past month.

"Love it," Professor Hicks said clapping his hands eagerly.

"Whatever gets you going, prof," said Geoff. "Me? I prefer hands on a screen before hands on dusty plumage, any day."

"But there's nothing like the feeling of the taut ribbing of a feather, or the way they unfold when you spread a wing. Perfect symmetry."

"On a lice-riddled live critter. Not something pulled out a dusty, mothballed drawer. Egh." Geoff shuddered.

"Is that so," the professor said and gave a knowing grin.

Geoff narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the other man. "Why?"

“Oh,” said Professor Hicks with a shrug, “Amur falcons are *‘lice-riddled’* are they?” He started off down one of the rows of towering cabinets.

Geoff’s ears pricked up. “Falcons?”

“Dozens of specimens from the—”

“Twenty-nineteen apocalypse,” Geoff whispered his disbelief.

In March 2019, with only a few weeks before they would have set out on their return journey to the Amur River region between the Russian Far East and Northeastern China, including a 4000 kilometre journey across the Indian ocean, over two thousand migrating Amur falcons had been obliterated by a sudden storm of tennis-ball sized hail stones near the KZN town of Newcastle.

Professor Hicks pulled open a wide, wooden door to reveal around twenty drawers filling the cabinet’s nearly two-and-a-half metre height. “These bottom trays have the March 21 birds,” he said solemnly, and then pointed to the top few trays. “Those are some of the March 9 birds.”

An initial storm two weeks earlier had wreaked havoc on the roosting falcons near Mooiriver, resulting in one of South Africa’s biggest species relocations. Some 1000 birds, stunned, injured and dying had been transported in bakkies and trailers to the safety of the Midlands and various rehab facilities. Over 700 had perished.

Photos of the 2000 dead birds, weeks later, were etched in Geoff’s mind.

“How?” asked Geoff standing transfixed at the dark shapes, wings tucked and tied, neatly arranged and tagged.

“The Curator of Birds at the time had set out to the location of the devastation and collected as many specimens as he could possibly carry,” said the professor. “Specimens that are still stored in the Museum’s facility today.”

Geoff leaned in and noted the details, neatly printed, on

the tag around one of the bird's legs.

"2000 birds in a matter of minutes," said Geoff, more to himself than the other man.

He felt a warm hand on his shoulder. "Know that you can come here anytime, Geoff. They are here for people like you to study. To protect them. There's only so much your digital devices can serve up."

In silence, both men walked back to the cases Geoff had brought in minutes earlier. Professor Hicks sized them up, feeling their strength or whatever he seemed to be fawning about to pass the awkwardness in the room. Then finally he turned to Geoff and asked, "Did you liaise with the lighting guys for Friday afternoon?"

"Sure did."

"Buchanan wants these up by Friday night and ready for Saturday morning's crowds."

"You mean the millions of people that crowd through here every Saturday?" Geoff leaned against one of the cases. "Right, urgent we get them up for then."

He received a shaking head in response and, "Optimism, my dearest assistant."

"Most people download data nowadays, prof. Seriously. It's only the freaks like us that choose to come down for the close-up stuff."

"There are plenty of freaks like us out there. I can assure you."

"Sad to say, but I am one in a million."

"Ha," laughed the professor in an over-the-top gesture. "Thank God for that."

Geoff eyed the professor as he made his way back to his paper-riddled desk and picked up a small oblong box.

"Pish," said Geoff, eager to carry on the verbal sparring. "Clone me and you won't even come close. All my experiences."

Allen cut him off, “Accidents and fumbblings through life are the things that make you, you.”

“Precisely, prof.” He enjoyed prodding his lecturer, trying to find what made the conservative man he respected tick. “I am the sum of my life.”

“And so much more, Mr. Niranjan,” said a voice from the doorway. They both turned to look at the short, elderly, spectacled man in his neat grey suit and tie, looking at them with that damned blank expression Geoff recognized from the local science news streams. Director Henry Buchanan raised a pointed hand and entered the room. “I keep telling Professor Hicks that you have all the potential at your fingertips, and who you are, or could be, is more than just your DNA mixed with some happy life lessons.”

