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VOID OF POWER

FROM THE ASHES

ANDREW C. RAIFORD



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

Void of Power - From the Ashes, book two of the VoP series, is dedicated to my children. All five are superheroes in my heart.

I also dedicate this book to my wife Beverly who tirelessly helped me through the preliminary editing processes and also for her love and support throughout the writing of this book.

PROLOGUE

Breathing wasn't difficult, it was impossible. Yet the naked figure continued to smile through the thick Plexiglas at the scientist holding a clipboard outside the water-filled tank. The smile was superficial, however. Beneath the calm exterior, her anger boiled with disgust for having been stripped, hog-tied, and connected to dozens of electrodes from scalp to toe, then mercilessly lowered into a water tank. Despite the fierce hatred she had for these people, she experienced no sense of panic and no fight for survival. She knew exactly how this episode would end. Things always happened exactly the way her visions indicated unless she took steps to change them. Even she could not understand this conundrum of time, cause and effect, and the ability to see outside of the temporal construct to which we seem inextricably fastened. If she could change it, why is it she couldn't foresee the results of her interference? Even the scientists were baffled by this. Heather rarely revealed every detail of the things she saw to the scientists under whose nasty care she lived and even lied on occasions to prevent them from carrying out their devious schemes. They concluded her visions were never 100 percent accurate, while only Heather knew the truth.

In Dr. Slater's twisted mind, the object of this particular experiment was to determine whether Heather Hollings' visions would intensify under life-threatening circumstances. His staff, including the lab assistants, had enough common sense to understand one cannot threaten a true clairvoyant with death. They suspected Dr. Slater had other motives for trussing Heather up this way.

Heather was confident she would not die now, so even as she neared the point of losing consciousness, she continued to smile at the researchers. The last thing she saw before she succumbed to a lack of oxygen was the door to the lab opening.

"Pull her out of there. Now."

The lab technician standing to one side had already begun to hoist the subject out of the glass enclosure. Heather choked and expelled water as

her head cleared the surface and revived rather quickly. Her face glowed with anticipation of what was about to transpire. Water cascaded from her body as the attention of every soul in the room was riveted on her. The present tension however, was broken when the newcomer spoke again.

“Whose infantile brain concocted this little experiment?” the newly arrived stranger asked without looking up from the tablet he held.

A tall, unshaven, obese man wearing a white lab coat handed his clipboard to an associate then moved menacingly towards the smartly-dressed critic. The large man’s intention, as he lowered his face to within inches of Dr. Harvey Tanner’s, was to intimidate.

“Who the hell are you to judge my work, stranger?”

“I’m the one who will remove you from this facility if you don’t get out of my face, Mr.,” he paused to read the towering man’s security ID, “Slater. Now, I will ask again. Whose infantile brain concocted this experiment?”

Doug Slater reached for Dr. Tanner’s tie and gripped it in his massive fist. “I happen to run this laboratory, tiny man and I don’t appreciate your tone,” he said in an amused, yet threatening manner.

Dr. Tanner placed his hand over Slater’s wrist who began to scream as his hand glowed, then burst into flames. The fire spread quickly up Slater’s arm and then consumed his head and shoulders. The younger assistants recoiled in horror as their boss’s cries for help filled the lab. The screams stopped soon enough, but the fire grew hotter and soon all that remained of their universally disliked boss was a smoldering corpse on the floor. The lab technician who controlled the hoist was on his knees vomiting while the rest covered their faces with handkerchiefs or lab coats to block the stench of burning flesh.

With a loud hiss, the Halon fire suppression nozzles began spraying in response to the heat, smoke, and flames. Dr. Tanner produced a small travel umbrella which he flicked open to keep the halon from hitting him. Waiting patiently for the fire system to do its work, he then motioned to his assistant to shut it down. Glancing up at Heather, who was smiling even more than before, he said, “You saw this coming.”

Heather didn’t respond yet maintained a satisfied grin. After being released from her bonds she was helped to her feet and wrapped in a thick, cotton robe. Pulling the robe tighter, she turned to Dr. Tanner.

“I did. But that’s not all. I saw a child killed in a car accident.” Her eyes moving across every individual in the lab, she said, “I have no idea whose child it is.”

With that, all but one person ran from the lab, desperately thumbing their cell phones. Dr. Tanner never took his eyes from her.

“That’s not true, is it,” he said more as a statement than a question. She tilted her head, then shrugged her shoulders before being led back to her cell.

Dr. Tanner turned to the only person remaining in the room who shook

as he gawked at the smoldering mass. “Get rid of that,” he said pointing to the corpse.

A senior staff member poked her head into the room and attempted to speak but withdrew for a moment due to the smell. When she had gathered her control, she said, “Excuse me, Dr. Tanner, your visitors from D.C. have arrived. Should I show them to the observation room?”

Tanner nodded as he wiped his hands on a handkerchief which he then tossed onto the black-charred, former lab scientist. Exiting the room and entering an elevator, he used his hand to brush any soot remaining on his jacket. He removed a communication device from his belt.

“Samuel, please bring patient number 34 to the observation room. Make sure he is presentable, then ready patient 23.”

The indirect lighting and comfortable stadium seating of the medium sized observation room were designed to put the occupants of the room at ease, a necessity because the subjects on the other side of the large plate glass wall were often disturbing.

Dr. Tanner greeted every guest as they entered the room, with a smile and a handshake with the enthusiasm of a politician, yet the coolness of a Hollywood celebrity. He, like every other person entering the room, ignored the guards who stood to either side of the entrance. People rarely paid the slightest attention to the dozens of security personnel at this facility, tucked neatly in a remote corner of what is known as Area 51. Not even Dr. Tanner knew one of the guards didn't belong there.

Tanner noticed the tiny woman with dull brown hair seemed bothered that she was required to attend this meeting. The timbre of her voice corroborated this fact.

“Are we going to be watching alien autopsy movies, Doctor? Because we might have saved ourselves a lot of travel-time by viewing those on a dozen websites.”

“No aliens today, I promise. But before you leave this room, you'll understand the importance of our work here.”

“I certainly hope so, Dr. Tanner, because I'd be very disappointed if we have to look at one more dead squid.”

“Patience, Dr. Muller. Patience.”

Dr. Tanner counted only nine individuals in the room, including the guards when the doors were closed and he took the podium.

“Thank you for coming and welcome. You are all familiar with this facility and our purpose here, so no introductions or explanations are necessary. You have been sent here by your respective organizations or summoned here by me to coordinate in efforts to gain access to certain assets vital to our national security. These assets are two nine-year-old children. After we lost major assets during our initial attempt to gain

custody of these children, the military was then given primary responsibility to capture or kill Coraline Paden and Eli Jennings.”

Dr. Muller interrupted, “Yes, Dr. Tanner, we are very aware the military lost a large fortune in equipment, as well as many lives.” She read from a notepad, “Numerous F-40s, Ospreys, attack helicopters, drones, Tomahawk Missiles, tanks, Hummers, anti-aircraft, GVCs, including hundreds of soldiers, pilots and crew members. A large loss with nothing to show besides the total humiliation of the Central Government and an impetus for the state militias to begin stockpiling weapons.”

Dr. Tanner’s countenance didn’t change whatsoever. “Had they succeeded in taking out these two children, the cost would have been considered negligible.”

“But they didn’t succeed, Dr. Tanner. If the Central Government could not eradicate these threats with air-force and military strike teams that included sophisticated warplanes and mechanized units with the latest in technology, what makes you think you can make a difference?”

“That is why you all were summoned here today,” he said abruptly. “I certainly hope we are smarter than the generals who earned their humiliating defeat. We have talent here the Central Government does not possess.”

At this point he gestured toward the glass wall at the front of the room. Lights slowly illuminated the spaced behind the glass revealing two separate cells, containing a woman on the left and a man on the right. Each sat shackled to a table. The man stared blankly at one of the side walls. The woman, however looked directly at the glass wall with a knowing smile on her face.

“Can she see us?” asked one of those seated.

“No. But she knows we’re here. The assets we possess here may not be equal to the extraordinary powers of Coraline and Eli, but working together, we stand a chance.”

A thin man with coke-bottle glasses, a goatee and mustache wearing a dusty old suit stood to speak. “And these assets you speak of, will they help us willingly?”

“Oh, they will help us. Remember, we have members of their families in holding cells. They will cooperate.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Tanner,” interrupted the frumpy Dr. Muller, “but the last time we checked, the family members of your ‘assets’ were liberated from your facility in Oklahoma by the very children which are the targets of this mission!”

Harvey Tanner’s face finally revealed some weariness of being questioned by those sent to aid his efforts. He looked at the floor for a count of three, then made eye contact with each person in the room. “That is correct. We no longer possess hostages. But our assets do not know this. As far as they know, their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters are still

being held by us. They will aid us.”

The man with the coke-bottle glasses cleared his throat and interrupted. “Dr. Tanner, excuse me, but I think she knows.”

Every eye went to the attractive woman attached to the table in the cell before them. Her smile turned into a grin, one that did not bode well for Dr. Tanner’s scheme. Dr. Tanner quickly moved on with his train of thought.

“Also... Also, we have not been idle these past few months. Since the incident in the Void, we have gathered information necessary to accomplish our goal: the capture or destruction of Coraline Paden and Eli Jennings. Our task is to concentrate on the children, Central Government will focus on the so-called Defenders. Even as we speak, military personnel are meeting to discuss how to handle this group. We know their names and faces. What we don’t know is how they happen to possess technology more advanced than anything we’ve thrown against them.”

A young man with longish hair and three-day growth on his face raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Rodriguez.”

“I was under the impression the children and these Defenders were united now. How can we focus on one without running headlong into the other? Shouldn’t we be meeting with the military in a joint effort? Anything we plan must include trained military personnel!”

“You are absolutely correct. I’d like to introduce to you Major Barrett Ratcliff. You will refer to him as ‘Major’.”

A sunbaked man with close-cropped hair stood and faced the group. His fatigues were clean and new, without the usual rank insignias you see on the men who guarded the base, yet his overall impression was that of someone accustomed to being in command.

“The Major and his team have been placed under my command and are here to assist us in any way we deem fit. Is this not so, Major?”

His response was a simple nod.

CHAPTER ONE

ADAM

West Texas winds could scarcely cover the sound created by heavy boots breaking through the dry, crusty earth as the muscular runner made a desperate attempt to move out of his pursuer's weapon-range. Carrying only his backpack, he moved steadily up and down the rugged landscape as the occasional bullet zipped past him. This only caused him to hasten his pace and perhaps duck lower.

Adam felt a sense of relief with the knowledge that his enemies were dropping farther and farther behind. It had taken an inordinate amount of time for his dim-witted assailants to figure out that taking potshots at a running person so far away was a waste of time and ammunition. He had only another three hundred yards to go before he reached rocky terrain, which would offer him cover and concealment as well as make tracking more difficult. Not that those giving chase were likely to be expert trackers, but even a child could follow the deep footprints in this crusty earth.

He had begun to reconsider the wisdom of leaving home for the sole purpose of paying a visit to the long-haired brunette he'd met during the appreciation ceremony in Austin a few months back. At this point he had only been struck by one of the dozens of rounds fired in his direction. Fortunately, the only damage was to his backpack, so his visit to the spectacular April Brice now seemed well worth the trouble.

Adam's thoughts drifted back to the first time he laid eyes on her. She caught his attention when he and his siblings were taking in the sights on 6th Street in downtown Austin the night of the festivities. Among the thousands of unknown faces Adam had seen that night, only one made him stop what he was doing to gawk. It was obvious to his siblings something or someone had temporarily robbed Adam of his senses. He appeared transfixed. His brother's girlfriend, Sarah, had to nudge him when he failed to notice there was a small, bright-eyed girl tugging on his arm to get his attention. Only then did he see the smiling face looking up at him.

"What's your name?" he asked as he took the Celebration Day

pamphlet from her hand and began to sign his autograph. She tried to answer, but no words came out.

“Her name is Rita,” laughed the blue-eyed girl standing behind her younger sister. “And as you can tell she’s a little nervous about meeting you.”

“How about you? Are you nervous?” he asked the beauty curiously.

“Nervous? No. Happy though. Oh, by the way, I’m April. April Brice,” she said with a devastating smile.

Adam introduced April and Rita to his brother Alex, Alex’s girlfriend Sarah, and sister Hayley, then invited them to join his group as they explored 6th Street.

“We’d love to, but we can’t. Those are our parents waiting for us,” she said pointing to a couple standing across the street. “We’re looking for a place to eat, so we won’t hold you up.”

“You would not hold us up a bit! Please ask them to join us; we’re starving, aren’t we guys?” Adam said turning to Alex.

Alex nodded in agreement. “Of course! We seem to be popular today, so I think we probably stand a good chance of being placed at the front of whichever line we choose. Well, maybe.”

The parents walked over after being frantically waved across by their daughters. Hayley and Sarah later said they had never seen Adam on better behavior than when he was working to impress April’s parents. Finding their way to the most popular restaurant on 6th Street, where the line wrapped around the block, the four New Castlehale icons gazed longingly at the restaurant menu board when the doorman who kept order outside the establishment recognized them. In a thunderous voice he called to them, “If ya’ll are The Defenders, and I know you are, ya’ll are more than welcome to a table right this minute! We’ve got a corner table we save for celebrities and we just threw that little creep Troy Jenkins out on his ear for mistreating the staff! Whataya say?!”

Adam, held out his arm for April to take hold, then stepped forward and said softly, “Defenders. Party of eight.”

Alex tapped Adam on the shoulder and jerked his thumb toward the six Texas State Troopers who had been shadowing them all evening to aid in their protection. “What about them?”

Adam turned to the maître d and asked, “Is there any way you guys could wrangle up some sandwiches for our State Trooper friends here and put it on our tab? I promise they’ll stay out of your way.”

The maître d snapped his fingers for waitstaff and spoke to them as he pointed at the six Troopers.

“Now then,” said Adam, “let’s eat!” With that, they entered the restaurant through the thunderous applause of those standing in line. They were quite the awesome sight that night. Hayley wasn’t particularly comfortable being the center of attention at any time, but here the feeling

was accentuated by the fact they were shoved to the front of the line. Her wave at the crowd was more of an apology than a celebrity wave.

Every minute Adam spends with April Brice makes him feel like he is walking on a cloud. For this reason, it is difficult for him to remember the details of that night in Austin. A bullet whizzing by forced him to concentrate again on his escape from these bandits. He knew they couldn't possibly catch him in a foot-race and was even less concerned about them acquiring a new vehicle on short notice. The jeep they had used in their attempt to run him down now sported a broken axle after hitting a tumbleweed-covered hole that Adam had easily vaulted. The driver of the vehicle scornfully laughed when he saw Adam jump the dead weed believing it would simply disintegrate on the bumper of the 4-wheel drive vehicle. Had the occupants been wearing seatbelts, the driver might have prevented impacting the steering wheel with his chest, and the front-seat passenger may not have been ejected through the windshield when the vehicle came to an abrupt halt. The tell-tale sign to Adam that his chances immensely improved was the flight of the two men who had been standing in the back seats hanging onto the roll-bar. They catapulted forward in twisted spasms through the air, smashing into the dirt with a breathy thud. Several minutes passed before they gathered their wits, collected their weapons, and stagger forward in a feeble attempt to follow their prey. They were a sorry lot firing their guns indiscriminately, although, at that point, Adam felt the jarring impact of a bullet striking his backpack. The Kevlar material and the contents of the pack saved his life, but he instinctively knew something inside was ruined.

Adam's long legs and excellent physical conditioning allowed him to quickly reach the ruins of an old stone building. Crouching low behind a partially destroyed wall, he paused to take stock of his gear. From his pack, he retrieved his tablet but found the impact of the recent bullet had smashed the glass. This reminder of his present danger caused him to stand and poke his head above the stones for a quick glance at his pursuers, who were still at a good distance. From his holster Adam drew a large-caliber handgun and after taking careful aim, he lobbed one of the .50 caliber projectiles in their direction. The meteoric strike of the bullet into a rock and the horrendous sound that followed caused them to turn tail and stagger back to their vehicle. Being in open terrain and being fired upon by someone tucked behind stone walls was not their idea of smart fun.

Upon inspection of the tablet, he realized he would not be able to access the faux-GPS system he and his siblings had devised, allowing them to triangulate the position of any aircraft or vehicle used by the residents of New Castlehale. Included in the system was an S.O.S. signal. Once sent it would summon a swift rescue mission. Early in the chase, Adam decided

not to use it so long as he maintained the upper hand. Given the lack of skill in his pursuers, there was no need to scramble fighter aircraft. Besides, he'd never hear the end of teasing from the rest of the Walsh family that he had to be rescued because of a girl. The tablet was beyond help. He stuffed it back into the pack anyway.

After taking stock of supplies, he drank from the water bottle, quickly put his arms through the straps of his pack and buckled it around his waist. Drawing the large revolver from its holster again, he replaced the two empty casings with fresh rounds from his belt. He immediately set out at a trot heading directly west to avoid the bandits. The Brice home was visible to him, but only as a wavy blob viewed through the rippling heat waves coming from the earth. "Only a mile and a half," he thought, which was about the same distance as a couple of laps around the hanger bay. Adam ran a lap at least once every three hours when he was working at home just to gather his thoughts.

Moving at a steady pace, it didn't take him long to reach the Brice property. He crept silently to the barn and peeked inside just to make sure the Beast was still where he left it, then walked casually to the main house.

He was within ten feet of the house when the screen door flew open and April launched herself onto Adam, who caught her in his arms. He closed his eyes, relishing this moment of the first real contact he'd had with her. When he opened them, he saw Trevor and Ruthy Brice, along with his own mom and brother Alex, who was grinning ear-to-ear. He dropped April quickly.

"Mom? Alex? What are you doing here?"

"Well, you may not have felt it necessary to broadcast an S.O.S. when you, on foot, are being chased by two vehicles filled with bad guys, but Mr. and Mrs. Brice here had enough sense to contact us! What were you thinking?"

"Do you see two vehicles chasing me, Mom?" He turned and pointed to the empty landscape.

"Explain yourself right now, mister!" demanded the worried mom.

Alex was beside himself with glee now that the tables were turned on his younger brother. Alex was usually the one in the hot seat, desperately having to explain himself to his mother while Adam stood by enjoying the spectacle. It was with a great deal of satisfaction he asked Adam, "What *did* happen to the bad guys?" The humor of the situation was not lost on Adam, yet he knew better than to white-wash facts to his mom.

"April and I took a walk into town to get a bite at the little diner," he said, pointing to a structure on the far side of a field east of their location. "We were the only ones in the place when three characters walked in and sat at the table right next to ours. They could have chosen any table in the place, but they had to plop themselves down right beside us and just sat there staring. I whispered to April to walk back through the kitchen and

out the rear exit, then run home as fast as she could. I would follow soon. She did as I suggested and excused herself to use the restroom, but one of the guys stood up to follow her. I gave him a rough shove back into his chair, then I pulled mine up to their table and sat down.

“The guy on the right said, ‘It’s three against one, boy.’ I back-fisted him into oblivion before he could get another word out of his mouth and turned to the others. Then it was two against one and there was zero chance these guys could get the best of me.”

“What did they do?” Mr. Brice asked.

Adam smiled. “They ran, and at that moment it seemed a good idea to give chase. Only when I reached the street, there were two vehicles and several armed individuals waiting outside. I turned tail and did some running of my own, straight back into the diner to grab my backpack and headed out the back door. There was no time to send an S.O.S. if I was going to stay ahead of this bunch. I did my best to lead them away from April, whom I could see already halfway across the open area there. She’s fast!” he said smiling at her as he lost his train of thought.

“Continue,” Evelyn Walsh said with a touch of amusement.

“The first vehicle drove right through the fence to chase me down. I took out their engine with one shot from my fifty and ran for the hills. The other vehicle followed me for a distance, and almost caught up, but broke their axle. I reached cover soon enough. One more shot sent them scurrying, and here I am. How did you get here so quickly?”

“Mr. Brice called Junction. Junction radioed Command while mom and I were airborne testing the new injectors in Flyer One. Hedgehog relayed the message when we were only minutes away. From altitude, mom spotted you sitting behind that stone wall. We could see you were in no danger, so we landed here at once.”

“Where is Flyer One?” Adam asked looking about.

Alex pointed straight up. Far above their heads the jet aircraft appeared as a tiny dot, hovering silently and almost invisible.

“You used my app! That’s great! Bring it down!” Adam bellowed out.

Alex thumbed a couple of icons on his wristband and the hovering craft descended rapidly, deployed its landing gear, and touched down lightly in front of the barn.

Adam turned to April and said, “I wrote that app.”

Evelyn stepped in front of Adam and grabbed him by the ear. “Adam Walsh, you listen to me. You might think you are Superman, but you’re not. When you get into trouble, you send out an S.O.S. Do you understand me?”

“Yes ma’am, but I couldn’t. A bullet took out my tablet.”

He pulled off his backpack and pointed to the strike point. Evelyn put her head down and leaned into Adam’s chest. April looked like she was going to faint, while Mr. Brice admired the way Adam regarded the danger

about as much as he would a mosquito bite. Alex broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Yah, Adam, you should always send an S.O.S. when you get into trouble like that. Always!” agreed Alex in mock superiority.

“Oh, look who’s talking! You’ve never sent an S.O.S. in your life!” said Adam calmly.

“That’s not true! I sent an S.O.S. to Sarah to save me from my loneliness yesterday, but she didn’t respond. She and Hayley are too busy in China to bother with me.”

Ruth Brice cocked her head sideways at Evelyn with a questioning wonder, “China?”

Evelyn nodded. “Yes. Long story. She is studying there. But we shouldn’t take up any more of your time. It was very thoughtful of you to call us. I’m glad somebody did.”

“It was the least we could do,” said Trevor Brice. “We’re happy no harm came to Adam and April.”

Evelyn paused for a moment to ponder the casual use of “Adam and April” in a sentence. What did she know about this family? They seem nice enough. Their property and home appeared organized and neat and it is completely understandable why Adam would be so attracted to this young woman. She’s intelligent, beautiful, well-mannered, physically fit, and certainly seems to be enamored with him. But Evelyn had only recently begun getting used to Alex and Sarah together with the accompanying hugs and kisses. At least Sarah was a known factor, and a loved one at that! It is difficult enough for a single mother, but now to see the baby of the family paying so much attention to this stranger who lived in a remote section of the Void was uncomfortable. She glanced at Adam, who at 6 foot 4 inches tall could hardly be thought of as a baby.

“Well it means a lot to us, Trevor. I also appreciate the fact you were immediately willing to go after my Adam yourself when you learned what happened in town. Thank you. If there is ever anything we can do for you, please let us know,” she responded.

“Actually, there is something you can do for us,” Ruth Brice chimed in immediately. She exchanged glances with Trevor and April while she seemed hesitant to say what she was thinking aloud.

“Please, Mrs. Brice, anything you need. Just ask,” Adam interjected.

“Well, this incident sort of made us more vulnerable than we were before. It’s nerve-racking enough being out here, even with Kermit so close. Those men now know where to look for your son, and I’m afraid they’ll try to find him through us.”

“Oh Ruth! I do apologize,” said Evelyn. “Please forgive my thoughtlessness. What would you like? We can install a security system if you’d like. We have cameras, sensors, all sorts of devices to give you better security. We have weapons and people to train your whole family.”

Trevor Brice nodded in surprise at such a generous offer. “Well, Ms. Walsh, that... all that...would be...well, more than generous!”

Ruthy Brice interrupted, “Ms. Walsh, I do appreciate your offer, but that is not exactly what I had in mind.”

Between Adam, Alex, and Evelyn, they all chimed in with responses that were all in agreement with, “Whatever you’d like. Please. Ask.”

“I’d like one of those S.O.S. signal devices. If the probability of those people coming after us is great, I’d rather have the air force and cavalry come to our aid than fight these people alone. I hope that’s not too much to ask.”

Evelyn immediately moved forward and placed her arms around Ruth. “Of course, that’s not too much to ask. We’ll have one out to you within twenty-four hours, along with the other things. Adam will supervise the installation himself.”

April’s mom responded by unleashing a torrent of emotion. For too long she had lived in fear for her family, existing on the edge of nowhere with no real help nearby. This was true even though her husband was a major in the Texas Militia. He had kept them safe to this point, but now that the danger had increased, she was grateful to receive the gifts the Walsh family offered.

Adam held out his hand to Trevor, who had his arm around his teenage daughter. “Mr. Brice, please forgive me for placing your daughter in danger today. It was never my intent. Sometimes we just forget our very presence can stir up hornet’s nests. In my vehicle, I have weapons and a couple of sweet devices that will give you a distinct advantage over your average bandit or group of bandits. With your permission, I’d like to install them before I drive home to collect the rest.

“Apology accepted, Adam, and thank you for leading those men away from April. That tells me everything I need to know about you. Please stay for supper tonight?”

“Mr. Brice,” interrupted Alex, who took a few steps closer, waving his hand back and forth as if to squelch a bad idea. “Um, I’m not sure you understand what it means to invite Adam for supper. I hope you have more cattle than those six in the pen out back. You’ll need them if you’re planning to feed my little brother.”

Evelyn laughed. “Don’t be alarmed, Trevor. Alex is exaggerating. You’ll only need two or three head, max.”

Adam glanced away into the distance to ignore them. April felt as if she’d died and gone to heaven.

CHAPTER TWO

SLICE AND DICE

Recent snow-storms had blanketed the Himalayan region, making any form of climbing activities impossibly dangerous. Even at lower elevations the cold winds forced the population to bundle up at night, though it was only the beginning of fall. Despite the cold, the white-haired, elderly monk seemed impervious to the winds as they cut unmercifully across the covered top floor of the monastery.

Four guards wearing charcoal grey uniforms also ignored the inclement weather to keep watch over their master. Each of the four had been awakened long before dawn at the sound of a hand-written note being slipped under their door, instructing them to join their teacher before sunrise. The invitation indicated they were to attend, speak no words, and merely witness the event about to transpire.

Master Cheng was the embodiment of patience as he centered his attention upon the neat rows of trainees seated on the cold stone pavement of the courtyards below. Uniformed instructors paced slowly up and down rows of novices, issuing commands. In unison they stood, bowed to the instructors, then spread out in organized fashion for the morning rituals.

Beside the master on the wind-swept rooftop stood a tall, slender female wearing a closely wrapped uniform enabling her to keep relatively warm, yet also assured her the freedom of movement needed to spar. Being one of only seven individuals allowed to wear weapons in the presence of the Master, she proudly wore a katana slung across her back with the handle protruding above her shoulder.

From this towering height, Hayley Walsh could distinguish Sarah from the other students below. It wasn't that there were only two students with any hair, but that Sarah had the only phosphorescent pink hair within three thousand miles.

Hayley stood quietly as she waited for Master Cheng to break the silence. It was custom to allow the teacher the first and last words in any situation. She wondered if he often tested the patience of those around

him by being silent for so long, but at last he spoke.

“Sarah shows great promise, little one. Yet, she harbors great pain,” said the bright-eyed monk who was a head shorter than Hayley.

“She continues to heal from the loss of her family, Sifu Cheng. Yet, she has come far since their deaths over two years past.” Hayley turned to her teacher. “Her desire to learn is greater than any I possessed on the day my father delivered me to Shaolin.”

“That is true, Hayley. But your gift of learning gives you an advantage. You only had to be shown something once, and you performed it perfectly from that day forward. You mastered in a few short years what others take decades to perfect. You are my star pupil, yet there was never a desperate quality in your desire. You have never known the usual struggles of achieving balance because you were born with it. Sarah has not been blessed that way, but yes, she does have great desire. See how she performs?” he said gesturing toward the courtyard below.

Hayley nodded with approval as she watched her best friend and almost-sister smoothly transition from one form to another with skill far beyond those around her. While the youngest of the trainees watched Sarah for a clue as to which move came next in the graceful forms, Sarah’s eyes were half closed as if concentrating on an energy yet discovered by her fellows.

Hayley longed for the end of each day when Sarah finished the chores every student must perform, and after the evening meal, she would then have Sarah demonstrate what she learned that day. After gentle instruction and tips for improvement, Hayley would end the evening by soothing Sarah’s aches and pains with deep tissue massages and ancient Chinese medicinal practices. While it was customary for Shaolin trainees to bunk in the long single room together, Master Cheng had agreed while Hayley was there, Sarah and the other female student, Guan Yin, could share her quarters. Sarah and Guan Yin were only the second and third female novices admitted to training in the past century, Hayley being the first.

The old teacher turned to Hayley, who continued to watch the students below. “You have done well since the day you took your leave of us. I observed new techniques as you sparred with Chi Wah and Kwai Po yesterday. Together, my two most experienced warriors could not best you. Please spar with me now that I may learn from my student.”

The aged master took a step back, placed his right fist into his left palm and bowed. Hayley reciprocated, then transitioned to a crane stance. Master Chen crouched low in the classic tiger, and the fight was on. A flurry of blows, blocks, kicks, and grappling techniques continued for minutes, with the teacher audibly shouting the name of each technique and style Hayley used in attack or defense followed by, “Show me something new!”

“Eagle Claw! Bamboo Leaf Palm! Very good!”

Although the master used techniques only a very advanced sensei would know, he found he could not land a blow on his best pupil. Nor could she strike him as long as she utilized techniques known to the aging warrior. The four witnesses to the bout experienced varying degrees of shock and wonder as their eyes followed the dueling pair across the rooftop.

The Master pressed forward using an attack he had personally developed. Having never revealed this technique to any living soul, he believed she could not possibly anticipate it. Closing on his opponent, he executed the savage blow but discovered she was simply not there. A powerful kick came from behind, sending the grey-bearded man flying forward. As Hayley expected, he flipped and skidded to a stop on his feet in a strong stance. He remained in that pose for a moment before standing erect to bow. Hayley had not expected him to end the match so soon.

“So, the student has surpassed the teacher. Good. But where did you learn this technique? It was a mere footnote in a scroll written by a 14th century monk. The ability to...” he paused to fish for the words, “... be not there, has been regarded as myth by many. My teacher thought it so, as did I until this moment.”

“Sifu, I read that scroll and pondered the footnote for many months before I made inquiries. There were no answers from those within our discipline, but I did find the answers I needed from an unlikely source.” She paused for a moment. Her countenance revealed what she was about to say would seem incredulous, even to a man with deep metaphysical roots.

“Speak it, little one.”

“The answers I sought came from a nine-year-old girl, Master.”

The master’s eyes brightened. “A golden child?”

Interlocking arms with Master Cheng, she smiled as they walked slowly to the steps that would lead them to the lower floors. “Golden Child is for movies, Sifu Cheng. There has never been a child such as Coraline. She’s more of an awakening for the human race this planet has not seen. I doubt the world is ready for this child. They’ll kill her before they start adoring her.”

“Such high praise, little one. I often thought the same thing about you, even though you were much older than nine when you first came to us.”

“This is different, Master. I inherited my ability to devour knowledge from my parents. A child prodigy, perhaps, but nothing remotely close to Coraline. My brothers inherited the same traits. Alex, although an accomplished scientist in his own rite, is gifted in a different way. He leads a charmed life. We’ve been amazed at his ability to ‘be not there’ when the hammer drops.”

“He drops hammers?”

Hayley laughed. “Forgive me, Sensei; it is an American expression meaning when danger is imminent. I’ve seen him ‘be not there’ during a hail of bullets and I’ve seen him do it in air-to-air combat. He almost seems invulnerable, yet I know it is merely talent accompanied by incredible luck. No, this child Coraline Paden is more than simply gifted or charmed. It’s almost as if the universe itself gave birth to a child that embodies the next stage in human evolution. Those not like her will fade away like the dinosaurs.”

“Ah. But you contradict yourself, Hayley. You said, on one hand the universe gave birth to this child, but on the other hand, you said the world is not ready for her. The world must be ready if she is truly a child of the universal field. But as you said, humans will always fear and resist what they do not understand. Perhaps this Coraline is here to teach us not to fear.”

They paused before a shrine dedicated to a previous Master where the elderly monk offered incense. Hayley stood back and patiently waited for him to complete his ritual. Master Cheng moved respectfully to a shelf beneath the shrine and pulled out a neatly folded hand-embroidered sash from below a likeness of the deceased. He held it at arms-length for a moment before pressing it to his forehead, then turned to Hayley.

“This sash, or a copy of it, has been passed on from master to master of Shaolin for 14 centuries. Every living master is its keeper but may not wear it unless the previous master acknowledges while he was yet fit; his student surpassed and bested him. This sash has not been worn in eight centuries, until today.”

Hayley was stunned. She could not form words for a few moments, looking from the sash to her master and back again. She even turned to the four witnesses standing silently behind her, hoping for support for what she was about to say.

“But Master Cheng, I can’t be the Master of Shaolin! I...I cannot! I will not! I have tasks away from here. You have aged instructors who are more than worthy to take your place!”

“You misunderstand little one. The sash does not make you Master of Shaolin. The sash merely indicates you have surpassed the master and bested him. It does not happen very often. You may take this sash with you in your tasks. We will have another made. If I am bested again, I will give that one away also. But none may wear this but those who have surpassed their living master while he is fit. Lastly, the wearer of this sash may open his or her own school.”

“My own school?”

Master Cheng nodded. Hayley was relieved and humbled. She carefully wrapped the sash around her waist and tied it off with gratitude. While living in New Castlehale, she had continued her training through knowledge gained from books and ancient manuscripts, applying the

techniques to the things she learned during her earlier years at Shaolin. She felt all her personal efforts now paid off, not just because of the sash, but because she had pleased Master Cheng. She leaned forward and hugged her teacher.

“And now, little one, please excuse me as I go about my duties. I suggest you go about yours.”

They bowed and separated. She moved as if in a dream as she walked down the wide staircase. In a flurry of fresh thoughts, she wondered how the other instructors, some thirty or forty years her senior, would react when they laid eyes on the ancient sash. Many, whom she had grown close to, would celebrate with her. One or two felt she was even too young to be allowed to wear weapons in the presence of the Master. These would outwardly congratulate her yet begrudge her secretly.

Stepping into the courtyard, only one instructor noticed her initially. His eyes passed over the sash and continued on as if he had seen nothing out of the ordinary. The students glanced at it as she walked up and down each row, but no one understood the significance of the intricately woven sash. Stopping occasionally, she would give instruction to a trainee who was making obvious mistakes. