

Bel Petersen's first impression was mistaken. The stranger who'd appeared in her garden past the vacant hour of midnight was not a man.

Cinching the belt of her bathrobe around her waist, she appraised the figure strolling gracefully into the moonlight to reveal stature far beyond the human norm. The woman stood more than seven feet tall. A tunic of pale ivory dropped slightly past her knees. Silver tresses flowed past shoulders as square and powerful as a soldier's.

This was no burglar searching for access to the house. The intrusion was crafted from supernatural means. Bel tried to make sense of her unexpected guest. Was this a spirit from a heavenly realm?

The example of surreal, feminine beauty indicated as much. Beneath the woman's brown skin a watercolor of hues swirled together, hints of eggshell blue and verdigris mixed with dashes of sunset orange and a dark, stormy grey. On bare feet she took confident steps forward. With each step, small ovals of fluorescent green light flashed beneath her. Each blade of grass was lit from within by fabulous light.

Bel's lips parted on a gasp. A subtle, silvery cast shimmered on the woman's skin. The sparkling layer seemed composed of stardust gathered from the midnight blue rim of the universe, bits of winking light that once fired the most massive objects in creation, the stars set out in the heavens to wash away the ignorance of night. Bold and pure, the effect brought to mind the silver cast of the portal, a door open across space and time, which had enchantingly formed in Bel's rose arbor earlier tonight.

Just a few hours ago, Bel had unwittingly conjured the portal with Zobie, her young friend, at her side. She'd done so by focusing on a heartfelt memory. In wonderment, they watched the rose arbor split into a series of prisms, one stacked before the next in a large rectangular array. In each prism, the growth of the climbing roses accelerated like an image on a movie reel slightly out of sync with the next. The plant's various stages of growth, death and rebirth—the simultaneous, circular pattern of life—offered Bel the conclusion they had unhooked time. Fascinated, she traced her fingertips across the portal's silvery rim. Contact with the gel-like substance made her feel impossibly good, as if she'd dipped her fingers in the waters of life.

Now, with the otherworldly presence gazing down at her, she again filled with a glorious surge of emotion. The euphoria provided a much-needed balm, subduing the

anxiety skittering through her chest.

Light pooled beneath the stranger as she came to a standstill. Above her head, the breeze trembled like a lover's sigh.

She said, "The fear is strong in you."

Like the portal, her voice was composed of layers. If Bel weren't standing with eyes wide open, she'd arrive at the erroneous conclusion several women were speaking in an uncanny harmony. The effect was baffling. It was also mesmerizing.

A nervous laugh escaped her lips. "I wasn't expecting company in the middle of the night."

"There's nothing to fear. I am a mother, like you."

"You are?"

Her visitor smiled. "You know my children well. They bring great pleasure to your kind."

"I don't understand," Bel admitted.

"Do you know the stories from the dawn of your great civilizations? They are the same in the West as in the East."

Bel frowned with confusion.

The spirit explained, "You are from the West. I will show you a story from your ancient times."

The announcement sent a hush across the garden. The sense of expectancy calmed the trees, halting the slow flutter of their leaves. An owl hooted, signaling the change. Bel's skin prickled, her eyes following the stranger's right hand lifting into the air, the glittery hue of her skin growing brighter. The way she poised her finger on the night breeze suggested the channeling of great power. From the tip of her index finger, golden sparkles burst into being and formed a line. A mysterious energy sizzled and snapped. The air became a canvas she filled with sparkling lines.

Bel marveled at the image taking shape. Was this a map? Yes, her companion was drawing a golden map. Working faster, she outlined a country shaped like a square. A curving border appeared, edging a country to the north. To the south, winking patches of blue represented a sea. When she outlined the shape of a boot, Bel sucked in a breath.

Europe. She was drawing the map of Europe.

Lines formed the familiar outline of Greece. The country glowed brighter than the rest.

Understanding, Bel said, "I know the stories of Ancient Greece."

Pleased, the apparition said, "Stories carried through time are a form of truth. What you view as imagination is a type of remembering from ages past."

"There's no such thing as creativity? No original thought?" The notion was hard to accept.

"Original forms underpin all human thought. The contents of your imagination are based on this truth. What you call 'creativity' is the reshaping of forms from ages before the Whole came to this world. Time carries these memories forward. They are never lost."

Trying to keep up, Bel asked, "What is the Whole?"

The spirit swept her hand across the winking lights she'd drawn. "The collective human soul, of which you are a part," she replied, erasing each line. "The Whole binds itself to the soul of the planet it inhabits, seeking compatibility with the world in which it resides. Each soul within your collective has a voice in these decisions."

The concept of all people linked in a spiritual collective—a democratic one, at that—was inspiring. Bel asked, "What about people who've died? They're included?"

"Every soul exists within the Whole." Her companion gazed at the canopy of stars overhead. "Soon, all will have arrived again. Many have already come."

"Everyone who has ever lived is being reborn?"

"Your population approaches the number quickly."

The possibility boggled the mind. Every person that had ever drawn a breath would reincarnate, joining the billions of people already on the planet? The first humans to walk the African savannah before the dawn of history. Every mother, father and child. Kings and queens from the medieval era, and the great artists of the Renaissance. Every farmer who'd toiled in obscurity, and every politician who had shaped countries in peace and war. The great thinkers, from Aristotle to Max Weber.

They were all in the process of returning.

Struggling to understand all she'd been told, Bel asked, "What does the returning of souls have to do with stories from Ancient Greece?"

The spirit tipped her head, as if making an introduction. “If it appeals, think of me as Gaia. I encompass all life on this planet outside the Whole. All non-human life.”

In Greek mythology, Gaia symbolized the Earth. Did she mean she was an earth spirit—*the* earth spirit? Bel found the idea appealing. If people were endowed with an eternal spark, an essence capable of surviving past the destruction of the physical body, why not all of life? Which meant everything, from single-celled organisms to the largest whale holding dominion over the ocean’s depths, was imbued with an eternal spirit. All of nature was immune to death.

Another, more pragmatic, thought intruded. Why had the essence of the natural world taken the form of a beautiful, ageless woman to speak with her? Again she recalled how she’d touched the portal earlier tonight, coming away from the experiment with a silvery gel on her fingertips. Was the gel a physical representation of the world soul—of Gaia?

Following the hunch, she announced, “I summoned you, didn’t I? Earlier tonight. You’re here because I touched the portal. Doing so made a connection between us.”

“The Great Mother hears the call of her kind,” Gaia agreed.

“When I touched the portal, you heard me? But I didn’t call out to you.” She wouldn’t have known how.

“My heart heard yours. We are connected by our ability to bring life.”