“Mr. Buchanan,” Geoff said and extended a hand to the approaching man. Professor Hicks had chosen to proceed to polish a nameplate he had pulled from a box in his hands.

“How are we looking for Saturday, Hicks?” the director asked after a brief shake of Geoff’s hand.

Geoff hated surnames. It reminded him of school. Not his best years. “Hierarchy’s a damn bureaucracy,” he often said.

“All good, Henry,” replied Professor Hicks and put the nameplate on his desk. “Geoff here has just brought up the last of the displays.”

“And the software?” asked the other man and turned expectantly to Geoff.

Geoff noticed himself automatically fold his arms as the focus turned to him.

“Professor Hicks did a whole song and dance number to the board to get you involved, Mr. Niranjan.”

“As you well know, Geoff was willing to help me out, help the department out,” Allen corrected himself, “at no cost, Director Buchanan.”

The suited man glanced at the professor then back at

Geoff. "Let's hope your skills match those of one of Durban's top IT companies, Nirranjan."

No doubt one of his well-connected friends lost out on a ripe municipal tender.

"Your predecessor, Mrs. Rankin, taught me to be self-reliant as a scientist." Geoff gave a cough. "Sir. That learning the technology, making it work for you, was as important as the research. Working hand in hand. Outsourcing is never ideal."

Buchanan's mouth formed a smile but without any warmth behind it. "But be careful not to spread oneself too thin, Nirranjan."

"Did you go through the list of species I sent you yesterday?" Professor Hicks asked the older man and placed another nameplate alongside the first.

"I did," said the director. "That's one of the reasons I'm stopping by." He approached the glass cases. "The other being to check that you and your assistant are on schedule with these lovely pieces for Friday afternoon."

"All on track," replied the professor with what Geoff could've sworn was a tolerant expression.

"Any feedback on the list?" he continued, revealing a pattern to his nameplate placements as he set another down.

With his handkerchief removed from his jacket pocket, the director inspected, and then polished an invisible mark on one of the glass surfaces. "There is a handful that I'd like you to reconsider."

Geoff glanced back to see Professor Hicks hesitate mid-placement.

"Okay," he said.

"Just some suggestions, you understand." The director gave a tight smile then resumed his polishing. "After all, I'm the paleontologist and not the ornithologist."

"Sure," the professor said putting the box down on the

desk. "No problem."

"I'll send you my notes and rationale. But, now I see I was meant to pop in for an altogether other reason." Geoff's face turned warm as the director looked back at him.

"You have?" asked Geoff.

"No such thing as coincidence, is there Mr. Niranjan?"

Geoff cringed and said, "Not really, no."

"Your DNA, young man," said Buchanan approaching another of the glass cases. He adjusted his glasses for a closer look. "Past life repository or basic structural map?"

"Basic structural map with information storage capabilities replicated by some tech genius," said Geoff, pleased with his added extra. "Past life? Not so much, Henry."

"Professor Hicks," asked Buchanan looking up from his inspections.

The professor had his hands in his pockets now, ambling over to their side of the room. "I'm not a fan of the past life idea, Director Buchanan."

Geoff took this as a cue and began checking the power inputs at the base of each of the cases.

"Really?" Buchanan considered for a moment. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall in your household when you and your wife get philosophical. Or do you choose not to have that argument?"

"Discussion. An argument is when I'm right and she's wrong."

"Or she's right and you're wrong."

"No. That's an anomaly," replied Professor Hicks and headed back to his desk.

"So basically you think you're right."

"Yep," came the muted response from behind the desk.

"I say DNA, shmee-NA," Geoff decided to rescue his professor. "You are who you are, not other people, let alone someone's reincarnated soul."

“Ah,” replied the director. “Taking a scientist’s point of view to the concept of reincarnation is a fantastic notion, Geoffrey.”

