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Re-enchanting Adolescence: Using Story to Give a New Generation Fresh Hope

Susan Stratton

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

RE-ENCHANTING ADOLESCENCE: USING STORY TO GIVE
A NEW GENERATION FRESH HOPE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

SUSAN STRATTON

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Portland Seminary
George Fox University
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

Susan Stratton

has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 10, 2021
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership & Spiritual Formation.

Dissertation Committee:

Primary Advisor: Nijay Gupta, PhD

Secondary Advisor: Ekaterina Lomperis, PhD

Lead Mentor: MaryKate Morse, PhD

Expert Advisor: Rochelle Deans

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the artists struggling valiantly to bring the re-enchantment of Shalom upon the earth, but especially to my artists—Ashley, my screenwriter; Jordan and Josh, my musicians; Micaiah, my streamer/musician/visual artist; and to Gary, whose very life is a work of art and who inspires me each and every day.

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ABSTRACT

The repercussions of four distinct worldview shifts—the Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution—has produced a narcissistic culture that impedes Gen Z’s ability to cultivate a transcendent personal narrative that is open to authentic spiritual formation. This “immanent buffered self,” so prominent in western culture, is taking a toll on the spiritual lives of 21st-century individuals of every age. The devastation in Gen Z, the newest generation, has severe consequences for the health of Gen Z and also for the church. One in three young adults do not believe in a Divine Being, and those young adults who are in the church ascribe to a Moral Therapeutic Deism as opposed to a Theistic relationship with a present yet transcendent God.

This work investigates the power of human imagination in music, visual arts, creation, and story to evaluate the efficacy of each for creating a new social imaginary for Gen Z; a social imaginary that includes a transcendent understanding of God and the universe. I will analyze each medium to determine its ability to create change in both worldview and behavior.

The research indicates that the impact of story is superior to other imaginative arts in its potential to change the social imaginary of Gen Z. Backed by neuroscience, the use of imagination through story-form can counter the three internal narratives of Gen Z: the world is a frightening place; meaning is over-rated; and “God? What God?” Story also places the reader in the body of the protagonist, and the reader travels with the protagonist toward a God of light and love. This study concludes that the use of story—in

all its forms—is the way forward in returning Gen Z to a transcendent and immanent God.

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

“Oh no,” cried Narcissus.
“It is for myself I weep!
I long for my own reflection.”

Each successive generation acts out Narcissus’s myth in its own unique way as the cultural milieu of the age molds each into its own image and likeness. The current generation peeking its head through the clouds of adulthood is no exception. Referred to as Gen Z, iGen, or even memelords,¹ Generation Z comprises roughly 32 percent of the population worldwide. Much like Narcissus gazing longingly into the water, the psyche of this generation was formed by gazing at various screens. Shining screens—both large and small—form the very foundation of their generational identity and are the critical cultural factor marking them unique among all generations that have ever lived. Research indicates that this screen-centric generation is the culmination of centuries of tumultuous change.

The Problem

The culmination of four distinct worldview shifts—the Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the myriad of scientific revolutions—has produced a narcissistic

¹ Jonah Engel Bromwich, “We Asked Generation Z to Pick a Name. It Wasn’t Generation Z,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2018, sec. Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/style/generation-z-name.html>.

culture that impedes Gen Z’s ability to cultivate a transcendent personal narrative that is open to authentic spiritual formation. The goal of this project is to explore how Christians might use the imaginative arts—principally storytelling—to help foster a social imaginary capable of guiding Gen Z readers beyond the secularized boundaries of atheism and the “buffered self” into a transcendent worldview in which seeking to know the light and love of God becomes plausible.² In Section One, I will examine four facets of Gen Z’s culture to demonstrate this point. First, Gen Z’s culture, particularly their screen life, is threatening their mental and emotional health. Second, Gen Z culture is the culmination of momentous cultural upheaval that has resulted in a disenchanted and self-centered western world. Third, the internal stories that Gen Z tells itself about itself reinforce an immanent and nihilistic worldview; and fourth, the convergence of these forces produced a generation that is incapable of envisioning a spiritual identity that includes a personal relationship with an immanent and transcendent God.

Generation Z: Balancing Upon a Precarious Edge

Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2012,³ has had the Internet at their fingertips before they could talk.⁴ This generation skillfully navigates the vast waves of

² The scope of this project includes discussion of the theology of General Revelation toward the specific purpose of creating spiritual seekers and does not necessarily include a discussion of the theology of Special Revelation. For a more thorough discussion on General versus Special Revelation particularly in light of postmodernism, please see Millard Erickson’s treatment: https://www-jstor-org.elibrary.johnsonu.edu/stable/j.ctt22nm5qk.10?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

³ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York, NY: Atria, 2018), 6.

⁴ Twenge, *iGen*, 2.

data flowing toward them 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University writes, “They are true digital natives.”⁵ However, this overabundance of data and entertainment has a dark side that has exacted a toll on this newest generation.

Gen Z: Screen Life

According to the authors of *Tech Generation*, teens aged 13–18 average over nine hours of entertainment media use per day, excluding screen use for school or homework. Almost one-quarter of all U.S. teens report using the Internet “almost constantly.”⁶ Between Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, ever-expanding streaming platforms, watching videos, and texting, these digital natives are busy, but they are not busy doing traditional work. Twenge reports that the hours of homework, paid work, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities are down for Gen Z as compared to Gen X. Gen Zers have 33 minutes more leisure time each day than the previous generation.⁷ How are the majority of Gen Zers spending these extra four hours a week? On a screen.

⁵ Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), Chap. 8, iBooks.

⁶ Mike Brooks and Jon Lasser. *Tech Generation: Raising Balanced Kids in a Hyper-Connected World*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chap. 1, z-lib.org.

⁷ Twenge, *iGen*, 23.

Gen Z's Mental Health

Neuroscientists believe that the same reward system in the brain involved in drug addiction may also be involved in behavioral addictions such as gambling and the use of digital technologies.⁸ Aric Sigman, a British psychologist, has determined that “digital natives exhibit a higher prevalence of screen-related ‘addictive’ behaviours that reflect impaired neurological reward-processing and impulse-control mechanisms.”⁹ Addiction experts have also found evidence to suggest that young brains are susceptible to becoming “wired” for and dependent upon technologically driven social interaction to get periodic dopamine bursts.¹⁰ Dimitri Christakis, a psychology professor at the University of Washington, sees a concerning picture emerging. He notes that unlike gambling or drugs, screens are pervasive and are now regarded as appropriate toys for very young babies. He sees symptoms of addiction in children as young as two.¹¹

Excessive screen time does not merely impact the brain of adolescents. It affects their social life as well. Since teens spend so much time in virtual reality, many have very little time for face-to-face interaction. The number of teenagers who regularly get

⁸. Brooks and Lasser, *Tech Generation*, 9.

⁹. Aric Sigman, “Screen Dependency Disorders: A New Challenge for Child Neurology,” *Journal of the International Child Neurology Association* 1, no. 1 (April 19, 2017), <https://jicna.org/index.php/journal/article/view/jicna-2017-119>.

¹⁰. Sören Krach, Paulus M. Frieder, Maren Bodden, and Tilo Kircher, “The Rewarding Nature of Social Interactions,” *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 4 (May 28, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2010.00022>.

¹¹. Erik Vance, “What Screen Addictions and Drug Addictions Have in Common,” NOVA, October 23, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/screen-time-addiction/>.

together with friends has plummeted.¹² According to Twenge, loneliness among American teens is at an all-time high, and the statistics show that social media is to blame. “Teens who visit social networking sites every day are actually more likely to agree with statements such as ‘I often feel lonely,’ ‘I often feel left out of things,’ and ‘I often wish I had more good friends.’ In contrast, those who spend time with their friends in person or who play sports are less lonely.”¹³

Statistics show that younger teens are particularly susceptible to acute loneliness. Twenge reports, “A stunning 31% more 8th and 10th graders felt lonely in 2015 than in 2011, along with 22% more 12th graders.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, this feeling of social isolation can lead to other psychological issues as well. One can only assume that studies will reveal that the Covid 19 Pandemic has only exacerbated these issues.

According to the *Stressed in America Poll*, conducted in October 2018 by the American Psychological Association, Gen Z adults (ages 18 to 21) demonstrate heightened manifestations of stress. Fifty-eight percent of Gen Z adults experience depression or sadness. Fifty-five percent report a lack of interest, motivation, or energy. Fifty-four percent feel nervous or anxious.¹⁵ Sixty-eight percent of Adult Gen Zs report being unable to sleep at night due to stress, and 58 percent attribute their poor eating

¹² Twenge, *iGen*, 78.

¹³ Twenge, *iGen*, 80.

¹⁴ Twenge, *iGen* 97.

¹⁵ For a discussion regarding anxiety in affluent American youth, please see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1950124/>

habits to stress.¹⁶ My Field Research Experience, conducted with 103 Sophomores at West High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, revealed that fear and worry for the future are among Gen Z's most significant challenges. Out of the one-hundred and three students surveyed, 57 percent indicated that they worry about the future "all the time," and another 25 percent stated they worry about the future "almost all of the time."¹⁷

The stress that Gen Zers experience is driving up both self-harm and suicide rates. College students reporting self-harm rose 30 percent between the years 2011-2016, according to an ACHA survey.¹⁸ The US Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports suicide as the third leading cause of death in US adolescents and is rising. The National Center for Health Statistics disclosed, "age-adjusted suicide rates among youth have risen by 24% over the last 15 years."¹⁹ According to my Field Research Experience, 54 percent out of the high school students surveyed indicated that they "almost always" or "always" wonder if life had any meaning at all.²⁰ This research leads one to wonder if the decay of meaning and the despair that drives adolescents to suicide are connected.

¹⁶. "Stress in America™ Generation Z," *American Psychological Association*, October 2018, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf>.

¹⁷. Susan Stratton submitted to Nijay Gupta, August 23, 2019, "Worldview Development and Literature Preferences in Adolescents," Field Research Experience, in partial fulfillment of Doctorate of Ministry, George Fox University.

¹⁸. Twenge, *iGen*, 109.

¹⁹. Sally Curtain, Margaret Warner, and Holly Hedegaard, "Increase in Suicide in the United States, 1999–2014," *National Center for Health Statistics*, April 2016, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db241.htm>

²⁰. Field Research Experience.

It is hard to argue with such consistent data across many different sources; however, Twenge and others researching this generation are not without their critics. Malcolm Harris, an American critic and editor, suggests that the multiple challenges facing Gen Z have more to do with cantankerous “consultants” and economics than cell phones.²¹ Annalisa Quinn, a literary critic for NPR, reminds us all of “intergenerational carping” and also throws suspicion on Twenge’s research.²²

Critics aside, the question remains: How did Gen Z get here? What historical and cultural factors contribute to such a multifaceted generational portrait? The next section tackles the sweeping historical forces that have converged to produce Gen Z.

Centuries of Tumultuous Change

Before 1500 BCE, western civilization regarded the natural world as a sign that pointed beyond itself to other nonhuman presences that inhabited the earth. This realm was understood as being imbued with spirits (God, Satan, faeries, sprites, angels, demons) that inhabited the world and the material items through which their power manifested.²³ In this ancient social imaginary, earthly civilization was part of a higher reality. It was part of the Kingdom of God. Meaning was located outside of the human

²¹ Malcolm Harris, “Are Smartphones Destroying a Generation, or Are Consultants?,” *New York Magazine: Intelligencer*, August 28, 2017, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/08/jean-m-twenges-igen-review.html>.

²² Annalisa Quinn, “Move Over Millennials, Here Comes ‘iGen’ ... Or Maybe Not,” *NPR.Org*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/09/17/548664627/move-over-millennials-here-comes-igen-or-maybe-not>.

²³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap: Harvard University Press, 2018), 32.

being in this vast space filled with otherworldly spiritual beings. The self of this world was porous, open, and vulnerable to forces outside of itself.²⁴ How did we move from an enchanted transcendent God-filled universe to a disenchanting immanent humanistic worldview?

The Birth of the “Buffered Self”

In *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor, identifies four significant shifts in world history that led to the anthropocentric secularization of culture. These shifts occurred from the collective repercussions of the Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolutions that changed human presuppositions regarding the priority and existence of transcendent power. These historic shifts created the plausibility structure that birthed the “immanent frame” from which humans now unconsciously view the world. Building on Taylor’s work, philosopher James K. A. Smith contends, “...it wasn’t enough for us to stop believing in the gods; we also had to be able to imagine significance within an immanent frame, to imagine modes of meaning that did not depend on transcendence.”²⁵ According to Taylor, this cosmic disenchantment was more than merely a shift from “magic” to “matter.” This shift produced a dislocation of meaning from “the world” to “the mind.”²⁶

²⁴ Charles Taylor, “Buffered and Porous Selves.” Social Science Research Council, *The Immanent Frame* (blog), September 7, 2008, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/>.

²⁵ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 76.

²⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 31-32.

Taylor believes that this anthropocentric secularization inspired a “nova effect,” spawning ever-growing “cross-pressured” movements of moral and spiritual philosophies of the good life and human flourishing to take the place of what was lost.²⁷ This pluralized secularization spawned a new modern self: a self that generates meaning not from external things or events but from an insulated and isolated inner self that gives its own self-governing order to its private life.²⁸ A new self-orientation of humankind’s social existence surfaced, one that “gives unprecedented primacy to the individual.”²⁹ The outside world might be the impetus to generate meanings, but meaning for the individual is formed within the mind itself. Taylor refers to this as “the buffered self,”³⁰ and the Western buffered self is master of its own meaning.

Not all philosophers and cultural critics are wringing their hands over the state of disenchantment Taylor describe. Max Weber views disenchantment as the necessary consequence of humanity’s learning from the past to carve a better future, and Rene Girard regards disenchantment as the cost of Christian maturity and closeness to God.³¹ None, however, disagree that this secularization has given rise to an oft-unexamined Humanism.

²⁷. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 299.

²⁸. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 37-39.

²⁹. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 146.

³⁰. Taylor, “Buffered and Porous Selves.”

³¹. Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2013), 13.

The Rise of “Exclusive Humanism”

As the reign of the buffered self became firmly ensconced, two theological ideologies arose that paved the way for humanism to gain popularity in western culture. The first of the two, Deism, drove a wedge between reason and revelation and natural versus supernatural manifestations. The second, Pelagianism, proposed that human nature is not tainted by original sin and was capable of choosing good and evil through human effort. Taylor suggests the combined force of these beliefs introduced both the conception of an impersonal god and humans’ ability to achieve an “agape-analogue”³² without the empowerment of divine grace. Humans, therefore, possess the dignity of a moral project not overseen by a deity. Taylor concludes, “For the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option.”³³ Exclusive Humanism envisioned a world that offered human significance and meaning without divine transcendence. The consequence of the emergence of “exclusive humanism” is the disappearance of divine being from the Western world’s collective social imaginary. This shift can be felt in every social construct in the modern world, including the defining stories that Gen Z tells itself.

³². Agape-analogue is the echo of the Christian ideal of agape love reshaped now into benevolence for all through exclusive humanism.

³³. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 18.

Reinforcing the Immanent Frame

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz holds that culture is the ensemble of texts or stories a people tell themselves about themselves.³⁴ If this is true, then the stories that a generation tells itself are the bedrock of not only that generation's culture but also its future. Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Christian Smith all elaborate the same truth. Humans are “narrative animals: we define who we are, and what we ought to do, based on what story we see ourselves in.”³⁵

The Defining Stories of Gen Z

David Herman, English professor at North Carolina State University, argues that stories are strategies that help humans make sense of their world and that narratives may provide an invaluable resource for structuring and comprehending experience.³⁶ In this section, I will summarize three narratives that appear to be part of Generation Z's cultural DNA: the world is a frightening place, meaning is over-rated, and “God? What God?”

The World is a Frightening Place. Gen Z grew up in the wake of 9/11, experienced the debilitating recession of 2009, watched in horror the global terrorism broadcast on all of their multiple screens, experienced the fear of going to school or the mall as mass shootings became commonplace in the West, and now face a pandemic of

³⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), Chap. 15, ebooks.

³⁵ Smith, *How (Not) to Be*, 68.

³⁶ David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 3.

global proportions that does not appear to be abating. Fear and worry for the future are Gen Z's most significant challenges. Dr. Joseph Mercola, referencing statistics from the CBHSQ report from May 2015, cites that “recent research shows anxiety—characterized by constant and overwhelming worry and fear—is now 800 percent more prevalent than all forms of cancer.”³⁷

With this much anxiety and chaos in adolescents' daily lives, it stands to reason that many Gen Zers are experiencing “maturity fears” and want to “grow up more slowly.”³⁸ This generation is in no hurry to drive, get a traditional job, have a romantic relationship, leave home, or in any other way take their place as responsible adults in the world. They try to assuage their fears by remaining in adolescence for as long as possible. For Gen Z, the world is frightening, and many find their various screens provide a protective barrier and safe space from the realities outside their front door.

Meaning Is Over-rated. Charles Lindholm, Professor of Anthropology at Boston University, observes:

Human societies are not only problem-solving devices and symbolic projections of sublimated desires, but also organizations for the production of meaning. As Weber and Geertz have argued, humankind is above all a meaning-making animal; our very indeterminacy, our imaginative capacity, our existential anxiety, the quandaries of our species-being, all continually press us to seek to make some sense of the world we live in.”³⁹

³⁷ “This Condition Is Now 8 Times More Common Than All Cancers Combined - How Are You Coping?” Dr. Joseph Mercola's Newsletter, Mercola.com, June 29, 2017, <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2017/06/29/anxiety-overtakes-depression.aspx>.

³⁸ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York, NY: Atria, 2018), 45.

³⁹ Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Identity: The History, Theory, and Practice of Psychological Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 195.

Unfortunately for Gen Z the pursuit of meaning takes a back seat to the pursuit of money. Twenge reported in 2016 that 82 percent of students surveyed said that “becoming very well off financially” was important versus 47 percent who said that “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was important.⁴⁰ The statistics reporting the high levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and suicide suffered by this generation tell the story of a generation adrift from meaning. Gen Z must write a new meaningful story if they are to navigate life’s turbulent waters.

“God? What God?”. Throughout the centuries, the yeast of secularization has done its work, and now with the complete denial of any transcendent reality in our world, many Gen Zers are adrift from spiritual moorings in their lives. Like an avalanche that begins with a single pebble and picks up speed and destruction as it careens downhill, the cumulative impact of this avalanche is now landing squarely on this generation and can be seen through the rapidly changing demographics of religion and spirituality.

Generation Z identifies as being both less spiritual and less religious. According to Twenge, “the percentage of young adults who believed in God changed little between 1989 and 2000. Then it fell off a cliff. By 2016, one out of three 18- to 24-year-olds said they did not believe in God.”⁴¹ Two factors contribute to this trend. First, more Gen Zers are raised in nonreligious households, and second, more adolescents are deciding that religion is not important in their lives. According to the Barna Group, nearly half of the

⁴⁰. Twenge, *iGen*, 168.

⁴¹. Twenge, *iGen*, 126.

nation's adult population (44 percent) now qualifies as post-Christian, and the younger the generation, the more post-Christian.⁴²

Generation Z and Spirituality: A Shattering Portrait

Growing up in the shadow of 9/11, the reality of a global pandemic, the slow-motion catastrophe of climate change, as well as two recessions, Gen Z knows that life is not easy and there are many challenges ahead. Unfortunately, many in this Generation have decided to face those challenges with their own intelligence, hard work, and maybe a bit of luck. Few seek guidance and wisdom from beyond their own immanent frame. There is little room for transcendence here as both fear and a fierce independence dominate the inner landscape of the buffered self of this newest generation. Perhaps Julian Barnes captures this generation's angst best when he quipped in his memoir, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."⁴³ The next section explores this angst and how "exclusive humanism" impacts Generation Z's spiritual identity.

Outside of the Church

According to the Barna Group, the percentage of Gen Z teens that self-identify as atheist, agnostic, or nonaffiliated has risen to 35 percent, (up from 30 percent of Millennials and Gen Xers). Those reporting themselves as Christian likewise dropped

⁴². "2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population," The Barna Group, August 12, 2015, Accessed on July 14, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-sees-sharp-rise-in-post-christian-population/>.

⁴³. Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2009), 1.

with each successive generation, with just 59 percent of Gen Zers describing themselves as some kind of Christian.⁴⁴ Worldwide the trend is the same. In roughly half the countries where data is available on Christians (37 out of 78), young Christian adults are significantly less likely than older Christians to say religion is essential to them.⁴⁵ One reason for this decline in the U.S. may be Gen Z's emphasis on individualism. Twenge reports that as individualistic factors rose in culture ("believe in yourself," "if it feels good, do it"), religion declined.⁴⁶ One issue consistently referenced for the decline in religion is the antagonistic antigay attitudes of the church. As a whole, Gen Z shows little tolerance for inequality in any form: sexual, gender, or racial. The church's attitudes in this area may prevent this generation from exploring Christianity.

Inside the Church

In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melissa Denton endeavored to map American teens' religious beliefs. After more than 3,000 surveys and interviews, they discovered that many of America's youth no longer worshiped the historical God of the Christian faith. They worshipped something more in line with the deistic god of eighteenth-century philosophers. After they correlated their data, Smith and Denton proposed that American teens adhere to five tenants. First, they believe a Creator exists,

⁴⁴ "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z," The Barna Group, January 24, 2018, Accessed on July 14, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

⁴⁵ "Young Adults around the World Are Less Religious," Pew Research Center, June 13, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/young-adults-around-the-world-are-less-religious-by-several-measures/>.

⁴⁶ Twenge, *iGen*, 126.

orders the world, and watches over human life. Second, God desires humans to be nice, good, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Third, the aim of life is to feel good about one's self and be happy. Fourth, humans do not need God to be involved in life except when required to solve a problem. Fifth, humans who are good go to heaven after they die.⁴⁷ Smith and Denton have identified this ideology as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

It appears that what attracts youth to religion today is not the life-transforming power of a sovereign yet personal God, nor the societal impacting force to make the world a better place, but the fact that religion meets the need for social and psychological benefits that teenagers find comforting and therapeutic. Smith observes, “For many U.S. teenagers, God is treated like a cosmic therapist or counselor, a ready and competent helper who responds in times of trouble but who does not particularly ask for devotion nor obedience.”⁴⁸

The Narcissism Epidemic

One distinctive trait that compromises the spiritual vitality of Gen Z is a phrase made famous by Pope Francis, “the virus of narcissism.”⁴⁹ Addressing the Pontifical Academy for Life, the Pope elaborates, “like the mythical figure Narcissus, people risk

⁴⁷. Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, rev. ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162.

⁴⁸. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 148.

⁴⁹. Junno Esteves, “Narcissism Is a Spiritual Virus, Says Pope Francis,” Catholic Herald, June 26, 2018, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2018/06/26/narcissism-is-a-spiritual-virus-says-pope-francis/>.

becoming infected by a contagious spiritual virus” that turns them into “mirrored men and women who only see themselves and nothing else.”⁵⁰ Research indicates the Pope is right; narcissism is the spirit of the age, and Gen Z has not escaped its influence. Twenge defines this epidemic when she says that narcissists “lack emotionally warm, caring, and loving relationships with other people. This is a main difference between a narcissist and someone merely high in self-esteem: the high self-esteem person who’s not narcissistic values relationships, but the narcissist does not. The result is a fundamentally imbalanced self—a grandiose, inflated self-image and a lack of deep connections to others.”⁵¹

Considering Gen Z’s social isolation, the potential for narcissism is a definite concern. Dr. Michele Borba, author of *UnSelfie*, has documented the growing indifference of Generation Z. “Teens are now 40 percent lower in empathy levels than three decades ago, and in the same period, narcissism has increased 58 percent.”⁵²

True Christian spirituality seems to be a rare commodity among today’s youth as Taylor’s buffered self remains in the spotlight. There appears to be very little hunger for God or even any thought of the eternal or transcendent. Yet unrest lingers. James K A Smith sums up this angst well: “Taylor’s account of our “cross-pressured” situation—suspended between the malaise of immanence and the memory of transcendence—names

⁵⁰. Esteves, “A Spiritual Virus.”

⁵¹. Twenge, *Epidemic*, 57.

⁵². Michele Borba, *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2016), 35, iBooks.

and explains vague rumblings in the background of our experience for which we lack words.”⁵³

The forceful sweep of history has brought Gen Z to this critical and precarious place. The culmination of centuries of momentous change that resulted in a disenchanted and self-centered western world has produced a screen-centric culture that is threatening Gen Z’s mental and emotional health. This self-culture is also reflected in the internal stories of Gen Z and only proves to reinforce an immanent and nihilistic worldview. Tragically, the convergence of these forces has produced a generation incapable of envisioning a spiritual identity that includes a personal relationship with an immanent and transcendent God.

Conclusion

Generation Z’s flawed social imaginary requires a new prophetic reimagining of a powerful and beautiful future to inspire it. This future must be rooted in the real world dystopian present that they face and not a religious fairy tale. This vision must be strong enough to break through the stronghold of the buffered self and embolden this next generation toward hope for wholeness and a socially constructed global revelation of goodwill and service for the good of humankind. Section Two will explore the potential of the imagination and the power of the imaginative arts to achieve such a goal.

⁵³ Smith, *How (Not) to Be*, 13.

SECTION TWO: OTHER SOLUTIONS

Earth's crammed with heaven,
 And every common bush afire with God,
 But only he who sees takes off his shoes...

Emily Barrett Browning

Section 1 examined Generation Z's flawed social imaginary and suggested the need for a fresh prophetic reimagining to break through the prevailing narcissistic worldview held by this generation. This section examines both the history and theory of imagination and how Gen Z's immanent social imaginary might be reenchanting by capturing their imagination through transcendent experiences in creation, visual arts, and music.

Introduction

They say the eyes are the window to the soul and gazing into someone's eyes offers the keen observer the secrets hidden within. However, the eyes also happen to be the window to the universe, which is ablaze with beauty, mystery and wonder. The question is, as twenty-first century explorers, do we still see the universe as a place of intricate splendor? Are we inspired to awe by a golden eagle soaring in flight? As we listen to a Mozart Concerto, do we exclaim with Einstein, "Mozart's music is so pure and beautiful that I see it as a reflection of the inner beauty of the universe."⁵⁴ Do Monet's Water Lilies take our breath away? Are we moved by the splendor of the cosmos, or have

⁵⁴ Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, re. ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 14.

we become oxygenated carbon-encased automatons living only to eat, sleep, and throw ourselves into work, never to raise our eyes to the horizon?

As noted in the last section, modern life has produced a generation that lives with an inverted gaze firmly fixed on self,⁵⁵ and there is hardly attention to spare for the universe and its wonders. The stories we tell flatten both our interior and exterior experience of the world and teach our children to do the same. A meaningful life is often neither sought nor missed. In a universe overflowing with connection and enchantment, this makes us orphans of our own making. However, there remains a dull ache, a longing to be reunited with our *raison d'être*. The question is, how do we reignite the spark within this next generation to look for meaning beyond themselves? How do we reenchant the world for eyes that have become inverted and clouded by self? I propose that we escort the holy faculty of imagination out of exile and place it firmly on the center stage of human understanding.

Imagination and Transcendence

The world is in love with the supernatural. In fact, the current zeitgeist of American culture overflows with mystical and marvelous imaginings of every kind: aliens, ghosts, multiverse musings, superheroes, angels, demons, fairies, gods, monsters, and vampires, to name a few. Are these mere attempts at vapid entertainment, or is something deeper driving our fascination with the mysterious unknown? Undoubtedly,

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, "Buffered and Porous Selves," Social Science Research Counsel, The Immanent Frame, September 7, 2008, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/>.

the power of imagination is on display seeking answers to life's most pressings questions. Is the supernatural real? Is there life beyond the grave? Does other intelligent life exist in the universe?

As important as these questions are, they are no longer tethered to any religious belief nor to a firm confidence in a good Creator God whose aim is to bring shalom to every corner of the earth. There is a free-floating angst in the twenty-first century that gnaws at individual souls in the absence of any secure attachment to an immanent,⁵⁶ transcendent⁵⁷ reality. Levy notes,

In the “melancholy, withdrawing roar” of God’s waning presence in the modern world, writers and other artists have sometimes celebrated human freedom from religious restraint, but more often have lamented the sense of God’s absence and thus the erosion of any sense of ultimate meaning from our lives.”⁵⁸

Twenty-first century humans rarely use imagination in the pursuit of transcendence. It has not always been this way.

⁵⁶ Tillich asserts that the coherence of both transcendence and immanence is best illustrated in the Judeo-Christian God, in the incarnation—something that is unique in world religions. In the Word becoming flesh, the universal, ultimate, and the concrete personal elements are united. The universal principle of God’s self-manifestation in nature and history appears in the Word, the Logos--the person of Jesus Christ. (Van der Merwe, W. L., and Wessel Stoker. *Looking Beyond?: Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics* (Brill: Rodopi, 2012), 13.

⁵⁷ Mark Johnson differentiates between “vertical” or religious transcendence, and immanent “horizontal” transcendence where the later “consists in our happy ability to sometimes “go beyond” our present situation in transformative acts that change both our world and ourselves.” *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 281.

⁵⁸ Sandra M. Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 56.

The Hebrew Bible and Imagination

The concept of imagination is as old as creation itself. In the Old Testament, the word used for imagination, *yetzer*, is found nine times throughout the Hebrew scriptures and derives its meaning from the root word to create.⁵⁹ According to theologian Martin Buber, “the *yetzer*, understood accordingly as man’s creative impulse to imitate God’s own creation, was arguably first realized when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.”⁶⁰ Social Psychologist Erich Fromm suggests, “The problem of good and evil arises only when there is imagination. Furthermore, man can become more evil or more good because he feeds his imagination with evil or good thoughts. They grow precisely because of that specifically human quality—imagination.”⁶¹ With the proverbial “apple” in hand, the first couple imagined a future of their own making: a future in which they were “like God.” This action’s unfortunate irony remains: Adam and Eve were already “like God” by the gift of the *Imago Dei* bestowed by God at creation.⁶²

Though the pre-fall role of imagination is not generally understood, the result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil unleashed the ability for the first humans to create possibilities in their own minds apart from God. Humans now think in

⁵⁹ Bible Study Tools, “Yetzer Meaning in Bible— Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon—New American Standard,” accessed August 25, 2020, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/yetzer.html>.

⁶⁰ Martin Buber, *Good and Evil*, (90-97), cited in Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Abington-on-Thames, UK: Routledge Publishing 1988), 42.

⁶¹ Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York, NY: Open Road Media, 2013), 126.

⁶² Genesis 1:26.

terms of dichotomies: past and future, good and evil, God and man. In Hebraic thinking, the *yetzer* divides into the *yetzer hara* or the evil imagination, and the *yetzer hatov* or the good imagination. It is up to each human to determine how to use their *yetzer*.

Philosopher Richard Kearney notes,

This loss of innocence, of contentedness with being what he is, is the cost of the freedom to become more than he is, to make himself other than his given self, to imagine alternative possibilities of existence... The freedom to choose between good and evil, and to construct one's story accordingly, is thus intimately related to the *yetzer* as a passion for the possible: the human impulse to transcend what exists in the direction of what might exist.⁶³

The prophets of Israel regularly used their imagination to “transcend what exists in the direction of what might exist.”⁶⁴ Utilizing what theologian Walter Bruggeman calls the “prophetic imagination”, Nahum Ward-Lev asserts that each of Israel’s writing prophets possessed extraordinary vision. Perceiving the world through the heart of God, they were able to keep one eye on the marginalized and oppressed and the other eye on what God had in store for the future of his people. “Lifted by divine inspiration, each prophet possessed the moral imagination to transcend the brokenness of his day and envision an alternative society.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 42.

⁶⁴ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 42.

⁶⁵ Nahum Ward-Lev, *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets: Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2019), 11.

Jesus and the Imagination

In the New Testament, Jesus sought to exercise his audience's *yetzer hatov* as he tantalized his listeners almost exclusively with story. His parables invited his hearers to use their imaginations to enter into the narrative he spun. He spoke of earthy everyday matters and wrapped them in divine truth. Jesus's distinctive metaphoric teachings are symbolic narratives, often expressing one simple yet central message, yet certainly relying upon the hearer's imaginative insight to discern their meaning.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur sums it up by saying that a parable is a metaphor in narrative form.⁶⁶ Theologian Paul Avis notes,

Thus Jesus did not teach in parables simply because he was a first-century rabbi preaching to first-century peasants and fishermen, but because his gospel was addressed to the whole person in its depth and integrity—to the heart as well as to the head, to children to whom the kingdom of heaven belonged as well as to the intelligentsia of scribes and Pharisees, to the alienated and outcast as well as to the aristocracy of the Sadducees. It was meant to evoke a response from the whole person as it was quickened by the Holy Spirit into repentance and faith and awoke to a new world of grace.⁶⁷

In his parables, Jesus brought earth and heaven together and helped his hearers use their God-given imagination not only to envision but take up residence in a world that they could not access with their senses.

Jesus not only offered parables to endorse the use of imagination by his followers, but he also provided additional weight for its use when speaking of the Shema with one

⁶⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. L. S. Mudge (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 10-11.

⁶⁷ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge Press, 1999), 58-59.

of the religious scribes. The scribe asked Jesus which commandment is the most important. In answering, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:4 with one small deviation: “The most important is, Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord: and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”⁶⁸ The original quote in Deuteronomy does not include loving God with “all of your mind.” The Greek word *dianoia* (διάνοια) translated here as “mind,” includes deep thought—and by implication imagination and understanding.⁶⁹ Trotter puts it this way. *Dianoia* “has more to do with coherence, seeing through the poetic mode, putting events and concepts together. It is not simply rational work, although it includes that.”⁷⁰ The ramification here is clear. Jesus is urging his followers to love God with all of their minds, which includes their imagination.

Imagination Theory: Then and Now

From the time of Jesus until the seventeenth century, westerners did not question the fact that true wisdom was rooted in the imaginative fables, stories, and myths of their age and that essential life-giving truth was embodied within these mediums. The Enlightenment cast suspicion and tended to marginalize the imaginative arts. Their work inaugurated a war against imagination, expounding that the entire realm of objective truth

⁶⁸ Mark 12:28-30.

⁶⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1991), 297.

⁷⁰ Thomas F. Trotter, “Theology and Imagination,” Religion Online, January 1, 1987, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/theology-and-imagination/>.

could be found in reason and reason alone. Intuition and imagination were relegated to the realm of a very personal subjective truth. These imaginative faculties, which alone offered the ability to synthesize, integrate, and make sense of the world around us, were submerged beneath the weight of pure dry facts and knowledge. It wasn't until the emergence of the Romantic era of the nineteenth century that the reign of pure reason was questioned.

Samuel Coleridge and the Romantic Movement

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a philosopher, a literary critic, poet, and theologian who, along with William Wordsworth, established the Romantic movement in England in the mid nineteenth century. For Coleridge, the imagination proceeds from God and leads to God as well. He identifies two different types of imagination: the primary and the secondary. Coleridge, who based his imagination theory on the work of Kant, Hume, and psychologist, Johan Tetans, states, "The primary *imagination* I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite *I Am*."⁷¹

Coleridge defines the primary imagination as that God-given ability that allows us to identify and organize stimuli from our environment. The primary imagination is the involuntary act of receiving impressions and perceptions from the outside world and organizing them so that the mind can form clear impressions from the data. He identifies the secondary imagination as the human capacity to take these perceptions from the

⁷¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 481.

stimuli around us and create new meanings. For Coleridge, human creative imagination is a reflection, a flash of God's creativity that rushes out in the beauty and fullness of creation.

Secondary imagination is the artist's domain, though he would argue that all may partake of the stimuli provided by the primary imagination to create beauty.⁷² J. Robert Barth notes, "Secondary imagination allows the artist not only to perceive the world in an orderly way, but also to express that order in a new medium, be it paint or marble or, for the poet, words."⁷³ Coleridge believed that human creative action mirrored the divine action taken at creation. The artist shapes meaningful patterns out of the symbols of experience in much the same way that God brought order to the cosmos as He created the world. "The exercise of imagination, (therefore) which can," as Coleridge writes in the *Biographia Literaria*, "awaken the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom," can open our eyes to "the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us."⁷⁴ As our experience grows, humans continually use the secondary imagination to create new patterns out of the symbolic material provided by the primary imagination.

Levy summarizes the impetus of Coleridge this way:

Our primary power to perceive symbols gleaned from the world about us (these pregnant signs of God's impinging presence and erupting action...) along with our secondary power to create new meaning through symbols (...through ritual,

⁷² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 481.

⁷³ Robert J. Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 19.

⁷⁴ Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination*, 24.

music, poetry, art, and story), is our opening into the transcendent realm. The imagination thus becomes our gateway to God.⁷⁵

Johnson and the Objectivists

Since Coleridge, western philosophers have offered a plethora of theories on imagination that treat meaning and rationality as “purely conceptual, propositional, and algorithmic, and therefore in no way dependent on metaphorical extensions of nonpropositional image schemata.”⁷⁶ In a broad sense, this body of work may be summarized in these terms. “Imagination is a mental faculty, which develops conceptions by the synthesis of perceptions. Inner and outer sensations as well as topical and memorized impressions, can be transformed by imagination into random images and varieties.”⁷⁷

Theories of imagination endeavor to offer us ways of defining meaning and the ability to understand the complex neural processes that accompany imagination. Since Coleridge, though, theories regarding imagination have become increasingly rational and objective. Philosopher Mark Johnson calls these theorists Objectivists.

According to Johnson, Objectivists believe that rationality transcends the way humans understand the processes of reasoning and the generation of meaning. They view

⁷⁵ Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, 10.

⁷⁶ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xxi.

⁷⁷ Jürgen Klein, Vera Damm, and Angelika Giebeler. “An Outline of a Theory of Imagination,” *Zeitschrift Für Allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie / Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 14, no. 1 (1983): 16.

reason in absolute terms and believe that reason follows its own logical rules and operates free of an embodied experience.

Johnson, on the other hand, argues that in his non-Objectivist (or “cognitive semantics”) approach, “three key notions are regarded as central: understanding, imagination, embodiment.”⁷⁸ For Johnson, the kind of imaginative structuring he proposes does not involve “romantic flights of fancy”⁷⁹ that supersede our bodies but symbolic interpretations of environmental stimuli that ground us more firmly in our body. Johnson sees the embodied nature of sensory stimuli that leads to a richer understanding of experience as key to furthering our understanding of imagination. His goal is to enhance the priority placed on an experiential foundation in imaginative processes, forfeited in Objectivist’s thought and research.

According to Johnson, the sensory images and the metaphors derived from them contain embodied structures of meaning intrinsic to the majority of our abstract thinking and reasoning. “The metaphorical projections are not arbitrary but rather are highly constrained by other aspects of our bodily functioning and experience. “Experience,” then, is to be understood in a very rich, broad sense as including basic perceptual, motor-program, emotional, historical, social, and linguistic dimensions.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, 173.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, xiv.

⁸⁰ Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, xvi.

Moreover, Johnson argues that this discussion is more than just a cerebral exercise in moving the pieces arbitrarily around imagination's theoretical chessboard. He stresses that

It is important to revive and enrich our notion of imagination if we are to overcome certain undesirable effects of a deeply rooted set of dichotomies that have dominated Western philosophy (e. g., mind/body, reason/imagination, science/art, cognition/ emotion, fact/value, and on and on) and that have come to influence our common understanding. We need to explore the role of imagination (in my suitably enriched sense) in meaning, understanding, reasoning, and communication. Only in this way can we begin to understand how it is possible for us to "have a world" that we can make sense of and reason about.⁸¹

According to Johnson, "Without imagination, nothing in the world could be meaningful. Without imagination, we could never make sense of our experience. Without imagination, we could never reason toward knowledge of reality."⁸² Without imagination, humankind is cast adrift in a sea of meaninglessness, and we are disconnected from the tools to create meaning. Abraham Heschel, a nineteenth-century rabbi and theologian states,

The secret of being human is care for meaning. Man is not his own meaning, and if the essence of being human is concern for transcendent meaning, then man's secret lies in openness to transcendence. Existence is interspersed with

⁸¹ Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, 140.

⁸² Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, ix.

suggestions of transcendence, and openness to transcendence is a constitutive element of being human.⁸³

Though care must be exercised with the faculty of the imagination. In large part, humans become what we read, what we see, what we hear, and that to which we expose our minds. Imagination has the power to transform vision, and as the Hebrew prophets, including Jesus, recognized, it can be a power for good or evil. This power of the human mind can access evil and the sinister, as well as the good and the Transcendent Other.

Capturing a God Oriented Imagination

C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* is a conversation between Wormwood, a young demon, and his uncle, Screwtape, a much more experienced fiend. In the opening pages, Lewis brilliantly illuminates the problem with most humans: they are far too tied to the mundane and ordinary in their lives. In one conversation, Wormwood reveals the following experience. A human who is an atheist and in Screwtape's charge is reading in the British Museum as was his custom. As transcendent thoughts and questions enter his mind, the experienced demon "suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch." Screwtape explains that, of course, The Enemy (God) presumably made a counter-suggestion that this subject was far more important than lunch. Wherein the experienced demon interjected into his subject's mind: "Quite. In fact, much too important to tackle it the end of a morning...Much better to come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh

⁸³ Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 66.

mind.”⁸⁴ By then, his subject was almost to the door, and once he was in the street, the demon explains, the battle was won.

Screwtape continues,

I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that whatever odd ideas might come into a man’s head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of “real life” (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all “that sort of thing” just couldn’t be true.⁸⁵

Lewis (and Screwtape) knew the buffered self’s inclination is to remain within the orb of its own sensory experience. The self in this interior self-referential world—where only what can be touched, tasted, smelled, heard, and seen involves the really real—is unlikely to reach for a transcendent understanding of life. For the buffered self, there is no meaning outside of that derived from within its own sensory data. Charles Taylor explains, “As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don’t need to ‘get to me,’ to use the contemporary expression. That’s the sense to my use of the term ‘buffered’ here and in *A Secular Age*. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it.”⁸⁶

French Philosopher Jules de Gaultier asserts, “Imagination is the one weapon in the war against reality.”⁸⁷ To capture a God-oriented imagination, the ordinary and

⁸⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1941; repr. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 16. Kindle.

⁸⁵ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 16.

⁸⁶ Charles Taylor, “Buffered and Porous Selves,” Social Science Research Council, The Immanent Frame, September 7, 2008, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/>.

⁸⁷ Dragan P Bogunovic, *Heavenly Wisdom: Talent, Imagination, Creativity and Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013), 193.

mundane must recede in importance, and the possibility of the transcendent must expand within the mind. Pascal believed that “there was little point in trying to persuade anyone of the truth of religious belief. The important thing, he argued, was to make people wish it were true... Once such desire was implanted within the human heart, the human mind would eventually catch up with its deeper intuitions.”⁸⁸ For James K A Smith, the deeper intuitions are the imagination itself. He argues, “...it is not enough to equip our intellects to merely think rightly about the world. We also need to recruit our imaginations. Our hearts need to be captured by a vision of a telos that ‘pulls’ out of us action that is directed toward the kingdom of God.”⁸⁹

Timothy Radcliffe observes that “Reductionism squashes any sense of the transcendent.”⁹⁰ The buffered self must be exposed to that which will take it beyond its interior focus and challenge the reductionism that has shrunk its understanding of the ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Heschel’s biographer, Shai Held, sums up this argument well when he says,

This is the tragedy of every man: to dim all wonder by indifference. Life is routine, and routine is resistance to the wonder. One of the crucial tasks of religion, Heschel therefore insists, is to struggle against the anesthetizing effects of our over familiarization with life in reality and renew in stillness a sense of perpetual surprise, a willingness to encounter the world again and again as if for the first time.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (1994; repr., Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016), 134.

⁸⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How the Worship Works (Cultural Liturgies 2)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 82, ebook.

⁹⁰ Timothy Radcliffe, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), 176.

⁹¹ Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 30.

The God-given faculty of imagination can daily give a fresh understanding of the world and provide this sense of perpetual surprise. Imagination enlarges our capacity to see beyond the wall of our buffered self and to engage reality as it truly is. Imagination provides the gateway through which we escape the limitations of any reductionist way of seeing the created order. American philosopher John Dewey stated, “The idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through the imagination . . .”⁹² Between the isolated and buffered self and the transcendent reality of Divine Being, modern humans need a bridge. The imaginative creative arts may very well provide that crossing.

Alternative Solutions: Art and Transcendence

Writer Jeff Goins states, “Great art is transcendent. It points to something *beyond* itself and the one who made it. This is why the Greeks believed in essences and muses. They knew something that we’ve forgotten: Art describes the invisible world; it hints at the hidden story.”⁹³ This invisible world, this hidden story is the Kingdom of God, and it is accessed through our imagination. Levy asserts “that all good art—poetry, painting, music, literature, film—creates an opening through the imagination’s gateway

⁹² John Dewey and Thomas M. Alexander, *A Common Faith*. 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 17.

⁹³ Jeff. Goins, “Great Art Is Transcendent,” Goins, Writer (blog), January 14, 2012, <https://goinswriter.com/great-art-is-transcendent/>.

where ... the mysterious Ineffable shines through.”⁹⁴ Imaginative creative arts can provide the link between the buffered self and the Divine reality beyond. In the following section, I will explore three artistic mediums and the efficacy of each to potentially bridge the gap between the buffered self of Gen Z and the Living Presence of God: the art of Creation, Visual Art, and Music.

Alternative Solution One: Creation: The Fount of Art and Transcendence

Calvin: Look at all the stars! The universe just goes out forever and ever!
Hobbes: It kind of makes you wonder why man considers himself such a big screaming deal.⁹⁵

Hobbes, that great comic philosopher, once again pinpoints the problem: the buffered self considers itself a “big screaming deal” precisely because the buffered self has lost the ability to place its significance within the vast universal whole of creation. The knowledge of transcendence has been lost.

Philosopher Peter Burger notes, “If the signals of transcendence have become rumors in our time, then we can set out to explore these rumors a dash, and perhaps to follow them up to their source.”⁹⁶ If there is a source to follow, it must undoubtedly begin in the created world. Ever since the dawn of time, creation has provided the angled mirror through which humankind recognizes the Creator as well as humanity’s place as the

⁹⁴ Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, 73.

⁹⁵ Bill Watterson, *There’s Treasure Everywhere—A Calvin and Hobbes Collection* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996), 370.

⁹⁶ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1970), 95.

Imago Dei. God is the original artistic impulse. The Trinity's work in creation beckons each of us to join the chorus of life that sings right outside our window.

The poet Emerson believed that it is in creation that we find true thought and faith. "There is I feel that nothing before me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground— my head bathed by the blithe air uplifted into infinite space— all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; The currents of the Universal Being circulated through me; I am part or parcel of God"⁹⁷ Sir Thomas Brown in his work *Religio Medici* concurs, "There are two Books from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of His servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the Eyes of all: those that never saw Him in the one, have discovered Him in the other."⁹⁸

Emerson and Brown are not the only ones entranced by the beauty of the created order. Einstein spoke of "rapturous amazement"⁹⁹ in responding to the beauty of creation. For Einstein, "religion does not rest on institutions, defining narratives, or charismatic individuals but on a recognition of the wonder and mystery of our universe and the 'superior mind' that lies behind it."¹⁰⁰ That "superior mind" is precisely what Coleridge

⁹⁷ R. W. Emerson. (1863) Nature, Reprinted in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Collected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 39.

⁹⁸ Alister McGrath, *A Theory of Everything (That Matters): A Brief Guide to Einstein, Relativity, and His Surprising Thoughts on God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2019), 447.

⁹⁹ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 1995), 38.

¹⁰⁰ McGrath, *A Theory of Everything*, 399.

was referring to when he spoke of primary imagination: “the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal art of creation in the infinite I AM.”¹⁰¹ These experiences of rapturous amazement, wonder, and mystery can be summed up in the experience of awe.

Creation Produces Awe. Social scientists, Piff et al, determined that awe involves feelings of wonder and amazement. It arises through experiences that evoke a sense of vastness, go beyond current frames of reference, and require a new understanding to accommodate the occasion.¹⁰² Providing documentation for Emerson, Einstein, and Brown’s experiences, Campos et al. found that awe produces a diminishment of the separate self and its interests vis-à-vis the perception of something infinitely larger than yourself.¹⁰³ Social scientists Keltner, and Haidt came to the same conclusion, “As in religious conversion (Spilka, Hood, & Godsuch, 1985) and Peak experiences (Maslow, 1964), nature-produced awe involves a diminished self, the giving way of previous conceptual distinctions (e.g., between master and servant), and the sensed presence of a higher power.”¹⁰⁴

Awe Produces an Increase in Self-less Behavior. Piff et al. determined in five consecutive studies that awe counteracts narcissistic tendencies. The first study found that

¹⁰¹ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 481.

¹⁰² Paul K. Piff, Pia Dietze, Matthew Feinberg, Daniel M. Stancato, and Dacher Keltner, “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015): 884, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000018>.

¹⁰³ B. Campos, M. N. Shiota, D. Keltner, G. C. Gonzaga & J. L. Goetz, “What Is Shared, What Is Different? Core Relational Themes and Expressive Displays of Eight Positive Emotions,” *Cognition and Emotion* 27 (2013): 37–52, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2012.683852>.

¹⁰⁴ D. Keltner and J. Haidt, “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion,” *Cognition & Emotion* 17 (2003): 310, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02699930302297>.

individuals with a higher dispositional tendency to experience awe displayed more generosity in an economic game. Their second study established that experimentally inducing awe caused individuals to affirm more ethical decision-making. Their third study revealed that awe caused individuals to be more generous to strangers. The fourth study demonstrated that awe inspired individuals to express more prosocial values. Their fifth study determined that induction of awe through creation in which participants gazed up at a grove of immense trees led to decreased entitlement and increased helpfulness and ethical values. The researchers conclude, “These findings highlight that the experience of awe can influence pro-sociality in a broad fashion and contribute to the growing literature documenting the centrality of emotions to human sociality (e.g., DeSteno, 2009; Keltner et al., 2014).”¹⁰⁵

Challenges: Gen Z and Creation. Calvin had it right all along. Just look up. Immersing Gen Z in nature could go a long way toward leading them to transcendence and the ability to think outside of themselves. Creation could provide the awe that Gen Z needs to move beyond the buffered self and the narcissism it cultivates. Nature also affords an excellent place for Gen Z to unplug from all their screens. Forbes magazine reports, “In the past year alone, web searches for ‘digital detox’ have increased by 42%, while a survey found that one in five consumers is taking a digital detox.”¹⁰⁶ A digital detox in creation sounds ideal. Unfortunately, 55 percent of the global population

¹⁰⁵ Piff et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” 883-99.

¹⁰⁶ Laura Begley Bloom, “Unplugged: 14 Best Places To Get Off The Grid,” *Forbes*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurabegleybloom/2019/08/26/why-you-need-to-take-a-digital-detox-and-where-to-go/>.

(including Gen Z) live in light-polluted concrete jungles¹⁰⁷ miles away from awe-inspiring natural settings.

Many organizations are already at the forefront in the effort to expose Gen Z to nature. A-GAP is one such organization. Spouting “tech-free freedom,” A-GAP¹⁰⁸ provides screen-free space while immersing participants in creation, art, as well as physical outdoor activities, and human connection. A-GAP hosts tech-free get-aways throughout the nation. Its mission is to raise awareness about screen addiction and provide a screen-free, fun, and stimulating environment for retreat goers. Retreat counselors collect participant’s phones at registration and return them when the retreat is over. When asked about her recent A-GAP experience, Hayley Bates, a 22-year-old retreat participant in Brevard, North Carolina, said,

I believe that the most meaningful parts of our lives flow from being present with others, with ourselves, with creation, and with God. AGAP gave me an opportunity to reconnect with the deepest parts of myself. It allowed me the opportunity to practice the life-giving discipline of engaging in community. A-GAP gave me the opportunity to engage in the most meaningful parts of what it means to be human.¹⁰⁹

As transforming as A-GAP’s weekends can be, it is difficult to get young adults away from their screens for even a weekend to engage with nature. Relinquishing their phones for even 36 hours can be a hard sell. The cancellation rate for those registered

¹⁰⁷ “68% of the World Population Projected to Live in Urban Areas by 2050, Says UN,” United Nations News, May 16, 2018, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.

¹⁰⁸ A-Gap, “Our Purpose,” accessed October 31, 2020, <http://agap.life/purpose/>.

¹⁰⁹ Hayley Bates, interview by author, Knoxville, June 25, 2019.

for an A-GAP retreat is high. I have personally spoken at several of these retreats, so I have seen the fallout first-hand.

Without a doubt, creation provides a wonderful opportunity to allow awe to disrupt the buffered self's processing of meaning, priorities, and goals, but natural wonders are not the only pathway to awe-inspired transcendence. Next, I will examine visual art's ability to carry humans beyond the buffered sphere.

Alternative Solution Two: Visual Arts and Transcendence

Theologian Thomas Merton declared that “art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in... a painting ...discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve.”¹¹⁰ Merton's words resonate with me and evoke memories of an experience I had in 1996 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts.

A crowd gathered at the museum that day, and excitement infused the air because the Monet (1840-1926) Water Lily collection was on display. French impressionistic art is my favorite, so I, too, was anticipating the pleasure of seeing Monet with my own eyes. The exhibition, the *Nymphéas or Water Lilies*, is a series of 250 oil paintings that depict Monet's water lily garden, including exotic plants, the pond, the bridge, and the weeping willow tree at his home in Giverny, France.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), 35.

As I entered the gallery, a distinct hush was evident as the crowd became absorbed in Monet's early paintings of his garden. Room after room of paintings, displayed in living colors and textures, captured the rhythm of the seasons and nuances of light in his garden. I had never seen paintings quite so textured. James Elkins, Professor of Art in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, describes Monet's process this way.

The best motions, the ones Monet must have made habitually, were violent attacks followed by impulsive twists and turns as the brush moved off. First the brush would scrape wildly, epileptically, against the canvas, jittering across its own trail, breaking it up, laying down thick paint alongside dry paint, and then it would abruptly lift and swivel, turning the jagged edges into little eddies. The gestures are a mixture of timidity and violence, of perfect control in the preparation and perfect abdication of control in the execution.¹¹¹

The result was breathtaking.

Thinking the tour almost finished, I turned the final corner and stopped dead in my tracks. My entire group stood stalk still as we gazed upon Monet's final pieces. They were vast and awe-inspiring. Each panel was over six and a half feet long, and in one series, three canvases merged to form one boundless whole. Monet said that the goal of his large water lily paintings was to create "the illusion of an endless whole, of water without horizon or bank."¹¹² The effect was immersive and stunning. I stood transfixed. Enchantment hung in the air.

¹¹¹ James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.

¹¹² Water Lillies by Claude Monet, "Water Lilies by Claude Monet," November 2020, <http://www.monetpaintings.org/water-lilies/>.

Great Art and Emotion. Great art points beyond itself to another deeper reality.

As Piff et al. demonstrated in the previous section, it makes us feel small in the presence of its vastness. Philosopher George Steiner puts it this way:

But if... the arts aim to “enchant”—and we must never strip that word of its aura of magical summons—...It would instruct us of the inviolate enigma of the otherness in things and in animate presences. Serious painting, music, literature or sculpture make palpable to us, as do no other means of communication, the unassuaged, unhoused instability and estrangement of our condition.¹¹³

Paul Tillich, the Christian existential philosopher and theologian, relates his experience as an army chaplain on the front lines of the war during the horror of World War I. Granted a furlough, Tillich traveled back to Berlin, where he visited the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, (now known as the Bode museum¹¹⁴), that displayed Botticelli’s *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*. Tillich was entranced. He relates,

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting, there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colours of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.¹¹⁵

In future reference to this experience, Tillich used phrases like “revelatory ecstasy” and “encounter with the power of being itself.”¹¹⁶ Fuller Seminary Professor

¹¹³ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232, Applebooks.

¹¹⁴ Masterplan Museumsinsel: A Projection into the Future, “Bode-Museum.” Art. Accessed January 9, 2021, <https://www.museumsinsel-berlin.de/en/buildings/bode-museum/>.

¹¹⁵ Paul Tillich, “One Moment of Beauty,” in Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989), 234–35.

¹¹⁶ Paul Tillich, “Human Nature and Art,” in Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, 12.

Robert Johnston notes, Tillich’s “primal experience of God’s Presence, mediated through and within a painting, proved foundational for all his later theological reflection.”¹¹⁷

Great Art Makes Life Worth Living. Artist Makoto Fujimura believes that art makes life worth living and that there is a direct link between art and faith. He states,

Art can therefore be defined as “the substance of things hoped for,” the visible thread of that worthiness of life revealed in culture. Of course, this is the term the writer of the Book of Hebrews used to describe faith: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Art also is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”¹¹⁸

Artists Working Toward Global Change. Artists Andrew Finnie and James Turrell provide examples of contemporary artists working toward that “visible thread” of faith revealed in culture. Andrew Finnie currently lives in Newcastle, New South Wales. His 2014 work, *The Body of Christ, The Tree of Life*, is a large scale ecotheological digital collage and attempts to reimagine a dialog between Christ and the earth. The crucifixion is displayed with the roots of the tree of life intermingled with the cross’s base. The collage provides a visualization of the crucified Christ amid all the networks that nurture and sustain life on this planet in all their earthly beauty.¹¹⁹

The Quaker American artist, James Turrell, has worked worldwide in his chosen medium of light. He uses the metaphor of the parable of Plato’s Cave to convey his conviction that humans need liberation from our sensory limitations that taint our way of

¹¹⁷ Robert K. Johnston, *God’s Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2-3.

¹¹⁸ Makoto Fujimura, “Art, Love and Beauty: On Art, Lecture 1,” MAKOTO FUJIMURA, February 14, 2014, <https://www.makotofujimura.com/writings/art-love-and-beauty-on-art-lecture-1>.

¹¹⁹ Victoria Emily Jones, “Art and Theology,” *Art & Theology* (blog), August 14, 2020, <https://artandtheology.org/tag/bruce-herman/>.

seeing. An example of a recent installation was in the *Dorotheenstadt Cemetery Memorial Chapel*¹²⁰ in Berlin, where he designed an immersive light show to correspond with sunrise and sunset each day. He states, “My work is more about your seeing than it is about my seeing, although it is a product of my seeing. I’m also interested in the sense of presence of space; that is space where you feel a presence, almost an entity—that physical feeling and power that space can give.”¹²¹

Turrell and Finnie are great examples of how God reaches out through the creative medium of great visual art to pull us out of the mundane and ordinary of our lives. It causes us to pause and reflect on the lens with which we view the world. At times, when we can see life through the eyes of the artist, we see beyond the created medium into the eyes of the Creator of all things—into the eyes of Presence itself. However, not all art has this capacity nor this aim.

The Devolution of Visual Art. Great art makes life worth living, however, in the past several decades, artists of every discipline, but especially visual artists, have been trained with the expectation that they only produce new and sometimes shocking visual works. Unfortunately, in many cases, skill or craftsmanship is no longer an essential qualification for the artist. A prime example of this trend was an Exhibit called

¹²⁰ Alexandra Alexa, “From Matisse to Turrell, 8 Artists Who Designed Transcendent Chapels,” *Artsy*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-matisse-turrell-8-artists-designed-transcendent-chapels>.

¹²¹ James Turrell, “James Turrell,” accessed November 3, 2020, <https://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>.

Sensation,¹²² which debuted in London in 1997 and then in Brooklyn in 1999. The show debuted a new generation of “Young British Artists,” including, for example, a pornographic sculpture by Jake and Dinos Chapman and Marcus Harvey’s portrait of convicted child-murderer Myra Handley. The work of Chris Ofill, however, caused the most controversy.

Ofill’s piece, entitled *The Holy Virgin Mary*, portrays Mary on a shimmering gold background. Her blue gown flows down from her head and falls open to reveal a lacquered ball of elephant dung for her breast. Surrounding her is an abstract composition of women’s buttocks cut from pornographic magazines. Two balls of elephant dung provide the base for the canvas.

Art such as Ofill’s and those referred to as the new generations of “Young British Artists” certainly will not provide an avenue to transcendence for this or any other generation. However, solace can be taken from the words of Aleksander Solzhenitsyn as he accepted his 1970 Nobel Prize in literature,

So also we, holding Art in our hands, confidently consider ourselves to be its masters; boldly we direct it, we renew, reform and manifest it; we sell it for money, use it to please those in power; turn to it at one moment for amusement—right down to popular songs and night-clubs, and at another—grabbing the nearest weapon, cork or cudgel—for the passing needs of politics and for narrow-minded social ends. But art is not defiled by our efforts, neither does it thereby depart from its true nature, but on each occasion and in each application it gives to us a part of its secret inner light.¹²³

¹²² Allison Young. “Chris Ofill, The Holy Virgin Mary,” *Smarthistory: Art, History, Conversation*, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://smarthistory.org/chris-ofili-the-holy-virgin-mary/>.

¹²³ Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1970,” Nobel Prize, December 10, 1970, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/>.

Challenges: Generation Z and Visual Art. Powerful visual art could provide a gateway into transcendence for Generation Z as it has for past generations, however many roadblocks stand in the way. First, the percentage of Gen Zers who frequent art galleries is relatively low. “Results from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts... tell a story of declining attendance at traditional performing and visual arts offerings, with the most significant audience declines among those under 45.”¹²⁴ Since many Gen Zers are not interested in anything tainted with labels or brands or big business, small avant-garde galleries may be of more interest than a national gallery.¹²⁵

The second issue concerns the way Gen Z views creativity. Creativity is essential to Gen Z. They view themselves as more creative than past generations, however, most of that creativity is online. Over half (55%) of Gen Zers report that they find the internet a more creative space than the creativity they experience offline.¹²⁶ Mary Ittelson, a reporter for the Pacific Standard states,

Based on my interviews with representatives of this generation, for Gen Zers, daily life provides constant opportunities to be both artist and subject. Think of the selfie, which is self-promotion but also personal expression: “This is how I want you to see me,” and also: “This is how I see the world.” Just as the Medicis, the famous patrons of Florentine art during the Italian Renaissance, paid visual artists to depict family members posed with birds, maps of the world, and

¹²⁴ Mary Ittelson, “Why Gen Z Isn’t Content With Traditional Museum-Viewing,” *Pacific Standard*, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://psmag.com/ideas/how-gen-z-presents-a-challenge-to-traditional-arts-organizations>.

¹²⁵ “Forget Millennials—the Art Market Should Be Looking at Gen Z,” *The Art Newspaper*, accessed November 3, 2020, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/forget-millennials-gen-z-is-taking-over>.

¹²⁶ “Why Gen Z Is A Generation of Creativity,” *Marketing Charts*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.marketingcharts.com/demographics-and-audiences/teens-and-younger-109216>.

religious figures, Gen Zers use their social media identities as homages to themselves—and as ways to signify and depict the world around them.¹²⁷

Can visual art provide a way to transcendence for Gen Z? Can transcendence come through a screen? It is doubtful, but only time will tell. We can have great hope that ultimately, God is in charge of Divine revelation, and there are no actual obstacles to the will and the way of the Spirit of God.

Alternative Solution Three: Music and Transcendence

Music is a strange thing,” wrote poet Heinrich Heine.

I would almost say it is a miracle. For it stands halfway between thought and phenomenon, between spirit and matter, a sort of nebulous mediator, like and unlike each of the things it mediates—spirit that requires manifestation in time and matter that can do without space ... we do not know what music is.¹²⁸

Heine penned these words in the nineteenth century, and musicologists today are still grappling with the meaning of music.

Most would agree that certain music holds within it the ability to transport individuals beyond the confines of their own mind; that it has the ability to engender an awareness of a transcendent reality just beyond human grasp. Hobbes and Brown, authors of *The Extravagance of Music*, state, “There is a two-way movement of surplus and abundance, from music to God and from God to music. Thus, on the one hand, music will

¹²⁷ Ittleson, “Why Gen Z Isn’t Content.”

¹²⁸ Heinrich Heine, *Letters on a French Stage*, quoted in MacDonald Critchley and R. A. Henson, eds. *Music and the Brain: Studies in the Neurology of Music* (London: Heinemann Medical, 1977), 217.

be found to open up horizons beyond itself, while, viewed from the other side, as it were, God may be seen as overflowing into the creation, in interaction with it.”¹²⁹

Music Transports Individuals Beyond Themselves. Music’s ability to transport individuals out of the mundane and ordinary into another mental dimension is well documented. If imagination is vital in creating music, it is also key in receiving the art form and the experience that it affords. The fusion of music with divine encounter has been recognized for centuries. George Steiner comments in *Real Presences*,

Music and the metaphysical, in the root sense of that term, music and religious feeling, have been virtually inseparable. It is in and through music that we are most immediately in the presence of the logically, of the verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable energy in being that communicates to our senses and our reflection what little we can grasp of the naked wonder of life.¹³⁰

Alf Gabrielsson documents thousands of individuals’ musical experiences, including dozens that deal specifically with music and the transcendent. Men and women of all ages report being swept up by music into another state of being. “‘Magical,’ ‘mysterious,’ ‘supernatural,’ and extraterrestrial’”¹³¹ are the words used to describe these experiences. One of Gabrielsson’s subjects, an older woman, describes her experience between music and the eternal this way:

Bach’s Christmas oratorio, about 10 years ago. A friend has asked me to go to the church. I didn’t think I had heard the Christmas oratorio before. So, I sat there, completely unprepared. And the choir called out: “Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage.” (*Shout for joy, exult, rise up, glorify the day!*) It hit me right in the chest, I got goose pimples, the tears ran down my cheeks and I knew every

¹²⁹ David Brown and Gavin Hopps. *The Extravagance of Music* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 65-66.

¹³⁰ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 369.

¹³¹ Alf Gabrielsson and Roy Bradbury, *Strong Experiences with Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

thing and I dissolved and wanted to fall down on my knees and kiss His feet. I who am an atheist. I felt eternity, everlastingness. A sentence came to me: “Come, for all things are now ready.”¹³²

This woman’s experience with the transcendent came through classical music, and there is little doubt that classical music provides a powerful avenue for transcendence. However, reenchanting an entire generation will almost certainly come through music that is both “popular” (as to reach) and “secular” (as to intended audience). Though many critics today deride “popular music” (Scruton,¹³³ Adorno¹³⁴), both David Brown and Gavin Hopps, the authors of *The Extravagance of Music*, venture the possibility that “secular music might have the potential to evoke moods and responses that can draw us into reflection on, and possibly also towards experience of, God.”¹³⁵

I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For. Perhaps no musicians better illustrate this type of music’s potential to reenchant a generation toward transcendence than Dublin-based rock band U2. When Bono (Paul David Hewson) and his friends formed their band in 1976, they framed their calling in light of Isaiah 40:3, “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD.’”¹³⁶ They refused to commit themselves to the easy path of playing worship songs or “Contemporary

¹³² Gabrielsson and Bradbury, *Strong Experiences with Music*, 178.

¹³³ Roger Scruton, *Music as an Art* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

¹³⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

¹³⁵ David Brown and Gavin Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167.

¹³⁶ Steve Turner, *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 105.

Christian Music” (CCM) for church kids. They wanted to prepare the way for the Lord to reach their generation by singing about the things they held in common with the “secular” audience they longed to touch, namely, human relationships, spiritual journeying, and the wonders of creation.¹³⁷

No song better illustrates U2’s unique calling than “I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For,” which made it to the number one song in the U.S. in 1987.

I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you

But I still haven’t found
What I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found
What I'm looking for

I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in the fingertips
It burned like fire
This burning desire

Chorus

I believe in the Kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one

But yes, I’m still running

You broke the bonds
and you loosened chains
carried the cross of my shame, of my shame
You know I believe it

¹³⁷ Steve Turner. “Imagining Hollywood,” Presentation. “An Evening with Steve Turner.” Act One, Hollywood, The McFadzean Guesthouse, La Canada, CA (October 30, 2009).

Chorus¹³⁸

U2's approach proved a perfect combination for musical success. *Rolling Stone* magazine, the Bible of rock and roll, named "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" 93rd on their "500 Greatest Songs of All Time,"¹³⁹ and the album it appeared on, *Joshua Tree*, at number 135 on their "500 Greatest Albums of All Time."¹⁴⁰ Over a 40-plus-year career, U2 won more Grammy awards (22 as of 2020) than any other band in rock and roll history. Incredibly, when *Rolling Stone* named their "100 Greatest Artists of All Time," U2 came in at 22.¹⁴¹

As theologian and U2 biographer Steve Turner explains, U2

...expertly created a body of work which draws from the best traditions of modern music, adds something unique and incorporates a vision clearly rooted in the Bible. More than any other act in the history of rock, they have forced God, Jesus, the Bible and a Christian worldview on to the agenda. Rock critics could ignore the Jesus rock of the 1970s (and they did!), but they couldn't ignore U2...¹⁴²

Along the way, U2 helped to reenchant the social imaginaries of millions of their boomer, bustler, and millennial fans, at least those who had ears to hear their often subtle yet ubiquitous homage to their creator and savior. While it might take hundreds if not

¹³⁸ "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," Songwriters: Adam Clayton / Dave Evans / Larry Mullen / Paul David Hewson / Victor Reina, Universal Music Publishing Group, Source: [LyricFind](#).

¹³⁹ "500 Greatest Songs of All Time," *Rolling Stone*, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-151127/>.

¹⁴⁰ Rolling Stone, "500 Greatest Songs of All Time."

¹⁴¹ "100 Greatest Artists of All Time," *Rolling Stone*, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/100-greatest-artists-147446/>.

¹⁴² Turner, *Imagine*, 106.

thousands of U2's to move the social imaginary dial of an entire generation, could music be the key to reenchanting Generation Z?

Music Trends in Generation Z. Teenagers love music, and Generation Z is no exception. A 2018 study of more than 500 young women, ages 13-22, revealed that nearly all survey respondents (94%) cite music as “important” or “very important” (73%) to their lives. “Most (92%) say the music they listen to impacts their mood. Nearly half (45%) say their favorite artists influence their personal style, and 40% said music plays a role in influencing their social circle.”¹⁴³

However, Gen Z's connection to music is different from previous generations in several ways. According to ReverbNation.com, one of the most influential music platforms targeting young artists and listeners, Gen Z is reshaping the music industry. At least four growing trends mark Their unique listening habits. Their music is:

- 1) Personally Curated: Gen Z listeners no longer purchase albums, but individual songs selected for one of the myriads of playlists they construct in the soundtrack of their life, “featuring different moods and experiences, such as ‘Chill,’ ‘Gym,’ ‘Sleep,’ ‘Study,’ ‘Moody,’ etc.”
- 2) Socially Constructed: Gen Z discovers the songs that fill their playlists through online communities, either friends' recommendations in social media, or the advice of a trusted streaming platform's algorithm. The *Sweetie High* study

¹⁴³ Brittany Hodak, “New Study Spotlights Gen Z's Unique Music Consumption Habits,” *Forbes*, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brittanyhodak/2018/03/06/new-study-spotlights-gen-zs-unique-music-consumption-habits/>.

revealed that 97 percent of Gen Z females claim to listen to at least five musical genres regularly.¹⁴⁴

3) Globally Influenced: Since traditional geographies no longer limit these social networks, Gen Z listens to music from all over the world, including the exploding genres of Peru Punk, Polish Heavy Metal, Australian LoFi, K-Pop (Korea), C-Pop (China), and J-Pop (Japan).

4). Emotionally Sad: Gen Z listens to music to express their feelings about the lonely and troubled world they inhabit so that there are “more sad songs in the Top 40 charts today than there has ever been.”¹⁴⁵

These trends point to several challenges facing any fledgling Gen Z version of U2.

Challenges: Generation Z and Music. The first challenge is the fact that Gen Z’s experience of music is exceptionally niched.¹⁴⁶ Young adults, insulated within a self-contained womb of their own choosing, may never be exposed to the type of music that can lead them to a transcendent experience with the God of light and love. For past generations, the top songs on the popular music charts were ubiquitous, and everyone heard the same pieces. Unfortunately, music that can transport its listeners outside of their carefully constructed cocoon may never reach the ears of most young adults today because of the plethora of music available to them. According to Hargreaves, Hargreaves,

¹⁴⁴ Hodak, “New Study Spotlights.”

¹⁴⁵ “4 Ways Gen Z Is Changing the Music Industry’s Listening Habits,” *ReverbNation Blog*, April 29, 2020, <https://blog.reverbnation.com/2020/04/29/gen-z-is-changing-listening-habits/>.

¹⁴⁶ Mark Mulligan, “Niche Is the New Mainstream,” *Music Industry Blog*, May 17, 2019, <https://musicindustryblog.wordpress.com/2019/05/17/niche-is-the-new-mainstream/>.

and North, “People’s musical identities are determined by their associative networks and ‘musical geographies,’ which are based on their accumulated lifetime experience of different pieces and styles, all of which are further associated with social and culturally-situated experiences.”¹⁴⁷

The second challenge is the current and pervasive sacred and secular divide in the church’s approach to music and the arts. U2’s remarkable journey almost never happened. Bono tells the story of a Christian religious group that he and the lead guitarist, The Edge (David Howell Evans), frequented. The bible teacher, adept in the Scriptures, gave great insightful talks but group members shunned the band members because of their secular musical profession. Bono explains that he and The Edge almost decided to leave music.

Then we came to a realization: ‘Hold on a second. Where are these gifts coming from? This is how we worship God, even though we don’t write religious songs, because we didn’t feel God needs the advertising.’ [laughs] In fact, we ended up at a place where we thought: ‘The music isn’t bollocks. This kind of fundamentalism is what’s bollocks.’¹⁴⁸

If the church wishes to reenchant Gen Z with a transcendent social imaginary full of God’s light and love, it will require a radical realignment of our sacred/secular orientation. The only musicians likely to write and perform these types of songs in a manner which Gen Z will listen are Gen Zers themselves, or perhaps Millennials, the

¹⁴⁷ David Hargreaves, Jonathan Hargreaves, and A. North, “Imagination and Creativity in Music Listening,” *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception*, January 1, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199568086.003.0010>, 18.

¹⁴⁸ Michka Assayas, *Bono* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2006), 163.

very generations who are currently abandoning the church.¹⁴⁹ Without a significant investment in creating Christian musical communities and schools willing and able to nurture a new generation of “secular facing” artists, the vast potential for music and re-enchantment will be lost.

Conclusion

As humans, we get a different glimpse into the Divine through gazing at the Grand Canyon than through viewing Monet’s Water Lilies or listening to a U2 song. Each of these mediums can and has led human beings to transcendence. Unfortunately, the efficacy of any of these art forms to lead Generation Z to transcendence is limited, as discussed in this section. However, there is at least one additional medium to consider that can provide a more significant opportunity for Gen Z’s immersion into transcendence, and that is the art of story. Section three will promote story as the most accessible gateway into transcendence and an encounter with the Divine for Generation Z.

¹⁴⁹ “2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population,” The Barna Group, August 12, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-sees-sharp-rise-in-post-christian-population/>.

SECTION THREE: THE SOLUTION

Section One examined the current worldview of Generation Z suggesting that the imaginary arts might provide a framework for re-envisioning a fresh social imaginary for this newest generation. Section Two considered the role of imagination and explored three art forms that show limited promise as mediums through which Gen Z's vision of the world could be transformed. In this section, I will explore the life-changing power of story and evaluate its efficacy in transforming the social imaginary of Generation Z.

Introduction: The Power of Story

Everyone loves an inspiring story. A story with a courageous protagonist emboldens us. Friendship or relationship stories can make us feel less lonely. A story about perseverance can convince us that we can keep going. Inspiring stories, however, can do so much more than make us feel. Story can change behavior, and sometimes story can change the trajectory of an entire life.

Tatiana Kasatkina grew up in communist Russia, where the Bible was banned. An avid reader, she was quite excited when her country lifted the ban on Dostoyevsky's work. In this spiritual vacuum, it was not the Bible that led Kasatkina to faith, it was Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*. She says, "When the regime removed Dostoyevsky from the index of forbidden authors, a cover that was hiding heaven from me was lifted, and a ray of light for a whole generation appeared."¹⁵⁰ Kasatkina is now a

¹⁵⁰ Giovanna Parravicini, "Dostoevsky and The Blows of Hope," English, December 3, 2009, <https://english.clonline.org/news/culture/2009/12/03/dostoevsky-and-the-blows-of-hope>.

scientific collaborator at the Institute on Universal Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences and directs the Study Commission on Dostoyevsky, set up eight years ago by the Academy. She is one of the world's leading experts on Dostoyevsky's work.

Michael Margolis, the CEO of *Get Storied*, says, "If you want to learn about a culture, listen to the stories. If you want to change a culture, change the stories."¹⁵¹

Dostoyevsky knew the power of story and set out to change Russian culture by the books he wrote. The question is, how do we capture the imagination of Gen Z, transform culture, and re-enchant the world through the stories we tell? Is it possible for story to reawaken a transcendent way of life that can contribute to authentic spiritual formation in this youngest orphaned generation? Section three explores story's ability to transform the social imaginary of culture and to re-enchant the world for Generation Z.

I will examine four different perspectives to address these questions. First, recent discoveries in neuroscience will be discussed to determine the efficacy of story to influence adolescents' worldview development. Second, the foundational stories comprising Generation Z's identity development will be identified. Third, the missing cosmic metanarrative robbing young adults of meaning and purpose will be explored. Fourth, the need for stories that re-enchant the social imaginary of Gen Z and provide counter-narratives to their generational worldview will be discussed. To begin, I will explore how the human brain interacts with story.

¹⁵¹ Michael Margolis, "If You Want to Learn about a Culture, Listen to the Stories. If You Want to Change a Culture, Change the Stories," #storytelling, Tweet, @getstoried (blog), July 22, 2013, <https://twitter.com/getstoried/status/359323658608590848>.

Neuroscience and Story

Human beings have been telling stories for as long as we have scratched out primitive drawings on cave walls. This is no surprise, for as neuroscientists have now discovered, our brains are created for story. Lisa Cron, author of *Wired for Story*, observes, “We think in story. It’s hardwired in our brain. It’s how we make strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us.”¹⁵² The medium of story is not merely a rational process for the human brain because both the cerebrum (the rational center) and the limbic system (the seat of our emotional responses) are both involved in the art of story. Psychologists Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar’s research has determined, “when we read a story, not only can we understand the time and place of actions but also we can imagine the scene and the protagonist. And when we read, for instance, that the protagonist’s wife has died, we do not simply understand that he is in mourning for her, but we are also caught up by the feeling of mourning.”¹⁵³

The Brain is Protagonist Focused

According to Ye Yuan et al.’s research and recorded in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, the central character of the narrative (or the protagonist) offers the key to the brain’s captivation with a story. Storytellers, regardless of their medium, focus on the key actor in a narrative. The protagonist drives the actions that provide the exterior

¹⁵² Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (New York NY: Ten Speed Press, 2012), 6.

¹⁵³ János László, *The Science of Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Psychology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 9.

narrative arc of the story and also functions as the focal point by which the listeners or readers understand the goal structure of the story's actions. As a result, people see the central conflict of the story through the protagonist's eyes. This narrative experiment explored protagonist processing. The researchers determined that what was unique to the narrative was the protagonist and his or her actions,¹⁵⁴ and not the sequence of the events of the story itself.

Meaning in Story Causes Brain Activity to Sync

Uri Hasson and his team of Princeton researchers discovered through functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) analysis that even across different languages, individuals who are exposed to the same real-life story show similar brain activity: their frontal cortices begin to align.¹⁵⁵ He calls this “brain alignment” or “coupling.” This alignment comes from more than just auditory information. In all subjects, brain activity synced as real-life stories penetrated deep into the brain's higher functioning area and caused alignment or coupling with the listeners. Further research showed that this brain activation is universal and is not language dependent. Real-life stories cause listeners to demonstrate the same brain patterns and to couple, not just with the other hearers, but the same pattern can be shown with the speaker as well. Hasson's work provides the

¹⁵⁴ Ye Yuan, Judy Major-Girardin, and Steven Brown, “Storytelling Is Intrinsically Mentalistic: A Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Study of Narrative Production across Modalities,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 30, no. 9 (September 2018): 1298–1314, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_01294.

¹⁵⁵ Uri Hasson, Asif A. Ghazanfar, Bruno Galantucci, Simon Garrod, and Christian Keysers, “Brain-to-Brain Coupling: A Mechanism for Creating and Sharing a Social World,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 16, no. 2 (February 2012): 114–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2011.12.007>.

neurological basis for the use of narrative in extensive brain coupling achieved through storytelling. Hasson concludes, "...a story is the only way to activate parts in the brain so that a listener turns the story into their own idea and experience."¹⁵⁶

Narrative Potentially Triggers Both Empathy and Self-Awareness

Similarly, Morteza Dehghani and a team of USC researchers confirmed that meaning in narrative causes brain activity to sync regardless of the native language of the readers. Participant's brain activity was mapped using fMRI technology as narratives were read in three languages: English, Farsi, and Mandarin Chinese. Passages from a Harry Potter novel were presented to nine participants using Rapid Serial Visual Presentation (each word presented for 0.5 seconds). According to the researchers, these stories read in all three languages resulted in unique patterns of activations in the "default mode network" of the brain. This network is responsible for the interconnected brain regions such as the medial prefrontal cortex, the posterior cingulate cortex, the inferior parietal lobe, the lateral temporal cortex, and the hippocampal formation.

This is but one of many studies that indicate that the default mode network is continually at work while the mind is at rest to discover meaning in narrative.¹⁵⁷ "One of the biggest mysteries of neuroscience is how we create meaning out of the world. Stories

¹⁵⁶ Lani Peterson, "The Science Behind The Art Of Storytelling," Harvard Business Publishing, Harvard University, November, 14, 2017, <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/the-science-behind-the-art-of-storytelling/>.

¹⁵⁷ Morteza Dehghani, Reihane Boghrati, Kingson Man, Joe Hoover, Sarah I. Gimbel, Ashish Vaswani, Jason D. Zevin, et al. "Decoding the Neural Representation of Story Meanings across Languages," *Human Brain Mapping* 38, no. 12 (December 1, 2017): 6096–6106, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbm.23814>.

are deep-rooted in the core of our nature and help us create this meaning," said Jonas Kaplan, corresponding author at the Brain and Creativity Institute and an assistant professor of psychology at USC Dornsife.¹⁵⁸ The researchers concluded that reading story-based narratives opens up the possibility of triggering both empathy and self-awareness for others regardless of nation of origin or native language.¹⁵⁹ Dehghani's previous research demonstrated that activity in some DMN nodes increases throughout a narrative and peaks when subjects read stories containing strong moral values correlated to the participant values.

Readers Transported into the Body of the Protagonist

Emory University researchers conducted a study on the lingering neural effects of reading a novel. Using fMRI and the participation of 21 college-aged subjects over a period of 19 days, researchers discovered that reading a novel caused heightened brain connectivity in the left temporal cortex, the area of the brain associated with language receptivity. Heightened connectivity was also seen in the central sulcus, the brain's primary sensory-motor region, showing implications for embodied semantics' theory. This study concluded that reading a novel can transport the reader into the body of a protagonist. The impact of reading on brain connectivity was observed, not only the next morning but for five subsequent days following the reading. Gregory Berns, the leader of

¹⁵⁸ "Something Universal Occurs in the Brain When It Processes Stories, Regardless of Language," Science Daily, October 5, 2017, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/10/171005141710.htm>.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

the Emory research team, notes, “It remains an open question how long these neural changes might last, but the fact that we’re detecting them over a few days for a randomly assigned novel suggests that your favorite novels could certainly have a bigger and longer-lasting effect on the biology of your brain.”¹⁶⁰

Story Releases Hormones That Change Our Brain and Our Behavior

Paul Zak, Director for the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont University, discovered that character-driven story releases oxytocin in the human brain. This same chemical is released when a mother goes into labor or when we are trusted or shown kindness. Oxytocin is the feel-good hormone because it motivates cooperation with others through empathy and its release is crucial to bonding between mammals. Zak’s research indicates that character-driven stories consistently cause oxytocin synthesis and are a predictor of the degree to which people were willing to help others.¹⁶¹

Zak’s research also indicates that even a ten-minute video can change behavior. His research team procured videos from St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. The video shows a father talking to the camera while his young toddler, Ben, who has terminal brain cancer, plays in the background. The father describes the difficulty of continuing to enjoy his son while knowing that he will die in a few months. The clip demonstrates a classic

¹⁶⁰ Carol Clark, “A Novel Look at How Stories May Change the Brain,” Science Daily, January 3, 2014, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/01/140103204428.htm>.

¹⁶¹ Paul J. Zak, “Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling,” *Harvard Business Review*, October 28, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>.

story arc and ends with the father determining to stay close to his son “until he takes his last breath.” Zac used a second control group narrative of Ben and his father at the zoo in which the narrative arc was “flat,” and people did not engage emotionally in the video.

In the first St Jude study, Zac and his team drew blood samples before and after participants watched one of the two versions of the video. Zac discovered that the narrative with the dramatic arc caused an increase in oxytocin and cortisol. It is instructive that oxytocin’s change correlated positively with participants’ feeling of empathy for the child and his father. Afterward, increased empathy motivated participants to offer money to a research confederate. Zac and his team connected story to an emotion and then to a prosocial behavior. The alternative “flat” narrative of the father and son at the zoo did not heighten oxytocin or cortisol, and those participating did not report empathy for the characters in the narrative.¹⁶²

In subsequent research, Zak and his research team demonstrated that for a story to motivate others, it must sustain attention through narrative tension.¹⁶³ This narrative tension leads the hearers to share the emotions of the characters both during the story as well as mimicking not just the feelings but also the behavior of the characters when the story is finished.¹⁶⁴ Zak notes, “If you pay attention to the story and become emotionally

¹⁶² Paul J. Zak, “Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative,” *Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science* (February 2, 2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4445577/>.

¹⁶³ Zak, “Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React.”

¹⁶⁴ Paul J. Zak, *The Moral Molecule: The New Science of What Makes Us Good or Evil* (London: Bantam, 2012), Chapter 3, iBook.

engaged with the story's characters, then it is as if you have been transported into the story's world."¹⁶⁵

Neuroscience conclusively demonstrates that the human brain was created for story. Humans are designed to develop stories as well as consume stories. It is the most effective imaginative medium that creates change in human behavior and beliefs. If story is so influential in human beings' experience, what literature has captured the attention of Gen Z?

The Literature of Generation Z

Robyn MacCallum proposes that literature for children and adolescents is an integral part of any generation's cultural "historic life-world."¹⁶⁶ Many genres make up the literary world of today's teens—historical fiction, fantasy, dystopian, and horror, to name a few. Jacob Chang, a Gen Zer and Director for Insights for JUV Consulting, stated in a recent interview, "I believe the YA novels that really trended for our generation were the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan and its spin-offs, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a huge one, *Twilight* [...] and even more recently: books like *The Fault in Our Stars* and other John Green novels."¹⁶⁷ On the suggestion of Jacob Chang, I will explore two such

¹⁶⁵ Zak, "Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React."

¹⁶⁶ Robyn MacCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 5.

¹⁶⁷ Kelly Jensen, "How Does Generation Z Read?" BOOK RIOT, March 4, 2019, <https://bookriot.com/2019/03/04/how-does-generation-z-read/>.

works that make up the historic life-world of Gen Z: *The Percy Jackson Series* and *The Hunger Games*.

The Hunger Games

It is no surprise that this generation identifies so strongly with Katniss Everdeen, the indomitable hero of *The Hunger Games*. In fact, some refer to this generation as Gen K¹⁶⁸ for Katniss. Many Gen Zers feel as though they identify with the same harsh dystopian world of inequality, cruelty, and struggle that Katniss faced.

Each year the Capitol of Panem chooses a male and female tribute from each district to compete against the other districts in a desperate and deadly game that is televised for all to see. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games*, faces the Day of Reaping, when the tributes for each district are chosen, with a stoic resolve to flee if selected for the games. However, when her little sister Prim is chosen as tribute from her District, Katniss volunteers to fight in her place. Thus begins *The Hunger Games*, which continue in a brutal display of violence as children compete against children in a winner take all battle to the death. Katniss overcomes in the arena, but in the final battle against the Capitol, her sister, Prim, is killed, leaving Katniss's initial sacrifice hollow and meaningless.

¹⁶⁸. Noreena Hertz, "Think the Millennials Have It Tough? For Generation K Life's Even Harsher," *The Guardian*, sec. World News, March 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/19/think-millennials-have-it-tough-for-generation-k-life-is-even-harsher>.

