

Crystal Blue Sky

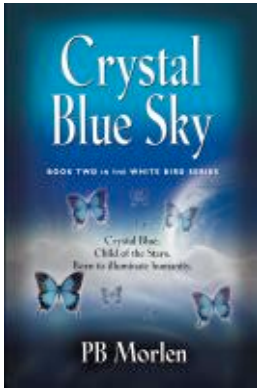
BOOK TWO IN THE WHITE BIRD SERIES



Crystal Blue.
Child of the Stars.
Born to illuminate humanity.



PB Morlen



Crystal Blue has learned her fate and begins the mission she was born to fulfill. With Wyndon and David by her side, she sets out to learn the secrets of the Oglala Lakota, ultimately strengthening her ghost, healing her past, and cleansing her spirit with fire and water. But something happens on an island in the North Pacific, something no one expected: One of her soldiers has fallen and a sacrifice must now be made.

Crystal Blue Sky

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CRYSTAL, FEELING cold and wet, opened her eyes, finding herself crouching down in a wide-open field strewn with lifeless bodies—dark figures darted past her through the snow. The air smelt of smoke and brimstone.

She jumped up and twirled around when a gunshot blasted from behind, gasping and stumbling backwards in the snow when she saw the running boy fall; red blood flowed from his lifeless body. Terror gripped her where she stood. Gunshots rang out and she saw another figure fall, then another. The air around her was ripe with screams and smoke—it was hell on earth.

Bloody Hell! Where was she?

From far away, she heard Wyndon howl long and loud, the howl becoming louder, quickly turning into the bawl of a great bear—its roar reverberating through her soul. She spun around, finding herself face-to-face with the long end of a smoking rifle. Through the smoke, she peered into a pair of wild and frightened eyes gazing down the length of the barrel.

Damn.

Crystal closed her eyes, bracing herself for the tear of the bullet, but the rifle flew out of the young soldier's hands. She opened her eyes and saw a great paw sweeping him aside. Suddenly, she was holding a large shield and felt bullets ricochet off its face.

Crouching down, she hid behind the shield and looked for the bear—even though terror rained down around her, she worried for its safety. And then she saw them standing around her—the ghosts of the fallen, wearing brightly colored shirts emblazoned with images of eagles and buffalo. She heard their singing as they began their dance—the Ghost Dance—the singing, a beautiful mixture of low tones and repetitive, soft staccato-like chants, touched her soul. Their ethereal forms wavered in and out of focus as they danced around her.

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ONE

May the Great Mystery continue to guide and protect the paths of you and your loved ones.

Lakota

The forest was dark and dense with eerie shadows lurking. The air was still, quiet, and heavy. Slowly, she placed her foot in front of the other, hoping not to alert that which had frightened them. The man at her side whisked her behind him when a movement ahead startled him.

“Shh...,” he whispered, continuing to take small, slow steps forward.

She crept behind him, gripping his hand tightly, hoping the scream lodged in her throat would remain there. Glancing behind her, she relaxed when no movement caught her eye, but the forest still unnerved her—it was too quiet.

Moments before, they’d been walking happily along the forest’s star-lit trail, whispering and sighing, until they’d heard the shrill cry of a night bird. For reasons unknown, the strident cry had sent them both into a panic. They felt it was the cry of death, both sensing imminent danger.

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Suddenly, from above, a pair of giant claws extended down, grabbing the man's shoulders, lifting him up off his feet and whisking him away into the night.

The scream she'd struggled to keep down escaped, and her cry rang out through the thick, heavy air. It had happened so suddenly she'd not had a chance to hold on to him. Looking up, she saw a huge black bird carrying his struggling form, and her heart sank when his figure began receding rapidly.

She began running blindly, her eyes glued to the bat-like flying figure. She tripped over exposed roots, cutting her arms and face on low-hanging branches. She ran until she could run no more and finally she collapsed, sobbing onto the ground. Her body quivered and shook, exhaustion overtook her and she slipped away into a numbing darkness.

From behind a tree, a pair of golden eyes watched the sleeping girl, and another pair much more intense, watched from a low branch in a nearby tree. The air began to stir and their eyes looked up to see a beautiful blue dragon with shimmering, iridescent scales slowly descend, landing only inches from the girl's slumbering form. The magnificent creature folded her great wings as she lowered her head to whisper into the girl's ear.

"Crystal Blue," her deep voice grumbled, "Ye musn't worry 'bout yer young man. He'll be all right as he's got his own business t' attend t'. Let him go, lass."

Crystal opened one eye, recoiling slightly at the proximity of the blue dragon's large head.

"'Tis not for ye t' follow him, lass. Ye must rely on yerself t' see yer mission through. If ye keep wantin' him close, ye'll deny him his own quest. Ye are now yer own energy anchor. Trust yerself an' believe in that which ye seek."

She sat up as the dragon spread her giant wings, launching herself gracefully into the air. "D' not let him distract ye," she grumbled before flying up through the trees and into the night sky.

Slowly, the others who'd been watching began emerging from their hiding places. Warily, she watched as they approached, one-by-one, first

acknowledging her with an efficient nod of the head, then heading off into the forest in the direction of the blue dragon.

The wolf's golden eyes gleamed and its silver-gray coat shimmered and shook as it trotted away, and the reddish-brown eagle's feathers ruffled as it took flight. The mountain lions sleek, sinewy muscles rippled underneath its tawny coat as it padded along on large, soft paws, and the blue iguana's small pink tongue flickered from its mouth as it waddled away. The small tufted-eared mouse's whiskers twitched as it scampered alongside the iguana, and the large scorpion's tail curled mightily as it skittered along. The black horse pranced proudly while its white mane and tail flowed gracefully, and the orca whale, whose black and white sides gleamed brightly, floated mysteriously over the forest floor, leaving behind the smell of the sun and the sea.

Unlike the other animals that had disappeared into the forest, a giant bear with a long, shaggy, silvery-brown coat and black eyes—whose great head hung low—remained at Crystal's side, standing so close she could smell its rich, ripe, musky scent. Somehow she was comforted by its presence. She glanced down, eyeing the bear's claws nervously—they were long, black and sharp. Secretly, she hoped she'd never feel them rip her flesh. Crystal shuddered at the thought and startled when the bear snorted and pawed the ground.

She looked up to see the wolf reemerging from the trees. His lips moved as he spoke in a rich, deeply accented voice. "Keep your marks hidden, girl. Trust no one except the dog and the man. You will be tested, make no mistake. We will be watching." Then he and the other animals faded away into the gloom of the dark forest.

As Crystal watched with an open-mouthed stare, wondering what this message could mean, the animal standing beside her nudged her gently. She turned her head and gasped. An enormous black dog with a thick, shaggy coat sat at her side—his presence even more comforting than the bear's.

Suddenly, the ground beneath her heaved violently and she threw her arms around the dog before a strangled scream tore from her throat.



South Dakota
December 28, 2010

THE SMALL airplane heading towards Rapid City, South Dakota, hit another air pocket and bucked, sending the papers lying loosely in her lap to the floor. She let out a startled yelp and jolted awake.

The man sitting next to her swung his head around, peering at his niece over his reading glasses. The plane bucked again.

Crystal pulled off her glasses and rubbed her tired eyes. “Bloody Nora,” she mumbled, rolling her shoulders and stiff neck.

David chuckled. His young niece had been sleeping and the turbulence obviously startled her.

“I give up, David,” Crystal said with a small sigh before replacing her glasses. She bent over, grabbed the few papers scattered in the aisle and began putting them back in order. “I’m getting bloody ill trying to read in this blasted airplane. Damn turbulence,” she mumbled through a yawn. “Anyway, I keep falling asleep. I can’t seem to keep my eyes open. I’m not reading anymore,” she huffed. Crystal leaned her head back, closed her eyes and groaned when the plane shimmied through some turbulence.

David smiled at his lovely niece whose long black dreadlocks sported numerous blue streaks. She’d bound her luxurious locks back with a bright red band and tied a multi-colored scarf around her neck which covered her newly-acquired serpentine tattoo. He thought she looked tired and a bit pale, and his heart softened. She’d had a rough few days.

He glanced at his watch—she’d only been asleep five, maybe ten minutes—then he glanced down at the pages lying loosely in her lap. She’d read through at least three, maybe four pages of his notes before her head had fallen slowly forward. He’d insisted she start reading the deciphered pages the moment they’d found their seats

on the small plane, and even though she was obviously distressed over the turbulence, she'd made a valiant attempt.

David pulled off his reading glasses and rubbed his own tired eyes before gazing sightlessly out the window, remembering how Crystal had come down the stairs early that morning, bags packed and looking...well looking absolutely radiant. The monster-sized black dog, Wyndon—who'd claimed her as his less than eighteen hours before—had followed her down the stairs and stood at her side: smiling. What a colorful pair they'd made: She, tall and elegant, with her long dark hair bound artfully back in the red band, and the dog sporting a fancy blue wool scarf around his neck—it appeared the dog felt rather proud of it. They were like a pair of well-matched bookends.

Standing before him, looking well-rested and clear-eyed, she'd smiled and asked sweetly, "So, David, what time do we leave?" No other questions were asked. He'd wondered if she would ask about the strange tattoo on her neck or the dog. Apparently, she'd forgotten everything from the previous day and night. She didn't ask about her grandmother, Madelynn, or her sister, Claire, who at that moment had been cloistered inside his library. She'd leisurely strolled down the stairs acting like nothing unusual had happened in the last few days. Obviously, she didn't remember, or if she had, she didn't want to talk about it, so he'd let it go, but she *had* insisted that the dog accompany them. He wondered how the giant animal was getting along in his transport crate in the cargo hold of the airplane.

A thread of envy began creeping in when he realized Crystal didn't know she'd forgotten a few hours of her life. He, on the other hand, had struggled with memory loss for so long it was now a part of him and he wouldn't wish it upon anyone.

He sighed deeply, still grappling with the fact that his deceased mother, Josephine, had a twin sister: Crystal's grandmother, Madelynn, who he was re-acquainted with after she and her friends stole into his home two nights ago. After the accident that had

claimed his parent's life and placed him in the hospital with a serious case of amnesia seventeen years ago, she, like many things, had been erased from his memory.

He shook his head, remembering his surprise at find her sitting on the floor with Crystal's head in her lap. He dragged his hand over his face, remembering how at first he'd thought she was his mother. He'd then learned that Madelynn had supposedly saved Crystal from being strangled to death by a monster-sized snake. Hell, he'd slept through the attack.

How the hell had he slept through something like that?

He shuddered, remembering the shadow that had crept over Crystal's lifeless form before a great wind had torn into and destroyed his living room. It happened only yesterday, but felt a lifetime away. Of course, he was grateful that Crystal had survived the mysterious attack, but at present, he was concerned about her memory loss. After all, he'd only just convinced her of the role she was to play in the upcoming months. He was also struggling with the fact that he had a twin brother and a sister-in-law who were supposedly lost somewhere: Elijah and Elizabeth, Crystal and Claire's mother and father.

He looked over and studied Crystal's profile. The overhead light bathed her face in its soft glow, and once again, he was charmed by the light spray of freckles over her nose and cheekbones, impressed by the length of her dark lashes now sweeping gently down over closed eyes. He smiled when her nose twitched, making the bright green gem on her nose sparkle in the light, grinning wider when she grumbled in her sleep, but his smile quickly faded when he began wondering if she had any inkling of her abilities. Probably not, he supposed. Not yet anyway, not until her memories returned.

She might have forgotten, but his memory of that night served him quite well. He knew they were part of something that would most likely go down in the history books: The books studied by scholars, scientists, mathematicians, story-tellers, physicists; basically

anyone who paid attention to the fact that the world was undergoing an intense shift never experienced before in the history of humanity. One in which Crystal was born to assist with.

He shook his head, remembering the strange encounters in the airport a few hours earlier. Obviously others could sense her divine qualities. Making their way through the airport, most people had ignored them, being too wrapped up in their own lives, hurrying through the terminal's walkways with unseeing eyes, chatting away on their cell phones, but a few stopped and stared with their mouths dropped.

A man who'd been walking toward them while they waited in the check-in line had stopped, dropped his briefcase with obvious surprise and stared. David thought it might be Crystal's hair—it was pretty spectacular—but the man continued to stare open-mouthed at Crystal until jostled by a group of excited teenagers on holiday. Then, he had shaken his head, looked around, picked up his bag and walked away. David noticed this, but Crystal hadn't. She'd been chewing her lip, twirling her hair, and madly thumbing through music on her new iPod, all the while mumbling under her breath about, *bloody rules insisting dogs travel with the luggage*.