“It is?” he asked wearily.

“Absolutely. Consider it this way.” The director put his finger to his lips and paced the room. “A person under hypnotherapy, or deep meditation, is accessing levels of their minds that normally lie dormant. I’d say they are accessing elements of their DNA much the same way that we access and store our data today using the DNA structure.”

“And?” asked Geoff.

“As you pointed out, your DNA is unique in its content, not only to create the very, um, unique body before me, but because of where that information comes from.”

“My parents,” Geoff contorted a disgusted face.

“Your parents; their parents. In fact, every one of your procreating ancestors.”

Geoff shuddered.

“My thoughts exactly,” chimed in Professor Hicks from his chair.

“Someone under hypnosis will have a vivid vision of being in ancient India, and even be able to experience a scene with smells and sounds. They come out of it and everyone’s knee-jerk reaction is to categorise it as a past life where their soul was incarnated as that person. And so on over time.”

“Hippies,” said Geoff.

“In a way,” continued Buchanan. “But, what if it’s really the DNA storage? Some ancestor’s DNA memory of its life is passed on at conception. In a moment of deep contemplation or dream, that descendant experiences those memories.”

“It certainly generates more questions than answers, Henry,” said Geoff.

“But, all food for thought, Niranjan. Active minds,” he said tapping his temple.

“Hell, man. Here I was thinking we were just putting some birds on display. Now we’ve got soul memories and DNA storage. Gee, director Buchanan, your interests certainly extend outside of flocking birds.”

The director narrowed his eyes at Geoff. “I do understand your type of humour, Mr. Niranjana. Don’t think underhanded sarcasms ever slip by me. Being cool isn’t just a t-shirt.”

“And where do you get all your coolness from, sir, your ideas on the ancestral lineage of a species?”

“Oh, you know,” he said. “I have get-togethers with like-minded individuals who share, how shall we say, knowledge that has been passed down.”

“Ah, sir. Get-togethers,” said Geoff with a nod and tapped his nose.

“Moving swiftly on from the bright and vacant minds of the youth. Professor Hicks?”

“Director, I need those recommendations as soon as possible,” said Professor Hicks looking at his desktop screen and nudging the box. “These are the nameplates I ordered last week and if there are changes or new ones required, they do need a day or two’s notice.”

“A bit presumptuous ordering in the first place, Allen.” The director approached the desk and picked up one of the nameplates on the desk. “I’ll get right on it.”

The director considered the nameplate, and then mumbled to himself, “Font’s a bit weak. Everything on track with those screen presentations, Mr. Niranjana?”

“Ja, sir.”

“Ja he says!” Buchanan turned on Geoff.

Geoff nodded blankly.

“Are you Afrikaans speaking, Mr. Niranjana?” the elderly man walked briskly to Geoff.

“Nought, sir.”

“I’ll take that to mean zero or no.”

Geoff nodded back.

"Then the correct term to the original question is 'yes', Mr. Niranjan, not the Afrikaans equivalent."

"Kiff."

"How long will you be with us, Mr. Niranjan?"

"Sir, I'll be out of your hair before you know it."

"I assume a performance evaluation is still due, Professor Hicks? Barring any bugs."

"No need to dot your t's and cross your i's on my account, sir. I've already completed my internship; received my perfect recommendation letters. This is a favour to my esteemed professor. And, the only bugs you'll find are on your specimens, not in my code. I know where to put my semicolons."

The director clasped his hands behind him and said, "Please enlighten us, Mr. Niranjan."

"These glass display cases," he began with his best show-stopping grin, "are four sides of top-of-the-line interactive screen technology with three-D projectable menus and controls.

"I'll be uploading my graphics and animation source files directly and doing the final testing myself. Sound will be delivered through the transparent mesh substrate moulded into the glass. *Boom!*" he said flaring his hands from his ears.

"Basically, the real stuffed and fluffed specimens are the start point for our civilians to navigate from." He pointed at a smiling professor Hicks, who had long since settled himself on his desk. "I know what you're thinking, professor. But, any person with half a day's experience on a mobile device will be able to navigate through this wonderland of technology and indulge in the full experience. Even director Buchanan here."

