

Out on the water, the impossible happens.

Astonishment brings me to a standstill on the Isle of Palms Beach. Gasping for breath, I peer through the milky dawn. The breathtaking sight freezes my brain with awe.

No, my eyes aren't playing tricks. I see the woman plainly, although she can't possibly be real. The spectacle makes the knowing—the clairvoyance I've experienced since early childhood—seem normal in comparison.

The irony is hard to miss. Still, I resist trusting my eyes. This stubborn refusal to accept the facts relayed by the most reliable of my five senses is nothing less than comical. A girl possessing a sixth sense should be receptive to extraordinary events. But this isn't what amuses.

At this point in an impetuous journey, how can anything fill me with disbelief?

Yesterday I spent the afternoon with an angel. Toren didn't particularly like the title and he didn't have wings, at least not that he was willing to reveal. During our meeting at the park in Virginia, he explained he's been generously supplying protection for all of my seventeen years. Presumably he accomplishes this feat from a cloud-bedecked perch in the unimaginable beyond. In my estimation, this makes him a divine messenger—and a guardian angel.

He's not the only celestial being to drop into my life.

The night before our encounter, after I'd driven from Cleveland in a burst of anger, I met a woman at a diner near the West Virginia border. Only she wasn't a woman. She was yet another angel, one more disturbing than Toren. Effervescent and pleasantly odd, Galanta was eager to share the most fearsome prophecies, including the details of a tsunami destined to strike Bangladesh. In the diner's thick, greasy air, I trembled beneath her appalling prediction.

Soon after, tragedy descended upon the Bay of Bengal and its thousands of doomed residents.

At my feet, the lapping waves leave greenish foam as pretty as filigreed lace. There's no breeze to speak of, nor anything to obstruct the view of a sight I'm still failing to process. Streamers of rosy light unfurl across the beach. I can see well enough. There's no one else around, not this early on a flawless Charleston morning.

Battling back amazement, I rock on the balls of my feet. The woman stands a

good ten yards out from shore, in the blue-green waters.

Only she's not *in* the Atlantic. She's standing *on* the water.

She's glorious. Like a mermaid or a sure-footed goddess, she surveys the eggshell blue sky and the clouds banking on the horizon. She's just standing there in her white shorts and beige tank top, appraising the sky with single-minded intensity.

Is she praying? Perhaps her thoughts are unremarkable, and she's mulling over the tasks sure to clutter her day. She stands at an angle, too far away for a proper reading of her mood. Whatever the contents of her thoughts, they carry enough weight to preclude her from noticing the goggle-eyed teenager on the beach.

Indecision swamps me. Call to her? Ask for pointers on how to circumvent gravity and stand on a diamond-bright wave?

No, not a wave. Curiosity lures me closer. A five-foot wide circle of water surrounds the woman. Smooth as glass, with her at the epicenter, the circle wears a bluish cast lighter in hue than the ocean's darker colors. Outside this calm perimeter, the ocean ripples and moves normally. Waves build to a gentle height before meandering toward shore, the Atlantic's soothing rhythm unappreciated by the woman lost in contemplation. Petite in stature, her brunette hair scraping her shoulders, she appears younger than my mother. Yet something about the curve of her hips implies she's much older. She's athletic, with a nice body for a woman who has apparently sailed past the half-century mark with health and vigor. In her watery solitude she's majestic, a modern day Venus. Only she's dispensed with Botticelli's oversized seashell to stand astride the water in bare feet.

I'm trying to decide how to gain her attention when the twined bracelet on my wrist snags my attention.

The ribbons grow warm. Licks of fire slide across my skin. They leap into my fingers with marvelous warmth.

Yesterday, during the meeting with Toren, the ribbons had changed from fabric into an extraordinary substance, metallic, nearly liquid in form. A thin slit opened in the fluid substance to reveal a view of the universe in real time. That peek into eternity was familiar—whenever I'm overcome by the knowing, I receive a few, precious glimpses of the cosmos in a sort of opening act for whatever vision will follow.

As it had done yesterday, the bracelet transforms.

Light tears through the surface. White-hot, blinding, it burns my corneas for the briefest moment. My eyes adjust and, through the slit of searing illumination, the boundless dark of the universe unfolds. A planet spins into view, its surface mottled moss green and a purple so dark it's nearly black. Stars whirl past, gems flung across the galaxy in a scintillating display. Next comes a mammoth star, fat and weary like an old man on his deathbed. The star expands, mushrooming out at an impressive pace. The gaseous shell rumbles with outlandish color, angry scarlet and blistering orange, and fire whips of crimson that indicate an imminent explosion. I flinch as the star detonates, scattering light across the firmament, before dragging the glinting streamers of its demise from the tiny window I've been afforded by the ribbons on my wrist.

There's no time to mourn the departure. My ears prick with anticipation. Too soon, I detect the sound. Beneath the visual delight of the galaxy show, an unearthly hum gathers strength. Growing louder, it vibrates straight to my marrow.

I'm unprepared, and frightened. During yesterday's vision in Virginia, the music brought a terrifying blindness. The sound tore away my sight for harrowing minutes.

White-knuckled, I press my fingers to the ribbons. I must force them back to normal before I'm again blinded. But how?

*Heavenscribe.*

In my mind's eye, the word pulses and flashes. Clamping my hands to my face, I will myself not to lose consciousness. The prospect of blacking out sends chips of ice through my blood. This is worse than the knowing, an event beyond my control. If I succumb to the vision, how to pull myself out?

*HeavenscribeHeavenscribeHeavenscribe.*

Fear tips my pulse into overdrive. Tamping down my dread, I try to stay in the here-and-now. I swallow mouthfuls of air. The taste of salt coats my tongue, prodding memories of French fries and hotdogs and the crystal saltcellar Black Gram found at an estate sale when I was in fourth grade. My ears welcome the greedy screech of a seagull, his aggression filling me with gratitude. I want another gull to alight on the sand, a dozen, more, enough birds to pin me down to earth.

*HeavenscribeHeavenscribe—*

How to banish the word from my mind?

With sudden inspiration, I call up a memory of an April storm, of water drenching the sidewalk, drenching me as I sprinted up the steps of my grandmother's house. I send the memory across the blinding words, dousing them with the love I'd felt in Black Gram's arms, my cheek resting against the doughy softness of her waist and the rosewater goodness of her scent flowing into my nostrils. Miraculously, the flood of emotion extinguishes the words.

My success is short-lived. Though the words are gone, the celestial music ratchets to a deafening pitch. The wall of sound nearly throws me backward. Planting my feet, I will it away.

When the music fades, I'm sweaty with relief. The bracelet grows cooler. The warmth tickling my skin ebbs away. My ears twitch, a delayed reaction to overstimulation.

Needing reassurance the danger has passed, I examine my wrist. Already the ribbons are losing their metallic luster. The near-liquid bands solidify, becoming threads woven together by unseen hands. The violet color blooms in each of the six ribbons.

Awed by the transformation, I try to calm my thumping heart. Whatever the energy I've commanded, it's powerful stuff.

From the corner of my eye, I catch movement down the beach. The woman, finished with her watery magic, reaches land at a leisurely pace. The surf kisses her heels as, pivoting, she notices me. Pursing her lips, she does a double take. Then she scans the northern end of the beach, still empty and silent, before returning her attention to the intruder of her dawn meditation.