The Hunger Games blends the atrocity of war with the absurdity of reality TV and provides keen political satire on the state of the world today. Literary experts are divided as to the efficacy of some of the darker dystopia available to modern adolescents. Though many laud its ability to heighten social and political issues, some experts caution writers to balance the creative tension to depict real-world tragedy with the need to open the door for hope in the end. Edith Clowes, the Brown-Forman Professor of Arts and Sciences, cautions that "...dystopian novels advocate a nostalgic revision of the past age and deconstruct utopian schemes only to abandon the notion of a beneficial social imagination," thereby embodying "a nihilistic attitude toward both the present and the future closing both off to a new imaginative possibility."¹⁶⁹

In the world of *The Hunger Games*, humankind is on its own to solve the meaningless tragedies of life. And in the real world, teens deal with global pandemics, scorched earth politics, oppressive monopolies, dysfunctional families, and violence both on and off the screen as humans square off against one another vying for power and control, causing dystopia to become an increasing part of everyday life. The question is, do the life skills and virtues that Katniss Everdeen learns on her journey provide a vision for a good life for Gen Z to pursue? It appears as though Katniss is the very embodiment of the buffered self. Cutoff from any god to turn to or virtuous tradition to guide her, Katniss must work out her own individualized strategies for surviving her life circumstances out of her own immanent understanding.

¹⁶⁹ Edith W. Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4, 32.

The Percy Jackson Series

Who wants to be a demigod? From the popularity of Riordan's books, one would think everyone under the age of 18 would want to enroll in Camp Half-Blood and learn both the etiquette and art of Demigod life. Percy Jackson, the son of the Greek god Poseidon, takes readers on wild adventures while also teaching them Greek mythology and care for the environment.

Riordan's first book of the series is *The Lightning Thief*. Following his mortal mother's death, Percy finds himself at a training camp for demigods, Camp Half-Blood. He soon discovers that he is the son of the Greek god Poseidon and that his best friend, Grover Underwood, is a forest spirit or satyr whose body is part goat and part human. Unfortunately, Zeus accuses Percy of stealing the most potent weapon in the universe: a lightning bolt. Percy suspects Hades is the actual thief, so he, Grover, and Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, journey to the underworld to clear Percy's name, save the world from war between the Olympian gods, and maybe even find his mother. Facing a myriad of mythological creatures on their way, they finally confront Hades, who turns out to be innocent. While there, though, they learn that Luke Castellan, son of Hermes, is the real thief. Castellan stole the weapon in order to empower the defeated King of the Titans and give him a chance to rule again. Percy emerges victorious, and the series continues.

Robyn McCallum's assertion that "[c]hildren's and adolescent fiction is, on the whole, dominated by humanist conceptions of the individual, the self and the child"¹⁷⁰ rings true of the Percy Jackson series. Humanism and classical culture go hand in hand, and both seem to be the firm ideological foundation for this series. Zoe Jaques, Lecturer in Children's Literature and Education at Cambridge University, states, "Percy's rejection of immortality at the end of *The Last Olympian* (2009) is very much in keeping with a humanist prioritizing of human life above all other states of being; the series remains firmly anthropocentric in this regard, and the posthuman potential of the demigod exists largely to affirm the basic good of humanity."¹⁷¹

The Percy Jackson series continues our culture's long fascination with humans with god-like powers. Spiderman, Aquaman, Captain Marvel, The Avengers, X-Men—each stand as cultural signposts to the truth that we teeter on the brink of a new era, the posthuman era. Zoe Jaques observes, "The effect of destabilizing divine authority and making it specifically embodied, while simultaneously inscribing a race of humans with godly powers, serves ostensibly to promote a form of 'advanced human' in a manner not radically distinct from Nietzsche's superman."¹⁷² Super-human stories offer fun and excitement, but these stories serve to subtly reinforce a humanistic or posthumanistic immanent frame displaying the now new and super-buffered-self on center stage.

¹⁷⁰. Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 257.

¹⁷¹. Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge Publishing, 2018), 172.

¹⁷². Jaques, *Children's Literature*, 169.

It's easy to see how the literature that attracts Gen Z echoes the same world-view narratives that fill the internal landscape of the stories that this generation tells themselves about their place in the cosmos. Together, they fortify their generational worldview. As mentioned in Section One, this consists of three factors. First, the world is a frightening place. Second, "God? What God?" Third, meaning is overrated. The emotional palette inherent in these narratives paints a dark picture for this generation. However, Dr. Mary Hilton, Senior Research Fellow at Homerton College Cambridge, reminds us of the potential of Young Adult fiction. She states, "Young Adult literature can help teenagers to think about, and hopefully to transcend, the rigid and dysfunctional structures of popular culture, stereotyping, oppression, and injustice."¹⁷³

Re-Enchanting the World Through Story

In order to reach this newest generation with the craft of storytelling, brave new storytellers will need to think outside the box and tailor specific strategies designed to challenge the current worldview of Generation Z. These stories will need to incorporate three key ingredients. First, these stories will likely need to be spiritual stories that are set in a God-soaked world and perhaps even introduce a Divine Being without promoting any particular religion or a connection to any specific faith. Second, future storytellers will need to create imaginative counter-narratives built on the zeitgeist of Gen Z culture in order to counteract Gen Z's current social imaginary. Third, they will need to follow

¹⁷³. Mary Hilton, and Maria Nikolajeva, *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture: the Emergent Adult*. Ashgate Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012), 15.

neuroscience research and be character-driven narratives with compelling protagonists and tension-filled plots.

Spiritual Stories Set in a God-soaked World

Sixty-seven years ago, Martin Buber likened the spiritual plight of the world to a solar eclipse—a time when darkness descends on the earth as the shadow of the moon obscures the light of the sun. Buber’s words ring as true today as when they were penned over half a century ago. He writes, “Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God—such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing. But it is not a process which can be adequately accounted for by instancing the changes that have taken place in man’s spirit. An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself.”¹⁷⁴ The sun itself is unaffected by a solar eclipse event, but the naked eye is deceived into thinking that the sun has vanished.

Since God is both immanent (closer than our next breath) and transcendent (beyond the scope of the known universe), the question is, how can Christian writers help widen the lens through which adolescents experience reality? How can writers re-enchant the world by reintroducing the intimate immanence of a personal God as well as the divine transcendence of the same in a world that has rejected the reality of both? Writers must use the power of their God-given imagination to create spiritual stories with a God who is present.

¹⁷⁴ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, re ed. (Amherst, N.Y: Humanity Books, 1988), 18.

The Role of Imagination. “Imagination is the creative capacity for thinking of things ‘as possibly being so.’”¹⁷⁵ It is human intuition reaching beyond our five senses to reveal the unseen or the not yet. Children live in this imaginative space quite naturally, but the young adults of Gen Z need retraining “to see” beyond their senses. Einstein believed that “...the pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives.”¹⁷⁶ His words echo the sentiment of Jesus when he said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁷⁷

Readers need to sense the world as through the eyes of a child, through the eyes of wonder, in order to apprehend God and his kingdom. Christian writers, therefore, must discover how to reintroduce wonder into their story world. To remove the obstacles and reveal the sun once again, writers need to immerse Gen Z in wonder and help them retrain their imagination. The next question is, how does imagination move into faith?

Imagination and Faith. Faith uses our imagination—that holy perception by which human beings move beyond their five senses and comprehend the Deity whose presence inhabits our world. In Exodus 3:14 of the Hebrew Scriptures, this Deity’s personal name אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*ehyeh ser ehyeh*) is translated “I am who I am.”¹⁷⁸ There

¹⁷⁵ Monika B Hilder, “Educating the Moral Imagination : The Fantasy Literature of George Macdonald, C.S. Lewis, and Madeleine L’Engle,” (PhD Diss., Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, 2003), 280, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/56372922.pdf>.

¹⁷⁶ Helen Dukas, and Banesh Hoffman, eds. *Albert Einstein, the Human Side: New Glimpses from His Archives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 83.

¹⁷⁷ Matthew 18:3.

¹⁷⁸ “Exodus 3:14 Interlinear: And God Saith unto Moses, ‘I AM THAT WHICH I AM;’” BibleHub, accessed December 7, 2019, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/exodus/3-14.html>.

are two possible senses for the phrase: “I am who/what I am” and “I will be who/what I will be.” Scholars assert that the later translation “is preferable because the verb *haya* has a more dynamic sense of being—not pure existence, but becoming, happening. Being present.”¹⁷⁹ By the use of the first person of this verb (meaning both I am and I shall be) YHWH is expressing the reality of his unconditional existence in the present and sovereignty over the future. Martin Buber asserts that the two-fold *ehyeh* means, “I am and remain present,” “I will always be present.”¹⁸⁰

Referring to this presence, Augustine confides, “The Lord is closer to us than we are to ourselves: higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self.”¹⁸¹ God’s presence is the fountain of enchantment in the world, and using the faculty of our imagination, God becomes closer than our next breath.

Countering the Internal Narratives of Gen Z

Counter-narratives must be developed to offset the generational stories already ingrained in Generation Z’s social imaginary: the world is a frightening place, meaning is over-rated, and “God? What God?”

¹⁷⁹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Roland K. Harrison, William Sanford LaSor Jr., and Edgar W. Smith, eds. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia; Volume 2: B-C (Volume 2 (B-C))*: Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Everett F. Harrison, Roland K. Harrison, William Sanford LaSor, Jr. Edgar W. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 507.

¹⁸⁰ Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation And The Covenant* (Whitefish MT: Literary Licensing LLC, 1946), 52.

¹⁸¹ St. Augustine, *The Confessions (The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Vol. 1)*: St. Augustine, trans. by Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 3.6.11.

The World is a Frightening Place. The dystopian world of story, currently so popular in the west, includes many of Generation Z's internal storylines, mainly, the world is a frightening place. This is not to say that the dystopian genre would be ineffective at addressing these internal stories, but these stories would need to build a nuanced yet re-enchanted lens with which to see the world in order to offer hope as well as to help rebuild healthy counter-narratives. The dystopian genre may potentially be able to counteract a fear-filled world if the dystopian story imparted courage through the protagonist throughout the narrative and offered a renewed hope at its conclusion. Infusing hope within the tale is a critical component to counteract the fear and anxiety that a dystopian story can produce. Whether it be fantasy, historical fiction, dystopian or contemporary, any genre could effectively offset the dark worldview overshadowing Gen Z as long as it offered a believable yet nuanced theistic story world, built structures of meaning from relationships and self-giving service, and used hope and courage as a foil for fear.

Meaning Is Over-rated. Currently, Gen Z seems intent to find their worth and meaning in the amount of money they make or the number of toys they accumulate. This perspective leads to a diminished view of the purpose in life and can be quite limiting. As discussed in previous sections, introducing the concept of wonder to this generation through story could lead to a changed understanding of life's meaning. Historian and philosopher Anders Schinkel says that wonder is a matter of perspective "...but ... wonder can also *lead* to a change of perspective and a revaluation, a re-assessment of the relative importance of things? Wonder can lead us beyond egocentrism ... towards

embracing a wider value perspective, greater empathy, and a sense of reverence for life.”¹⁸²

Heschel states that wonder is our greatest necessity.

The awareness of grandeur and wonder has all but disappeared in the present age. Our educational system stresses the importance of controlling and exploiting reality, of deriving power from knowledge, but there is little education for wonder, for the sublime. We carefully teach children how to measure, and to weigh, and to spell, but we failed to teach them how to Revere, how to admire, how to appreciate. The sense of wonder and awe, the sense for the sublime is such a rare gift; Without it, the world becomes flat and the human person hollow.¹⁸³

The good news is that Generation Z is still very young, and their values are not set in stone. The right stories may yet introduce wonder into their lives so that they can rethink their values and reevaluate their idea of what is important in life. MacIntyre insists “the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore, story can reframe Gen Z’s values and reeducate them to seek meaning in life outside of their bank account.

“God? What God?”. Building on the previous sections on “Imagination” and “A God-Soaked World” to counteract the narrative that there is no God, stories must subtly introduce a divine being who is present and active in the story world. Through strong character-driven story, writers can tap into the imagination of the reader. As the protagonist journeys toward a divine being of light and love, the reader will enter the

¹⁸² Anders Schinkel, “Wonder, Mystery, and Meaning,” *Philosophical Papers* 48, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 293–319, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2018.1462667>.

¹⁸³ Donald J. Moore, *The Human and the Holy: The Spirituality of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1989), 37-41.

¹⁸⁴ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Bloomsbury USA Academic, 2013), 488, ebooks.

body of the protagonist¹⁸⁵ and go with them on this internal journey. As the protagonist in the story moves beyond their five senses and comprehends the deity, whose presence inhabits the story world, the reader will go with them. As they do, the reader's lens will refocus, and they could very easily begin to see differently in the real world they inhabit and contemplate the reality of a divine being of light and love.

In addition to countering these three narratives, writers will need to build upon the strengths of Gen Z's cultural context. They will need to provide counter-narratives that will also include themes of diversity, political inclusion, entrepreneurial pursuits, environmentalism, and social activism. To be attractive, these stories must offer a realistic picture of modern life, and undoubtedly, they will dive into places of deep darkness. There will be despair held within their pages, but they must leave their readers with hope, courage, and new ways of thinking about themselves in the world.

Stories Based on Neuroscience

Third, smart writers will base their works on best practices in fiction writing that are fueled by recent discoveries in neuroscience. Neuroscientist Paul Zak discovered that stories that follow the classic storytelling structure identified by German playwright Gustav Freytag would produce a powerful empathetic response in the audience. Freytag's five-act story structure, used in all Classic and Shakespearean dramas, elicits two

¹⁸⁵ Carol Clark, "A Novel Look at How Stories May Change the Brain," ScienceDaily, January 3, 2014, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/01/140103204428.htm>.

neurochemicals, oxytocin and cortisol, to be released during the drama.¹⁸⁶ Freytag's structure includes the following form. Act one, the *Exposition* introduces the setting, place, and characters of the story. Act Two, *Rising Action*, has the protagonist encounter many obstacles on the way to Act 3, which is the *Climax* of the drama and contains increasing tension. Act 4 involves *Falling Action* and the revelation of any final plot twists while any loose ends are brought to closure. Act 5 is the *Denouement or Resolution* that brings closure to the story. Two other important factors are first, the writer must create a plot filled with tension as the protagonist ricochets from one obstacle to another, and second, the protagonist must be powerful yet vulnerable and likable, with a good sense of humor and a penchant for getting into trouble.

A Note Concerning Film. Everyone loves to get lost in a good film or a good television show. The reason is that film and television offer story in living color on a moving screen. The brain research that finds written story a catalyst for change also finds story communicated through film or video to be equally compelling. Therefore, the medium of film, television, and streaming video hold the same great potential as written stories and may have even greater effectiveness for reaching Gen Z with a transcendent message of hope through story. According to Wibbitz, Generation Z spends 3.4 hours a day online watching videos.¹⁸⁷ This does not count out traditional written story, far from

¹⁸⁶ Paul J. Zak, *The Moral Molecule: The New Science of What Makes Us Good or Evil* (London: Bantam, 2012), Chapter 3, iBook.

¹⁸⁷ Hillary Kay, "Wibbitz Releases New Research on Millennial and Generation Z Audience Trends in Social Video," Business, January 15, 2019, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190115005282/en/Wibbitz-Releases-New-Research-on-Millennial-and-Generation-Z-Audience-Trends-in-Social-Video>.

it. Film companies are now gobbling up Intellectual Property (IP) of novels and short stories like there is no tomorrow. According to Variety’s Elaine Low, “Considering Netflix’s content spending spree, Disney’s superhero gravy train and burgeoning streaming platforms that now require content — not to mention the need to make a project stand out from about 500 other scripted series — finding a book with a built-in audience can relieve some of the pressure to develop hits for the small screen.”¹⁸⁸

Consider the 2019 book *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. Reese Witherspoon’s production company optioned the book five months before publication. Lauren Levy Neustadter, Witherspoon’s head of film and TV, said, “We knew in our hearts that the book was going to be recognized for being spectacular, and it really was.”¹⁸⁹ *Little Fires Everywhere* is now a smash TV sensation and a New York Times bestseller. The two mediums literally feed one another. Today an author can not only see their book in print but also on the silver screens where Gen Z, always hungry for new content to view, will devour it whole.

Story: The Power to Change the World

Recent advances in neuroscience paint a clear picture of the potential of story to change the worldview of adolescents. From philosophers like Plato and Aristotle to great religious leaders like Jesus, storytelling is often used to persuade and teach. In fact,

¹⁸⁸ Elaine Low, “So Much TV, Too Little IP Yields Writers Rich Rewards,” *Variety*, January 31, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/biz/news/tv-intellectual-property-1203123268/>.

¹⁸⁹ Elisabeth Egan, “What’s It Like for an Author to See Her Story Turned Into TV?” *The New York Times*, sec. Books, February 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/books/review/celeste-ng-little-fires-everywhere-hulu.html>.

Jesus's teaching highlights the effectiveness of communicating in story since parables were his genre of choice. Storytelling has also played a significant role in molding the social imaginary of the church. From Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to *Pilgrim's Progress* to *In His Steps* to the *Chronicles of Narnia*, church history is sprinkled with significant works of fiction that God used to move the church to new heights through imaginative storytelling.

Literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall observes,

Fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence. Studies show that when we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to make us rubbery and easy to shape.¹⁹⁰

Storytelling is art with emotional impact. Therefore, this is an invitation to the church's storytellers to become more creative in presenting an imaginative God-soaked world. It is a call to be bold, trusting in a sanctified imagination to lead us forward. Lewis writes, "For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy."¹⁹¹ Future storytellers need to see with new eyes the Morning Star and the splendor of the sun and reframe their own lives around a God who is here.

¹⁹⁰ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013), 383, ibook.

¹⁹¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2001), 43.

This invitation also includes the imperative for writers to create story worlds that are character-driven and filled with obstacles and contain high narrative tension. It is also a mandate for storytellers to create compelling counter-narratives that address the dark internal narratives that dominate the social imaginary of Generation Z.

Canadian author and pastor Buxley Cavey recently stated, “God leaves a trail of breadcrumbs in nature, art, science, religion, and every individual life—all leading toward Jesus. Today, let’s be alert, stay curious, ask questions, and share the Gospel so we can partner with God and help people complete the journey.”¹⁹² There are many ways to share the good news of a loving God. Storytelling is merely one of them, but it is a tried and true medium to help people see with a newly re-enchanted lens. May the storytellers of the future pick up their proverbial pen and create new, enchanted worlds that help people begin the journey.

¹⁹² Cavey Bruxy, (@Bruxy), Twitter post, 6.12 a.m., June 5, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Bruxy/status/1003987963976577025>.

SECTION FOUR

Artifact Description

The artifact for this dissertation is a young adult fantasy novel entitled *World Raiser*. It explores the intersection of neuroscience, adolescent development, and faith formation through the story of Alira Winslow, an Atlantean princess who is thrown forward in time with no memory of her former life. Now a junior at Hamilton-Wenham High, this fiery Boston teen has no idea that each night her dreams betray her, and that each day both desperate friends and dangerous foes edge ever nearer. And as her mysterious past shatters her safe and comfortable present, Alira realizes that the truth she seeks may be even more disturbing than all of her mother's lies.

World Raiser is currently in its second draft and is about 120,000 words. The dissertation includes the first 25,000 words as a sample of the completed project. *World Raiser* is the first of three novels in the series entitled, *The War of the Watchers*.

Artifact's Connection to Thesis

This paper's thesis is that tension-filled, character-driven story provides an avenue for the re-enchantment of Gen Z's social imaginary and has the potential to introduce Gen Z to the light and love of God. There are three reasons that this YA novel connects to the thesis. First, young adult brains are wired for story in a way that is incomparable to any other artistic medium. Second, young adults spend a significant portion of their day consuming story. Third, as opposed to film or video, a novel was in my wheelhouse of skills and seemed an effective artifact to represent the thesis.

The Human Brain is Created for Story

Story really is magical. As introduced in Section Three of this work, no other medium captures the brain's attention, like a tension-filled, character-driven story. First, the human brain locks onto the protagonist in a story, and the reader sees the narrative through the perspective of the main character. This not only occurs with individual readers or listeners but the brains of groups of participants exposed to the same story become synced together during the story event.

Research indicates that it is the meaning in a narrative that activates brain processes both in individual reading and also during group story events. During these story events, the human brain transports the reader or listener into the body of the protagonist, and participants live the story as though it was their very own experience. To increase this effect, the brain releases oxytocin that bonds the reader with the protagonist of the story and impacts the reader's empathy, self-awareness, and altruism. The impact of story can be measured in the brain, not just during the story event but also for at least five subsequent days following the reading experience.

The Artifact. In *World Raiser*, the protagonist, Alira Winslow, journeys toward a God of light and love as she overcomes the obstacles provided by the plot. According to Neuroscience, readers will bond with Alira and journey with her as they "enter the body of the protagonist" and begin to contemplate the reality of a transcendent Being in the same way Alira does throughout the story. The faith of the Atlanteans shines through gradually in book one. In book two, Alira will journey to Atlantis and meet the God of the Atlanteans, and in book three, this God will become her God.

Adolescences are Hungry for Story

he second reason that *World Raiser* is an appropriate artifact for the thesis is that adolescents are hungry for story. Gen Z consumes story in various forms: books, television, movies, but by far, the most popular form of content is streaming video. This generation spends up to ten hours a day engaging with online content and 3.4 of those hours is with streaming video. According to Decision Lab, “Approximately 70% still watch traditional television.”¹⁹³ However, reading is not out of the picture. Producers are snatching up IP (as discussed in Section Three), and the number of Gen Zer's who are reading is increasing. There is a 34 percent increase in Gen Z readership since the March 2020 pandemic began.¹⁹⁴ Library Journal reports that over half (50.4%) of Gen Zers “are always on the lookout for a good book to read.”¹⁹⁵ However, smart writers targeting the young adult audience will expand their repertoire to television and web-series based stories to maximize their impact.

Writing is in My Wheelhouse

I have always been a voracious reader. Even as a child, I read everything I could find, particularly in the genre of fantasy. Reading provided a break from my current

¹⁹³ Tram Le Hoai, “Yes, the Internet Is Redefining Gen Z’s TV Habits,” Decision Lab, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.decisionlab.co/blog/yes-the-internet-is-redefining-gen-zs-tv-habits>.

¹⁹⁴ Amy Watson, “Reading More Books during the Coronavirus Outbreak U.S. by Age 2020,” Statista, June 18, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107853/book-readers-coronavirus-us/>.

¹⁹⁵ Amy Rea, “Reading Through the Ages | Generational Reading Survey,” Library Journal, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/detailStory=Reading-Through-the-Ages-Generational-Reading-Survey>.

emotional landscape and allowed me to escape into a story world of wonder and imagination. Upon finishing a novel, I was refreshed and ready to tackle real-life once again. When considering an artifact to design for this project, a novel seemed the perfect artistic medium that would, first, match the thesis and, second, provide a medium that I could develop and execute.

SECTION FIVE: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATIONS

Query letter

Susan Stratton
7706 Hodges Ferry Rd.
Knoxville, TN 37920
susan.lynn.stratton@gmail.com
323-358-8440

Dear Agent,

World Raiser, a 115,000-word young adult contemporary epic fantasy details the adventures of an ancient and amnesic Atlantean Princess as she navigates the world of a 17-year-old American high school student.

This fiery Boston teen has no idea that each night her dreams betray her and that each day both desperate friends and dangerous foes edge ever nearer. And as her mysterious past shatters her safe and comfortable present, Alira realizes that the truth she seeks may be even more disturbing than all of her mother's lies.

Vulnerable and exposed, Alira soon discovers that the isle of Atlantis is no myth, that dark magic is more than just a fairy tale, and that 15,000 years isn't long enough to outrun the bounty on her head. Slowly she realizes what the Atlanteans have known all along, Alira alone stands between the Lightless and their true ambition, the domination of planet earth.

This debut novel is a story of identity, friendship, and trust in the tumultuous teen years, all with a fantastical twist. I hope my story appeals to young adults of all ages who enjoy strong, time-traveling, contemporary female heroes such as Nix in *The Girl from Everywhere* as well as the cosmic war, forbidden romance, and magical world of works such as *Furyborn*.

Thank you so much for your time,
Sincerely,
Sue Stratton

Novel Synopsis

Backstory/Prologue: Desperate to protect the Arcadian Threshold from Nephilim invasion, the Atlantians prepare to plunge their city deep beneath the Atlantic Ocean. Elleira, the Infinity of Atlantis, and Darius, Chief of the Atlantean Order of Wisdoms, use the Threshold to escape to seek aid from their allies in Greece. Elleira wards it behind them so that none but the Infinity can use it. However, as an explosion rocks the Threshold, Elleira and Darius are transported not only through space but also through time. They arrive in Greece 2500 years in the future and thousands of years younger. Cut off from their people and pursued by the waiting Nephilim, Darius entrusts the now infant Elleira to a childless American couple who later settle on the North Shore of Boston. For 16 years, Elleira grows up as a typical American teenager, Alira Winslow, while Darius and the Nephilim scour the earth to find her. Alira alone holds the power to open the Threshold, save her people from their watery exile, and defeat the Nephilim. That is if Darius can help her embrace her true identity before the Nephilim capture her and claim her for their own.

Swept up in the latest video craze, ALIRA, GENNA, and DYLAN slash at the monsters on their screen while malevolent eyes observe their every move. Facial recognition software installed in the game is sweeping the earth for an unknown female, one who holds a strong resemblance to both Alira Winslow and her best friend, Genna Miller. As Alira enjoys the waning summer days, she has no idea that both primordial friends and ancient foes edge ever nearer.

While finishing her junior summer project, Alira discovers a box in her mother's closet that leads her to conclude that she is adopted. Devastated, Alira withdraws but is coaxed to the beach by two faithful friends. While there, a menacing golden-haired creature draws Alira deep beneath the waves. Just as Alira accepts her inevitable death, a flicker of light appears. The light forms a Word, and it explodes from her with such power that the sea erupts into chaos. As the waters churn, RION, the mysterious surfer, appears and whisks her to safety. Following her ordeal, Alira discusses the box with her mother. The discussion goes poorly, leaving her angry and disillusioned. She resolves to go on Mediterranean Sea-mester to find her real family.

On her first morning in Athens, Alira hits the streets searching for information. Her leads quickly become dead ends. She returns to the boat, disheartened that she will ever find her family of origin. Encouraged by Genna and Dylan, Alira decides to take out an ad in the Greek English Newspaper. As the ship's crew assembles, Alira is surprised to find that Rion is the translator for the trip and that her new history teacher, DARIUS Sokratus, is joining them.

Silently, another boat arrives in the harbor, and dark eyes are fixed on the research vessel housing Alira and her friends. VLAVI and ERIS, Lightless cousins, charged with finding the Atlantean Infinity, await final confirmation that the Infinity is aboard.

During an afternoon swim, Dylan is stung by Portuguese Man-of-War, and Darius reveals Alira's healing gifts to save him. This event triggers a cascade of revelations as Alira discovers that she is Atlantean, endowed with certain supernatural gifts.

SARX, the Lightless elder, descends into the depths of the earth to be imbued with knowledge and power by The Watchers. The Watchers gain their limited dark

omniscience by spying on human dreams, and they have finally found her, the object of millenniums of searching: the Atlantean Infinity.

Meanwhile, Alira's training begins as her new allies prepare her to regain her office and remember her true identity. One such training session occurs in Rome, where Alira is desperately trying to perfect her telepathic connection with her human friends. Vlavi happens to be in the same Italian Piazza having lunch when he perceives the use of the Atlantean language. A tense chase ensues through the streets of Rome.

The Atlanteans barely escape and flee to the island of Sardinia where, through powerful magic, a group of exiled Atlantean expatriates has successfully eluded the Lightless. While there, Alira is overwhelmed by the wonders of her homeland but is also devastated by the terrible knowledge that she alone is responsible for Atlantis's demise. Their reprieve on Sardinia is cut short as knowledge reaches the colony that The Lightless are coming. The Atlanteans return to the ship and plan to fly home in the morning. That evening, in a case of mistaken identity, Eris appears in the girls' room and kidnaps Genna. For all her training, Alira is helpless to stop her.

Plans to rescue Genna ensue. Intelligence suggests that she is on the island of Corvo, a Lightless stronghold. Now with the clock ticking, the Atlanteans must recover Genna before the Lightless recognize they have the wrong girl, and Genna is killed.

After brief preparation on Flores Island, the Atlanteans breach the Corvo stronghold and find themselves in the middle of a Lightless war. Against all odds, they save Genna and return to Flores. During a celebration meal, Alira discovers that her real Father may still be imprisoned on Corvo. Not wanting to endanger her friends, Alira returns alone to find him. Rion follows. A battle ensues between Alira and Eris. Alira,

though pushed to the brink of death, trusts in the assistance of her human allies, defeats Eris, and in the process, the Atlantean Infinity within her is reborn.

Darius and Rion encourage her to return to Atlantis. Instead, Alira decides to return home for the holidays and make things right with her mother.

Denouement: When she returns home, Alira receives a call answering the ad she placed in the English-Greek newspaper. The voice on the other end of the phone says, “Hello, Elleria. This is your Father.”

Critical Note: The Atlanteans follow a God of light and love. God’s presence and influence in the lives of the Atlanteans build as the novel progresses. Alira does not meet this God until Book Two when she journeys to Atlantis.

Post-Graduate Considerations

Intended Readership

- Primary Readership: Ages 12-18.
- Secondary Readership: Millennials and Gen X read 55 percent of YA books. My hope is that young adult readers of all ages will enjoy *World Raiser*.

Promotion and Marketing

Promotion will include a website dedicated to *World Raiser*, a professionally produced trailer, and various giveaways when the book is launched. Marketing will encompass pop-up ads on all social media platforms relevant to Gen Z, which include TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. I will include Facebook marketing for the Millennials and Gen Xers that may be interested.

Initial Budget

\$3,000 for a book trailer and social media advertising.

Post-Graduation Plans

World Raiser will be completed in July of 2021. I will begin reaching out to the following agents in August:

Suzie Townsend, New Leaf Literary and Media.