"Thank you, Geoffrey," director Buchanan folded his arms tightly across his chest.

"I've programmed some special tidbits nested into various

sections for the more studious and curious enthusiast, should they venture that deep into the presentations. One added item you may want to throw around with your buds at your weekly get-together, Henry, is that I've used full, 100 percent pixel depth with the projected displays. It's the leading open-source technology that I'm sure 'one of Durban's top IT companies,'" Geoff finger hooked the air, "employs. And I'm only going for Real space three-D, not that myopic, simulated three-D that gives me a damned headache."

"Dare I ask for your version of what pixel depth actually means?" asked the director.

"Generally, a pixel is a flat square."

"I understand a pixel, Geoffrey."

"Back in the good old days of three-D, you'd bombard each of the two retina with two separate flat images. The brain does the convergence and melding, and voila, you've just fooled the brain and eye into thinking it's looking *into* something. Smoke and mirrors three-D. You can't interact with it because there isn't actually any depth. An object that appears half a metre away isn't. So, you cannot press or touch accurately. But, and here is where this wizard weaves his magic, by giving the pixel a special dimension, it has a width, height, and," he paused for effect, "depth. So, now a projected image has a real depth. Not a simulated one. And that is measured in pixel depth, sir. Any questions? Yes, the chap in the back?"

Director Buchanan turned to look at Professor Hicks who seemed remarkably entertained and impressed. The director shook his head in dismay and headed for the door.

"Keep me up to date on the progress, gentlemen."

Geoff wiped his brow and walked over to professor Hicks.

"What's with that ou, prof? It's like everyone else is his sounding board for his own voice. When we talk we're merely background noise."

“Indeed, Geoff,” Professor Hicks gave Geoff a pat on the shoulder. “Nice presentation, by the way.”

“If I had’ve known about his secret handshakes, I would’ve searched, investigated and learned the shit out of it so that when I first got to shake his hand and he tried his slippery finger-wrist-thing, I would’ve given a comeback move and confused the hell outta him that this wet-behind-the-ears-genius could actually be part of his club. Bastard.”

Professor Hicks laughed and headed back to his desk.

“Ever think of what species of bird people could be, Geoff?”

“All the flippin’ time,” replied Geoff eagerly. “What’s the director?”

“A Grey Loerie. Turaco.”

“Corythaixoides! Excellent. Stiff and dull looking. Irritating call. Keeps telling you to go away. Nothing more than a glorified chicken with bad hair.”

Professor Hicks leaned back in his chair laughing.

CHAPTER 3

Off in the distance she could hear water running. Like lying on the grass beside a small stream. For a moment she felt safe. Only for a moment.

#

“Frank,” said Ruth solemnly.

“Hmm,” he replied.

“We’ve got our missing person.”

“And I think I might have figured out how Liza died.”

#

The sound of water running was still there. The sleep, or rather dried tears, in her eyes made it difficult to open them. For some reason, she couldn’t open her mouth.

#

In one gulp Frank emptied his coffee and they left the cafeteria.

“After you left the Room of Hours this morning, I was talking to Angel about some of the astrological characteristics that the killer’s astro would need to match. So we walk over to the water cooler to fill up his jug and as the water’s pouring out of the cooler bottle a bubble gurgles all the way to the top. And I’m thinking, that’s like someone letting out air under water, right?”

Making their way back to the elevators, heading for the Room of Hours, Ruth noticed Frank slow his pace as they approached the daycare glassed hallway. He looked out at the deserted play area. He checked his watch.

“And then?” she asked distracting him.

“That’s when I remembered Liza’s mouth and neck.” He felt his mouth going dry. Not from talking so fast, but from what he was about to suggest. “What if the killer wanted them

to breathe under water?”

“She drowned so how’s that—”

“Hear me out,” he stopped and faced her. “Let’s take accidental drowning into account. He would never have dunked her head under water. He would have been aware that some water might splash over the cavity.” He spotted a bench and took a seat, still focused on Ruth.

“Okay,” she said suspiciously as she sat down, straddling the bench to face Frank.

“What if the killer filled up his bath.”

“And then?” whispered Ruth, eyes wide.

#

Her brain began to acknowledge the cold tingle of water on her legs, buttocks and back. Her neck was tight and awkward, her body rigid in whatever was tying her down. A wave of heat pulsed through her. She was taking short, quick breaths through the small hole in her neck, feeling it strain.

#

“Imagine a snorkel for breathing. Maybe a plug-hole and hose attached.”

Ruth stared unblinking at Frank.

#

She couldn’t see clearly through the haze of her eyes. If she could just turn her head...

“I wouldn’t start moving your head around too much.”

Her body went cold.

“If you break that seal around your neck, the water will go into your trachea cavity. And you could drown. Regardless of what you may think, I don’t want you to drown.”

There was quiet, except for the flowing water rising around her chest.

“I used to sit beside the bath and watch my mother while she bathed. Afterwards, she was so worried about lying back too far. I had to help her wash her hair. It was awkward. I only recently came up with this idea.”

A cold wet hand ran over Elizabeth’s forehead and hair.

“She used to have the most beautiful hair.”

#

“He probably didn’t think of sealing the nose and mouth.”

“And as any person would have done, Liza probably panicked and tried to breathe the way her body naturally intended her to.”

“Through her nose and mouth,” said Ruth putting her head in her hands. “Holy shit.”

“What did you say the missing woman’s name was?”

#

Elizabeth was shivering all over and battling to breathe. Her chest was beginning to hurt from the strain. The water was over her mouth now and still rising.

“The best thing to do is to breathe,” came the cold voice from behind her. She could still picture the face from that morning, and from the day before. How did she end up in this situation? Why?

“I’ll tell you everything about her after this. In the mean time, breathing in ‘yes’, and out ‘here I am’. Nowhere else to be but here.”

#

“I think he’ll be a bit more careful with Elizabeth. He’ll probably tape up her mouth and plug her nose properly so that there’s no way she can accidentally swallow water. And with any luck,” she stood up and looked through the glass, “she’ll be breathing while under water.”

#

Elizabeth was breathing for her life.

#

“Okay, now we know how he killed Liza, how he’s going to torture Elizabeth, and anyone after her. But, we still have to figure out why. Why abduct middle-aged women, keep them for two weeks, mess with them? And now start this water shit. That seems to have no purpose.”

“Not if it’s about what he’s telling them. That’s when it’ll all make sense. Everything has a reason for him.”

“Middle-aged women, tracheotomy, water. Those are our leads.”

“That and now Elizabeth’s Soul Trace,” replied Frank.



Some of you may be old enough to recall the turn of the twenty-first century when the world sat with expectation of the End Days, the apocalypse described in many religious texts. I have watched these come and go. I've seen the soothsayers' predictions turn to dust, as they themselves have succumbed in the end. And still, in a New Age frenzy, many exfoliated and ablated repentance, self-evaluation and soul searching — attempting even a basic connection with the higher realms that had, for so long, been neglected or relegated to superstition — others barreled on in their ambitions and their belief in their own misguided godlike abilities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen was born and lives in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. His background is Graphic Design, Creative Direction and Film. His first short story was published in 2015 in the *Imagine Africa 500* speculative fiction anthology. More short fiction followed in the “Beneath This Skin” 2016 Edition of Aké Review, “The Short Story is Dead, Long Live the Short Story! Vol.2”, the debut edition of *Enkare Review 2017*, *The Bloody Parchment*, *AfroSFv3*, and *The Kalahari Review*. He is a charter member of the African Speculative Fiction Society and its Nommo Awards initiative. He was featured in Part 11 of the 100 African Writers of SFF on Strange Horizons. *Soul Searching* is his debut speculative fiction novel.