A little while later, after they'd checked their bags and passed through security, a young girl had pulled from her mother's hand, ran over and planted herself in front of Crystal, staring wide-eyed in wonder like she was looking at the most beautiful thing in the world. This time Crystal had noticed but looked over her shoulder thinking the girl was staring at someone or something else. The girl's mother had grabbed the young girl by the shoulders, steering her away with harsh admonishments about kidnappers and strangers. The young girl kept staring at Crystal over her shoulder until she'd disappeared into the crowd.

Two more times these phenomena happened before they'd boarded the plane. An older woman had taken Crystal's hand,

gripping it tightly saying, *thank you, thank you*, over and over until a young man had lead her away.

Crystal had glanced at David, shrugging her shoulders. "Minnesotans are awfully nice, aren't they?" she'd said with a quick, casual smile before flipping a heavy lock of hair over her shoulder, settling into her seat and pulling up her knees, popping in her ear buds, then opening up a slim book.

The last encounter was with an airport employee, a young man who drove the shuttle carts through the airport for those needing assistance. David made sure to keep an eye on Crystal when she made her way to the restroom as people were acting oddly around her. When she headed back, the young man drove the cart to her side, insisting that he drive her rest of the way. David had laughed at Crystal's perplexed expression as they were only twenty or thirty feet away. When the cart pulled up behind their row of chairs, the man helped Crystal out of the cart like she was the queen herself. Crystal had thanked him, returning his wave before he drove away.

DAVID GLANCED at the papers in Crystal's lap, remembering how the manuscript spoke of *The Shaman*. This was the part of the decoded manuscript that he had wanted Crystal to read. It was important she knew a little bit about this particular person's role in their community when they met with the Lakota shaman. He hoped his explanation would be sufficient.

Carefully, he lifted the papers off Crystal's lap and quickly found where she'd left off. Then he nudged her awake and she yelped, jumping in her seat, her startled eyes blinking into his surprised face.

"Bloody hell, David, what?" she asked irritably, rubbing her neck.

"You okay? Is your neck sore?"

Crystal dropped her hand and narrowed her eyes. "My neck is fine." She ignored him for a moment then gave him a quick, apologetic smile. "Sorry 'bout that. I didn't mean to bite your head

off. You just startled me." She wrinkled her nose when she saw the papers. "I'm not reading those."

"No, no, you've read enough. I just want to make sure that you understand the role of the shaman within a community."

Crystal smiled. "Okay, you read, I'll listen."

"All right, let me see." David smiled at Crystal who twirled a lock of blue hair. "You just read what a shaman is and what they do, right?"

She nodded her head.

"Can you explain it to me, Crystal?"

"Sure." She worked her bottom lip with her teeth. "Um, the shaman works within a community as its healer and its spiritual advisor. They can communicate with the spirit world on behalf of their community and often treat sickness caused by evil spirits. And, they believe that everything is connected and there needs to be balance."

"Good, that's a start. I'll tell you what I know of shamanism and you can read the rest of this later, how's that?"

"Fine." She was grateful that she could rest her eyes, besides her neck had started aching again.

"Would you like anything to drink, dear?" Crystal heard the pleasant voice ask. She opened one eye, smiled and politely shook her head.

"Coffee, black," David said, smiling at the attractive flight attendant before reaching over, taking the cup of hot coffee off the small tray.

"The shaman practices the art of shamanism which is thought to be the oldest form of spiritual practice," he began after taking a sip of his coffee. "They work within a community as its healer and its spiritual advisor."

"The shaman understands the connection and need for balance amongst all things. They believe that all aspects of the world that

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humans share with the rest of creation is alive: the animals, plants, rocks, and even the wind.

“The shaman believes that all objects in the physical world have a "spirit." It is the spirit that is the source of power. Shamans communicate with the spirit of both living and non-living things; although they don't really believe that anything is non-living. Through this communication, they gain an understanding of the world around them, and the more you learn, the more power you have to draw from.

“Shamans also have the ability to see a spirit body. This spirit body can be seen surrounding people like brightly colored flames or heat waves. The spirit body normally extends around people anywhere from eighteen inches to about three feet and responds to how people feel and what they are thinking. Brighter colors have higher vibrations and darker, duller ones have lower vibrations. Some believe the size of a spirit body equates to how much power a person has. Basically it is an aura by another name.”

“That's pretty cool,” Crystal said. “I mean, being able to see colors around people, talking to animals and rocks and stuff.”

“Well, they don't actually talk to them. It's more like silent communication. Anyway, the art of shamanism is dying and dying rapidly. Many cultures are losing their shamans due to various reasons: most notably they're losing their natural resources, places where the shamans can gather herbs for treating sicknesses, or their waters are becoming polluted.

“Many indigenous people's ancient practices have been looked upon as witchcraft or sorcery and their community's shamans have been either killed, imprisoned or both. They carry an ancient sacred knowledge that *'the powers that be'*,” he said, making quotation signs, “have been trying to keep secret for hundreds of years. This has been happening since Christianity and colonization first started to find its way around the world. Most shamans, if not all, are considered

pagan, and their beliefs and practices have been all but wiped out in the modern age.

“Many indigenous tribes have been brutally oppressed and some exterminated. The shamans, the keepers of the sacred knowledge, were, and still are in some places, the first to be killed.”

They sat for a moment in silence.

“About eight years ago, I traveled to Bolivia and stayed in a very small village high up in the mountains,” David said. “I met a shaman, a wonderful medicine man. His village called him the *Kallawaya*. I didn’t want to leave. I fell in love with the Andes and someday I hope to return.”

“Bolivia. Where is that again?” Crystal asked.

“It’s a country in South America next to Brazil and Peru. I was on the western side of the country high in the Andes Mountains. There is no air in this world that is more pure or no night sky as clear.”

“Sounds wonderful.” Crystal smiled wistfully. “I hope you go back someday, David.”

Suddenly, there was a loud ‘bang’ and Crystal felt a blast of very cold air rushing past her feet from the front to the back of the plane. Immediately, oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling, and the plane began descending at a rapid rate, sending the cup of coffee on David’s tray and the papers on her lap to the floor.

“Jaypers!” Crystal yelled as the plane continued to drop, stealing her breath and causing her ears to pop painfully. Her heart hammered so hard she feared it might burst from her chest. In slow motion, she grabbed for her swinging mask before turning her head to find David, sitting frozen, terrified and unable to move. She quickly put on her mask and reached up, grabbing his mask and throwing it over his head, all in a matter of seconds. Then she leaned back into her seat.

Damn.

Thump, thump, thump, went her heart. She drew in a ragged breath as blood pounded in her ears, her mouth feeling dry as

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sandpaper as sweat poured down her back. She gripped the armrests, preparing for impact.

Suddenly, the surprised passengers heard a panicked voice crackle through the speakers: "Mayday! Mayday! We are making an emergency descent due to loss of cabin pressure! Mayday! Mayday! We are...."

Abruptly, the captain's voice was cut off throwing the cabin into an eerie silence, save for a few babies and children crying. Softly, from behind, a voice began reciting "The Lord's Prayer." "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name...." The sounds around her were muffled, as if she were under water.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

She turned her head, catching the frightened eyes of the young man across the aisle clutching his iPad tightly to his chest.

She swiveled her head back around and peered at David. He was white as a sheet. Then she remembered her dog. Wyndon! He was down there all alone! It was her fault that he would die! She'd insisted he come along. Tears poured down her cheeks and grief punched a hole in her heart.

"Oh, Wyndon," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry. Please," she whispered through her tears as the plane fell from the sky, "please, don't let us die."

DOWN BELOW in the cargo hold, the huge black dog shivered in his crate, his big head resting on his paws. His crate had skittered across the floor and was lying on its side, wedged between two large boxes. The falling sensation he now felt was familiar, reminding him of something from his past he'd long forgotten. He closed his eyes. Memories of another life flashed before him and he whined softly. It all began with a woman, small and wicked, with perfect white teeth. He whined again, remembering the hideous creature that had killed his brother and the events that had changed his life forever.

TWO

*A dimple on the chin, a devil within.
A Gaelic Proverb*

*City of Jiroft
Kerman Province, Iran
December, 1960*

The brothers of Aryan descent walked side-by-side down the narrow street of the crowded city. They did not see the old woman who watched them rub her pale, gnarly hands together. And then, in the blink of an eye, she vanished.

The brothers, heads bent together in conversation, hadn't seen the disturbing form slink out of the cemetery a few moments before that now glided silently behind them. Its dreaded form shifted at an awkward gait along the ground, keeping tight to the outer walls of buildings so as not to be detected by the unsuspecting pair.

Yesterday, Wyndon, the younger and taller of the two Fèrdôsë brothers, had declared they would no longer wear the gray and red uniform of the Secret Police. He was tired of the fear the uniform evoked from his countrymen, his heart wasn't in it anymore and they had agreed to exile themselves from the group only three days

before. Even though the brothers were members of the Shah's Secret Police, they had often found themselves hopelessly hungry and desperate to remove themselves from the merciless group.

The two men varied in appearance: The younger one, very tall and muscular with long, black shaggy hair and startling blue eyes, the older brother, Amin was short, trim, and tidy, wearing a bright white turban. Their outer appearance varied, but their inner workings were quite similar. After all, they were brothers and they were both hungry.

"I have not eaten since yesterday." Wyndon rubbed his stomach. "It is unfortunate that I almost stole a mango from the fruit stand. That is how desperate I am."

"Wyndon, it is good that you did not attempt to steal the fruit." Amin nodded his head. "You know the penalty for theft. You no longer wear your uniform for protection and you need both of your hands."

Wyndon scowled and clenched his fist, the other gripping the hilt of his belted scimitar. "I would not have been caught. I am fast and I am strong so do not underestimate me brother. It was not for that reason that I hesitated. The fruit was rotten."

"Ah, well then it is good that you did not steal it. It would have been a tragedy if the price you would have to pay for a piece of rotten fruit would be the loss of your hand. If you are so intent on stealing, maybe you should steal from someone who could afford the loss, eh brother? It would not do our neighbors any good if you stole from them."

Wyndon shrugged his shoulders and reticently agreed: He should not steal from his neighbors, Allah would not approve.

As the two men walked deeper into the city, the streets narrowed into alleys where beggars cried for mercy. Their huddled forms lined the dark street and their hungry eyes stared out of gaunt faces in hooded robes—they dared not bother the men who carried the

curved sabers. Wyndon cringed, hoping their desperate situation would not have them joining these poor, pathetic souls anytime soon.

As they neared a double set of doors—one amongst many—the loud pronouncement from the mosque began calling out the mystical and powerful *adhān*: the Islamic call to prayer. Wyndon's neck hairs rose: They should be on their knees in supplication, not wandering down dark alleyways.

Amin pushed one door open and the pair entered not knowing what they would find.

"This is where she said we should wait," Amin whispered. "She instructed us to wait here until she arrived. She will then tell us what we are to do. She promised me it would be honest work, and work that will pay well."

"Let us hope she comes soon." Wyndon's eyes darted furtively around the empty room. "I do not like being cooped up in this small space when I do not know what is on the other side of these walls. I do not want a night creature to come upon us and suck out our blood."

Amin agreed with a brisk nod of his head. They had both feared vampire-like creatures all their lives. They knew they were myth, but they had put great energy into staying away from them

Unbeknownst to the brothers, the dark form that had followed them crept unnoticed into the stale smelling room, curling up in a corner and waiting until she came to give instructions. Its hooded, red eyes gazed unseeingly towards the door as it waited for its gift.

Wyndon shifted uncomfortably, sensing something ominous approach, gripping his scimitar tightly as he and his brother went back to back. Amin had felt the same threat and his weapon was already drawn.

Slowly, the door opened, and what entered took the brother's breaths away: a woman, fairy-like in appearance, drifted in through the doors and stood in front of the pair. Her golden, waist-length hair danced around her tiny form and her green eyes sparkled from her

angelic face. Both men were thoroughly entranced as she appraised them slowly. She reminded them of the *peri*: The mythical, fallen angels who appeared as fairies.

"Ah, splendid creatures," she purred as she circled them. "And brave ones who carry their blades well." A tiny, pointed tongue darted out of her mouth to lick her delicate pink lips.

Wyndon snapped out of his trance, thrusting his chin at the tiny woman. "What is it that you offer?"

Her smile set off a pair of exquisite dimples. "Did your brother not tell you?"

Wyndon eyed her warily; feeling trapped as the stale air in the room was becoming quite heavy, setting his nerves on edge. He turned his head to see his brother's face, surprised to find Amin still staring at the mysterious creature with the flowing hair. Wyndon jabbed him with his elbow, trying to snap his brother out of his spell, but Amin's wide-eyed gaze remained fixed on the woman.

"No," he turned his attention back to the tiny woman, "he did not tell me what you offer," he said flatly. "Tell us now, or be on your way."

Her twinkly laugh danced through the dark room and the hairs on the back of Wyndon's neck stood up. This female creature had his hackles up and he was becoming very nervous.

"Brother," he said loudly, grabbing Amin's arm. "Look at me." He grabbed his brother's chin, turning his face towards him, and stumbled backwards. Fear gripped him at what he saw: two red eyes gazed out of Amin's stony and very pale face.

He whirled around, facing the tiny woman. "What have you done to my brother?" he bellowed.

She laughed again and folded her hands in front of her demurely. "I have not done anything. It must have been the *vetala* in the corner there." She motioned with her chin. "He's been following you two for quite some time."

Vetala!?

Wyndon's eyes flew to the dark form huddled on the floor in the corner.

His terrified heart slammed in his chest and blood rushed to his head so fast his ears hurt. They were not real! It was what he feared the most! His hands shook and he began to sweat as the creature unfolded itself and stood. At once the back of his shirt was soaked with perspiration and his knees started to give way.

No, I must stay strong for my brother! Pull yourself together man!

"What is it you want?" he said in a low voice shaking with anger and fear.

"I see that you are very intelligent," she said lightly. "For your brother's life, an agreement you must make. The vetala will not harm him if you do what I say. If I were you, I would decide most quickly as your brother begins to wane."

Wyndon looked at his brother. Amin's skin was becoming paler and his cheeks had begun to sink in.

"He waits for my command." The dainty woman once again motioned to the demonic creature.

Fearfully, Wyndon eyed the corpse whose body had the markings of the vetala: its feet and hands were pointing backwards. He knew his brother would soon be joining this demon in the twilight zone—the existence between life and the after-life—if he didn't act quickly.

"What is it you want, sorceress?" He asked the woman, now knowing what she was: A conjurer, magi, or sorceress. They were the only ones who could capture the vetala, making them slaves to do their bidding.

"You two must accompany me as soldiers of the Secret Police to help me gain entrance into your country. I have traveled with my students who are now being detained at gun-point. I find it very inconvenient, so if you do as I request, then your brother will remain unharmed. If you refuse, his soul will be lost forever."

How could he refuse? “Do you know what you ask?” Wyndon knew that if he and his brother were seen in the uniforms they had discarded they would be shot on sight.

“I know what it is I ask. I also know that if you do not answer me in one second, I will instruct my demon to rip your brother into shreds.” She smiled daintily, showing off perfect white teeth.

“Have your demon release him at once and we will do as you ask.” Wyndon growled.

The sorceress’s tiny hands moved quickly, silently instructing the vetala to release the small man from its death-like hold.

At once, Amin sagged against Wyndon. He shook his head, setting his turban at an odd angle.

Wyndon stood tall and strong, allowing his brother a few moments to compose himself. Amin was proud and would not appreciate any aid. He knew his brother had composed himself when he heard him speak.

“Who are you and what do you want?”

The woman gathered her cloak, drew up its hood and headed out the door. “Get dressed and come with me.”

Get dressed? There on the floor at their feet were their dreaded uniforms of the Secret Police.

“Wyndon?” Amin’s worried eyes turned towards his brother.

“Do as she says,” he growled. “We will wear them one last time, brother. And then as Allah is witness, they will be burned.”

AS THE group approached a dusty old jeep parked at the end of the alleyway, they passed countless huddled forms lining the narrow lane. The ragged forms hid behind each other as the small band made their way down the lane—they’d sensed an evil presence with a nasty stench and whether it was the small woman, one of the soldiers or the cloaked form with the odd gait that followed along behind, they did not know.

"Where are we going?" Amin sat in the front seat of the jeep and Wyndon slid behind the wheel. "And who is it that who sits in the back with the woman? His presence is most upsetting."

If you only knew. "We have been hired to assist this woman and her students who are being held at a base just outside of the city near the airport. We will instruct them to be released, and then we will be paid."

Amin tilted his head, staring at his brother oddly. "You know that we will be killed for our act of treason. Her payment, will that save our lives?"

"You will be sufficiently rewarded." The woman glared at the back of his head. He dared not look at her, fearing if he would be sucked into her magic like before.

Wyndon drove out of the crowded city, west towards the airport, the woman instructing him to drive to the base where her students were being detained.

Soon, the jeep pulled up to a one-story brick building with small, barred windows. An armed guard stood at the front door, ignoring them as they approached.

"Let us pass," Wyndon growled. Without blinking, the guard stepped to the side and they entered the building; the ghoulish looking form in the cloak remaining in the jeep.

The guard's skin crawled as he observed the still form: It reminded him of a night creature his grandmother had told him of, a creature he'd hoped never to meet.

Inside, another door was attended by another armed guard standing at full attention. He eyed Wyndon and Amin in their uniforms and immediately lowered his rifle, taking the stance of a soldier at-ease: They out-ranked him by a mile. Inside the small room, a group of tired young students—five women and seven men—were sitting huddled close together. Their faces brightened when their professor entered the room.

“We’ll take them from here.” Wyndon glared at the guard. “They will come with us.” The guard nodded his head, allowing the group to leave and the small woman led them all to an old bus.

Wyndon eyed the woman warily; her appearance had completely changed. When they’d stepped out of the jeep she’d been the beautiful tiny woman, but before she’d entered the building, in the blink of an eye, she’d changed into a prim old woman with a tiny pair of spectacles perched on the end of her nose. He shook his head, wondering if the old woman wearing the long gray skirt, starched white blouse and black hijab wasn’t someone other than their captor. When she looked at him—before he’d given the guard his instructions—he’d seen the same look in her eye they’d seen back in the city: madness.

She handed Wyndon a well-used map. “You will drive us to an area near the Halil Rood River. Here are the directions, follow them carefully.” Her students looked at her in wonder. They had no idea she spoke the Farsi language.

Wyndon knew the area they were to travel well. He and his brother grew up in a small village near the Halil River and the distance was not far, however, it would take them a long time as the road was old and not well traveled. Why the crazy old bat would want to go there, he hadn’t a clue. There was nothing out there but lots of sand and lots of water. He also knew he had no choice but to comply. He slid into the seat behind the large steering wheel of the old bus and waited for his next set of instructions while wondering what happened to the strange creature that had accompanied them from the city—he’d disappeared.

Amin sat behind his brother, seeing his scowl. Unlike his brother—who was notably agitated as he kept throwing angry glances toward the old woman—he was actually looking forward to getting out of the city and earning a little extra money.

As the bus made its way southwest towards the river, Wyndon heard one of the men call the woman ‘Dr. Merovingian’. Ah, so that

is her name, he thought. It is good to know the name of the person who is to pay us. He was grateful for the hours Amin had spent studying the English language at his academy. He hoped he was paying attention to what they were saying.

"I thought we were going to Kerman University." One of the young male students claimed loudly.

"That is true, Luis." The old woman nodded her head. "Since we are so close and we have our own driver now, I thought it would be pertinent to our research if we visited this special area first. We are very close to where some claim civilization began." She bristled with excitement.

One young man's eyes brightened. "Ah, excellent. Yes, I have heard that, but don't we need permission? After all, it is not our country, and we can't just go off exploring."

She peered over his spectacles. "I assure you, Levi, I know what I am doing. Can you not see that we have our own Iranian guides? No less, soldiers of the Shah's Secret Police? They will serve us well if we are questioned. They work for me and will do as I say."

All eyes turned to the brothers sitting quietly in the front seats. Amin smiled and nodded his head; Wyndon's scowl only deepened.

"What are we looking for, professor?"

She smiled at the petite young woman with the beautiful soft-brown skin, high cheek bones, and wide-set eyes. "The area we travel to, Daisy, is where a certain discovery has been made. I wanted to check this out for myself, see if it is authentic."

"Vot kind of discovery?" Luis asked quietly.

She smiled a secret little smile. "I do not want to spoil the surprise, Luis. I promise you though, that you will not be disappointed. I can tell you that it might prove an Islamic civilization, older than Mesopotamia, may once have existed. If we find this proof, then our research for later projects will be better funded. Therefore, we must investigate."

“Doctor Merovingian, we didn’t sign up for this ye know,” a young woman with long red hair said, her delightful Irish accent covering the accusatory tone in her voice. “I know th’ laws of this land an’ this makes me very nervous. How do we know we can trust them?” She glanced towards the two brothers in the front of the bus.

“Trust me, Miss O’Cuilleain. Do you think I would allow any harm to come to you and your classmates? For goodness sakes, I have gained permission from our department head at the University. Do you think he would have allowed this if he thought we would come to harm?”

The little red head chewed her lip, heading back to the young man with curly blonde hair. She sat down, resting her head on his shoulder.

WHEN THE bus stopped two hours later, Pepper awoke with a jolt and turned to look at Kolie whose head rested against the window in sleep. Pepper nudged her and Kolie awakened with a snort.

“Shhh”, Pepper giggled. “We’re here.”

Wyndon parked the bus close to the cliff wall and he and Amin quietly waited for their next set of instructions. He wished they could drop them off and be on their way, but he wasn’t that naive.

“What’s that *thing*?” He heard one of the girls he’d noticed earlier whisper. She was a beautiful young woman with ebony skin and bright eyes which slanted exotically. He didn’t think he’d ever seen a more beautiful woman, and it had been hard to keep his eyes off of her.

“I don’t know, Pep.” Kolie’s almond-shaped eyes widened. “Whatever it is, I hope it leaves us alone. Look at it, poor thing must have sore feet. Oh, wait a minute,” she whispered, peering out of the window, letting her breath fog the glass as she stared. She gasped, shrinking back into her seat when she realized its feet pointed backwards from the direction it moved in.

Wyndon followed her gaze, looking out the window. Cold tendrils of fear crawled up his spine when he spotted the demonic creature standing off to the side. He looked at his brother whose calm regard indicated he hadn't seen the ghoul.

"Come along, students," Deloria said from her place in the front of the bus. "This won't take long. When we're done, we'll head to Jiroft which isn't very far from here. I have our hotel rooms booked and I've been told it is a very nice hotel.

She glanced at Wyndon, motioning with her head for him to get up. He was to lead the way out of the bus. He walked down the steps and out of the bus as Amin started to rise.

"Please wait for the rest of the group." Deloria said to Amin.

Amin sat back down and patiently waited while everyone got off the bus.

Outside, Wyndon eyed Deloria and the vetala warily.

Suddenly, the door to the bus slammed shut, locking Amin inside. He stared with wide, frightened eyes—he'd seen the vetala!

Deloria, standing primly, stared intently at the cliff wall, ignoring the students and the hysterical little man locked inside the bus.

The students gasped when suddenly, an enormous black dog, the size of a small pony, lumbered out from behind a large boulder and ambled toward Deloria. The dog ignored those who stared at him in fright, sitting down next to her, his blood-red eyes gleaming eerily.

"What is going on, Professor Merovingian?" Marty hugged Daisy close. "Where did he come from?"

"This is, Cerberus."

"Fitting," Luis grumbled.

"Doctor Merovingian?"

The old woman looked at the slight girl with the highest IQ of the group. "What is it, Sandra?"

"Do you mean us harm?"

“Astute as always, Miss Liang, but you will only come to harm if you don’t do as I say.” Her beady eyes flicked towards Luis and Marty suspiciously.

A short, round young man with a thick mustache took a step forward. “Why did you bring us here, professor? What would you have us do?”

“I’m glad someone has a good head on their shoulders.” She smiled at Angel. “I need you all to bear witness to an auspicious event. This will be exciting. You should all be very proud that I have chosen you for this task.

“Cerberus?”

The huge dog padded softly and heavily toward the group of students, gathering them up as a shepherd would gather his flock. Instinctively, they huddled together as the dog continued circling them. When one would try to leave the tight circle, he snapped at them with his great teeth.

Deloria stared at Wyndon who stood next to the bus. The vetala had obviously already started on him—his eyes had glazed over and he’d begun to drool. Holding her arms high over her head, she let out a screech, long and loud.

Wyndon’s hands covered his ears and he began thrashing about, throwing himself at the bus, and then collapsing on the ground, jerking about in what looked like massive convulsions.

Inside the bus, Amin screamed and tried to escape to help his brother, but it was no use, he was locked in tight.

Deloria continued to screech until Wyndon’s form lay still on the ground. Then she walked over to him, and as a puppeteer would, she pulled him up with invisible strings. When he opened his eyes, the little group gasped: The man’s eyes glowed bright red.

“No!” Amin’s hands were bloody and raw from pounding on the windows. He’d slashed at the windows with his scimitar, but the glass wouldn’t break. Everyone in the tight little circle felt the raw emotion coming from the man in the bus, and they took pity on him.

With a quick flick of her hands, Deloria opened the doors of the bus, and Amin scrambled down the stairs, flying toward her, holding his scimitar high above his head.

“What have you done?” Amin cried as he flew at the old woman.

She raised her arms, flinging him backwards into the bus and he crumpled onto the ground, his sword landing a dozen feet away.

She grinned wickedly, looking at her students who stared with horrified expressions. They finally saw her for who she truly was: an evil sorceress.

“Wyndon, Cerberus, follow me.” Deloria walked toward the spot in the cliff wall she spied earlier, leaving the vetala to his gift. She knew what would happen next; it was something even she wouldn’t want to see.

Cerberus nudged the students along and Wyndon plodded lifelessly behind, prodding them with the scimitar he’d robotically removed from his belt. Luis tried to pull out of the group, but Cerberus snapped his jaws, practically taking off his hand. With ferocious and frustrated eyes, he inserted himself back into the group.

When they got to the cliff wall, Deloria stopped and began uttering a string of words no one understood. Suddenly, the wind picked up and sand dervishes began dancing at their feet while small rocks and sand began sliding down the face of the wall. Moments later, a ten-foot high fissure opened, sending a blue light streaming from the opening.

Deloria quickly disappeared into the crack and Cerberus and Wyndon began nudging the students, one-by-one, through the opening. Moments later, a scream of terror rang out near the bus, sending everyone’s hackles up. Abruptly, the scream was cut short and Daisy fainted. Marty gently picked her up gently, carrying her through the large gap in the cliff wall.

“Here,” Deloria thrust a torch at Pepper and Kolie, “I want you to carry these and do not, I repeat, do not try anything.”

The girls blanched at the madness leaping from the old woman's eyes. They couldn't believe this wicked creature had been their formal professor. She'd changed completely: Her once tidy hair was now a stringy mass of gray, frazzling madly about her face. The glasses which had seemed permanently affixed on her nose were now gone, and her mad eyes gleamed. Gone was the prim and proper attire she'd always worn, replaced by a long black cloak covering a rag worn dress that dusted the ground around her feet. A pair of scuffed and worn boots poked from beneath her dress, crunching softly on the dirt path.

Pepper and Kolie's hands shook as they held the torches—their shadowed forms wavering on the close walls of the tunnel as the group passed through. Deloria led the way as they began descending ancient stone steps that hadn't seen human feet in thousands of years. Down, down, down they spiraled along the curved staircase, the air heavy and still. Wyndon and Cerberus brought up the rear, discouraging any chance of escape.

Suddenly, a great wind roared up the staircase, blowing out the flames from the torches, and as fast as the wind began it ceased. Before anyone could take another step, an invisible force picked them up, whisking them down the steps at breakneck speed.

"What's this?" Deloria's mad eyes gleamed as she struggled to free herself from the invisible bonds. "This isn't supposed to happen!" she hissed.

Arms were pinned to sides and feet were held tightly together by an unseen force as they fell faster and faster through the light. Frightened shrieks and surprised grunts bounced off the walls as they fell hundreds upon hundreds of feet down—even the dog, Cerberus, looked frightened as he tumbled through the blue air.

"Just like god damn Alice in the god damn rabbit hole," Luis grumbled as they fell deeper and deeper into the earth.

After what seemed like forever, the group's legs and arms were finally freed, and they stumbled and tripped as they fell onto a dirt

floor. The blue light that had illuminated the tunnel they had fallen through suddenly blinked off, throwing them into total darkness.

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WYNDON LIFTED his head and whined before scrambling to a sitting position. No longer was the plane falling from the sky. He sensed the plane leveling out and he shook his great coat, sending black hair flying everywhere. He worried for his mistress, the one who had called his name and pulled him from his heavy sleep. He wished he could go to her and tell her that everything would be all right, but he'd have to wait. He was a dog after all: A very, very patient dog.

"CRYSTAL." THE voice drifted to her ears through the murky waters and she felt someone rubbing her arm. "Crystal, it's okay. We're okay."

"Are we dead?" she mumbled, turning her head and opening her eyes, staring into David's pale face. Suddenly, her eyes flew open and she sat up. "We're not dead!? What...what happened?"

"Sudden loss of air pressure," he explained. "Crew followed procedure and took the plane down 10,000 feet before leveling off."

"What?" Crystal huffed. "You mean we weren't ever going to crash? Well, why didn't they tell us that? I thought we were going to die, David."

She looked around at the other passengers. Mothers and fathers tended their children then tended each other. The young man across the aisle who'd clutched his iPad now stared sightlessly at the screen. Crystal peeked around behind her curious as to who the voice belonged to that had so calmly recited the prayer. She smiled at the elderly gentleman who, with a shaky hand, drank down his airplane-sized bottle of whisky. He gave her a quick wink as he screwed back



the lid. Crystal leaned back in her seat, watching the attendants rush up and down the aisles, making sure no one had been hurt.

She narrowed her eyes at David suspiciously. "How do you know this, David? Did they say something? Why didn't I hear?"

"They've made their apologies, Crystal. The captain explained what happened. You...you checked out."

"Dude, I did not check out," she said, staring at him pointedly before flicking her eyes away and bending forward to look out the window. "I was concentrating on keeping the plane in the sky."

"Are we almost there?" she asked after a moment, hoping to change the subject. She was ashamed of herself for fainting. She was a bloody coward.

"I don't think I can be in this plane for much longer, David. I'm worried about Wyndon. He's probably scared to death."

David squeezed her hand, feeling awful for freezing up when she'd needed him. Unfortunately, the plane's sudden descent had scared the crap out of him. He'd thought he was made out of tougher stuff. Obviously, he wasn't.

They'd only been in trouble for three, maybe four minutes, but it had felt like a lifetime. He rubbed his face with a shaky hand. That was one of the worst things he'd ever been through. He looked at Crystal. She'd held it together long enough to put his mask on when he'd sat there, frozen, like an idiot. He took a deep breath, hoping when push came to shove he'd come through for her. He shook his head, remembering how calm she'd looked, how fast she'd reacted. And she was the one who hated flying.

She was tough. He had to give her that.

The captain's pleasant voice made the announcement: They'd be landing in ten minutes.

Crystal rubbed her neck. She couldn't remember having a worse headache in her entire life. She began counting the seconds until they could get off the damn airplane. She worried she might throw up all

over David. Not only was she afraid of flying, she'd also dealt with motion sickness her whole life.

Damn.

She hated the fact that she was a coward.

## THREE

*To touch the earth is to have harmony with nature.  
Lakota Proverb*

Claire stared out the window of the city bus as it crossed over a bridge, heading east into Minneapolis—she hadn't noticed the small communities of fish houses spread out on the frozen bays, or the beautiful lakeside homes the bus had passed on its way past the huge, frozen lake. She didn't see the overpasses, the green freeway signs or the white, snowy embankments as the bus sailed down the freeway—her mind was elsewhere.

This morning, before Crystal had come downstairs, she and the others had been sealed off in David's library behind closed doors. They'd not been able to see her sister off as Pepper had warned them that Crystal would most likely remember nothing of their visit. She wasn't to see them because it might bring back memories from when she'd walked between worlds—of all things—after the horrible shadow had overtaken her yesterday. No one had any idea what state of mind she would be in when she awoke, or what kind of

emotional state she'd be in. They didn't want to take any chances, so they'd decided that Crystal must not know of their presence unless she'd asked about them—which she apparently hadn't.

Claire's blue eyes narrowed a fraction: She'd been all but bullied into the agreement by her grandmother. Her ill-concealed glares at her grandmother had exposed her apparent disapproval.

If the story she had shared with them were true, the story about the interesting trip to the center of the earth when her grandmother and the others were turned into some sort of guardians of a blue crystal, well then they were most likely part of a story that science fiction books were made of. If she hadn't seen with her own eyes her cat turning into a giant lion, she'd think that maybe she was part of some bizarre reality show.

Claire fidgeted in her seat, remembering her grandmother's recitation of the events which occurred seventeen years ago the night her parents disappeared. Her words played over and over in her head. She struggled with the fact that her parents weren't dead, they were alive somewhere and no one had seemed fit to tell her or Crystal this bit of information. She wished she'd known this before, she was angry with her grandmother, angry at the betrayal, angry at the deception.

Her usual guileless, blue eyes narrowed once again, and she pursed her lips. Hopefully, the kind detective who had taken her phone call could help.

Claire stepped off the bus and crossed the street toward the U.S. Court House building—the steel and glass structure looming high over the city street. After successfully navigating through the government building's security, Claire found the elevators, making her way to the sixth floor. She spoke with the receptionist and waited patiently in a stiff, uncomfortable chair.

"Ah, Miss Blue," the overweight detective shook her hand, "I'm Detective Eide, it's nice to meet you. Please, won't you follow me?"

Claire smiled tentatively, following the older gentlemen with the generous belly past glass-walled offices and cubicles where city employees and officers were hard at work. Once inside his office, he shut the door and offered her a chair before taking a seat behind his desk.

"Now," he said kindly, "what can I do for you?"

"I would like you to re-open a case, detective. I presume it's been closed for a number of years since the incident occurred in 1993," Claire explained. "There was a terrible fire and people believed that my family died in it. Well, we didn't." She smiled. "You see, my sister and I are alive but my parents have disappeared. We were all in Florida at the time of the fire."

The detective nodded his head as he pulled himself up to his computer. "When did you say this fire occurred, Miss Blue?"

"December 1993, and my family's name is Lange, not Blue. Claire saw a flicker of recognition in the detective's eyes before they drifted back to the computer screen.

After a few moments, he sat back in his chair, folding his hands over his large stomach. "Why are you coming to me now?" he asked, his eyes narrowing a fraction. "This case has been closed for over a decade after we determined you all to be dead."

Claire shuddered at the thought. "I only learned my parents were alive two days ago. Before that, I didn't even know that we lived in this city, and I certainly didn't know that people presumed my sister and I were dead. Could you tell me what happened after the fire, detective? Did you ever find out who could have done this?"

"We never determined who was responsible," he said slowly. "Do you have any information you'd like to share with me, Miss Blue? Or better yet," he added, "can you prove to me that you are who you say?"

Claire shook her head sadly, letting a well-planned tear escape. "I can't prove anything to you, Detective Eide, but I would like to think that you would be happy to know that my family was not at home

the night of the fire, and that we're not dead. We were in Florida with my father's parents. Doesn't that count for something?"

The detective smiled thinly. "Miss Blue, the city is full of crack pots that come in here, claiming they are this person or that, hoping for a little bit of attention and possibly some type of reward."

"Well, really," Claire huffed and the detective held up his hand. "Before I share any details of the investigation, I need to know how you are related to this family. No one has ever contacted us regarding this tragedy. And so," he brought his hands up, letting them fall back into his lap, "you can understand my concern."

"My parents are Elijah and Elizabeth Lange, married August 17, 1987." Claire began reciting what little information she had. "My sister is Crystal Diana Blue, born April, 10, 1992, and I'm Claire Helena Blue, born September 9, 1989. My grandparents, James and Josephine Lange, were killed in a car crash in Clearwater, Florida the night my parents disappeared, the day after the fire. We were raised by Madelynn and Piers Blue, my grandmother's twin sister and her husband. We lived in Ireland up until 2002, and then we moved back to the states and lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The fire that destroyed our home occurred in the early morning hours of December 28, 1993: Today's date, actually." Claire's eyes widened at the coincidence.

The detective sat forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "Madelynn and Piers Blue you say? They never told you about the fire or the explosion?"

Claire shook her head. "We were told that our parents died in a fire—my grandmother refused to talk about it. My sister and I were lead to believe that we were orphans. Up until yesterday we thought our parents were dead and Madelynn and Piers were our grandparents."

Claire lifted her chin. "I must admit I'm a bit angry about the deception, Detective Eide. I would really like to know what happened that day."

“Why haven’t you just looked the information up? That’s what most people do now-a-days. With the internet set up like it is it’s easy to find information like this.”

Claire sniffed. “Of course I’ve already researched this, detective. I found the newspaper article describing the incident claiming that my family and I were feared dead, but I found no information as to how or why this happened. I understand that certain investigative activity can be disclosed if it is in the public interest.” Claire smiled. “Aren’t you the least bit interested in finding out what may have happened to my mother and father, Detective Eide? Aren’t my desires to find out who blew up my house in the public’s interest?”

He strummed his fingers on his great belly, wondering if he really wanted to re-open this case. The whole thing had left a bad taste in his mouth from start to semi-finish, however, he was a detective, and this young woman who sat across from him seemed sincere enough. And, she’d gotten her facts straight, although, she could have picked them up from anywhere.

He’d have to pull in Hines and Samuelson; they’d want to meet this young woman who claimed to be a member of the family presumed to have been killed in the deadly explosion that had rocked the quiet neighborhood seventeen long years ago. It was amazing really, only this morning he’d longed for something to sink his teeth into before next summer’s retirement already being planned by his wife. Maybe re-opening this case would be his ‘swan song’ and he could go out in style. He’d have to run it by Deputy Chief Johnson.

The portly detective swiveled around and with a labored attempt extricated himself from his chair.

“There are a few gentlemen that I’d like you to meet, Miss Blue. Do you have an hour or two to spend with us today?”

Claire nodded her head. “I have all the time in the world, detective. I just want to find my mother and father.”

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A HEAVY cloud hung over Cosmo's head. Even though he clung to the hope that Adam and Daniel were safe, he couldn't shake off the sense of dread. He knew that Adam was with Serena, but Daniel's whereabouts were as yet unknown.

The old man puffed his pipe as he looked out the window into the fading light. Another day had passed with no word from Daniel or Deloria, that awful woman with the mean eyes who had abducted his poor grandson a few days ago. Cosmo removed his wire-rim glasses, dragging an unsteady hand over his face. Where was he? Where was Daniel?

With an impatient shake of his head, Cosmo slipped his glasses on and went in search of Adam's cat. Serena had asked him to check up on the elusive feline and as yet, he hadn't found her. While searching for her, he'd gotten distracted. It was hard to concentrate when his worries dragged him through unimaginative scenarios depicting the plight of his grandson.

Cosmo peeked into Adam's hall closet and moved a box of books. Nope. She wasn't in the closet.

He headed into the kitchen and opened a can of tuna. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," Cosmo said half-heartedly. "Come out, come out, wherever you are, ye blasted wee monster," he whispered, letting loose a grunt as he bent down to look under Adam's bed. A pair of green, slanted eyes stared at him and the cat hissed.

"Ah," he cried, almost falling over, startled by the intensity of the cat's stare and verbal warning. He chuckled nervously. Afraid of a silly cat, bah. Well, at least he knew where she was. He peeked under the bed again. The cat growled softly as cats do when they're upset.

"Jezebel," Cosmo said softly. "It's okay. Adam will be home soon, don't worry."

The cat's tail rose and fell lazily and she hissed again, although this time it was with much less intensity. Cosmo dared not reach



*CRYSTAL BLUE SKY*

under the bed to stroke her—she'd probably take his hand off. So he let her be. He fed Adam's fish, splashed a bit of water into his houseplants, and filled Jezebel's bowls with fresh water and food. He knew he'd come back tomorrow as Adam's apartment somehow comforted him. The territory was neutral and tranquil with no mementos reminding him of any of the strange occurrences over the last few days.

As yet, he hadn't opened the bookstore. How could he? He had no one to help him other than Jeremy Craven, the lad who often came in on Saturdays during the busy summer months. He'd made a call to the boy, yet hadn't heard from him.

Anyway, he thought as he made his way down the two flights of stairs to the street, he had to focus on finding Daniel. It was time to go out to David's and meet with Madelynn and the others. After all, he thought as he hurried down the frozen sidewalk, they too wondered where Deloria and Daniel were.

Once he was back in his apartment, Cosmo checked his answering machine for any messages, answered the few that he could, and once again locked up the store. He walked around the block, shivering in the cold of the parking garage before retrieving his Buick. And with a hopeful heart, he made his way out of the city toward the lake.

FROM A window across the street, a pair of dark eyes had watched his movements. Another smaller and beadier set of eyes belonging to a small animal perched on the woman's shoulder, watched as well. The old woman cackled and the little ferret's whiskers twitched. "We'll have the stone soon, boy," she hissed. "We'll have the stone soon."

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THE PLANE set down with barely a bump and Crystal drew a relieved breath as she stared out the window into the gray, leaden skies over South Dakota. She narrowed her eyes: Where was the bloody sun?

They had survived certain death, but her sense of gratitude was quelled by the day—cold, dark and gloomy. She missed the beautiful, warm blue skies and hot dry air of New Mexico that she'd finally come to love. At first, she'd taken it for granted; now she missed the desert's vast skies and the hot arid winds the Midwest did not have, especially in the middle of winter.

A pang of homesickness shot through her and uncertainty reared its head. Then she began worrying, once again, about Wyndon. "Poor wee beastie," she whispered to no one in particular.

Crystal continued to stare forlornly out the window. She admitted to herself that she enjoyed what she'd read about the shaman—she understood the need for balance in all things: peace, love, harmony and all that jazz. So then, why couldn't a shaman have been called on to do what she was supposed to do? Turn the light on and re-wire the people. Obviously, she fainted whenever she was afraid. How was she supposed to help anyone? She twirled her hair nervously.

She was heading toward South Dakota to meet with the Lakota who would probably tell her more unbelievable stories. She was with a man she barely knew and a great big dog she knew she couldn't live without, who, before this morning, she'd never seen before. She loved his big goofy face, and the way he cocked his head to the side when she spoke to him—it made her giddy with happiness every time.

She gave her head a quick shake, amazed that the only one she worried about when the plane was plunging to the ground was the

dog. Already, he meant something to her. He was special and she hoped he'd come through the ordeal in one piece.

Finally, it was time to deplane. Crystal got up from her seat and shuffled down the short aisle toward the exit. She turned the volume up on the iPod Amin had given her that morning. She'd been amazed that he'd downloaded *all* of Elton John's music: Every song the pianist had ever recorded she now had direct access to. And, he'd downloaded more of her favorites: Neil Young, Sublime, Dave Mathews, Joni Mitchell, Godsmack, Train, Coldplay, Lily Allen, Kelly Clarkson, Mumford & Sons, Linkin Park, Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade, Ravel, Grieg, Phillip Glass, and even her recent favorites: Brandi Carlile and Adam Lambert. Amin was obviously a mind-reader, she supposed, and now, she was set for music until the end of her days.

She shook her head at the mystery of it all as she thumbed through the music, looking for her favorite new song—she wanted to hear it again. She'd only just discovered it. It was odd that she'd never heard it before: *Crystal Blue Persuasion*, written by some guy named Tommy James a few decades back.

Crystal hummed, smiling at the baby who stared at her over her mother's shoulder. The baby grinned toothlessly and drooled while its mother patted its back. Probably, that baby didn't faint, she thought miserably as she neared the cockpit's door. Probably, she was the only one who had.

Damn.

She looked ahead, noticing the crew offering quick apologies to everyone before they stepped from the plane. Strangely enough, the young captain whose voice they'd heard give the May Day call grabbed her hand as she passed, squeezing it tightly. "I'm truly sorry," he whispered, his blue eyes staring into hers.

Surprised and humbled at his sincerity and personal apology, Crystal stopped, pulled out her ear buds and said, "You and your crew followed procedure and most likely saved our lives. You

should not be apologizing to us," she smiled, squeezing both his hands, "you should be commending yourself and your crew. And," she added with a knowing nod, "There are no accidents." The surprised captain blinked his eyes in confusion before slowly nodding his head, recognizing the wisdom of her words.

Then she turned and walked off the plane, wondering where in the world those words had come from. When the captain had squeezed her hand, offering his sincere apology, she'd felt something shift deep within her bones and a warm sensation had flooded her heart, causing the words to spill right out.

Interesting, she thought as she twirled her hair while making her way through the terminal, not noticing the glances thrown her way by those who'd heard the words she'd shared with the captain.

WYNDON PRACTICALLY bowled her over when she released him from his cage. He barked loudly and spun around, almost clipping David off at the knees. She laughed at his antics and clipped on his leash, letting him drag her outside so he could sniff around every garbage can and bench while David collected the luggage and the rental car. After he calmed down, she knelt at his side and checked him for injuries. He slobbered her with a kiss and offered her his paw. Crystal smiled, he was just fine.

THE HEAVY band of clouds that had dumped a foot of snow over the Black Hills and the surrounding areas had moved north, leaving behind a beautiful blanket of white snow and a clear, cold sky. As they drove south, the low winter sun cast its light over the stark yet beautiful white canvas spreading endlessly out around them. Crystal was amazed at the huge expanse of land, realizing it looked like New Mexico—wide open and rugged.

Two hours later, Crystal peered out the car's window, her breath steaming the glass and her nerves getting the best of her. She'd

remembered something David had said, *She would be involved in initiations and most likely they wouldn't be pleasant.*

Bugger. What if she failed?

As the car began slowing down, Crystal saw lights up ahead. "Bloody hell, David," she whined. "I'm hungry. Can't we stop and get some blasted food?"

"I don't think there's going to be anywhere to eat other than maybe that gas station." David offered.

"Well pull over, dude, I'm starving!" Crystal glowered.

As he slid the car into the parking space, he raised an eyebrow and threw her a curious glance, wondering why she'd become so irritable.

Crystal threw open the door, jumped out and stomped through the snow into the brightly-lit building. David watched her disappear behind a magazine stand. Behind him, Wyndon whined softly.

Her abrupt change in personality startled and confused him. She'd seemed fine when they'd gotten off the plane, although after an hour in the car, her personality had changed: She'd complained about the weather at least a dozen times and had insisted that he was driving too slowly, 'like a turtle' she'd said. She hadn't taken into consideration that the snow-covered roads were pretty bad. Even though he'd had plenty of practice driving in these conditions—Minnesota winters could be brutal and getting from point A to point B in deep snow was an art that he'd mastered—numerous times he'd wondered if they would make it to their destination before dark.

David sat in the car, considering what to do next. He had planned on stopping anyway as the town of Pine Ridge was their destination—that's where they were now—unfortunately, no one had met them at the airport like he'd hoped, and he wasn't sure what to do.

Suddenly, Wyndon barked. *Woof!*

David turned around and ruffled the dog's huge head. He'd forgotten about him and Wyndon was probably desperate to get out

of the car. "Come on old boy," he clipped Wyndon's leash to his collar, "I guess it's just you and me."

CRYSTAL SHUFFLED around the gas station looking for nothing in particular. She knew she was being unreasonable, but she couldn't help it: She didn't feel well. She picked up a bottle of ibuprofen and replaced it, this irking her even more: She had no money.

Bollocks.

She tightened the scarf around her neck and strolled through the aisles, feeling a bit like a freak for not knowing how she'd come by the blasted thing on her neck. Fear and pride had kept her from asking David. How could he know if she didn't? She grumbled, staring sightlessly at the floor, trying to remember the previous day. She sighed, it was no use; her mind was a blank.

She felt she'd gone somewhere and had done something, but she couldn't remember what. She'd gone to bed without a tattoo and a dog and had woken up with both. Obviously she'd forgotten a whole day because the newspaper she now stared at declared that it was three days after Christmas and her memory served her two. This feeling of a time-lapse was horrible. She'd felt like this one other time: Her supposed friends had slipped her something, said it was candy, and she'd spent the better part of a day and night worrying if the couch in the room was going to eat her. Later she'd found out it had been LSD. It had been horrifying and she'd felt powerless and extremely vulnerable. She felt like this now. The two emotions didn't mix well together.

Bugger.

Once again, Crystal rolled her aching neck. Strange dreams lingered in her brain, much like the memories of her encounter with the blue dragon and the animals after she found the manuscript. One disturbing dream in particular nibbled at her: the one about storm clouds and snakes. The visions came and went fleetingly, almost playfully, and she awoke more exhausted than before she'd slept.

She stared at a magazine—pale-faced creatures with fangs and blood graced its cover. “Bloody vampires,” she mumbled. The craze had taken hold and now they were everywhere. She shivered, closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the rack. All this confusion and pain made her extremely cranky. She was still hungry and needed some money, so he straightened up, breathed deeply and peered around the rack, snorting when she saw David slip. He caught himself before Wyndon dragged him around the corner of the building.

Suddenly aware of the man standing beside her, she casually glanced at his tall, lanky form, and quickly lifted her eyes, reading the word on the front of his red cap: ‘*Cougars.*’ He flipped through a magazine, and before she looked away, quickly looked up to catch her eye, flashing her with a smile.

She smiled thinly and dropped her eyes. He looked familiar. She swore she’d seen him some place before; she remembered his cap. Was he following her? She tried to dismiss it, but felt him staring. Maybe it had been a bad idea to stop. Maybe they should just get back on the road and get to where they needed to go.

Quickly, Crystal headed back to the Land Rover. David and Wyndon were nowhere to be seen. She huffed and tried the door, but it was locked. Where the bloody hell did they go? Now, she would have to go back inside because she was already freezing to death, her neck hurt like hell, and she was scared.

Crystal glanced at the building and saw the tall man watching her, so she headed in the other direction, toward another entrance a bit further down.

Once inside, she peered out into the fading light of day, finally spotting David and Wyndon as they hurried across the parking lot. Relief flooded through her, and then she became furious. How dare he scare her like that and make her stand and wait for him! The angrier she became the more her neck hurt.

Crystal gasped and unwound her scarf. It felt like someone had given it a good yank. Jayspers! Her throat was closing fast!

She tried taking deep slow breaths, but the harder she tried to steady her breathing, the more difficult it was to catch her breath. She slid down the glass window as her weakened legs could no longer support her.

Two men standing at the cash register looked over. "Hey girl, are you okay? God, Frank, she's turning blue, like her hair."

Crystal tried to show them the universal sign for choking, but her arms felt like lead, lying useless at her side.

Damn.

Suddenly, a pair of strong arms picked her up and carried her towards a small room at the back of the gas station. Her eyes flew to her helper. He was the tall man she'd seen by the magazines! She struggled, slapping the man's arm feebly while taking shallow breaths, trying not to faint. She felt her coat and scarf come off, and then something cool with a powerful pungent odor being applied to her neck.

Crystal's racing heart slowed and her labored breathing eased. She eyed the man nervously as he watched with serious black eyes before he turned to pour her a glass of water from the sink.

"Here, drink this," the man said gently, offering her the glass.

With one gulp, she downed the glass of water and studied him again. He did look familiar: His high, flat cheek bones were strong and his long hair was pulled back. Where had she seen him before?

"Ah, thank you." She finally managed. "How did you know what to do just now? What did you put on my neck?"

"It is bear root."

*Bear root?*

Crystal looked at the man for another moment. Her breathing had returned to normal and her racing heart had calmed. Suffocating was a terrible thing—something she never wanted to experience again.



"Yes, but how did you know that I couldn't breathe. Or rather, do you just carry that stuff around?"

The man laughed, "Yeah, I do. I carry bear medicine always."

"Oh," she managed. "Well thank you. I don't know what happened," she said to herself.

"You wear the mark of the serpents."

Crystal's hand flew to her neck. "I what?"

"On your neck, your tattoo," he said, looking at her closely. "That is a very mysterious tattoo, and you have blue streaks in your hair."

His prying was getting on her nerves. "Yeah," Crystal said, standing up and taking two steps back, "I happen to like blue." She threw her scarf around her neck and put her coat back on.

"Do you travel from Minnesota?"

"God, Crystal, there you are!" David ran into the room. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Sorry, dude." Crystal smiled weakly. "I had an anxiety attack or something and this guy helped me."

Crystal turned, eyeing the tall man sitting casually on the bench. "What is your name by the way?"

"Corbin." He stood up and offered his hand.

"Well, thanks again, Corbin. I'm Crystal and this is David."

David stepped forward to shake the man's hand.

"And to answer your question," Crystal said, "Yes, we are from Minnesota."

"They said you were coming," Corbin replied. "I saw you in the airport and thought it might be you, but I wasn't sure until now. You have the look of the angels about you."

Crystal raised her eyebrows and dropped her mouth.

*Angels?* She looked like an angel?

Holy Shmoly.

Corbin turned to leave and then stopped, turning to David. "Please, follow me and I will take you to where you need to go." He

gave him an approving smile. "You are a very capable driver. Some of my friends would not have driven on these roads today."

As they approached the car, Wyndon jumped from the back seat to the front and back again, causing the Land Rover to rock back-and-forth.

"That your dog?" Corbin asked, peering into the vehicle.

"That's Wyndon." David opened the door and Wyndon shot out like a canon, baring his teeth at Corbin.

"Whoa." He put his hands up, backing into his truck parked next to their vehicle. "He's a big one. It's all right fella," he said, putting his hands down. "I didn't hurt her."

Wyndon lowered his snarling lip and wagged his tail. He sat down and offered his big paw.

"I guess he likes you." Crystal smiled when the tall man shook Wyndon's paw.

"He knows I mean you no harm. Dogs are good to have around, especially this one. He'll watch out for you on your travels."

Crystal and David looked at the man, both wondering how he knew about her travels.

Corbin jumped in his truck and slammed his door, firing up his truck as Crystal, David, and Wyndon scrambled into the Land Rover. They flew out the parking lot as the truck's tail lights were already well ahead of them.

"Jaypers!" Crystal cried, strapping on her seat belt. "He drives like a mad man. And, dude, I didn't get anything to eat!"

David reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a bag of Cheetos. He tossed the bag over to Crystal. "Here."

Crystal's eyes lit up. "Oooh, I love these." She tore the bag open and stuck a handful of the powdery orange snacks into her mouth. "Mmmm," she sighed happily as she mumbled and chewed, "the cheese that goes crunch."

David chuckled; relieved she was once again her pleasant self. He would need to remember this: Food made her happy.

*CRYSTAL BLUE SKY*

FIVE MINUTES later, Corbin's truck pulled to a stop in front of a small house. He jumped out, making his way to the front door where an old man stood on the front step illuminated in the overhead light. David and Crystal weren't exactly sure what to do, so they waited, watching the two men talk for a moment before the older man disappeared into the house. He reappeared a moment later and headed toward the car.

David opened his door to greet him, surprised when the old man went to the other side of the car and opened Crystal's door. She almost fell out when Wyndon jumped over her, practically barreling the old man over who quickly stepped out of the way and peered into the car. He was older than she'd first thought, his face was deeply lined and his eyes were a bit rheumy, but his voice was strong.

"Welcome, 'She-Who-Walks-Under-Starry-Skies'," the old man said briskly. "We've been waiting for you."

*\*\*~\*\**

RIGHT BEFORE he pushed the bell, the large home's heavy front door opened and Amin greeted him with a tired grin. Lady, David's golden-haired dog, stood at his side wagging her feathery tail.

"Hello, Cosmo, come in." The little man swung the door open wide letting Cosmo through. "They are waiting for you in the living room. I will be in shortly to serve a late lunch." Amin took Cosmo's coat and disappeared down the hallway with Lady following close on his heels.

Heading down the hall towards the living room, Cosmo glanced into David's small sitting room where only a few days before he and David had discussed Crystal's fate. That was before all the commotion, before she'd been attacked by the serpent, and before Daniel had been abducted. He noticed that the piano was repaired and the room once again neat and tidy, feeling like he was in a dream

revisiting the nightmare. Then he walked into the living room and his dread vanished when he spotted his new-found friends.

"Dear, Cosmo." Pepper threw her arm around his shoulders. "You look well rested."

He smiled, nodded his head and began greeting everyone. Luis stood near the fireplace and returned Cosmo's greeting with a brisk nod and a toothy grin. Angel and Levi, playing a game of chess, broke their concentration to throw him a quick smile before bending their heads down over the board once again. Marty gave him a firm, hearty handshake, Sandra inclined her head shyly before returning to her knitting, and Madelynn approached him, smiling brightly, taking his hand and leading him to a place near the fireplace. Daisy and Kolie gave him a quick hug before he settled down into the chair. He felt safe with this magical group and his feelings of dread over Daniel's disappearance and the surreal events quickly fled.

He accepted the cup of tea Daisy offered with a grateful sigh as Lady trotted into the room. Acting like she knew he could use more company, she lay down beside his chair, resting her head on her paws.

"'Tis good t' see ye, Cosmo," Madelynn said kindly. "Have ye heard anythin' from the boy Adam?"

Cosmo was surprised. He didn't know she knew about Adam. Nevertheless, he nodded his head, nothing should surprise him anymore. "I spoke with his sister, Serena, yesterday," he said, before blowing on his tea and taking a sip, delighted with the unusual flavor.

Madelynn waited patiently for more information.

"He's been hurt," Cosmo explained, "and now he's with Serena and her husband in Pine Ridge, South Dakota." Cosmo shook his head. "If he was with anyone else, I would have to go after him. The thought of him suffering curls my toes."

Madelynn leaned forward and patted his hand.

"I needn't worry, though; Serena will take good care of him." Cosmo said with a firm nod.

"What happened to him, Cosmo?" Madelynn asked quietly.

"Daniel told me that a brute hit him over the head with a metal pipe somewhere in Wisconsin. Adam was making sure Daniel, his mother, Gina, and that brute left town." Cosmo groaned. "He shouldn't be involved in this, you know? I needed Gina to leave town because I thought she'd try to take Crystal again and he insisted on going. It's my fault that he's hurt. Serena must hate me." He put his head in his hands.

"Shhh," Madelynn soothed. "Nothin' is yer fault, Cosmo. Remember, we've entered this story mid-way through. Events began unfoldin' a long time ago, an' nothin' happens by chance anymore. We are part of an amazin' chain of events that most likely will be talked about in th' history books."

Madelynn patted his hand once again, then leaned back in her chair and finished her tea. "You say th' lad is at Pine Ridge?" she asked. "Isn't that where David and Crystal are?"

Cosmo nodded. "Serena told me she'd been instructed to take him there so he could lay by the Sacred Hearth. She said he was on a vision quest, and that we shouldn't worry about him, but rather hold him in our higher thoughts, sending him light and love."

Madelynn smiled. "I think we can do that, don't you, Cosmo?" Then she asked, "Does this boy, Adam Walker, love my granddaughter?"

Startled, Cosmo pondered her question. Love her? How couldn't he? She'd wiggled her way into his heart easily enough. Cosmo smiled, remembering the first day he'd met her, the day she caused so much commotion in his bookstore. He smiled again, realizing that his life had been pretty dull up until the day she'd burst into his shop, stepping on customers' toes and sitting on poor old men reading their newspapers because she couldn't see through her

frozen lenses. Then he chuckled and grinned like a school boy, remembering her colorful outbursts down in the basement.

Madelynn watched the emotions cross the old man's face. Yes, she thought, her charming, yet rebellious granddaughter had gotten underneath this gentle man's skin all right, just like she'd done with her own husband.

She'd watched her husband's clear blue eyes soften when Crystal had nuzzled his shoulder the first time he'd held her. It was as if the child knew she needed to bond with this man who was to be her protector. From that moment on he'd been wrapped around her tiny finger.

"Now, ain't that a pip!" Cosmo shook his head, sighing happily. "I do believe he does love her. How could he not?"

Madelynn nodded. "Good. Did ye warn him then t' stay away from her?"

Cosmo pursed his lips, remembering the poem from the manuscript he'd read to Adam. "He's been warned."

Once again Madelynn nodded her head, letting her gaze wander over to Pepper who waited for her cue before addressing Cosmo. Madelynn smiled, indicating it was time to report the situation about Daniel.

"Cosmo," Pepper said, "we think we know what might have happened to Daniel."

"You do?" Cosmo asked with some surprise. "Tell me. Where is he? Is he safe?"

Angel and Levi looked up from their chess match, Sandra set down her knitting, Marty rubbed Daisy's arm, and Kolie walked to Madelynn's side. Lady lifted her head and wagged her tail just as Amin entered the room with a tray full of sandwiches.

"We don't know where he is, Cosmo, but we do know he's safe." Pepper shared a quick look with Madelynn before continuing. "Could you tell me a bit about him, Cosmo?" she asked. "For instance, does he have any pets?"

"Pets? Any pets? Gee," Cosmo shook his head, "I don't know. Why?"

"Cosmo," Pepper said quietly, "I discovered something upstairs when I was searching for a clue as to what might have happened to the boy. You see, I can tap into energies, many of us can," she added, "and I came across something interesting. I discovered Daniel's sweater and on it was a bit of fur. I don't wish to alarm you, but I fear Deloria might have done to Daniel what she'd done to Wyndon years ago."

"What!? What do you mean by that?" Cosmo cried, fearing to hear the worst. "You said he was safe!"

"He's quite safe, Cosmo," Madelynn said soothingly. "Deloria doesn't take her responsibilities lightly, after all. If he's been changed, she would have had t' use a familiar energy."

Cosmo gulped. "Changed?"

"Daniel must have a pet, and Deloria discovered this," Pepper explained, "using the fur to transform him. She needs another to do her bidding as her magic works best on creatures."

Cosmo rolled his eyes. Good God, what was this woman talking about?

"Most likely, Daniel is now a wee beastie," Madelynn offered quietly. "I promise ye, Cosmo, Deloria will not hurt him. If our theory is correct, she needs him t' help her find th' crystal."

Cosmo was dumbfounded. He watched this group of people eat their turkey sandwiches like nothing unusual was being discussed.

"Well, what do we do now then? Should we call the police? Should we call the zoo?"

Madelynn chuckled. "We must find out what sort of pet he had, Cosmo. We must go t' his house an' investigate. Ye are th' only one who knows where he lives."

"Where who lives?" Claire asked from the doorway, her face fresh and glowing, Vincent cradled in her arms. "What's going on?"

She grabbed a sandwich from the tray and plopped down on the couch. After kissing Vincent's white, furry head she released him and he sauntered away, jumping onto a chair and settling in on top of a cushion.

"Hello, my dear," Madelynn said to her granddaughter who had been gone for the better part of the day. "We're just discussin' Daniel."

"Oh." Claire took a bite of her sandwich. "Do we know where he is yet?" she mumbled, her mouth full of ham on rye.

"We're goin' to go find out. We need t' know if he had a pet." Madelynn explained.

Claire smiled, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Sure he has a pet. He has a little ferret named Arthur. Why?"

"A ferret!" Cosmo cried.

"Why yes," Claire said, wondering why the old man's face was turning red.

Oh my God! Cosmo dropped his head into his hands. His grandson had been turned into a ferret.



## FOUR

*The frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives.  
Lakota Proverb*

Crystal threw a frightened and baffled look David's way before the old man dragged her from the car. He had called her some name about 'under the starry skies,' or was it 'in the starry skies.' How did he know about her secret thoughts with Adam? she wondered. She was beginning to get fed up with feeling like she had no bloody business of her own.

Crystal huffed and stomped up to the house.

Once inside, the old man took her hands in his, staring at her long and hard. Crystal chewed her lip, trying not to meet his eyes and feeling quite uncomfortable, but since the old man wouldn't release her hands, she finally met his gaze. Seemingly satisfied with what he saw, he nodded his head, dropped her hands, and disappeared from the room.

Moments later he returned, carrying a narrow, cream colored bag made from some kind of animal hide. It was about twelve-inches long with beads embroidered onto the ends of long fringe—the top drawn closed with a string.

"This is my grandfather, Warren Sun Bear," Corbin said proudly, introducing the older man. "He is a Lakota Elder and shaman. We are honored that you are here, 'She-Who-Walks-Under-Starry-Skies'."

Crystal wanted to be gracious, but the personal invasion made her want to scream. Why they were calling her that? Were they teasing her? Old, angry energy bubbled to the surface from days on the playground when she'd been taunted and called names.

She was going to have to tell them to stop.

She looked down and clenched her fists, willing herself to get a grip. She took heavy breaths and tried to calm herself, becoming slightly nervous when her neck began to throb.

David looked at her oddly before introducing himself. "I'm David Lange and this is Wyndon."

Wyndon sat down and proceeded to offer his paw to the old man.

The old man let his gaze linger on the huge black dog with the fancy blue scarf that was now crooked, wrinkled and soiled. Wyndon set his paw down and they stared at each other for a few minutes.

"It is good that he has found you," the Elder said. "He carries the spirit of the bear and that is good. I sense a strong attachment between you two; one that may be threatened. You both may have to prove yourselves to each other before too long. We shall see."

And as if to himself he said, "It is a very interesting situation."

Wyndon wagged his tail, staring with adoration at Crystal. She patted his head, grateful the wave of anger had passed and waited for the older man to explain what he meant. They might be threatened? She hadn't liked his words. The old man didn't offer any explanation, but instead, Corbin invited them to sit down on the small couch.

After sitting, David caught Crystal's eye and quickly put his fingers to the side of his mouth, brushing them over his lips. He

thrust his chin at her and brushed his lips again, indicating she had something on her mouth.

Her eyes flew open. Bugger. Her mouth must be covered in Cheetos dust.

Horrified, she quickly grabbed her scarf and wiped her face, leaving a streak of orange in the colorful wool. She slumped into the couch, wishing she were invisible. She must have looked like a clown with her bright orange lips and blue hair. She was surprised they'd let her in.

Damn.

"Thank you for accepting us into your home," David was saying politely as he pulled a small bag from his pocket, offering it to Warren. "Please accept my gift to you."

The old man nodded appreciatively as he accepted the bag of Sir Raleigh pipe tobacco.

"I'm a bit amazed you knew we were coming. I probably shouldn't be," David said with a quick smile. "There are forces at work here that are much greater than I've ever experienced. I would love for you to tell us the story of how you knew of our coming, and why you call Crystal 'She-Who-Walks-Under-Starry-Skies'."

"Yes, I would too," Crystal said shortly. Then she set her chin, chewed her lip and looked away.

"Before I tell you anything," Warren said softly, "I would like to tell you that you have carried your name for many hundreds of years. It is not new."

Crystal twirled a lock of hair and wrinkled her nose, letting her eyes find his kind face. His soft smile had her questioning her anger.

The old man answered her thoughts. "I sense that you are angered by what we call you. Do not worry—your name was given to you many, many years ago. It is your secret and spiritual name. I know you understand its meaning."

His eyes held only compassion and her heart softened—she didn't need to worry—her thoughts were safe.

David looked puzzled. He knew nothing of her secret thoughts with Adam and she wasn't about to tell him. She shrugged and patted Wyndon's big head.

I would like to offer you a gift, one that was given to me by my father's father," the old man said, handing Crystal the bag.

"Thank you." She stroked the soft hide, thinking it one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen. It was soft as down and light as a feather.

"You may open it," Corbin said.

Carefully, Crystal undid the drawstring and drew out a beautiful pipe. She held it reverently, instinctively knowing that it was special. Its bowl was carved from dark red stone and nine black feathers were attached to its long, blue wooden stem.

"You are a Pipe Carrier and were born to this task," Warren told Crystal. "No one has used this pipe since it was made many hundreds of years ago. It was given to my ancestors by the spirit of the White Buffalo Calf Woman who told them to keep it safe and sacred until the girl from the starry sky comes to claim it. We will use this pipe during our ceremony tomorrow, and you will learn more about the sacred pipe ceremony then."

Humbled by his words, Crystal didn't know what to say.

"Many know of your coming," Warren explained. "You are part legend from our clan stories and many may not believe that it is truly you. The First Nation peoples of the world made a contract with your ancestor when emerging into this fourth age, and we intend on honoring that contract—the contract that you were born to fulfill. We call you 'She-Who-Walks-Under-Starry-Skies' because that is where you came from, like your ancestors before you," the old man added with a quick nod of his head.

Crystal's surprised eyes flew to David—he watched her intently. It was his turn to smile and shrug. She'd heard this twice now—that she'd come from the stars. She was finding it most disturbing.

"May I see the serpent? The mark on your neck?" The old man asked politely.

Bugger, she thought, now I have to show David, but the old man *had* asked kindly, and she really hadn't done anything wrong, so she unwound her scarf, keeping her eyes averted from David, feeling the heat of a blush begin to spread.

Warren peered at her neck shrewdly, studying the marks with pursed lips. Crystal chewed her lip and tried not to squirm, feeling like a bug under a microscope.

Finally, the old man settled back into the couch and Crystal wound the colorful scarf back around her neck.

"She has two then," Warren said softly. "One gold...one blue. That is unexpected. Tell me, young Crystal, how did you come by these marks?"

Crystal wanted to admit that she couldn't remember how it had gotten there, but she didn't want to sound like an idiot. How could she possibly not know? Once again she wanted to sink into the couch and disappear.

"Well," she began as a new blush spread over her cheeks, "I don't exactly know." She quickly shrugged her shoulders. "I went to bed last night and I didn't have this." She fluttered her fingers at her neck. "When I woke up this morning, I did."

She wouldn't look at David, knowing he watched her like the other two men. She didn't want to see the confusion in his eyes, or the disbelief.

"What were your dreams then?"

"My dreams?"

"You obviously traveled in your sleep and had a journey. One does not acquire the mark of the serpents without having had a very great journey. Please try and remember."

*A great journey?* Crystal scoffed. She hadn't bloody well journeyed anywhere, other than to this place in the middle of nowhere. Nonetheless, she tried to remember her dream and closed

her eyes, thinking hard. She thought so hard it hurt her head and then she sighed loudly. It was useless! She couldn't remember.

Wyndon nudged her hand and she began stroking his soft head—this settled her thoughts and quieted her discomfort. Suddenly, a familiar vision of she and Adam walking under the stars flashed into her mind and she remembered.

Crystal opened one eye, looking at the men waiting patiently—Warren's kind eyes conveyed his interest.

"Well," she began, "I was walking with a friend and we were holding hands—talking softly to each other," she whispered. "The sky was lit brilliantly with stars and we were happy." Crystal glanced at Warren once again.

He smiled and nodded his head. "Yes, you walk under the stars often I imagine. Please, continue."

Crystal furrowed her brow, twirled her hair and continued. "While we walked, something big and black flew out of the sky and picked Ad..., my friend up and carried him away. I think it was a bird, maybe a crow. Then I fell, and the woods, they came alive and were full of all kinds of animals." Crystal's voice was barely a whisper as she re-lived her dream.

"Their eyes followed me and, and I was really scared, but then I found Wyndon," her lips lifted in a small smile as she stroked his head, "and, well I wasn't afraid anymore." Crystal remembered the small blue dragon, pondering whether or not to mention it. She decided now would be as good a time as any.

"Then I heard a voice from above call my name. It belonged to the blue dragon—the dragon that I encountered after I found the book in the basement of Cosmo's bookstore."

David's eyes widened with surprise. *A blue dragon?!* She'd never mentioned that!

"Please continue," Warren said.

“Um, the blue dragon flew out of the sky and said something, something like, ‘*I could do what I needed to do by myself. I didn’t need my friend to help me and that I should let him be.*’”

“How do you know this dragon was a she?” Warren asked.

“Well, believe it or not, she sounds like my grandmother.”

Warren smiled and nodded his head. “Indeed.” For a long time he sat quietly with his eyes closed.

Crystal refused to look at David. She knew he probably thought she’d made the whole business up about the dragon. A blue dragon for bloody sakes...if she’d heard someone talk about such a thing she’d think they were completely off their nut.

On the contrary, David watched Crystal closely, knowing she’d told the truth. There was magic and mystery at work here. Who was he to question or deny anything that she said? But a blue dragon? He shook his head, wondering how she’d kept this a secret.

David knew of the boy she wished to keep secret, however, he knew she loved the boy named Adam. The book had told him that before warning to keep them apart. He wondered why she was hesitant about sharing this piece of information—he’d forgotten how it was to be a teenager in love.

Warren and Corbin had closed their eyes, continuing to sit quietly for some time. Crystal bided her time by inspecting the beautiful pipe, turning it this way and that, peering into the red bowl and stroking the black feathers. She sniffed the bowl. It smelled sweet, like flowers. As she stroked the black feathers, she remembered the huge black bird in her dream that had born Adam away.

The old man opened his eyes and looked at David. After studying him a few quiet moments, he focused his gaze on Crystal.

“Indeed, you’ve journeyed well in your dreams, young Crystal,” he said with a nod of his head. “This dragon that you speak of who sounds like your grandmother, you’ve met her before?”

“When I first found the book, the book that travels with us,” she explained, “I was somehow transported to a place the dragon called the Crystal Cave. During this time my pineal gland was activated and supposedly the eleventh layer of my DNA was either enhanced or adjusted, and now vibrates higher, allowing me to be a direct conduit to the Akashic lineage of my ancestors. The dragon spoke of many things that I confess were way over my head. I understood basically nothing of what she told me.”

Warren’s eyebrows rose as he listened to Crystal’s admission. He glanced toward Corbin and then David. David shrugged his shoulders. It was pretty impressive that she could relay this information with such humility, reaffirming the fact that she really had no idea of her special qualities.

Crystal smiled, finally meeting David’s eyes. “David did explain some things to me,” Crystal said with emphasis, “but the whole ordeal was very unpleasant. My insides felt like they were on fire—it was extremely painful, and I witnessed some very unpleasant and upsetting times of my life that I had hoped to forget. I also witnessed the lives of many men and women, one who I’ve seen since. The dragon told me these visions were necessary for the activations.”

Warren nodded his head. “You went to the Crystal Cave you say?”

Crystal nodded her head.

“Was the light in the cave blue?”

Crystal nodded her head again.

“And when you returned did anything unusual happen?” he asked.

Crystal held up a lock of blue hair. “My hair turned blue and I’ve seen a woman who wears a blue band wrapped around her head—I don’t think she’s real, or rather here, in this world.”

“No doubt this woman is your ancestor,” Warren said matter-of-factly. “No doubt she is one that you will soon be visiting.”

Crystal had already gathered as much.



“Did this woman speak to you?”

Crystal shook her head. “No, but I know she was warning David not to show me the manuscript, and when she heard that we were traveling to South Dakota, she disappeared.”

“Warning you say?”

“For some reason, I’m not to get near the book.” Crystal offered.

“Do you agree?” Warren asked David.

He nodded his head. “We’ve been warned.”

“Well, I can certainly understand why,” Warren said. “It is after all very powerful. And you,” Warren said to Crystal, “are extremely vulnerable to its vibratory frequencies—you are its human counterpart; its voice, and therefore it will attempt to seduce you back.

“This book can be quite dangerous.” Warren’s eyes found David. “It has a will of its own. There are millions of stories within its records and they are forever changing. At times you may feel lost or extremely confused. You are its keeper now, and if you remain clear-headed and focused the book can cause no harm.”

Warren wagged a weathered finger in David’s face. “If you lose your wits and allow the voices and stories within to seduce you, Crystal and many others will be in danger.”

David smiled and nodded his head slowly. “I won’t let anything happen to Crystal. I can handle the book.”

“We shall see,” the old man said softly.

“Crystal, when you were in the cave did you by chance encounter other animals when you met this blue dragon?” the old man asked.

Crystal nodded her head. “There was a mountain lion and a wolf, a brown eagle and a beautiful black horse with the most glorious white mane and tail.” Crystal used her fingers to count off the animals so she wouldn’t forget one—she knew there were nine, counting the dragon. “A big, scary, bug-like thing, a green lizard, a little fluffy mouse, and, well, a whale, a killer whale, and of course the blue dragon.”

“So,” Warren said, “you’ve been with the soldiers and the bear. That is good—they are powerful protectors. I know now how you came by your blue streak as the bear is from the Third Brother Clan, marking those who it deems worthy with its blue spirit.

“I didn’t see a bear,” Crystal offered.

“No matter,” Warren said with a quick nod, “the bear was there. Perhaps you didn’t see the bear?”

“I suppose,” Crystal said slowly, wondering how this man knew so much about her.

“I dreamt of a bear the other night, though,” she said slowly, “a really big bear with long, sharp claws. I think it was protecting me.” She closed her eyes, trying to bring the dream back.

Warren continued, “I’ll need to know more about your dream to help you understand how you came by your mark. We will most likely discover more about this tomorrow,” Warren said kindly.

“I speak for everyone when I tell you that we are greatly and deeply honored with your arrival on our sacred grounds. The Lakota, Dakota and the Sioux Nation have foreseen your arrival and it is with great pride that I have been honored with providing you with your pipe and shelter for your first night. We will continue with our stories tomorrow after we’ve all gotten a long rest.

“Please,” the old man said to Crystal, “retrieve your things and bring them in. Corbin will show you where to put them, and then we will share a meal and go to bed early so that tomorrow we will have much energy for our ceremony. It is not every day that one such as you comes to our community. Corbin, will you please help her?”

After they left, Warren looked at David with serious eyes. “Does she know?”

“What exactly do you mean?” David asked with surprise.

“Does she know that she visited the other world? Does she know that she wears both sides of the Atlantean Serpent?”

“No, she doesn’t know that. I didn’t even know that. I was told not to tell her anything about what happened. We’re not sure what she remembers. It happened so fast,” David said quickly.

The old man nodded his head. “She received these marks before last night then?”

“Two days ago, in my home, an unseen force tried to take her. Apparently, she received her gold tattoo from this first attack. Madelynn, her grandmother, claimed she’d been attacked by a large serpent.”

David met Warren’s eyes, expecting to see doubt, but the old man eyed him calmly, nodding for him to continue. “Yesterday, again in my home, something strange happened and once again she was attacked and fainted. Her grandmother and the others gave her something: special powers, I think, and when she awoke, she was completely illuminated in blue—it was incredible,” David said softly, looking at Warren with a pained expression. “I was told she did die.”

“How did she return?”

“The special powers they offered pulled her back from the dark serpent’s grasp. When she awoke, she had the blue serpent tattoo. She doesn’t remember anything of the last thirty-six hours.”

“The blue serpent and the soldiers came to her aid. That is good.” The Elder lifted his lips in a soft smile. “She walked with the *wakan* spirit, the bear shaman, between worlds, and obviously has already started her quest to face her fears so they can be transformed and released—that is why she dislikes her ancient name, she feels inadequate. She doesn’t yet know that she is the designated Ascendee for all her lifetimes. She must face the fears of many of these lifetimes so the sacred knowledge will be granted to her, and she can find the wisdom of who she truly is.”

David shook his head slowly. Boy, oh, boy. The elder seemed to know more about Crystal than the book did.

“Designated Ascendee?” he asked. “May I ask what you mean by that?”

The door burst open and Crystal came through, dragging her suitcase with Wyndon on her heels. She cast them a curious look as she passed, following Corbin into the room they'd prepared for her.

Warren answered David's question with a lowered voice. "Her soul, like many people's, has experienced at least a thousand different lifetimes on earth. She has been chosen and has accepted to experience the lifetime of ascension. All of her other aspects, her past lives, her ancestors, are with her, watching, waiting, some fearful, some hesitant, and some downright terrified as they become integrated into this one last lifetime on this earth. She is ascending into the next dimension, the next age, the age of the human. Unlike the others on our planet who are awakening into their enlightenment, integrating their lifetimes together in order to ascend to the next age, her awakening will be riddled with unseen dangers.

"You see," the old man added, sensing he needed to further explain the situation to this man who needed to watch her closely, "she is the voice and spirit of the Feminine Divine. Her ancestors are the female goddesses who've watched over and protected their people for centuries. Before they ascended, becoming the goddesses, masters, and avatars, many of their lives were brutal, filled with pain and suffering, and their deaths were ghastly and unpleasant. When she touched the ancient book that awakened her soul, the eleventh layer of her DNA was activated and she witnessed these lives. Now, in order to heal and integrate their pain so that they may ascend with her, Crystal will have to remember and face some of their suffering.

"She has been marked by both sides of the serpent and both carry within them her divinity. The light serpent holds her love, her joy and her compassion. The dark one holds her fears, her doubts, her pain—those aspects of herself that she cast aside—and will shadow her, hoping she will not face these parts of herself for if she does she will take away its power. Remember, many of her ancestor's lifetimes were those of great power, evil and greed. These aspects will not

want to be enlightened. Most likely the dark one will strike hard, trying to throw her off guard."

He saw David's eyes widen with concern and added, "She has the bear and an amazing group of soldiers who will watch over her, and she has the dog who is *waka*." The old man nodded his head. "He is strongly connected to both the spirit world, the man and to her. He will help ease her mind when she becomes confused or disoriented. Do not worry about what will happen or what she will find out, it is not our place to be concerned."

"Why is Wyndon *waka* and what is *wakan*?" David asked.

"Wyndon's animal energy is *waka*, very mysterious. It is not a typical solid animal energy, but rather, a mixture of human and animal."

David was amazed at the astuteness of the old man. How could he know that Wyndon had walked as a man less than two days ago?

"And *wakan* are great spirits of the unseen world," Warren explained. "The serpent is looked upon as a divine entity by our people because it led us to this sacred area—our name is derived from the serpent. Crystal wears the mark of two, and because she obtained the mark from *Wakan*, she is very powerful and is capable of doing great things or causing great destruction, depending on her choices."

Crystal stepped from her room and Warren stood to make his way over to his honored young guest. He whispered to David, "Do not worry, she will find her Bear Medicine tomorrow when she awakens her unconscious in our *Inipi* ceremony. This will strengthen her ghost and cleanse her spirit, giving her great strength." The old man turned and steered Crystal to the kitchen, offering her food.

David leaned back, his thoughts traveling back to his own sweat lodge experience in Peru. It had been intense yet therapeutic to his soul, and during this ceremony he'd met the beautiful angel who looked like his mother, encouraging him to follow in his father's

footsteps. It was then that he further pursued his education, attaining his doctorate in physics.

AFTER SHARING a delicious stew and warm bread so soft it melted in her mouth, Crystal wrapped herself up in her big coat, preparing to take Wyndon out for one last trip around the little house. The night air was brutally cold, the sky clear and brilliant with stars. The sliver of moon shed little light over the snow and little lights twinkled from small homes spread out around the area.

Standing still under the vast and beautiful starry night sky, Crystal breathed in deeply, sending Adam all her love. Wyndon whined, pulling on the leash and she laughed as she started to run. The cold was exhilarating—finally her mood lightened and she felt better.

The old man had asked her about her dream and she'd actually remembered—it had been a long time since that had happened. She thought of the blue dragon's words. She was to leave Adam alone, for now. This was something she needed to do without him, and it was up to her to trust that the dragon's message held true. She needed to let him be.

She unclipped Wyndon's leash and they played in the snow like children. She threw herself at him, tackling him to the ground. Playing with Wyndon was invigorating. She'd never had a dog of her own.

As they lay side-by-side together in the snow she thought about the bear from her dream that had stood by her side. She turned her head and buried her face in Wyndon's warm fur, realizing that he was like a bear: huge and furry. Then she jumped up, kicked a boot full of snow over him and ran to the house. He leapt to his feet, shook his immense coat of fur and happily followed her inside.

Freshly laundered sheets and a bright colored Navajo blanket adorned the little bed that waited for her. Wyndon found a place

*CRYSTAL BLUE SKY*

next to the door and circled at least five times before settling down, lying his heavy head on his paws and focusing his eyes on her.

She blew him a kiss before she got out of her traveling clothes and quickly pulled her heavy nightgown over her head. Then she dug through her little bag, pulled out a pair of thick wool socks, slid them on and wiggled her toes in their warmth.

Jumping in bed and snuggling into the covers, she dug in her bag again and pulled out Adam's book, preparing to read another of Lord Byron's poems. Flipping through the pages, she finally decided on one called, "A Fragment:"

*When to their airy hall, my father's voice,  
Shall call my spirit, joyful in their choice;  
When, poised upon the gale, my form shall ride,  
Or, dark in mist, descend the mountain's side;  
Oh! May my shade behold no sculptured urns,  
To mark the spot, where earth to earth returns:  
No lengthened scroll, no praise encumbered stone;  
My epitaph shall be, my name alone:  
If that with honour fail to crown my clay,  
Oh! May no other deeds my fame repay,  
That only that, shall single out the spot,  
By that remembered, or that forgot.*

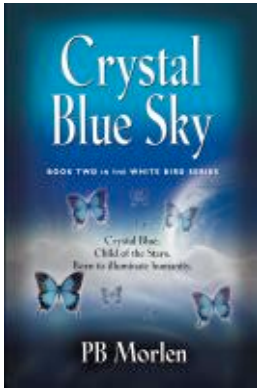
She read the poem through twice, stroking the book's soft cover lovingly before placing it back into her bag. With the poem's words still lingering in her head, she thought of Adam and within moments she was fast asleep.

*She walked with Adam hand-in-hand, and with a laugh, whispered in his ear. His long dark hair swung down, shadowing his profile. She took her hand and brushed it back behind his ear. She screamed as his face turned toward her, displaying a huge set of malevolently grinning teeth.*

*She staggered backwards, staring at the huge bear whose head was the size of a truck tire. With arms spiraling, she tripped over something lying on the ground. The bear that had been standing on its hind legs fell onto all fours, and slowly began approaching her. She looked to see what she'd stumbled over and saw that it was the pipe that Warren had given her, but it was much bigger and the bowl wasn't red, it was blue.*

*She picked it up, holding it over her head. Immediately, the bear stopped and stood on its hind legs once again, stretching its long body and swiping the air with its arms and long, sharp claws. She continued holding the pipe over her head, offering it to the bear stem first. The bear roared mightily and sank back to all fours before slowly walking away.*





*Crystal Blue has learned her fate and begins the mission she was born to fulfill. With Wyndon and David by her side, she sets out to learn the secrets of the Oglala Lakota, ultimately strengthening her ghost, healing her past, and cleansing her spirit with fire and water. But something happens on an island in the North Pacific, something no one expected: One of her soldiers has fallen and a sacrifice must now be made.*

# Crystal Blue Sky

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