Brianne Johnson, Writers House.

Quressa Robinson, Nelson Literary Agency.

Thao Le, Sandra Dijkstra & Associates.

Tamar Rydzinski, Context Literary Agency.

Kate McKean, Morhaim Literary Agency.

Elana Roth Parker, Laura Dail Literary Agency, Inc.

Zoe Plant, The Bent Literary Agency

Tanusri Prasanna, Foundry Literary and Media

Deidre Knight, The Knight Agency

SECTION SIX: POSTSCRIPT

Summary of Execution

In 2008, Gary and I moved our family to southern California in order to minister to the entertainment community. Gary took over Act One, a training program for aspiring Christian filmmakers. It was during these years that I saw first-hand how “content creators” ruled culture.

While in Hollywood, two Harry Potter movies premiered: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009) and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (2010) and the Hunger Games book series was launched. Both of these works had a powerful influence on the youth of the world. One encouraged the use of magic apart from any transcendent reality, and the other pitted children against children fighting to the death for necessary resources for survival. Not that these works are bad, but I remember thinking there have to be better stories. The idea of writing a novel that could make a spiritual difference for the youth in the world was birthed in Hollywood. So, when presented with the need to create an artifact for this program, a book was a natural choice.

Throughout the process of writing *World Raiser*, I read over twenty-five books on the anatomy of story. I studied structure, dialog, theme, emotional impact, character development, POVs, subtext, world-building, conflict, and symbolism. One of my most helpful resources was my daughter, Micaiah, who is herself part of Generation Z. Her help proved invaluable with dialog as well as insight regarding her peers. My most challenging realization is that any piece of art, but particularly story, must evoke strong emotion in the participant in order to evoke lasting change. I am still working to bring

World Raiser to a new level of impact through raising the emotional tension of the plot and characters.

Analysis of the Approach

I am an evangelist at heart, so researching Generation Z for my dissertation was a natural place to start. My heart broke again and again as I realized their brokenness and how far they were from God. Our most precious stewardship—our children—are languishing, and the church’s current solutions are not working. The church must think outside their known constructs to reach this generation, and imaginative storytelling is an excellent place to start.

Researching story brought many unexpected blessings. First, imagination theory brought surprising insight as I saw the implications for change using our God-given imaginative faculties. Unfortunately, imagination is considered suspect today and therefore neglected in the mainstream church—much to our detriment. Second, the neuroscience research backing up the power of story was a clear confirmation that the people of God need to determine how to incorporate more imaginative storytelling in church life, ministry, and outreach. Though creation, music and visual art certainly have an important role to play in the revelation of the Divine on the earth, I am more convinced than ever that God created our brains to respond uniquely to story forms and is calling the church to incorporate creative storytelling in a more robust way than previously considered.

Conclusion

Researching and writing this dissertation was both a joy and a challenge. Beyond trying to publish *World Raiser*, I am currently discerning the next steps for the vital information regarding imagination and story entrusted to me. Beyond the current novel I am finishing, there may be a need for a nonfiction book focusing on the efficacy and power of employing story and imagination in the church. One can only hope that one day the church will abandon an overly rationalistic approach and seek God and the Kingdom with the full faculties of their *dianoia*. It is the firm conviction of this work that God's people need to release their sanctified imagination from exile and escort her to once again to center stage where she can change our water into the new wine we so desperately need.

APPENDIX A:**ARTIFACT**

WORLD RAISER

AN ARTIFACT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
PORTLAND SEMINARY IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

SUE STRATTON

PORTLAND OREGON

FEBRUARY 2021

PROLOGUE

Elleira to-Ápeiro looked to the sky and knew that the coming eclipse would bring her doom. Elleira tore her eyes from the coming disaster just in time to block an opponent's thrust. The massive frame of a Lightless warrior filled her vision, a silver toothed Kopsis in his right hand, and a black tri-sphere spiked mace in his left.

She danced forward, attempting to reach through his guard but darted back as the black spiked ball of his mace grazed her ear. His mailed fist lashed out, catching her across the face. She staggered back, her teeth red with blood. "Still playing with balls, I see, Lightless?"

He sneered. "Still playing at warrior, Princess?"

Elleira gritted her teeth as around them, the clash of battle raged. The red uniforms of her troops locked in terrible battle with the dark armor of her foes. She spat blood and forced a grin and a silver laugh through her cracked lips. "Watch your step, oath-breaker. That's Infinity to you."

The warrior shifted his weight and charged, his black eyes wild, spike and mace singing above him. "This day, I will see you on your knees, girl. It has been foretold. The Watchers, herald our great victory. They saw you vulnerable, defenseless, stripped of your crown, your powers, your breath...the Threshold ours for the taking."

Icy dread trailed down Elleira's spine. She slammed the window of her mind against the dark thoughts and refocused on the slowly circling menace before her.

The Lightless leapt forward, driving her back, deeper into the whirling blades and dark figures all around them. He closed like flame darting for air. His spike catching her sword. Trapping the weapons between them. He leaned down toward her, his eyes dark pools of greed, "I will have your breath, to-Ápeiro. I will have it all."

Elleira's eyes narrowed. *Enough!*

Her head snapped forehead, crashing into his nose. He staggered back with a wordless roar. Elleira set her feet and breathed out a single word, “Aspida.”

A shimmering blue shield took shape, surrounding her. The Lightless lunged toward her, beating savagely against the impenetrable blue light. Grunts, screams, and the clash of weapons battered her senses as the battle raged around her. Through the shield, she watched her squad of Firebrands falling one by one against the seemingly endless wave of enemy combatants. A cold despair clutched at her heart.

Beyond her shield, the Lightless continued to throw himself against her alchemic bulwark. She raised her sword, eyes grim. *Now, to finish this.*

Her field of vision shimmered as the warrior continued to rain down blows, and suddenly, the shield dissipated. He leaped forward, his face a mask of triumph.

NO. She wrapped her mind around the blue aura, trying to hold it in place, but it was gone. *What is happening? Why did the shield fail?* Alarm bloomed like a thunderhead within. She shook it off. *Focus.*

The Lightless easily beat her sword aside. Elleira sprang back, but not before a curtain of red fire swept across her forehead. She swiped at the blood from the cut, trying to get distance between her and the charging enemy.

The two combatants circled each other warily, both seeking the killing blow. Elleira forced a smile. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

In the distance, she could see the stairs rising to the city. A blur of red and black filled the winding stairway as her Red Robed Warriors held back the sea of dark uniforms. *We still hold the gate, but not for long. I have to end this quickly.*

She darted forward, dangerously close to the gleaming spike, and spun left, breathing out a controlled whisper, “Exousía.” Essence flowed from her. Elleira staggered, drained from the loss, but it was worth it. In the blink of an eye, the Lightless

warrior before her stopped mid-swing. His eyes glazed over. His free hand went to his head like he was trying to remember something. Elleira raised her gleaming blade.

“To-Ápeiro!” Her head jerked toward the sound.

She could see three of her Firebrands cutting through the press of the enemy toward her position. One leapt before her, his fist pounded his chest in salute as his deep voice cut through the noisy chaos. “Your pardon to-Ápeiro, but the Counsel requests your presence.” The guard glanced at the confused Lightless soldier. “I will finish this.”

Elleira nodded to the young warrior before her. “He’s all yours.”

Flanked by the other two Red-robed warriors, they cut their way toward the stairs. Elleira’s blade whirled tirelessly as she cut through the mass of combatants. As soon as they saw her coming, every single Lightless targeted her. Her uniform blazed white set against the darkening skies as the light from her essence radiated through the skillfully wrought material. It was a clarion call to the enemy. Every single one saw her and wished for her death. She glanced skyward and clenched her jaw as the shadow of the moon inched closer to completely obstructing the light of the sun. *Light preserve us.*

Elleira could see the fighting at the gate clearly now. A thick wall of men and women surged around the stairs. *I must get through.* She inhaled deeply and released the ancient phrase, “Ygró fos.”

A faint white glow appeared, but as she started forward, it suddenly dissipated. She glanced down at her hands in mounting dread. *What is happening?* Pushing down her fear, Elleira ran through her remaining options. She considered the stairs. *Well, there is no cutting through that black sea any time soon.* She veered left away from the main stairway and toward the solid sandstone wall surrounding the keep.

She turned to the two Firebrands who flanked her. “Thank you for your assistance. Report back to your squad.” Without a word, their fists pounded their chest, and they were gone. Elleira turned toward the wall, running her hand across the cold stone. She

whispered, “Diamésou.” Relief flooded her as she took a deep breath, merged with the white sandstone, and disappeared.

High above the battle, she burst onto the balcony above the wall, displaying a surge of power and energy she did not feel. The gathering straightened at her presence.

“Elleira, thank the Light.” Xerxes, appeared from the crowd, a map and stylus in hand. He snapped his fingers, and a Freshling approached, hastily draping a hooded cape over her shoulders. She reached for the scroll tucked in a hidden pocket deep within her cloak and felt peace for the first time in hours. She breathed it in.

“That was wildly irresponsible, even for you.” Xerxes didn’t bother to keep his voice low.

Elleira narrowed her eyes. “You are no longer my teacher, dear Xerxes. I’ll lead my troops as I see fit.”

Xerxes stiffened, but nodded. “Your highness.”

Elleira brushed past him, her eyes finding Marciana, the red-robed General of her forces, “Any news from my Father?”

Marciana shook her head, eyes troubled. “None, my lady.”

Elleira turned on her heel and strode from the balcony into the war chamber, Xerxes close behind her. The large room was open on all four sides, giving a bird’s eye view of the battle. It wasn’t going well.

To the north, black and blue clad troops mercilessly pounded the main gate. To the east, she saw the people of her city, brought into the high walls for protection from the enemy, cowering and crying out as hot ashes rained down from burning rooftops. To the north, a contingent of enemy warships flooded into the now unprotected harbor. Their billowing sails stretched nearly to the horizon as the last vestiges of her Father’s naval blockade gave way. She swallowed hard. Her eyes lingered on the massive flagship now

wholly surrounded.

“Father,” her voice a choked whisper, “retreat while you can.” Elleira forced her eyes away from the naval battle and to the growing horror onshore.

The once tranquil waters boiled as a grotesque army of Karkinos swarmed the beach. Her heart dropped as yet more of her outnumbered troops battled to break the charge of the giant crustaceans before they reached the first watercourse. High above the besieged city, the moon, ignoring the desperate battle below her, slunk ever closer to the blood red sun.

With grim resolve, she turned her attention back to the war room. It was packed full of Guardians, each arrayed in the unique battle regalia of their respective orders. Worry lines were etched deep into each face. Elleira joined Marciana at the large map in the center of the room. The Chief of the Weaver order shifted to make room.

Elleira took in the scene with hard eyes. She could feel the gazes of every person in the room boring into her. The Blue-robed wisdom contingent lingered near the southern viewing wall. The Chief Wisdom’s clear eyes bored into her from the far side of the room. Leaning against the map table, she imagined him as a powerful blue magnet drawing all thought and feeling into his vortex. The city’s Judges were present as well, each displayed their order, but in much more subtle ways. One wore a sash of green indicating his allegiance as a Weaver, and another added blue feathers to her hair, signifying her lineage as a Wisdom. They all huddled together at the far side of the map, speaking low. Their minds awash in fear and worry.

She squared her shoulders and addressed the room. “My father has faced despair before. He has triumphed. He will again.” She saw a few heads nod, but few seemed certain. Elleira frowned. *There’s something... No, someone, stirring our fear.*

Elleira closed her eyes and reached out with her mind toward the battlefield. There she found inky tendrils of darkness so foul that they threatened to engulf her. She recoiled, gasping. *Such hideous strength.*

Even at this great distance, she could feel the power of the same black arts that had twisted once regal creatures into killing machines thwarting her abilities, blocking her every attempt to coordinate a counterattack. Closing her eyes, she probed for their power source. *Where are you?*

Elleira's eyes snapped open as an arch of fire blazed against the twilight sky. Her attention riveted upon a single enemy warrior battling at the first watercourse. The enemy's flaming snake-like-whip lashed out again, sending a rain of deadly fire. To her horror, as the spark of flame reached her troops, it roared to life, engulfing all it touched. As she watched, an entire battalion of soldiers burst into flame. Their screams were lost in the din of war, though they rang through her just the same. The lithe enemy warrior turned. Even at this distance, their eyes locked—evil pulsed toward her.

“Eris!” She hissed.

Elleira flung out an arm. “To the west! Order the remaining Warriors to target the Fire Wielder on the near side of The Ring of Sovereignty.” Elleira's order rang out above the chaos. Marciana nodded and hustled away. Elleira's stomach clenched as she watched her go.

They've left nothing to chance. Even the darkened skies of the eclipse keep the Karkinos from fainting in the sunlight. After fifteen centuries of failure, the Threshold is within their grasp.

Her chin fell to her chest, her long auburn hair concealing her face. Smoke filled her nostrils as the noise of war assaulted her. The measured beat of the war drums reverberating throughout the city sounded very much like a death march. The city would be lost. All would be lost. Unless...

Elleira closed her eyes against the growing anarchy. Her hand reached for the ancient scroll in her pocket. The parchment felt solid beneath her fingertips as she reviewed from memory the birth prophecy it contained—*her* birth prophecy.

Elleira's slumped shoulders slowly straightened as though strengthened by each

word. She raised her chin. Her eyes now focused beyond the battle, beyond her beloved island. And as the darkness grew, Elleira set her jaw. She knew the path she must take.

Tearing her eyes away from the bloodshed around her, she turned to face the Guardians. They surrounded her in a protective semicircle. Elleira searched each face. For millenniums the creative energy of her people had prepared for this moment. These very Guardians had hatched a plan so daring and audacious that its vast scope caused her heart to catch in her throat.

Elleira steeled herself. “Are the Weavers ready?”

An involuntary gasp erupted from the assembly. Elleira paused and let them feel the full weight of her words.

“We must act now.” Each word reverberated with authority, her authority as the rightful Infinity. “If we wait, too many of the enemy will be left inside the city for our forces to defeat.” Elleira paused, letting the logic of her words convince them.

“We must guard against that possibility. A warded Threshold will be useless if I am not here to empower it.”

A chorus of objections burst from those assembled.

She silenced them with a wave of her hand. “You all know our first allegiance must be to the Threshold.”

“Guardians,” she proclaimed, “fifteen thousand years of watchful vigilance, of unrelenting sacrifice must not fail now.”

Elleira spun and exited the room. Her somber companions trailed reluctantly behind—no one needed to ask where she was going. Prophecy had spoken—not just Elleira’s birth prophecy, but the warnings and wisdom of countless ages. Together, each had led to this desperate act. As their procession moved through the keep, each Guardian searched for an alternative that would deliver them from this hour. Fear creased their furrowed brows. After all, hers would not be the only sacrifice consecrated this day.

Elleira's would merely be the first.

As they crossed through the Celestial Gardens, Xerxes' once again drew near. "Elleira, this is madness."

Elleira squeezed her eyelids shut and quickened her pace. "Madness or not, history will determine."

Eyes pleading, he reached out and lightly touched her forearm. "Elleira!"

She turned, resting her hand on his shoulder, her voice a whisper. "Today we must survive. Our actions, no matter how audacious, must prevail."

Elleira squared her shoulders, drawing herself up to the full stature of her office. "The Descent must occur swiftly. I've ordered the ships to return. However, I've been unsuccessful in reaching my Father's flagship. You must find him. You must convince him to retreat before we dive beneath the waves."

Worry leached from his deep forest eyes.

"And Xerxes," Elleira's voice cracked, "give him my love."

Desperate resignation filled the space between them. Xerxes pulled himself up to his full height. "*Tha Prospathisei...*" His strangled voice intoned the familiar proverb.

"*...na afxi thei kai páli!*" Her voice choked out the appropriate response.

As her weary eyes followed his retreating form, she realized her whole body leaned forward—toward him. She ached to call him back. She longed for him to offer alternatives, solutions, any recourse other than the path Providence had illuminated. As he disappeared beyond the Crystal Bridge, she turned, willing her weary legs forward.

He is right. This is madness. Despair billowed within, but she hardened her resolve and strode on. Reaching the Sacellum, she paused, took a deep breath, and plunged inside.

As she stepped through the arched doorway, the whisper of a melodic aria rose above the cacophony of the raging battle outside. The deep wisteria blue of the flowering clematis covered the interior walls of the Sacellum, interspersed between the vibrant tapestries depicting the rich history of their civilization. Golden vases and other artifacts of worship were displayed on ornate tables tastefully placed in sets of three. Elleira took no notice of these but fixed her gaze upon the ancient gateway veiled behind the falling water.

Most days, the blue gaze of an open heaven smiled down upon the delicate blue flowers and the blue of the waters, creating a harmony of color and space in the Sacellum. Today, the dark skies and the nearly completed eclipse, mirrored the darkening room and the somber spirits of those assembled.

All eyes focused on the center of the room where the water, flowing east to west, gathered in a smooth basin. The water danced as both light and sound played on the surface of the pool. None could explain how the gently flowing music and the azure light emanated from within the water itself. Glory needed no explanation; the sight was breathtaking.

Stopping at the edge of the basin, Elleira shrugged out of her cloak, making eye contact with each elder assembled around the pool. She nodded and stepped in. As she waded through the light-bearing water, the pool came fully alive, sparkling in anticipation—pulsating, bubbling, beckoning. Every eye transfixed on the wall of water at the center, the ancient door behind and on the figure resolutely advancing toward it.

Suddenly, a blue-robed Wisdom strode forward from among those assembled. Elleira turned to see that it was Darius. He entered the sacred pool. His voice rose above the soft flowing music and the distant cacophony of war. “I cannot do this for you, Elleira To-ápeiro,” he sighed, shaking his head in playful resignation. “But I can do this *with* you.”

Almost to the ancient doorway, Elleira hesitated and met his gaze. The faintest quiver of her lip betrayed her outward calm. She reached out to take his arm.

“Thank you, dearest Teacher.” She swallowed hard. “There is no one I would rather have by my side.”

As the assembly watched, Infinity and Wisdom together disappeared behind the veil of falling water.

No one moved. The stones themselves held their breath.

Above them, the moon glided fully into place, casting the room in deep shadow.

Suddenly the entire city reverberated with a powerful blast. The Sacellum reeled and swayed. Ancient stonewalls cracked. Tapestries tore. Bodies collided with hurling stone, display tables, and golden vases. Waves of water surged throughout the round room as the Arcadian Threshold rocked back and forth on its base. Men and women still on their feet rushed to steady the ancient portal.

When the assault finally subsided and order restored, the Arcadian Threshold still stood, but the Wisdom and The Infinity had vanished. Only two things remained. A shimmering seal that none could break save the Infinity herself, now protected the ancient gateway and a weathered white cloak cast aside on the Sacellum floor.

CHAPTER ONE

“Am I facing this monster alone or what?”

Alira Winslow’s fingers flew over the controller, her eyes locked on the TV before. Beside her, her friends, Dylan and Genna, clutched controllers in death grips.

“I need some help here!” Shrieked Genna, her long dark hair flying in her intensity.

“In a minute. One minute. I almost got her.” Dylan’s voice skipped through several octaves as his excitement rose.

Onscreen, a tentacle monster appeared from nowhere and takes out Dylan’s avatar. Dylan threw down the controller as his avatar pitched forward, blood spurting everywhere. “If I could’ve had some damn healing, I would have had him.”

Genna jumped up from the couch. “Give it up, Dylan. He had your number.”

Dylan lunged for Genna’s controller. “I distinctly remember someone telling me they’d be better at support if they only got the right skin.”

Genna looked at her onscreen avatar decked out in a purple sequined jumpsuit. “I am better at support than you. Better looking.”

She stuck out her tongue at Dylan. “We all know that only the greatest players can play support in Shadow Mountain.”

Dylan smirked. “That rules you out, G.”

Genna smacks Dylan in the arm.

He grimaced. “Ow.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, toughen up.”

Alira snagged Dylan's controller from the carpet. "Who wants another round?"

Dylan shrugged, already on his phone. "I'm good."

Genna nodded, "Me too. We'll get 'em next time."

Alira sighed and looked at her own phone. "Hey! Did you guys check your text? Let's move this party to the beach. Eben says there's a sea monster and promises it's worth our while. We should at least check it out."

Dylan rolled his eyes.

Genna raised two claw-like pincers and snapped them toward Dylan. "What's wrong, Dylan? Are you scared?"

"Yeah, right." Dylan mumbled, still rubbing his arm.

Alira glanced at her phone. "Let's go. I want out of here before my mom gets home anyway."

Genna and Dylan exchanged knowing glances.

Ten minutes later, with the soaring blue skies of Singing Beach above and the crashing surf beside them, the three trounced down the beach.

Genna flung a hand in front of her eyes. "Ugh. It's so bright. I should have brought my sunglasses." She turned to Alira. "Are you sure your Mom won't mind our ditching out without telling her?"

Alira sighed. "She's not real big on noticing anything I do these days, so I don't think she'll really care." Genna and Dylan exchanged another look.

Suddenly, Dylan smiled and swept Alira up in his arms and led her in a dramatic spirited waltz down the crowded beach. “Cheer up, Buttercup. We’re going to see a monster.”

They danced down the beach, but before too long, the swarm of bodies amassing at the north end of the beach ended their spirited waltz. Before he released Alira though, Dylan shifted her weight to his left arm and dipped her head to the ground. Suspended upside down, Alira noticed Dylan’s brown eyes grow round as summer moons. She gasped. *If he falls on top of me this could really be a death drop.*

Dylan shrieked.

They both tumbled onto the toasty sand. Alira lay on her back until her giggles ran out. She closed her eyes drawing in a deep breath. Warmth spread through her and fresh resolve. *I stayed away too long.*

Alira climbed to her feet and dusted herself off. She fixed her friends with a crooked grin. *Sometimes it takes a whole lot of silly to chase away the sad.* She threaded her arms through Dylan’s on one side and Genna’s on the other. “Ok, Monster. Here we come.”

Together they plunged into the milling throng. No one was disappointed. As they pierced through the edge of the crowd, they saw orange spiny legs sporting enormous pincers jutted out from the piled rocks. As they approached, an icy shiver ran down Alira’s spine. Beneath lay the enormous dark orange carcass barely exposed. Of course, Eben, their floppy-haired classmate, was already holding court, carefully explaining the species and genus.

“The giant spider crab is the largest known species of crab.” Eben balanced precariously on the unstable pile of stones. “It can live up to ten years and span up to ten full feet. This specimen though is at least double their normal size.”

Eben was the junior class's resident brainiac. If he didn't know everything, he certainly thought he did. Eben continued to examine the creature as he spoke. Everyone else in the crowd gave those gigantic and awful looking pincers a wide berth.

"The Japanese name for this species is Taka-Ashi-Gani literally meaning 'tall legs crab,'" Eben spoke loudly addressing the crowd, "Spider crabs are considered a prized delicacy in many parts of Japan."

He ran his hands through his short dark hair. "But the real question is what in the heck is it doing here on the north shore of Boston?"

Glancing up from his prize, Eben noticed Alira for the first time. "Ali!"

He leaped down off the mound toward her. "It's a real beauty. Don't you think?"

Her eyes roved over the giant beast. "Yeah, kinda takes your breath away."

He pushed his sliding sunglasses further up on his nose. "We should call your mom. She's going to want to see this."

"Sure." She nodded noncommittally, her attention by the sheer size of the creature before her.

Alira's mom, Megan Winslow, was Director of Aquatic Fisheries Research for the New England Aquarium. She often lent her expertise of Atlantic marine life on the northeastern shoreline. Eben had done a short internship with her this summer, helping her to gather water samples and analyze tide pool growth in the area.

CRACK!

The enormous weight of the crab shifted on the rocks sending the crowd screaming and nearly trampling one another to get away. Alira startled and Eben jumped a mile as well. They shared a nervous laugh as they saw the retreating crowd and the rest

of their friends now standing a safe distance apart. The crab, however, remained quite dead and was now settled more firmly on its rocky grave.

Calm descended on the nervous crowd as they realized their nightmare had not come to life. Eben turned continuing his examination of the carcass. In the momentary hush, Alira heard ... singing. Her eyes searched for Dylan. *Hmmm*. He was deep in conversation with Tiffany and Chance, two more of their classmates. No singing there. The song was faint, but she could still hear it.

Alira picked a path around the enormous crab following the lilting melody. She smiled. *My mom's going to love this thing*. Then she frowned and banished all thought of her mom. She stopped to examine one of the sharp pincers. *This is a lousy burial ground to choose. It doesn't make any sense. How did you end up here big fella?*

Coming around a huge pile of rocks she spied a hunched tan figure examining one of the gigantic orange pincers. Wisps of a haunting song in an unknown language met her ears. Alira stopped and held her breath, straining to hear the lilting melody. The Singer, sensing he was no longer alone, stood and turned. Alira was greeted with a bedazzling smile, amazing bright golden eyes and muscles, lots of tanned muscles.

He's beautiful... If a boy can be beautiful. As warmth pooled in her stomach, a bashful smile formed at the corner of her lips.

Excited voices from behind the rocks broke the spell. Pulling her eyes away she turned as Eben and Genna rounded the stone mound. Eben took one look at Alira and followed her gaze.

“Stop drooling, Ali. He’s too old for you anyway. Call your mom! She’s got to see this thing before someone takes it away or the specimen starts to deteriorate.” Eben placed his cell phone in Alira’s hand. Dazed, she glanced up as the singing stranger turned to go.

Alira elbowed Genna as she mechanically dialed her mom's number. "Have you ever seen that guy before?"

"No way!" Genna whistled under her breath as mystery boy disappeared behind the jutting stones. "I would definitely remember him! Did you talk to him?"

Alira shook her head as her mom answered. "Mom, what are you doing right now?" She didn't even wait for an answer. "You've got to come see what just washed up on Singing Beach."

With that introduction, Alira handed the phone to Eben. Grabbing Genna's arm she steered her friend out of the crowd. Her eyes roved the crowded beach and landed on the blonde figure disappearing around the rocky point.

She smiled to herself and whispered to Genna. "Two mysteries in one day. A giant Japanese crab and a giant blue-eyed blond."

Genna giggled, "I'll take Mr. Blue Eyes any day."

A ghostly blue glow encircled the vacant ring like the halo of a winter moon shining in a clear night sky. Above the ring, a crowd waited, silent as the dead for the combatants to emerge. An icy lull laced the air with a hint of foreboding and an uneasy watchfulness. Fates would be decided this night, if blood were spilt, if the Elder fell. But no. None entertained such thoughts, not even in the anonymity of this ancient obsidian amphitheater.

Out of the shadows, a cascade of light glinted and all eyes riveted to the left of the ring. The cascade took shape and a warrior emerged. Thousands of silver scales glimmered from his armor as Vlavi The Younger swaggered into the spectral gloom. He moved like silver silk, fluid and graceful. His ornate shield of iron and onyx adorned one arm while a golden weapon extended from the other. Dark curls were brazenly displayed

on his bare head and he approached the center of the ring like a self-indulgent King ready to give audience.

A fist flashed skyward and Vlavi held aloft a half moon blade, gleaming golden in the eerie light. A dark murmur erupted from the crowd as all eyes flashed to the opposite side of the amphitheater. Shock swirled and as it swelled, it birthed outrage. Outrage for the disrespect. Outrage for the audacity. Outrage on behalf the Elder. Vlavi grinned, the night all the sweeter for the roiling emotion.

Sarx The Elder stood motionless half shrouded in inky shadow as he watched the antics of his younger brother. Only the most discerning recognized the ripple of disdain that crossed his perfect and timeless face. He tightened his grip on Qadosh, his battle axe, and stepped forward. His ancient wound throbbed with each step. He straightened to his full height and squared his shoulders. He hated this charade, but Vlavi loved a spectacle.

As he walked, Sarx inspected the weapon in his opponent's gloved hand, the blade of the Enemy: the very blade that nearly claimed his life. The memory swelled around him, filling his senses: the battle of Gilgal Rephaim. *How many times have I replayed this contest?* His Dragon Fire Battle Axe rising and falling, a whirling nightmare unleashed upon the unsuspecting enemy. He remembered pivoting from one traitorous Usurper to another and suddenly there they were face-to-face. He stopped momentarily stunned by the face—his face—it was the first time he'd seen his brother since The Breaching. It was like looking in a mirror. Then the bite of the golden half-moon blade and darkness. He discovered much later that it was Vlavi who had rescued him, Vlavi who had carried him from the carnage.

And it is Vlavi now who taunts me with the very same weapon. His anger burned hot. Even now Sarx heard the ancient blade singing its victory anthem over him and his throbbing wound answered in kind. He cursed under his breath and locked eyes with his younger brother. *Vlavi, this time you've gone too far.*

Both combatants approached the center of the ring and offered a short nod. Sarx's controlled tone brimmed with scorn. "I see you've looted our prisoner's belongings, brother."

Vlavi once again lofted Glasalia into the air and even in the twilight of the ring the half-moon blade drew all light into itself. "It's magnificent, isn't it? It seemed like such a waste to leave it gathering dust."

"It should have been ground to dust, but you always did have a weakness for our enemy's beauties." Sarx watched the muscles in his brother's jaw clench but continued. "I should kill you for your impertinence."

The brother's voices were muted so none heard their banter. The elite who were privy to this archaic rite sat in rapt attention watching the drama, all awaiting the first blow. Truth be told, the crowd was torn between the brothers. Sarx's victory would assure the status quo, Vlavi's on the other hand would create opportunity for advancement. This was Vlavi The Younger's second attempt to overthrow his brother. All knew that this was not a personal battle. It was merely the enactment of the Code of Progression set down long ago by The Watchers as the appointed method of succession. Each contender is allowed three such contests. The third concludes in either triumph or death. Previous challengers to The Elder's rule had retreated to obscurity following the second bout or succumbed to their own foolishness in the third and final match. None present really doubted The Elder's prowess, but then Vlavi was so entertaining and so very unpredictable.

The harsh clang of metal against metal brought the crowd to its feet. The combatants retreated ten paces and turned. Sarx's dark armor merged with the shadows of the ring. He flipped his visor down and charged.

Sparks flew as battle axe and half-moon blade collided. Vlavi lurched back and Sarx pressed his advantage with three short bursts of his axe.

“So, any progress to report on our pursuit?”

Vlavi threw him off. “I’m testing a new surveillance system that shows promise. My men are closing in even as we speak.”

The two circled each other like Saber-teeth of old ready to pounce. “They better be. You assured me you could find her. Promises are empty when they hold no results.”

The Younger’s pale face flushed. He rushed Sarx, pushing him back against the cold obsidian wall. His words were all but lost in the clang of metal. “If my promises are empty, it’s because your intel is wrong.”

The two combatants locked eyes, their bodies leaning stiffly forward. Both blades shook from the exertion as each brother fought for control. Vlavi’s deep lilting voice broke the impasse.

“Perhaps if you would allow me to see for myself, progress could be made.”

Sarx’s anger flared through him and he lunged, unleashing the full force of his fury. “You will never have that access.”

As he spoke, his battle axe crashed down upon Vlavi delivering blow after punishing blow. His brother gave way beneath the barrage, his shield barely holding.

They had rehearsed this conversation before. It was always the same and patience was wearing thin. Years stretched into decades, decades to centuries and centuries into millennium. She had eluded them far too long. Now they were sure. She was alive, of that they were certain. The Elder’s intel was never wrong. Their interpretation could be wrong, but not the information itself. Here at last lay the root of their animosity. Vlavi The Younger wanted access. Access was not an option and it never would be as long as the Elder drew breath.

Sarx's axe drove forward in yet another deadly arc. In the split second before impact, Vlavi dove left, rolled and sprang to his feet. Sarx's momentum carried him forward and he was powerless to halt the force of his own thrust. Pain blazed through his cheek as the butt of his axe stopped his forward motion. Blood registered on his tongue. He jerked upright and spun, swallowing the copper salty liquid pooling in his mouth.

He turned to find a blur of silver sparks bearing down upon him. The impact carried him backward. He stumbled and a whoosh of air escaped his lungs as he thudded to the ground. Qadosh clattered down beside him. He gasped and attempted to roll beyond the lunging Vlavi but there was no escaping him. Weight constricted his chest; he was pinned.

Vlavi's eyes were wild with battle frenzy. "Forgive me, Oh Great Sarx The Elder, of course! I'd forgotten. You alone are favored! You alone are the All Seeing One."

Golden metal flashed above Sarx's head: the killing blow. He thrashed for the handle of his Battle Axe as he searched his brother's face. An unreadable emotion flitted across the Younger's countenance and for one short heartbeat he wavered.

"I have allowed you far too much leash." Sarx spat as the butt of his battle axe caught Vlavi hard beneath the chin. Blood spurted from Vlavi's open mouth as he spun backwards, crashing to the ground.

Sarx rose slowly and straightened his armor. He leaned over the semiconscious heap of his brother. "Vlavi." He slapped his brother's cheeks with his gloved hand. "Your only priority is to find the Infinity. She is all that matters. Do not test me. We are not the only eyes searching. Find her and when you do, set a watch and contact me immediately. Or next time, I will end this."

Without a backward glance, Sarx stalked out of the ring, Qadosh the battle axe in one fist and Glaslia, the half-moon blade in the other.

Alira smiled as she climbed into the front seat of Genna's blue Mustang. *This car is so retro that it's almost vintage.* The engine roared so loudly that normal conversation was close to impossible. Instead of talking, Genna just opened the windows, blared the radio and everyone sang along. Spirits were high after their 'monster of a day,' so the car practically danced itself as Genna made the circuit from the beach to Tiffany's, and then to Dylan's and finally to Alira's house.

As the Mustang pulled to the curb, Genna cut the engine and fumbled for something on the dash. Producing a white envelope, she waved it toward Alira. "It finally came! Did you get yours?"

"What?" Alira drew a blank.

Genna's words ran together in her excitement. "Oh, you know, the ancestry thing we did this summer? For our project?"

The light dawned. "You got yours? What's it say?"

Genna beamed, thrusting the paper toward her. "Look... This is so cool. I'm officially Norwegian and German with a wee bit of the Irish!"

Alira smiled as Genna completely massacred an Irish accent. She scanned the document. "That's really cool."

She handed the envelope back. "Wonder what I am?"

"Go check and call me!" Glancing at the clock on the dash Genna squeaked, "Yikes! I gotta fly, I'm soooooo late!"

Alira closed the car door and waved to her friend only to see her mom heading down the driveway in her red Mini Cooper.

Rolling down the window, Megan asked cryptically, “I’m off.” Her mom was all smiles.

“To Singing Beach?” Ali guessed.

“Yes!” Megan exalted. “Thanks to your quick phone call, the Boston Aquarium is now proud owner of the largest spider crab on record.”

Alira looked sheepish and backed away. “Ah, Eben really deserves all the credit. He practically held me for ransom until I called you!”

Alira ducked her head back in the car window. “Hey, did the mail come?”

“It’s in there on the desk.” Her mom nodded toward the house. “I won’t be long. I’ll bring something home for dinner.”

Alira waved and made a beeline for the mail.

Finding her prize, Alira fingered the envelope as she bound up the stairs to her bedroom. YourLineage.com was printed prominently on the return address. It took her back to that hot, boring summer afternoon in late June. She and Genna decided to test their DNA to determine their ethnicity and give their summer break project some extra punch.

Alira flopped down on her bed and ripped open the letter. *I almost forgot about this.* She scanned the page for her results. Her eyes fell on two words.

Unknown Origin? Glaring out the window Alira shook her head. *You’ve got to be kidding me!*

She crumpled the paper and threw it dramatically into the trash. “What a scam!”

Alira stared at the ceiling for a long moment. “So, I’m what? An alien?”

Grabbing a required summer reading book from the stack beside her bed, she forced her attention to her next assignment.

Rolling her eyes, she grimaced at the title of the book: *Descent into Hell* by Charles Williams. “You and me both, buddy.”

CHAPTER TWO

Lifting his face skyward Darius closed his eyes and savored the warmth. *The sun feels good.* He grabbed his water bottle and took a long drink. *If only it could penetrate my soul, and not just burn the back of my neck.* Pulling up his collar, Darius looked out over the water and contemplated just what ‘news’ his friend could have that was so urgent.

At Xerxes’ insistence they had traveled all the way up the coastline to Maine. Sun, water and rocky shores were beckoning his email declared, and so Darius had suggested this sleepy little corner of the world. Darius had visited Cape Porpoise Pier only once before and he chose this place because it was very much out of the way of things. Touristy enough for two out-of-towners not to attract attention, and bustling enough for very busy fisherman, too absorbed in the catch of the day or the lack thereof, to care about two crusty fellows out for an afternoon of fishing.

The surf breaking on the exposed rocks and Goat Island Lighthouse gleaming in the morning light would normally take his breath away, instead he just sighed. There was a day that the old Darius would be curious to see if there were any goats on Goat Island. He might even venture to see the goats and whatever else one might find on a ‘goat island’. Now there was a taste he sorely missed.

One simply cannot get a good smoked goat anywhere in this confounded country. Darius shook his head as if trying to shake away cobwebs, trying to remember what life was like before . . . what he was like before.

The last sixteen years beat on his skull like the pounding surf: this God forsaken age, the loss, the loneliness, the doubt, this confounded tongue. And dare he dwell on the fear? Not a day passed that the panic of what might be seized him and conspired to drown him in a sea of hopelessness.

Thank the Heavens for Xerxes! Darius sighed. *Where is he anyway?*

Suddenly breaking into his thoughts Darius heard his name called. Scanning the pier, the parking lot, the rocky beach, he found nothing.

There it came again, “Darius!”

Puzzled he followed the sound of the voice. All he could see was a grandiose sport fishing boat blatantly ignoring the “no wake” sign. That boat’s moving far too fast. Darius’s eyes grew wide and he stumbled backward as the boat surged toward the dock. *Fool of a Captain.*

In the blink of an eye the massive yacht pulled up and stopped with a flourish. Darius twisted his body away from the cold salt-water, his arms flying up to cover his face, but he was too late. Water spun from him as he whipped back around, fists curled at his side. He glared up searching for the culprit as bubbling laughter rolled down on him from the helm.

Shading his eyes from the sun, Darius looked up to find the impressive figure of his friend, striking black hair, solid muscular build, and a more than generous smile, shaking with amusement. Xerxes bent down, extending his massive hand. Darius crossed his wet arms. He alternated his glare between his friend’s face and the outstretched hand.

“Sorry, mate. That was a little too close for comfort.” Xerxes laugh boomed as he hauled Darius on board.

Xerxes moved toward the helm as Darius’s sharp golden eyes darted around the cabin: ample bar- no used glasses, open briefcase: blue folder slightly protruding, large beach towels folded on the leather bench. A shiver ran through him as the cool sea breeze penetrated his clinging damp clothes.

Darius reached for a towel and tried to shake off his irritation. “Don’t you think that all this might attract attention?”

A wide smile spread across Xerxes face as he gunned the powerful engine. The boat sprang to life and charged through the waiting water. “You always did worry too much, Darius.”

Moments later, Xerxes dropped anchor far away from unwanted eyes and ears. He turned the Captain’s chair toward Darius and leaned forward. With excitement spilling from every pore, Xerxes revealed the news that his friend had been waiting sixteen long years to hear: “Darius, we found her! She’s right here under our noses! She’s been here for years!”

Dumbfounded, Darius fell back onto the waiting Captain’s chair.

Oblivious of his speechless companion, Xerxes paced the cabin. “Can you even believe our good fortune?”

Darius’s eyes narrowed in disbelief, “Are you sure? What proof do you have for your claim?”

Xerxes stopped in midstride, chuckling. “Oh yes. I forgot. It must always be proof with you, Ah ... Darius.”

Xerxes reached for his brief case and began shuffling through a stack of paper inside a bright blue folder.

“The whole thing was actually quite accidental from a causality perspective.” Xerxes voice took on his professorial tone, his ebony face shining with excitement.

“As you know my current research on ancient civilizations focuses on the study of human migratory patterns in the birthing of civilizations, so from time to time I have been asked to consult on The Genographic Project. One of my colleagues on that project keeps close tabs on the current activities of The YourLineage.com project. The researchers at YourLineage.com are using DNA samples to make knowledge of ancestry readily available to the general populace. They send my colleague any unusual data they

come across. So, on a lark one day I asked if he wouldn't mind keeping me in the loop on the data, they send him. I thought it might be useful in my own research. I'd forgotten all about it until I received a note from him with this attachment."

After a moment of thought Xerxes handed the document to Darius. "There in your hands is a copy of the DNA test results from a sixteen-year old girl living on the north shore of Boston."

Darius scanned the paper before him.

Name: Alira Winslow.

"Alira is phonetically close to Elleria." Darius murmured under his breath.

Ancient Ancestry: Unknown.

Country of origin: Unknown.

Common Ancestry: None.

Xerxes smiled down at Darius. "I'm sure Alira Winslow was quite disappointed with her results."

Darius raised his head from the document. "I must admit this is the most encouraging lead we've had."

"This is no mere lead." Xerxes swung around to face his friend. "This is Elleira, Darius. I'm confident."

Emotion difficult to read played across Xerxes face. "It's true I have only seen her photo. It's also true that I have not seen her face for well, a very long time. And it's also true that she is indeed ... um ... somewhat changed."

With dramatic flourish Xerxes presented the entire folder to Darius. “But I would know her face anywhere.”

Darius slowly opened the folder before him as Xerxes massive hand came to rest on his shoulder. Staring back at him was the smiling face of his most precious charge, his brightest and most beloved student—the Infinity he had lost both sixteen long years ago.

“Louloudi.” Darius whispered. His hands holding the folder trembled and shoulders that had carried a burden far too heavy for far too long began to heave and great drops of relief mixed with the end of a long grief spilled on the cabin floor.

“Ah, the thrill of back to school shopping; there’s nothing quite like it!” Dylan opened the Mall door with a flourish beaming at Alira as she crossed the threshold into his domain.

The thought of being the day’s fashion consultant for Genna and Alira had him nearly giddy. His milk chocolate eyes shone as he guided his two charges from store to store, providing expert advice on colors, and trends as he built spectacular outfits complete with stunning accessories. Unfortunately, many of his best ensembles had to be left behind due either to lack of funds or lack of moxie on the part of the girls.

“Dylan, you do realize that this is the North Shore of Boston and not Hollywood or New York City.” Genna’s idea of dressing up was a new pair of jeans and some Boho fringe.” Genna was Alira’s best friend, but with her carefree spirit and outlandish style, she really belonged to a time long past. The Sixties would have suited her just fine.

Dylan stood his ground. “Well, you do realize that two weeks from today we will be trouncing around Europe! You can’t look like you just crawled out of your hippie mom’s closet.” With that, he ducked away into the store, in search of more clothes.

Alira smiled. “Come on Genna! He does have a point. Why not try something new?”

“I’m not worried about new! I’m worried about being dead! If my parents caught me in that miniskirt, they’d murder me!”

Knowing Genna’s parents traditional and protective ways, Alira had to admit that she did have a point. “Well, you have to promise me that you’ll try something different today.”

Just then Dylan appeared both hands juggling more hangers than he could hold with two other girls in tow.

He was saying, “Now Blondie, you certainly can pull off this butter cream blouse with this sable jacket. Go try it!” He pointed her to the dressing room. “You’re going to look stunning!”

She dutifully headed in the direction of the fitting room.

He eyed the other girl with him. “Ok, Ginger, this muted print is definitely gonna make those amazing eyes of yours pop!”

“Trust me,” he called after her as she followed her blonde friend to the fitting room.

Alira and Genna gave him an incredulous look.

“What?” Dylan shrugged, palms raised upward.

“I think I might start my own business. I’ll call it ... Dylan’s Daring Dress-up service.” Noting the blank look on the girls’ faces he followed with, “Well, OK. How about Dylan’s Delicious Digs?”

With that, Alira and Genna burst into giggles. They laughed until tears streamed down their faces. Dylan joined in eventually, but they could tell they had hurt their friend's feelings.

Stealing a look at Dylan's face Alira knew enough was enough. Taking a deep breath, she pulled herself together.

"Ah, Dylan, I was just making Genna promise me she would try something new this year.

"Hmmm," He put his index finger to his lips trying to recover at least some of his lost dignity.

"A makeover?" Dylan tilted his head, the wheels already turning. "Definitely a makeover! That's exactly what you need: a new you for the start of school! A new you for a new year!"

Delight played on Dylan's features. Taking Genna's elbow, he steered her toward the checkout line.

Hours later with almost all their money spent, the weary warriors stopped at their favorite juice bar for a quick pick me up. "One more stop!" Dylan eyed Genna over the top of his drink.

She groaned. "I thought we were done." Genna's green eyes flashed to Alira for support.

"Nope!" Dylan crowed triumphantly. "I promised you a makeover and so a makeover is definitely on the agenda!"

Genna opened her mouth to protest, but Alira shot her friend a look.

"Ok." Genna's shoulders slumped in defeat. "But nothing too crazy."

Deep in thought Dylan fingered a lock of Genna's hair. "How about we warm up that dirty blonde mop of yours with some warm brown? And we could pay homage to your Irish roots with just a wee bit of red!"

Genna's eyes narrowed as she bit her lower lip.

Dylan's attention bounced to Alira. He reached out to finger her hair. "And what ethnicity are we going to highlight for you, my dear?"

"My Lineage results haven't come yet." She glanced at her phone, hoping that her lie didn't register all over her face.

"That's weird." Genna pursed her lips. "We mailed them in at the same time."

"I know, right? Bizarre." Alira changed the subject. "I think auburn's a good idea. We can be twins!"

Panic radiated from Genna's face.

"You don't have a thing to worry about." Dylan beamed with confidence.

"You're in good hands."

Alira gathered her packages and stood up. "I can't wait to see the new you!"

"Where do you think you're going?" Genna and Dylan chorused together.

"I'm off to the stables this afternoon." Alira frowned glancing at her phone again. "Mom's picking me up at 2:00. I've gotta work a birthday party."

Genna pouted. "You're still coming to the bonfire aren't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it!"

As Alira turned to go Dylan exalted, "OMG! Am I good or am I good?"

His chest puffed with pride as he pointed to the young blonde shopper that he had helped earlier. She looked stunning in her new blouse and jacket!

“I’ve got it!” Dylan grinned. “I’ll call it Definitely Dylan: fashion courage for the faint of heart.”

There will be no living with him now. Alira smiled as she glanced over her shoulder leaving a rather radiant Dylan and a terrified Genna alone in the food court.

Alira replayed their conversation as she walked. *Why in the world did I lie to my friends? This ancestry stuff is so stupid.* Her heart slid into her stomach. *Maybe a better question is, ‘Why does it matter that some stupid company screwed up my test results?’ It’s no big deal what ethnicity any of us are anyway!*

She hit the exit bar with more force than she intended sending a kid dashing for cover behind his mom.

Spotting her mother’s red Mini Cooper, Alira climbed into the front seat. “Mom, what ethnicity are we again?”

“Well, hello to you too!” Her mom started the car. “And you know, a thanks for picking me up would be nice!”

“Sorry.” Alira shrugged, buckling her seat belt. “And yes, thanks for picking me up.” Not to be deterred Alira pressed on. “So, what ethnicity are we?”

Megan stole a quick look at her daughter in the passenger seat. “Well, mostly European descent, I think. I’ve got some Spanish and Russian roots and your dad’s ancestors were primarily from the British Isles—some English and maybe Scottish if I remember correctly. Why the sudden interest?”

Alira took a deep breath. “Well, it’s really no big deal, but last spring in Biology we studied genetics. Genna and I were really into it. I was curious how I can have golden

eyes and you and Dad have green and Genna was wondering about some stuff too, so we decided to get some answers. We each sent in a DNA sample to YourLineage.com. We thought it'd be cool cause we could use the results in our junior summer project."

Her mother shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, what did you learn?"

"Nothing!" Alira almost shouted. "The results said that I was from *an unknown origin!*"

Megan Winslow visibly relaxed. "What about Genna? How were her results?"

"They were fine." Alira's flat response hung in the air between them.

Her mom glanced over at her and smiled. "Well honey, there must be a glitch in their test. I wouldn't worry about it. And you know, we've talked about your lovely golden eyes before; it's just a recessive gene that both your dad and I have. You're definitely the lucky one!"

Alira turned toward the car window, the words 'Unknown Origin' taunting her. As the Massachusetts' hills rolled by, she pressed her face against the cool glass. *Lucky? I sincerely doubt it.*

CHAPTER THREE

The growing night outlined her petite silhouette, a moving shadow amid deeper shadows. Delight played on her childlike face as she watched the dark water and moonbeams play on the surface of her arm. She loved the way her luminescent skin glowed like turquoise pearl in the moonlight. Looking up she saw the rising moon.

Oh, I've missed the moon. She smiled as the moonbeams jumped off the puffy clouds and into the dark water.

Moonbeams have all the fun. I want to be a moonbeam!

Lifting her face toward the heavens she stretched out her arms and twirled in place. *First, I'll play hide and seek with the clouds, then as soon as they find me, I'll stream down, streak across the water and dare the waves to play catch! The waves would always lose.*

Paidi stifled a giggle. For though she was of water more than of air she always cheered for the moonbeams when they teased the chasing waves.

Reaching out, she cupped the glimmering ray in her outstretched hands. Suddenly remembering herself, she released the ray and peeked from behind her rocky hiding place toward the nearby beach.

Yes! More hu-mans coming. This is the perfect place to watch as they gather around the hot hurtful orange light. Her delicate features brightened. *They cannot see me in my rocky spot...* Her eyes grew round in the dim light. *But I can see them.*

Hidden behind her jagged rocky outcrop, Paidi's dark silhouette looked almost human as she arched her back, flexing her long sleek legs. Tilting her head backward she immersed her flowing octapaws into the sea. They responded with a quiver of delight that made Paidi smile. She was quite proud of her octapaws. They were not only the crowning mark of her race but they also distinguished her royal lineage and bearing. A

shadow crossed her childlike face. *No more matter.* She sighed. *No more.* Paidi slowly drew her head from the water pushing thoughts of tribe, home and family away... far away.

The night was quiet, but even so the sound that came over the water to her was muffled. She strained to hear human words, to smell human smell. But here in the gathering after light, she could only watch. That was enough. Paidi's large yellow catlike eyes glowed as she observed the gathering humans.

He would be so proud if He could see me now. Still and quiet. He would say that these pointy rocks are the best hiding place. He would see that I am careful and a good see-er. She breathed in deeply her chest puffing with pride. *He would pat my octapaws and say, 'Paidi will not let ME down.'*

And He was right. Paidi would never let Him down.

She could see Yellow Hair still talking with the girl who had just changed her top color. Yesterday her top color was different. Paidi rummaged through her mind pictures.

Why do hu-mans change their top color? She shook her head in confusion. *Maybe hu-mans are sad because they do not have playful octapaws on their top.*

Paidi affectionately raised her hand and stroked the back of her head. In turn, the tentacle gently and lovingly wrapped itself around her wrist gripping with its powerful suction. *Too bad for hu-mans, no octapaws.*

Suddenly Paidi ducked behind the rocks. Humans were at the water's edge arms raised, pointing. Her breath caught in her chest. *Can they see me?* She stood stock-still. *Can they see my eyes glowing in the water?* Behind the rocks her mind turned the idea over.

No... Paidi dared one quick peek around the rock. *I must be careful of my eyes. But they would not know.* She smiled mischievously. *The hu-mans would think Paidi was*

night twinkle light bouncing on the water. She glanced above for confirmation. *Yes, the night twinkles are out now.*

She breathed out her relief.

The hu-mans think I am a twinkle. Paidi clapped her wet hands with delight. *I will dance with the twinkles on the waves.* Just as she turned into one small pirouette a lone dorsal fin surfaced. Fear prickled on her skin, her octapaws tensed.

Ugh! Eaters. So many Eaters. They should not be here. Paidi winced. How she hated the Eaters. He called them her Protectors. Paidi sniffed. She didn't need Protectors.

The moon was high in the sky and the hot hurting light grew bigger and brighter on land. More humans came. Earlier Paidi watched as Yellow Hair reached down. He gave something to the girl who had changed her top color.

What did Yellow Hair give her? Was it a treasure? Did she like it? No matter. Tonight, she was to keep mind pictures of him. Yellow Hair was all that mattered.

Paidi must watch. Paidi must make Him happy. Paidi must make Him proud.

She mind pictured her happiness when He came to her. The Young Dark One came alone. She was alone. He remembered Paidi. He came after her long aloneness. He said these mind pictures very important. He said Paidi was the only one who could help. He whispered that this seeing would be their secret. The Elder brother need never know. Paidi shuddered at the thought of Sarx the Elder. Icy hot orange tongues burned in him. She was happy to keep their secret.

It made her happy to help again, after so long. Paidi gulped. But hurt would come too. She couldn't think about the hurt now. *No! No! No!* Her hands flew to her head to drive away the dreaded, the hurt. Paidi's head shook from side to side, her octapaws flying in the night. *NO!* Paidi breathed in the warm night ocean air. She must stay Now where moonbeams play, and twinkle lights bounce for Paidi.

She forced her attention back to the young humans- and Yellow Hair. Fierce glowing eyes absorbed the sandy scene, mind pictures flashing. She could not fail. She would not fail ever again.

The start time of bonfire had long passed by the time Alira opened her car door and flopped down behind the wheel. *I'm exhausted.* She reached up to adjust the rearview mirror. The mirror framed the barn perfectly in the growing twilight. She shook her head. *I'm done. I am so done.* So much work for so little nothing! Grumpy horses. Squealing girls. *Next time I'm sticking Tiffany with the whole mess.*

Her mood was not improved as she pulled into the crowded beach parking lot. *Come on, come on... there's got to be a spot here somewhere. Yes!* Squeezing the Mini between an enormous SUV and a green Volvo wagon, she grabbed her stuff and quickly snaked through the sea of cars. Passing the last row, she stepped off of the concrete. Her feet sunk deep into the warm white sand of Singing Beach. Kicking off her flip-flops, she wiggled her toes even deeper as she scanned the horizon for her friends. She paused letting the warmth spread through her.

Spotting the dancing flames near the north end of the beach, she slogged toward the cluster of beach-clad teens. As the sand beneath her feet sprang to life, her furrowed brow smoothed, a reluctant smile spreading across her lips. *Sing to me oh magic sand!* Quickly dragging each foot through the cooling sand, she delighted in the familiar sound. The sand wasn't exactly singing as the name of the beach implied, but the friendly squeaks always lifted her mood.

As she walked, the sand and the gently lapping water coaxed her agitated heart toward calm. *Maybe today can be salvaged after all.* Alira inhaled the late summer sea air and her body surrendered to the quiet of the evening. Glancing upward, the first stars peered through the gloaming sky. Perfect night for a bonfire. Closing in on the crowd, she scanned the beach for Genna and Dylan.

Her breath caught in her throat.

The mysterious blonde singing stranger! Her heart skipped a beat as her hand went instinctively to the band holding her ponytail. With one short tug, her long auburn hair fell in layers around her shoulders.

Oh, why didn't I put on some makeup or at least take a shower after the stables? Alira groaned as she tried to shake some life into her lifeless locks.

Looking up she noticed that the stranger wasn't alone. He was sitting some distance apart from the fire talking to... a girl with dark sunglasses and long auburn hair like hers. Alira's brow crinkled in frustration.

She flipped her long hair off of her shoulder. "This is all Tiffany's fault, that no good slacker! If she had just shown up for work today, I wouldn't be so late. Wait 'til I find her and give her a piece of my mind!"

Her pace quickened as she nursed her agitated thoughts. *Where is she anyway?*

Taking another quick look around the crowd, she spied her offending friend along with Chase and Dylan.

As Alira closed in on her irresponsible coworker, she turned seething remark after seething remark over in her mind, but Dylan interrupted her internal tirade.

"So, what do you think?"

"What do I think about what?" Alira snapped.

"What do you think of our girl?" Dylan repeated his question but this time stressing 'our girl' and nodding toward her mystery boy.

Ali followed his gaze through the raging orange flames. She couldn't believe her eyes. The mystery girl who was with her mystery boy had taken off her sunglasses. Alira gasped. Our girl was Genna.

The Eaters circled, menacingly closer this time. They wanted Paidi to go. Eaters were empty heads, but they still knew that the sand was bare and the humans had gone.

Stay. I want to stay and play with the waves. Paidi gazed longingly at the open sky and the dark blue expanse. I could skim fast and not be caught by the Eaters. She smiled in the moonlight. A dorsal fin glided closer. Paidi crossed her arms; she would not be herded.

Paidi could hide, her catlike eyes widened as she considered, but then the Younger's face would fall. He would mind-search. He would seize her self-words. Paidi cannot cover self-words from Him when he searches. Her bright countenance darkened.

Then, He would not smile. He would not say she was a good Paidi. Panic began to rise. Her arms defensively wrapped around her middle.

He would send them. They would find her. They always did. Paidi's breath came in short shallow gulps.

She mind-pictured the first time the Temptress found her. Naughty Paidi had left the long explore with her tribe and was frolicking with a school of young seahorses. Hiding in the corals from the horses, Paidi spied the shy shining creature.

What a sparkling treasure! She clapped her hands with delight.

Spellbound Paidi watched her golden top wave wildly in the current, while her body glimmered like a zillion twinkle-lights. Waving to the Shining One, she invited her to join them in their game.

Soon they were madly zigging and zagging through the tidal flows. Large sea rocks, waving weeds, and fishies flew past. Pursued and pursuer zoomed fast in their new fun. In and out and up and down they flashed through the wet. The Shining One swam over a hanging rock. Clever Paidi skimmed under it hoping to catch her new friend on the other side. NO! Desperate stopping. Small hands pumping and Octapaws back. Paidi too fast, could not stop. Too late she saw the thin tangles. Caught! Paidi pulled. She struggled. Soon Paidi's mind went dark. She opened her eyes to trembling dread and tangled mind-picture. All else was gone.

The image suffocated Paidi. Her head ducked under the cool wet.

Breathe!

Paidi let the cool salty wet flow into her. She held the wet inside for a long time. When she surfaced, Paidi took a long air breath. She held the air, surrender etched on her features. Looking up for one last time, she plunged deep, skimming quickly and quietly through the night.

“The Sea Elf has returned, sir.”

Vlavi looked up from the document he was reading. “Bring her and assemble the Council.”

“At this hour, sir?” The fresh-faced guard regretted his question as soon as it left his lips.

Ever so slowly, Vlavi turned his head fixing his black gaze on his one-blood messenger. The guard grimaced, his hand clutching his throat.

“Yes, sir!” Stumbling over his own feet, he ran to fulfill his orders.

They grow younger each year. Vlavi's eyes followed him out the door. Good thing I'm in a benevolent mood tonight.

Each council member arrived in various states of alertness. Those of Vlavi's own race of course were mentally sharp, and fully ready for their Master's call. The One-bloods among them were sluggish, wishing desperately that they were still in their warm comfortable beds.

Vlavi nodded and the guard led a shivering Paidi into the room through a side door. Her large shining eyes blinked repeatedly in the bright light.

"You're late." Vlavi lifted her chin so their eyes met. "You know how cross I become when I'm kept waiting."

Paidi ducked her head trying to hide behind her guard.

Suddenly the ornate French doors swung open wide as a vision of female brilliance swept into the room. Her long flowing beaded green gown hugged the curves of her perfect figure. Today, her long black hair was pinned with small clusters of emeralds arranged as flowers, showing off her lovely oval face. Every eye was fixed on her though she hardly noticed. She was used to such attention. Three male attendants trailed close behind.

Vlavi's brow knit in frustration. "Eris, what a surprise! I do appreciate your use of the door this time."

"Anything for you cousin." She purred.

Glancing at the small elf cowering before Vlavi, Eris's mouth displayed a pretty smile. "Ah V, I see I'm just in time for all of the fun. You should've told me you were playing god tonight. I would've come earlier. You know how I love to watch you work."

“You’re always invited my pet.” Vlavi took the extended bronze hand in his and raised it to his lips. “Frankly, I don’t know whether I should kiss your hand or simply bite it off, darling.”

“Now, now dear. Really, after all I’ve done for you…” Eris shook her pretty head, her dark eyes flashing.

“Yes, I’m truly an ungrateful wretch.” Vlavi’s sarcasm rang through the room as he kissed Eris’s hand.

“As you can see cousin, I’m in the middle of… things, boring things that we can discuss later. Will you join me for a late dinner tonight, my sweet?”

Eris eyes narrowed. She circled Paidi like a cat circling a mouse. Her eyes never left her prey. “Dinner sounds lovely, V, but are you sure I can’t stay? You should know well enough by now, dear, these sorts of things don’t bore me at all.”

“I do know how much you like a good show cousin. Though tonight I’m afraid you’re too late.” He lied.

“We’re just wrapping things up. Why don’t you go and powder your nose while I finish here? I promise not to leave out a single juicy detail.”

Eris eyed him suspiciously. “I look forward to hearing all about it. Don’t be long, you know I hate to be kept waiting.”

Eris’s eyes narrowed. She cast the elf one last long look before sweeping out of the room in the same dramatic fashion with which she entered.

Vlavi shook his head as he watched her go. *Always turning up at just the wrong moment.*

He then nodded to the two guards flanking the terrified elf.

As they made preparations for the extraction, the momentary pause gave Vlavi a chance to collect his thoughts. The unexpected and troubling arrival of his cousin definitely threatened to disrupt the smooth running of his organization.

What does she really want? Vlavi's index finger tapped his parted lips. She always arrives offering aid, information, and support but often in exchange for certain privileges. *Is she part of Sarx's game? I grow weary of games.* He turned over the possibilities. Eris is powerful though. She could be a valuable asset.

Vlavi's advisors stood waiting for him to continue. Under the weight of their gaze he shook off his perplexing cousin and returned to the business at hand.

"No more interruptions!" He barked to the guards at the door.

Vlavi paced the length of the room almost lightheaded with expectation. He hungrily eyed the small form of the young sea elf now drugged and gagged before him. Her eyes tightly shut against the coming horror.

"Ah, little Sea Elf. This will be over before you know it." Vlavi's voice melted like butter over the huddled creature. "Come here and show me what you saw."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Why does this always happen to me?" Genna wailed. "He ditched out as soon moon came up." Genna lay sprawled on the floor, Alira looked down at her from the bed."

"I dunno. He seemed super interested to me."

Genna groaned and put her face in her hands, “You’d already left.” She sat up. “Thanks for that, by the way. You didn’t even say hi!”

Alira grimaced, “Sorry, it’d been a long day. But, what do you mean? He just left?”

“Apparently, I wasn’t everything he dreamed. He made some lame comment about my eyes being green. He just kept staring. Honestly, at first it was kind of dreamy and romantic, but he just kept staring and I started getting really creeped out. After what seemed like a million years, he said he was sorry, but he had to be somewhere. And poof, he was gone.”

“Boys!” Leaning in, Alira dropped her voice to a whisper. “Maybe, he’s a vampire? Or, wait, a reverse vampire and he only preys on helpless green-eyed girls in the day.”

Alira slowly raised her arms extending stiff fingers as a low growl emitted from her throat. Opening her mouth and baring her teeth, Alira froze in her very best vampire imitation, finally coaxing a half-hearted smile from her friend.

“All boys want to do is suck the life out of us anyway.” Alira lunged for Genna’s throat as both girls erupted into giggles.

“You’re right.” Genna sighed and slid a bracelet off her wrist. “He gave me this shell. I should go throw in the ocean.”

She handed it to Alira. It was a common nautilus shell on a braided cord. As Alira fingered the shell it felt oddly warm to her touch.

“Pretty.” She passed the bracelet back to Genna.

“You know, the more I think about it the weirder tonight was.” Genna shook her head. “He gave me this bracelet and told me to remember but he didn’t tell me what to

remember, or even to remember him. Honestly, I think he had me mixed up with someone else.” Disappointment reverberated in her voice.

Genna pulled herself to her feet and flopped back on Alira’s bed. “What a jerk.”

“Does the lame-vampire-slash-mystery-jerk have a name?”

“Rion.” A dreamy far-away look spread across Genna’s face. “He may be a jerk, but he’s sure a pretty one.”

Alira took one look at her dreamy-eyed friend and hit her square in the face with a pillow. As pillows and stuffed animals flew through the air, Genna slowly regained the full force of her smile.

By the time they were done, Alira’s formerly cheerful and orderly room was in shambles. Stuffed animals littered her pink shag rug like autumn leaves after a nor’easter. Frilly pink lamps balanced precariously on the nightstands, books were scattered all around her unmade bed and all the clothes that had been piled on her purple papasan chair now littered the floor. When Genna opened Alira’s bedroom door to leave, the room was completely upset but Genna was back to her old self.

“Sorry to abandon you,” Genna apologized, “but I promised my mom I’d be home before midnight.”

“Go ahead you lame-vampire-slash-mystery-jerk lover, you!” Alira smiled as she threw a stuffed unicorn after the form of her retreating friend.

The thrown purple unicorn landed in the hall at the feet of a frowning Megan Winslow. Genna mouthed a silent ‘I’m sorry’ at her friend before quickly disappearing down the stairs

Alira winced as her mother cleared her throat. “Just what in the world is going on here, Alira? I was fast asleep. I’ve got an early morning meeting at the Aquarium.”

“Sorry. Genna stopped by and we had some things to sort out.”

Her mother blinked in the bright light and surveyed the mess before her. “It looks like you’ve got a lot more to sort out now.”

Alira shrugged. “It’s not as bad as it looks.” Alira got up to retrieve the wayward unicorn.

As she gathered armfuls of colorful bears, dogs and assorted sea creatures, Alira quietly called after her mom. “Do you have time to show me where those pictures are tomorrow? You know the ones I need for that project?”

Megan yawned. “Ask me about it in the morning, honey. I’m going to try to get back to sleep, and no more unicorn fights at midnight!”

“We’re done here.” The extraction complete, the limp form of the young Sea Elf lie crumpled on the imported marble floor. Vlavi, The Younger signaled to the waiting guards. “Return the elf to her cage.” The guards began to yank the ropes from the prone figure. Vlavi frowned, “Gently.” He turned, a distinct look of victory radiating from his timeless face.

Vlavi’s High Council stood in a semicircle staring at the unconscious Paidi. The day’s events had left them all with a morbid sense of satisfaction. He appraised each in turn remembering the state in which he first found them. They were all indeed quite changed.

Few in his organization were privy to such things. Extractions were always private affairs. Vlavi had learned that knowledge is power and the Younger shared power sparingly, though he did share. Vlavi knew how to reward loyalty. He counted on the greed and ambition of those in this small circle. He fed their hopes and dreams quite well, and in turn they helped him slowly, quietly build his empire—his own kingdom,

apart from his brother's. Each of his advisors craved power; Vlavi made quite sure that this need was insatiable.

He was not disappointed nor threatened by their aspirations. Aspiring humans were the easiest to manipulate, though he used the term 'human' loosely. Blind ambition blinded more than just the human heart. It blinded the conscience as well. Mortals who were with him for decades barely resembled anything close to human anymore. The Younger preferred it that way. The only thread of conscience Vlavi left intact was loyalty, blind loyalty to him and him alone.

He surveyed the scene before him. Surrounded by Libyan marble, gold leafed walls, thick imported rugs, rich leather furnishings, and countless slaves, Vlavi The Younger suddenly imagined he looked every inch like one the earthly kings of old.

As a young boy, he witnessed the rise of Nimrod the Great. Vlavi and his elder brother, Sarx were granted audience to this powerful King just once. The opulence of his kingdom was breathtaking and was overshadowed only by the power emanating from the man himself as he presided upon his throne. Vlavi imagined himself on that throne now: *Vlavi the Great*. He smiled and held the image, indulging the moment.

Abruptly, he snapped his fingers. The guards hastened their step and each member of the small group before him stood a little straighter. Vlavi's smile turned hard as stone. *I don't need The Watchers, Brother. I have found our prey without any help from you or your hordes.*

As the sea elf was carried away, Vlavi clasped his hands and began to pace. "So, it's true. The mers were right. Orion the Hunter! Alive! How is this possible? Where has he been all these millennia?"

Vlavi's index finger pressed against his lips. "Why surface? Why now?"

His commanding voice echoed in the massive ornate chamber.

“It has to be her.” Vlavi swiveled on the gleaming marble.

Vlavi swelled with anticipation. “Oh, illusive enchantress can you really be here? After millenniums of waiting, are you finally in our grasp? In my grasp?” Vlavi’s voice rang with triumph.

A shadow passed over his countenance as a disturbing image entered his mind, “But where is that meddling philosopher, that troublesome teacher?”

Vlavi practically spat. “He must be close. That ancient filth would never let his charge wander far beyond his reach.”

“Commander,” Vlavi barked.

“Yes, sir.” A tall broad grizzled man stepped forward.

“Follow them both. Confirm the identity of the girl.”

Abruptly, the image of the Infinity’s long-sought mentor forced itself upon his mind’s eye and the last time Vlavi had seen him. The memory of the carnage rose in his mind. Blood and sweat filled his nostrils; he heard the clamor of death. Sights, sounds, and smells The Younger had long since grown quite accustomed to. As the battle raged, he found himself locked in deadly combat with the ancient teacher. *The fool risked everything in a vain attempt to turn me instead of trying to destroy me.*

“A grave mistake.” Vlavi whispered under his breath, “one that may yet prove fatal.”

The Younger paced the room, his ancient rage now kindled, roared to life. His advisors averted their eyes and shifted uncomfortably on their feet. “Find that odious teacher. I want him before Sarx even knows he’s alive.”

Spying the commander, he ordered, “You are to lead the hunt for my great nemesis.” Vlavi pulled himself up to his full height. “Do not fail me.”

“I won’t, sir.” His voice rang with confidence though his slightly dilated pupils and his shallow breathing betrayed him.

Vlavi inhaled deeply, regaining his composure.

He turned toward the large picture window overlooking the water, a sardonic smile forming on his lips. He watched the rising yellow orb splash orange and red streaks as it greeted the new day. *It is a new day dawning. Victory is mine.* Boldness welled up within as the sun rose over the sparkling water. *Vlavi the Great.*

Alira sat amid stacks of photos in her mother’s room. The scene looked like a rousing game of fifty-two pick up except with photos instead of playing cards. Alira definitely did not share her mother’s meticulous ways. As she sorted through the pictures that familiar knot wound tighter and tighter in the pit of her stomach.

Dad. How can I miss someone so much who I hardly even remember? Alira sighed. She clutched a photo of the three of them at her 7th birthday party. *I’m going to miss you forever, aren’t I?* She put the photo aside. Glancing at her phone, she was startled to see how much time had passed.

I’d better get going. Alira quickly sorted through the array of photos before her. I need to get this project off my back.

In short order, all of the photos were back in place and in their proper boxes. Alira was left with two stacks. She picked up the pile for the project and shuffled through them: her baby pictures, her first few birthdays, playing Ariel in her elementary school play, Paladin, her first pony, her first trophy for show jumping, Halloween parties in the neighborhood, beach days with the gang, the day she got her learners permit.

The other pile was smaller—it contained the faces of the people she loved: her mom and dad, Genna and Dylan, and a few cousins who lived in Vermont.

Alira's heart sagged in her chest as she carried her chosen photos into her bedroom and put them on her desk. She glanced at her stack of pictures, so many of them containing her dad. *I'm never going to get rid of this dad shaped hole in my heart. It's been years and it's still there always aching, reminding me of him.*

Returning to her parent's room, she took a deep breath and held it. Opening the closet door, Alira surveyed the shelves. "Where did these all come from?"

I guess I'll just have to wing it.

She stacked two boxes on top of each and tried to shove them back onto a high shelf. They went halfway into place and then got stuck, something on the shelf blocking them. *Ugh.* Alira stalked into her Mom's room, grabbed a decorative chair, and brought it back to the closet.

Can't have anything out of place, for OCD in chief. She took down the stack of boxes then hauled herself onto the chair. She frowned, there on the shelf was a colorful bag filled with wrapping paper scraps had fallen on its side revealing a tattered pink box with a dusty pink lid. It was unlike any of the black labeled photo boxes her mother had given her to look through. Alira reached for the unadorned box, then hesitated with a twinge of conscience.

This is Mom's. I shouldn't open it.

She stopped and listened. A hollow hush filled the house assuring her that she was indeed alone. She exhaled.

She shook her head. *A quick peek can't hurt anything.* Her pulse quickened as she opened the box.

Inside, she found a very old and very small pair of baby booties with little pink bows. There were photos of her parents on a boat and lots of photos of a baby. Putting those aside, she continued to probe the layers of the box. Next, she found official looking papers written in a foreign language.

What is all of this?

Beneath the papers lay a beautiful and extravagant necklace nestled on a pink and white crocheted piece from a long-discarded baby blanket. Beneath the blanket piece was a yellowed note pinned in a completely different language. A hastily penned English translation ran down the side of the page. It read: *My name is Elleira. I need a mother and a father and a safe place to grow up.*

The grandfather clock in the downstairs hall chimed as Alira stood, still on the chair. “Elleira? Alira?” The words echoed in the empty house. Her eyes scanned the note again. Her breathing came in short shallow gulps.

Alira stared unseeing. Both hands clutched the offending note. Her mind took on a life of its own as she recalled snatches of conversation here, unguarded looks from distant relatives there.

For a moment Alira’s fog lifted as an idea hit her. Leaping down from the chair, she snatched one of the photos from the pink box she ran to her room and grabbed one of the photos on her desk. The baby picture Alira had chosen for her school project was a perfect match to the photo of the baby hidden away in the pink box.

All the color drained from her world as the realization clearly etched in the photos before her took hold: *I’m adopted.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Alira's heart jumped to her throat as a violent shaking jarred her awake. She gasped for breath, her numb mind reluctant to come on-line. *Earthquake? In New England?* She bolted upright in a pink explosion that sent pillows, comforter and stuffed animals flying in every direction. Alira's auburn hair was a tangle and her ivory complexion, pale. Dazed golden eyes blinked struggling to focus.

A heartbeat later the shock registered. Dylan and Genna were gleefully bouncing away on her bed.

"What are you doing?" Exasperation punctuated every syllable.

"We're not losing you again, Ali." Genna's silvery singsong voice rose and fell in time with her jump, her side-braid bounding from her shoulder with every thud off the bed. Orange boho fringe flew wildly through the air with every leap.

"Go away." Alira threw the comforter back over her head.

"I'm sick,"

Genna and Dylan exchanged glances.

Genna shrugged and proceeded to coax the blankets down revealing her very frustrated friend. "Yup! Your mom told me on Thursday."

Dylan's staccato voice chimed in. "She told me on Friday."

Genna stopped bouncing and eyed her friend. "And on Saturday I think she told us both. But now it's Sunday and she doesn't think you're sick anymore!"

"Yay!" The two friends chorused.

Genna jumped off the bed, hands on her hips. “Come on, you’re getting up, getting dressed and we’re getting the heck out of here!”

Dylan opened the blinds and late summer sunshine streamed into the very pink room. Stuffed animals littered the fuchsia shag rug like autumn leaves after a storm. Laced lamp shades balanced precariously on lamps, while her nightstand threatened to topple over from the weight of all the books. Her purple papasan chair was piled high with clothes and those escaping littered the surrounding floor.

Ignoring the mess, Genna headed straight to the closet and pulled out a purple tee and jean shorts. “How about these?”

Alira groaned and burrowed down deep within her layered cocoon. In one swift motion, Dylan pounced on the bed and whisked away all her blankets revealing a shocked Alira in her silky summer PJ’s.

Alira blinked and sputtered, her voice climbing to a shrill pitch. “What if I had been naked under here Dylan, did you ever think of that?”

Dylan pressed his lips together and nodded seriously. “Actually, I did.” His chocolate eyes sparkled with mischief as he stroked his angular chin. “I decided it was a risk I was willing to take.”

Alira grabbed the closest pillow and threw it full force at Dylan.

Dylan lobbed the tee and shorts toward the bed. “Come on, Ali! Don’t make us pull you out of here in your PJ’s. After your break-up with Justin, you kind of vanished this summer. We just got you back and we’re not losing you again.”

Alira glared at him, he was right. She had all but disappeared after she had gotten her heart broken. Dylan’s almond brown eyes were wide and pleading. How could she ever stay mad at him? Lime green board shorts and a black crew neck tee hugged his wiry frame and, as always, his straight black hair was a carefully groomed mess. He

stood in the middle of her chaos looking every inch an anime character sprung to life. She looked at Genna. No help there. Her arms were crossed, determination etching her face.

Alira whispered under her breath. "I'm going to kill her."

Her whole body cringed at the thought of Megan. She slumped down against the pillows as the events of the last few days crashed upon her. Even though the warm summer sun streamed through the open window, her life stretched before her like a long dark tunnel. Everything she took for granted: her home, her mom, and all of her past faded into the murky blackness. There was no light at the end of it. Taking a deep breath, she pushed down the rising despair and pointed toward the door.

"Ok. Ok. I'm up! Everyone out. I'm getting dressed."

"Darn!" Dylan snapped his fingers. He shot her a look of mock disappointment as he and Genna headed for the door.

Genna tossed her hair, "Don't take too long or we'll be back."

Dylan grinned, "water balloons are still on the table."

Alira rolled her eyes. "I'll remember that when I have to wake you up for night watch on sea semester."

Dylan blew her a kiss and sashayed out. Genna just grinned and pulled the door shut.

Minutes later the three friends were crammed into the front seat of Genna's Mustang, Oldies 103.3 blaring on the stereo. They were cruising toward The Wall, and

some of the best surfing in New Hampshire. Her mind numbly echoed the lyrics of the Simon and Garfunkel song. 'I am a rock. I am an island...'

Alira sat still as a stone staring out the window.

What am I supposed to do I do now? Nothing has changed but everything's different. Especially me. Alira stole a glance at her friends beside her. They were singing to the radio, completely oblivious to how her universe had changed. She wanted to go back and be oblivious. The whole world felt foreign.

Who am I? She shook her head, staring at the floorboards. The phrase *Unknown Origin* mocked her. *Where am I from?* Alira wasn't sure she wanted to know the answers.

The Genna-mobile pulled into the gravel beach-front parking lot right as Genna's brother, Lance, arrived toting their surfboards. Genna's was a Stand-Up Paddle board that required extra room for transport. Lance, an avid surfer, was always more than willing to help out. As Genna, Lance and Dylan readied their boards, Alira found a great place to sit among the rocks to watch the action or sleep.

Probably sleep. Alira stretched her tired muscles. The rock was warm beneath her and provided a great view of the shoreline. *I've been sleeping for days, but I'm still exhausted.* As she watched the busy beach, she hummed the chorus of the song from the drive up. What were those lyrics again? She absently fingered the stones beside her. *I am a rock.* She chose a white smooth stone flecked with black. *I am an island.* She tossed the stone in the air and watched it land on her open palm. *And a rock feels no pain.* Her hand closed around the hard stone. She imagined her heart as a giant red stone. Her chest was heavy with the weight of it. *And an island never cries.* She gazed out over the open blue water and shoved the rock into her beach bag.

Just then Genna stood up on her board. She threw her arms out, wobbled and tried to catch her balance, but then, splash. She was in the water.

“And, down she goes.” Alira smirked as Genna struggled to get back onto the board.

Alira laid back on the rock and crossed her arms over her body. *The nerve... dragging me out of my warm bed and forcing me to the beach.* The sun warmed her upturned face. *Well, I can't stay sad forever. Staying in bed is definitely not going to solve this.*

She propped herself up on her elbow and watched Genna wrestle her SUP board in the waves. Memories that she and Genna shared flooded her: study sessions, sleepovers, all of the times holed up in her room sharing their favorite Youtubers or a new band, the beach bashes, the school trips, her support after her dad's funeral.

Just then Genna stood up finally balancing on her board. Smiling victoriously, she turned and waved to Alira. Alira jumped to her feet and threw her hands up over her head saluting her victory. As she sat back down her heart swelled. *Well, maybe I'll let one person at least visit my island.*

The Wall at 10th Street was crawling with surfers. The tide, wind and swells were all cooperating to produce great surf, well, great by New England standards. Alira watched appreciatively as grace in motion powered through the breaking waves. Some of the best surfers on the North Shore were showing off today. Her eyes fell on one long boarder in particular. Tall, tan and muscular, his light hair flying behind him as he soul-arched through the swells. Of course, he would be here. She watched Rion the lame-vampire-slash-mystery-jerk glide smoothly into shore.

I hope Genna doesn't see him. She scanned the horizon searching for her friend.

Genna was not the only stand up paddler at the beach today. The SUP's were out in force on this lazy August afternoon. Swimmers and body surfers were also taking advantage of the rare summer surf. Even a few sea kayakers dotted the horizon.

Wham!

Alira jumped as a beach ball landed on the rock beside her. She grabbed the ball and smiled as she tossed it to the little girl who came to claim it. In the distance, she spied Eben canvassing the shoreline behind a group of giggling kids. Eben, with a pail in one hand and a notebook in the other, was quite intent on whatever the children were chasing. Curiosity got the best of her so she left her comfy rock to see first-hand what was going on.

As Alira drew near, Eben bent down reached into the water grasping something from the rocky bottom. As he stood she could see that cupped in his dripping hand was a bunch of tiny crabs.

Eben dumped them in the pail and looked up at her approach. “Hey, Alira. What are you doing here?”

Alira smiled at her geeky friend. Abrupt as always. What he lacked in social graces he made up for in brains. They all forgave him because he really was a sweetie at heart and also a huge help with Algebra 2 and Chemistry.

“Ah, just hanging out.” Alira peered into his bucket at the wriggling crustaceans. “What’s with all those crabs?”

“Don’t know yet.” He gazed out into the Atlantic. “These waters are swarming with juvenile Taka-Ashi-Gani. My best guess is that the large crab we found on the beach released her eggs just before she died.”

“Wow! You mean those tiny things are going to be giants too?” Alira reached her hand in the bucket and cupped a baby crab in her palm. “You don’t look so tough little guy.”

Eben eyed the squirming bucket. “Yeah, I think they’re the same species, but I won’t be sure until your mom takes a look at them.”

Before Alira had a chance to respond a shrill sound split the air. The Lifeguard's whistle sounded alerting the beach that there was danger. Normally, it was just kids goofing off, but Alira's head snapped up as she surveyed the blue horizon.

Was that a fin there in the distance? She squinted her eyes against the sun. "Is that a fin?"

Eben's eyes strained against the sun's glare. "No, I don't believe that is one fin." His face was the picture of calm as he pushed his sunglasses up his nose. "I see at least five. By the size of the dorsals, I think those are great whites."

Eben's impossible words reverberated menacingly in her ears. "Great Whites?"

Alira's heart lunged into her throat as she took in the chaotic scene. Surfers and swimmers alike were running out of the water. Worried parents scooped up their children holding them close. The guard's shrill whistle filled the air as they ran up and down the beach, arms frantically waving at those remaining in the water.

Her wild eyes combed the beach. Alira spotted Dylan coming off his board about thirty yards down the shoreline. Lance was already out of the water, taking a short breather between sets.

Genna, where are you?

Eben's voice broke through her panic. "Did you know that the great white Shark lives for about twenty-five years. The biggest great white ever caught was off Prince Edward Island in 1993. It was twenty..."

"Genna!" She pointed to a lone paddler in the distance. Several Great Whites stood between her and the shore.

"Go get help, Eben!"

Eben stood, his mouth gaping open, staring at the distant figure of their friend.

“GO!” Alira’s bellow startled him, and he took off running.

Her heart raced as she stood at the water’s edge and helplessly watched the scene unfold. Taking a deep breath Alira tried to force herself calm. Her mind raced as she examined all possible options.

Covering her eyes from the glare, she gasped as the sharks circled ever closer to her friend. Glancing down the shore she noted that Eben hadn’t even reached the guards yet. Searching the beach, she spotted an abandoned red kayak drying in the sand. Before she could think about it too hard, Alira was running for that kayak as a great boldness rose within and she dragged it with all her might toward the water.

Gripped by a fierce abandon, Alira screamed to the ocean, to the sky, to the sharks, to anyone who was listening. “I have lost too many people! You are not taking Genna from me too.”

Alira set her jaw and splashed the kayak into the surf. She plunged her oar into the water and paddled furiously toward the small outline of her friend.

Alira’s heart pounded as her adrenaline surged. The voice of her own fear battered her.

This is stupid! Have you lost ALL sense? Alira ignored that voice. She also ignored the fins lurking in the distance; she was committed now. The water was more difficult to ignore. It splashed up at her teasing her fears and playing with her phobia.

Dark water was an old nemesis buried deep within the folds of her subconscious, the dread was now palatable. She glanced back to the shore where a crowd was forming and surveyed the distance she had covered.

No turning back now. Resolve set her damp features in stone.

Directing her attention once again to the prone form of her friend, Alira dug at the water with her paddle and focused on the horizon.

As the red kayak closed in, she could see not five dorsal fins, but ten to twelve sharks circling the tenuous safety of the SUP board. *Where did they all come from?* Alira stared aghast at the sight. *I've never heard of so many together in the north Atlantic.*

Alira was close enough now that she could hear Genna's muffled cries. Her friend's eyes were shut tight to the surrounding menace; her head buried deep in the crux of her right elbow.

"Genna!" The wind and waves swallowed her voice. "Genna!" Alira roared. Genna's head shot up, her eyes wild. She craned her neck for the source.

Alira grimaced as four of the dorsal fins abandoned Genna's board and headed straight for her.

"Genna! Over here!" Swallowing the bile in her throat, Alira kept her voice even. "I'm going to pull along-side. Jump in. Keep your paddle."

It took a few seconds for Genna to position herself on her board. By that time, Alira was close enough to reach for the hand of her friend.

We're going to make it. Alira could hardly breath as she grabbed Genna's outstretched hand and pulled her into the small boat.

The kayak pitched wildly as the additional weight toppled the delicate balance of the craft. Alira focused all of her attention on calming the hysterically rocking boat. She could see Genna's whole body shaking in the front seat. She could hear her teeth chattering and between sobs Genna kept repeating, "I can't... I can't believe you came for me! I can't believe it."

Alira reached out for Genna's shoulder. "You're my best friend in the whole wide world. I am never going to let anything happen to you!"

Genna turned in her seat. Her breathing was coming in great gulps; her eyes wild and unfocused.

"Genna! Genna! Look at me!" Alira fixed Genna with a steady gaze. "If we are going to get out of this alive, I need you to focus. Take a deep breath and paddle!"

Alira breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Genna's eyes clear. Her friend nodded, turned around and fastened her attention on the distant shore. Both girls paddled with all their might.

If we can just make it to the wave break, we'll be ok. Alira willed the kayak to the shore, stroke by stroke, gritty determination coursing through her. Her wary eyes roamed the water. One fin on the right. Two on the left. Alira's heart threatened to beat right through her chest. Her knuckles turned white on the paddle. *Great whites are ambush hunters. Why are they still pursuing?* She swallowed hard as the distinctive dorsal fins edged ever closer.

Alira couldn't see Genna's face, but she noted the stiff jerky movement of her body. "Hang in there, Genna. We're almost there." Alira forced an enthusiasm that she didn't feel.

Their paddling took on a rhythmic quality as Alira matched Genna stroke by stroke. Out of the corner of her eye, Alira thought she glimpsed something golden waving in the water just beyond the reach of their paddles. She closed her eyes and quickly shook her head but the image remained and seemed to keep pace with the kayak.

"Golden seaweed?" Alira's arms ached. Her breathing came in ragged gulps. "There is no such thing as..."

Wham! A twenty-foot shark rammed the bottom of the kayak. Her thoughts scattered as her body momentarily defied gravity, propelled through open space.

Alira's world clicked into slow motion. She heard Genna shriek. The air felt cool on her wet face. The sunlight glinted off of the blue green water. She tasted salt on her tongue. Alira hung suspended in time. Eternity bottled in a moment.

Then, without warning, her worst nightmare came to life, invading her waking hours and terrorizing her day and she plummeted in the icy churning murky depths.

Arms! Move your arms, Alira. Refusing to succumb to her fears, Alira pumped her arms struggling to the surface.

Where's Genna? She broke the surface with a gasp.

She glimpsed an exhausted Genna desperately clinging to the side of the capsized kayak. Relief washed through her as she took a few strokes toward her bedraggled friend. Suddenly a surge of power wrapped around her body drawing her beneath the surface. It was as if the water itself grasped her and pulled her downward. Deeper and deeper she descended. She struggled to break free, her lungs burned from lack of oxygen.

Frantically Alira pulled at the water with all her might. An unnatural force held her fast. As she continued to descend, Alira glimpsed the sharks matching her descent.

Though practically blind in the murky grey water Alira heard an unearthly voice break through her frantic muffled silence.

"You interfered with my game." The eerie feminine voice echoed in her head.

Alira swung her head from side to side searching for the voice. Her thoughts tumbled over one another as her oxygen deprived brain tried to make sense of what was happening.

Appearing out of the gloom, a beautiful and terrible creature floated before her, golden hair waving in the current. On her face was a playful twisted pout. The creature motioned to the sharks and at her bidding they surged forward.

Recognition glimmered in Alira's confused mind. *Her face! I know it.* Her mind flashed to a long-forgotten memory on her parent's boat. Those dreams. She kicked her legs with all of her strength, but something held her fast. Her eyes followed the back of the creature as it turned and advanced toward the red kayak and Genna.

Helplessly, she watched the sharks lurch forward. As exhaustion, and lack of oxygen overwhelmed her, Alira involuntarily breathed in the cold salty water. The water entered her mouth, then her lungs. It filled her, forcing her down, down beneath her very self. Time stood still. An internal reality engulfed her more real than the sea she was in. She floated aimlessly in the dark.

Then in her mind's eye she saw a faint light glimmering in the distance. As she watched, the light grew in both intensity and breath. Brightness overcame her and took the form of a word merging with her. Alira now was a Word. It bubbled up from the depths of her being. It moved through her, rising from the great expanse that was now her inner space.

Alira opened her mouth and as the word dawned, exploding from her, the sea erupted with stunning power. The creature reared back, surprise and fury etched into her face. Everything rocked back confronted by the terrible unseen force. The scene was chaos: waves in an angry uproar, sharks tumbling nose over tail through the churning water along with various fish and sea plants caught in the powerfully moving stream. The shark mistress was nowhere to be seen. Curiously the kayak was still in place.

Suddenly, a firm hand gripped hers. She turned to see Rion the mysterious singer by her side.

Either I'm dreaming or I'm dead. Her wide eyes gazed up at him as a calm serenity enveloped the sea. A dolphin appeared, circling them playfully.

She inhaled the cold salty water. Her insides felt light, airy almost. *Is this what death feels like?* She began fading to a center deep within. Her hand remained in his as her delirium deepened. Floating, Alira turned her head and stared deeply into his golden eyes, accepting the inevitable.

Rion's eyes never left hers as his lips curved into a soft reassuring smile. He took her hand and placed it on the waiting dolphin.

He looked directly into the animal's eyes. "Dive deep my friend. Keep her safe. Escort her to safety."

In her dream like state, Alira noted that the lame-vampire-slash-mystery-jerk was indeed talking to the dolphin and she understood him. Speaking with dolphins and breathing underwater were indeed quite normal.

This is a lovely dream. Alira smiled under the water.

Suddenly, Alira remembered her friend. *Genna! Where's Genna?*

Alira tried to ask, but the Dolphin was already moving fast with her in tow and together they dove through the dark dreamlike waters.

Alira lay motionless on the deserted beach. Two sets of bright golden eyes stared down at her bedraggled form. Her wet tangled hair formed a pillow beneath her head and her beach clothes clung wet and cold to her still form.

“You were right bringing her here. Her lungs will take some time to recover,” a woman’s deep lyrical voice said as she covered Alira with a blanket. “We’ll need to get her to a hospital as soon we’re sure her lungs have fully reverted.”

Her tan and muscled companion cast her a worried glance.

“You’re sure she’s ok?” Rion’s concern leaked through his casual demeanor. The woman nodded and let out a long slow whistle.

Kalliste shook her head, her red wavy hair swinging with the movement. “I can’t believe it’s really her! After all these years, she washes up on my beach.”

Tearing her eyes away from the unconscious form before her she fixed her gaze on Rion. “And you!” She rested her hands on her slim hips. “I can’t believe you risked a Word of Power.”

Rion’s face flushed as he rubbed the back of his neck. “You heard that?”

“Of course, I did! Trust me. Anyone from the Breaching within a hundred miles heard that.”

He lowered his voice. “That wasn’t me.” He nodded toward Alira.

Kalliste pursed her red lips as she whistled again.

“So, maybe there’s more memory in that pretty little head than we had reason to hope.”

“Well, she doesn’t remember me, that’s for sure.” Rion’s shoulders slumped and he exhaled through his nose. He lowered his eyes as he studied the unconscious girl before him.

Kalliste laughed long and loud. “Ah! Come on Romeo, give her some time.”

Rion's head jerked up, his brow knit. "Who's Romeo?"

Kalliste stifled a laugh. Ignoring his question, she bent over Alira checking her pulse.

"So, that Mer went after the other girl instead? Pure dumb luck. Vlavi's not going to happy when he hears about this." A smile played on her glistening lips.

"I love it when they're at one another's throats." She threw her wild red hair off of her shoulders. "It keeps them off of ours!"

"It won't take the brothers long to figure this out." Rion cast a long look up and down the beach.

"The good news is that the big boys must still be in the dark." Kalliste's bare feet paced the length of the body before her.

"They don't have either girl yet, so they can't know much." She swished her long colorful skirt as she thought furiously. She turned to Rion. "Ok! So, this is what we're going to do."

Twenty minutes later, Kalliste was driving fast toward the Addison Gilbert Hospital in Gloucester MA, the unconscious Alira Winslow safely tucked in her back seat.

Thankfully, it was an unusually slow day at the ER and the novelty of an unconscious and unidentified girl washing up on one of the local beaches had the staff's full attention. Kalliste sat in the triage room waiting to relay her story to the ER intake nurse.

Well, here goes nothing. Kalliste stood as the nurse entered the room.

“What is the nature of your relationship with the girl?” The nurse looked up at her as she shuffled the papers on her clipboard.

“I don’t know her at all. I was walking on the beach near my house when I noticed something strange in the water. I went to investigate and that’s when I saw her.” Kalliste wrung her hands for effect.

“I almost started screaming because I thought she was dead. You know, it was quite a shock.” Kalliste added a convincing quiver to her voice.

This is definitely Oscar worthy.

“I pulled her out of the water and that’s when I noticed she was still breathing. I was so relieved.”

Kalliste paused for emotional effect. “I couldn’t revive her though, so I brought her directly to the hospital. I didn’t have my phone with me, or I would’ve called an ambulance.”

The nurse nodded and bustled away, but by the time the third nurse has asked her the same questions, Kalliste quickly tired of the whole affair. Her eyes darted toward the door and she began plotting her escape. When the nurse was momentarily called away, Kalliste lightly touched the heart necklace around her neck, brushed her lips and blew a silent kiss to the unconscious Alira. She then slipped out the door and slid safely back into anonymity.

At the exact same moment, in another room down the hall to the right, the unconscious and unidentified girl, began to stir. Bright lights pierced through the hovering fog that had settled on Alira’s brain. She woke up from the worst and most bizarre dream she had ever had.

She cracked open her eyes and tried to take a deep breath. “Ugh.” Alira groaned. Breathing hurt. Her head ached. Her muscles had turned to mush.

Alira’s confusion compounded rapidly as she took in the white sterile room and the hard bed. Her whole body was shivering beneath countless blankets in a strange room, with strange smells, surrounded by strange people.

Seeing movement from the bed, a nurse crossed the room, eyes intent on the stirring Alira.

“Well, hello dear.” The nurse’s expert eyes took stock of her patient. “How are you feeling?”

Still dazed, Alira wasn’t exactly sure how to respond. She blinked her eyes both at the bright light and at the unfamiliar woman standing over her. Alira opened her mouth to answer but her throat felt thick, swollen and raw.

“Do you know your name, dear?”

Alira winced as she cleared her throat. “Alira, Alira Winslow.” Her voice sounded strange to her ears, hoarse and raspy.

The nurse scurried for a pen and some paper on the counter. “Can you remember your address or phone number?”

Alira nodded and with her voice cracking and strained she supplied both for the scribbling nurse.

“I’m going to go call your parents, dear. They must be worried sick about you. I’ll be right back.” Before Alira could ask her where she was or how she happened to be there, the nurse bustled out.

Alira sagged back against the pillows, glad to be alone. *What's the last thing I remember? Ugh.* She blinked her eyes in the neon lights. *What happened to me?* She willed her sluggish brain to comply. *A dolphin! I remember a dolphin!* Her muscles screamed as she tried to sit up. *And, water!* Her hand reached up touching her damp hair. *I was in the water!*

Remembering the water brought it all tumbling back: Genna and the sharks, the lame-vampire-slash-mystery-boy, the dolphins and... An involuntary shudder coursed through her. What was that creature? She shook her head, bleary eyes taking in the white room. *How did I get here?*

Just then the nurse came hurrying back in the room. "My, oh, my, was your mother ever glad to hear you were here! She's worried sick." She smiled a grandmotherly smile. "She'll be here shortly."

"Can I go home then?" Alira looked up hopefully.

The nurse scribbled furiously on her clipboard. "I'm not sure what the doctor will say to that. He may want to keep you overnight for observation."

Seeing the dismay on Alira's face, she chuckled. "Don't worry, darling. We'll take good care of you! I promise!"

With an encouraging nod, the nurse was off again.

Alira's head fell back on the pillow as she tried to make sense of the day's events. The next thing she knew her mom was stroking her hair, her eyes red and puffy, tears still flowing down her cheeks.

Alira winced as she tried to raise herself up on her bed.

"Oh, Alira, I thought I'd lost you." Her face wet with tears, Megan hugged her daughter.

Alarmed Alira blurted, “No, mom, I’m ok! Really! Don’t cry! Alira had never seen her mother like this and it completely unnerved her.

“Do you know what happened? Genna said . . .” Megan began, but got no further.

Alira lurched forward almost falling out of bed. “Genna? Is Genna alright?”

“Yes, yes, honey, she’s fine. I hear you’re quite the hero.”

“A hero?” Alira almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of it.

Her mother’s voice choked with emotion. “I’m so proud of you, honey. You are the most precious gift I could ever have. You’ve no idea how much I love you.”

Just then the doctor came in to make arrangements for Alira to spend the night. The doctor and her mother spoke in hushed tones in the corner of the room. She overheard words like ‘ordeal’, ‘oxygen deprivation,’ and ‘hallucination.’ Finally, Alira stopped listening. She just kept turning her mother’s words over and over in her mind. As her drowsy mind closed that closet door, she lingered over one thought. *Maybe being adopted doesn’t matter all that much after all.*

CHAPTER SIX

Alira tossed and turned in her hospital bed. Despite her fatigue, she kept replaying the previous day’s events trying to make sense of them. She longed to talk with Genna to see what she remembered. The greatest barrier to her sleep, however, was the hospital staff themselves.

Honestly, why did the doctors make me stay? Alira bristled at the well-meaning nurse as she woke her up for the third time that night coming to take her vitals. *It*

certainly wasn't for any rest. She grumbled as she turned over in search of a comfortable position.

Just before dawn, Alira stirred awake expecting to see her night nurse fussing with her monitors. As she opened her eyes, however, there was no nurse. Her room was dark and quiet but she could feel an unseen presence watching her. Alira's grogginess dissipated as her pulse quickened.

Just then a figure emerged from the shadows gathered in the corner of her room.

"Shhh..." a male voice whispered, "I'm a friend."

Adrenaline swept through her as she fumbled unsuccessfully for the nurse's call button.

"Who are you?" Her voice rose to an alarming pitch and echoed in the quiet room.

"Shh, Alira! It's Rion. I don't think we've met yet, but I saw you yesterday." His words tumbled out in a rush as he kept an eye on the door.

"Rion?" Alira blurted. "What are you doing here?"

Alira had a lot of other questions she might have remembered if she hadn't just awakened from a sound sleep and if her body wasn't completely stressed from her terror of the day before and if adrenaline wasn't pumping through her veins like water through a fire hose.

"Is this a dream?"

The beautiful boy before her just stood there with his mouth open. "No. No, this is definitely not a dream, unless we're both dreaming."

His voice came in a whisper as he moved out of the shadows and closer to Alira's bed. "I just needed to make sure you were ok." His face flushed. "I never meant to wake you."

Suddenly self-conscious, Alira smoothed her ruffled hair and took a deep breath. "That was um, nice of you, but you could have come during regular visiting hours. How did you get in here anyway?" Alira peered at him in the growing light.

Rion threw her a conspiratorial look and whispered, "Very carefully."

An awkward silence enveloped the room. Dozens of images flashed through Alira's brain in that quiet moment: Genna and the sharks, paddling furiously through the water, a very weird riptide, a terrifying underwater creature who talked, a dolphin, and Rion, this boy right here in her hospital room, holding her hand under water.

Shaking her head to clear her mind Alira finally broke the silence. "What happened yesterday?"

Rion locked eyes with her. "What do you remember?"

"Now that's a clear dodge." Alira snapped, irritated.

"Not a dodge, I just need to know what you remember." Alira frowned, he seemed to mean more than just the shark attack.

"I remember some pretty weird shit, but now that you're here I'd guess that not all of them were induced by oxygen deprivation." She glared at him, suspicious. "So, spill it, I need to know if I am crazy or not. Tell me what happened!"

Startled, Rion glanced at the door, grabbed her hand and whispered, "All I can tell you is that you're not crazy. You need to trust me on that. If I were you, I'd be careful who you tell what."

Rion's eyes darted toward the door again. "A nurse is coming now and I have to disappear. I'll see you again soon. I promise."

Before Alira could form the phrase, 'Don't you dare,' she heard the door latch turn. Rion melted into the shadows as a different nurse lumbered into the room.

"Almost morning." She smiled as she fussed with her monitors. "Did you have a bad dream, dear? I thought I heard you call out in your sleep."

"I must have. I don't remember." Alira yawned playing the groggy patient.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Orange juice would be great." She said aloud while internally she had a completely different request. *How about a tall tan blonde who talks to dolphins?* Alira frowned as she nestled back under her covers. *Or maybe a nice long visit to the psyche ward.*

"You'd think you stayed in that hospital for weeks. Look at all of these flowers you received." Alira, Genna, and Megan surveyed the boxes on the kitchen counter.

"There's one more out there, girls. Would someone mind grabbing it?" Megan pulled a vase of sunflowers from a large box. "It's in the back seat."

"Got it!" Genna headed out the front door and returned toting a huge lush plant.

After placing the plant on the counter, she glanced at her phone. "I gotta run. It's my brother's birthday and we have a MFT planned today."

Megan raised her eyebrows, throwing both girls a questioning look.

"Oh, MFT- mandatory family thing." Genna grinned at Megan.

“Ah!” Megan threw her a smile.

“I’ll walk you out.” Alira slipped on her shoes and headed for the front door.

“Thanks for coming to the hospital with my mom to bring me home.” Alira slipped her arm through Genna’s as they walked toward the car. “It meant a lot.”

Genna stopped. “I could never thank you enough for... for what you did.” Genna’s voice choked on the last few words.

Genna studied the ground as she worked to regain her composure. In that moment Alira took a good long look at her friend. *She looks five years older. I’ve never seen such bags under her eyes.* Alira stole a glance at her friend’s hands. Nails ragged and raw. She looked away, her throat thick. *Everyone’s been so concerned about me. I can’t believe I forgot about what she went through.* She bit her lip.

Genna then threw her arms around Alira’s neck and whispered. “I’d be so dead without you.”

After an awkward pause, she let go and stepped back. “I’ll see you tonight at Dunks right?”

Alira forced a smile to her lips. “Definitely.”

Alira waved as Genna carefully backed the mustang out of the driveway, but worry crowded her thoughts as Genna’s car disappeared down the street. *I can be such a brat sometimes.* She turned back towards the house. *I wonder what she needs?*

As she walked in the door, Alira heard her phone vibrate. She followed the sound to her beach bag flung on the kitchen bench. Rummaging through it she found her towel, her phone and the rock she had picked up on the beach that day.

She stuffed the rock in her pocket and picked up her phone. The screen said she had missed a call from Dylan. She looked up as Megan finished arranging the last of the flowers in a vase. "I'm so glad Eben thought to grab my stuff."

"You were lucky." Megan whizzed around the kitchen arranging the vases. "In all the chaos at the beach that day, your stuff could've easily been lost."

She turned and fixed her daughter with a knowing look. "Eben seems like such a nice boy. We should have him over for dinner."

Alira rolled her eyes and busied herself listening to Dylan's message.

She turned to her mom. "If it's ok, Dylan, Genna and I are going to get together tonight to observe our yearly mourning for the end of summer."

Megan hesitated, but then nodded. "That's fine, but don't be too late. School's tomorrow and we still have a lot to do to get you ready for Sea-Mester." Alira sighed, but nodded and started to leave the room.

"Oh, Honey?" Megan stopped what she was doing and turned to her. "Were you able to finish that project you have due tomorrow? You know the one with all those photos?"

Alira froze, halfway out the door, cringing at the mention of the pictures still sitting on her desk upstairs.

"Almost, I may need some help from you in order to put all of the pieces together so I can write up the report. Maybe we could talk later? It shouldn't take long."

"I'd be happy to. I'm going to run to the stables to care for the horses. Why don't we chat when I get back?"

Alira's squeezed her eyes shut as her mouth formed a firm line. "Sweet!"

Dread churned in the pit of her stomach as Alira bounded up the stairs to her room. *Come on, this is probably no big deal. It's just one big misunderstanding.* She glanced at the pictures lining the upstairs hall. Smiling family portraits. Years of her school pictures. She shook her head. *Remember the hospital.* She squared her shoulders and moved to face the hall mirror. Her reflection stared back at her.

"I belong here." Her quiet declaration hung in the upstairs hall amidst all of the photos. With one last nod of her head, Alira proceeded down the hall and into her room.

Her project spread across her desk exactly where she'd left it. She grimaced and plopped down on her chair.

"Ow! What the heck..."

She jumped up and fished around in her right pocket. Pulling out the white-flecked rock, she balanced it on her palm for a long moment. *I am a rock.* The words of the song coursed through her mind. She set her jaw. Clutching the rock in her fist, she exhaled a determined sigh and slipped the rock in her desk drawer. The drawer closed with a loud thud.

She was just putting the finishing touches on her summer report when she heard her mom's car in the driveway. Alira buried her head in her hands.

I'm so not ready for this. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed the picture of her parents holding the baby on a boat. *Who are you?* She pushed her chair back from her computer and fixed her eyes on the baby. Where did you come from? A loud sigh escaped her lips. She rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. *I'd rather face the sharks.*

Alira slowly descended the stairs. She took each step one at a time knowing full well that she was approaching a huge turning point. Her mom was sitting at the kitchen table. Bracing herself she entered the kitchen as an all too familiar lump formed in her throat. Megan looked up as she entered.

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright? How is your head?” Her Mom stood to give her a quick hug.

“I’m ok” She sat down at the table. “I’m definitely feeling better today than yesterday.”

“I’m glad.” Megan looked thoughtful. “So, what’s up with this project and how can I help?” Megan put aside the ads and sipped her coffee.

“Well.” Alira nervously played with the photo in her hand. “I had some questions as I was putting together all of the pictures for my collage. The truth is I came across another box in your closet.”

As Alira made this last statement, her mom put down her coffee cup and fixed her attention fully on her daughter.

“I found this picture in a different box.” Her eyes widened and her voice sounded tight to her ears. “A pink box.”

She placed the offending photo in the center of the table. Neither spoke. Children’s voices could be heard fighting over the same coveted swing in an adjacent yard, dogs barked across the street, and a truck labored past the front of the house. The kitchen, however, was dead silent.

Alira thought she might throw up.

Finally, her mom recovered enough to speak. “I don’t know what to say.”

She watched the color rise on her mother’s neck. Alira knew what was next and she desperately wished for someplace to hide from the wrath to come.

Megan’s voice was low. “Just what do you think you were doing snooping in my closet?”

“I wasn’t snooping. I was putting...”

Her mother cut her off, shaking her head.

“Alira. You stuck your nose someplace it didn’t belong.” Megan was standing now, her arms crossed.

Alira’s head was spinning as she watched her Mom as if for the first time. She wasn’t sure what to expect by bringing up the photo, but she was not expecting this.

Her mother’s fists balled at her side. “This day should never have come.”

Alira’s shoulders snapped back, her spine rigid, unyielding. Her mother’s warm words from the hospital washed away in an icy blast of hypocrisy and betrayal.

“You’ve lied to me, my whole life!” Alira’s lower lip quivered as her eyes surveyed the sudden stranger before her.

She stood up and faced her mom, anguish, betrayal and confusion coursing through her. “I am so sorry that I messed up your perfect little life and your perfect little secret, but this is my life, not yours.”

Alira sped toward the door and then spun. She took a long look at the scene before her. Broken relationships were scattered everywhere, pieces of the past she knew and the future she had hoped for lay in shambles as well. She could practically smell the smoke from the burning bridges.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” The choked words came out in a whisper.

Alira slung her backpack over her shoulder and looked around one last time. The house was as quiet as a tomb as she closed the front door. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she made her way to Dylan’s.

“OMG! OMG!” Dylan shook his head. “You’re adopted?”

“Shhh! Dylan!” Alira snapped her head around in a panic. “I’m not ready for the whole world to know yet.”

She stared at her folded hands on the table and continued in a whisper. “You’re the first person I’ve told.”

Dylan held his head in his hands. “I’m sorry Alira, but it’s like, a shock, you know.”

“Trust me, I know.”

Dylan sat there staring at Alira, donuts and hot chocolate spread out on the table between them. The Dunkin Donuts wasn’t busy at this hour and the silence hung over their table for a long moment.

Dylan shook his head. “Dah-Rama! No wonder you didn’t want to get out of bed.” Dylan raked his fingers through his hair. “But like, if you’re adopted then anybody could be adopted.” His brow furrowed. Alira could see his mind whirling as his expression rapidly moved from concern to thoughtful to outright hope. “Genna could be adopted or…” his chocolate almond eyes grew round. “I could be adopted.”

Alira threw a piece of donut at him. “Dylan, stop it! You’re not adopted,”

“I don’t know, Ali, my parents have been acting really weird lately.”

Alira just rolled her eyes and sighed, “Not everything is about you, Dylan.”

Dylan flipped his hair and sent her his best grin, “but aren’t most things?”

Just then Genna arrived with more hot chocolate and donuts. “I guess we have enough now!” She plopped down with a bounce beside Dylan.

“What’s up?” She rustled through her donut bag.

Dylan looked excited. “We just found out that we’re both adopted.”

Alira threw the piece of donut she was nibbling at her friend. Genna’s eyes darted between them.

“What are you talking about?” Genna demanded as she bit into a chocolate sprinkled.

Alira looked at Dylan and rolled her eyes again. “I just found out I’m adopted. Dylan here’s just being dumb.”

Dylan scoffed. “Excuse you, hopeful.”

Alira picked up her hot chocolate warningly. “Don’t say that.”

Genna lurched back, her eyes wide. “How do you know for sure?”

Alira relayed the whole story ending with the big fight she and her mom had right before she walked out the door.

“My mom was seething like a live volcano when I left.” Alira’s voice was full of torment she was feeling. “I wouldn’t be surprised if I’m back up for adoption already.”

Genna frowned. “She would never.”

Dylan flicked a glance at Genna. “I dunno. Her mom has always scared me.”

Just then other school friends that Dylan knew came in. Dylan, always the social one, excused himself and the girls finally had a minute alone.

Alira watched Dylan's back retreat across the small shop. "What do you wanna bet that the first thing he tells them is that he's adopted?" She sighed with just a trace of an ironic smile.

Alira turned her attention back to Genna. "I ruined everything. How could I've been so stupid?"

"Ali..." Genna fumbled for the right words. "Parents can be so stupid sometimes."

"Ever since dad died." A lump formed in Alira's throat. She looked away. "I've known something was wrong."

Genna's voice was soft, coaxing. "Your mom loves you. I've seen it."

Alira bit her lower lip, unconvinced.

"Come on, Ali. Of course, she loves you. Everyone loves you."

Would they though? If anyone really knew me? Absently Alira fingered the bits of sprinkles and donut crumbs on the table replaying the scene in the kitchen just hours before. She closed her eyes. Her mom's angry face was painted in living color on the back of her eyelids. Her eyes flashed open.

"Sure. She loves me when I make her look good. She loves me when she can brag about me or show me off as the perfect daughter in her perfect little world."

Alira brushed away the angry tear that escaped down her cheek. "You weren't there, Genna. It's like she turned into a monster or something. I don't know how else to describe it."

Alira paused and lowered her voice. "I just don't think I can ever trust her again."

Genna reached out and took her hand. Alira grasped Genna's hand and held on tight.

"Well, the good news is that you're going to get a definite break to sort things out. Seven days and counting before Sea-mester begins."

Alira shook her head and sat back in the booth. "That came fast."

The weight on Alira's chest felt like it might crush her. She tried to take a breath. Seven days feels like an eternity. *Can I really go away right now with my life in such a mess?*

"One week and we hit the seas." Genna checked the time on her phone. "Ouch. We need to keep unpacking this, but we'd better head home. My alarm is set to go off at six. That's definitely going to be a shock to my system."

At the word home, the full import of the afternoon's events crashed in upon Alira. *Home? Do I even have a home?*

Alira mechanically gathered up all of the bits of uneaten donuts and her untouched hot chocolate and carried it all to the trash. Most of the crowd had thinned out and there were only a few remaining patrons. Dylan had ditched them long ago saying that he had to dash and finish his summer project. The girls were grateful that he had grabbed a ride with other friends.

Lost deep in thought, Alira didn't hear the footsteps approach behind her. Looking up, she saw Genna already outside at her car. Alira quickly swung around and crashed into the man behind her, sending his tray of donuts and hot liquid soaring through the air.

Startled Alira cried, "Oh, I'm so sorry."

Staring back at her was the equally startled face of Darius Sokratous. "Oh no, no. My fault entirely, dear girl."

Darius stooped to wipe up his spilled coffee with the napkins he had in his hand. Looking up, he fixed her with his bright gaze.

Alira's nerves were shot. Suddenly, a floodgate of tears let loose as she looked into the eyes of the stranger that she had just showered in coffee. Something in those tender golden eyes unleashed a sorrow within her so deep that she could hardly breath.

Without a word, she ran out of the shop and into Genna's blue Mustang slamming the door behind her.

Alira wailed, "I just completely lost it on that guy in there. What's wrong with me?"

Genna looked at her distraught friend and then through the window at the man still standing in the middle of the shop, dabbing his shirt with a napkin. "Don't worry." Genna turned the ignition and her car roared to life. "You'll never see him again."

Alira's mind still held the image of those forgiving eyes. The lump in her throat doubled in size. "Not with my luck."

Genna tried to make small talk on the drive home, but Alira just stared out the window. Her whole world was yanked out from under her and she was free falling over a great black abyss.

Alira sat stock still in the passenger seat long after Genna pulled to the curb. The house was dark. The black wrought iron fence surrounding the house cast long shadows into the pools of yellow light collecting on the sidewalk. The shadows lined up like rows of sharp swords warning her away. It looks more like a prison than a home.

"Looks like she went to bed." Genna offered.

"At least something's going my way today."

“I’ll be here at 7:15 sharp.” Alira got out and Genna waved as she pulled away, leaving Alira alone in the dark with her fears and her questions.

She dragged herself up the long driveway. At the door, she stood staring at the colorful welcome mat. It mocked her. She stepped over it. Ever so quietly, Alira turned the front door knob and felt it give way beneath her hand.

Opening the big oak door, she held her breath, listening. The steady tick tock of the grandfather clock in the living room was the only sound to greet her. She exhaled again, relief flooding through her. She tiptoed up the stairs and into her room. Just as she was about to crawl under her covers, clothes and all, she heard a light tapping on her door. Her heart went through the floor and she waited. Finally, after a minute, her doorknob turned and her door cracked open.

She heard her Mom’s voice whisper in the dark. “Honey, are you awake?”

Alira froze in the dark, debate raging within.

If I just stay quiet, maybe she’ll go away. She held her breath and crossed her fingers.

“We don’t have to talk.” Her mom paused. “I have something for you, and I’d love to give you a hug.”

Silence.

Finally, Alira gave in. She reached over and clicked on the lamp by her bed. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the light. Her mom stood in her doorway, a nervous smile on her face and an old pink box in her hands.

“Hi.” She set the box on her desk and turned toward her.

“Alira, I’m so sorry about all of this.” She opened her arms inviting her in for a hug.

Alira hesitated, her lip quivering. A tear made its way down her cheeks as she stiffly sat back down on the bed.

Megan’s arms dropped to her side. “You must be so angry and confused. I don’t blame you one bit.”

After a few minutes, Megan motioned to the pink box on her desk. “I guess I’ve got a lot of explaining to do.” Megan Winslow’s eyes brimmed with something Alira had never seen before. “It was a very sad time for us...when we found you. Even though your dad and I were very much in love, we’d just found out that we couldn’t have children. We took off on our boat and buried ourselves in our work, in some ways trying to escape the pain of it. And then, one day we docked at a busy port in Athens for provisions. When we returned, there you were! No explanation except that hastily scrawled note. We actually had to go back ashore and have someone translate it for us.”

Her mom’s chin dropped to her chest, her hair covering her face. “We were going to tell you when you were old enough, but then when Dad died.” Her words caught in her throat. “I just kept putting it off.” She looked up, her eyes brimming with tears. “I couldn’t take the chance that I might lose you too.”

After a pause, she looked up. “You, Alira Megan Winslow, are my special gift from Greece and you always will be.”

Millions of questions bubbled within but Alira was too exhausted to ask any of them. She wasn’t sure she wanted the answers now anyway. *Greece? I don’t want to be from Greece.* I just want it all to go away.

Long after her mom blew her a kiss, turned out the light and closed the door, Alira sat staring at the pink box. The light of the full moon illuminated it perfectly. Part of her

wanted to throw it out the window, but instead she approached the desk and lifted off the lid. Once again, she carefully removed all of the various layers making sure she hadn't imagined them. She set aside the baby booties, and all of the old photos. As she went to remove the official looking documents, she could see a blue glow emanating from beneath them. Removing the papers, Alira gasped as she uncovered the necklace. The blue center gem was glowing warmly in her darkened room.

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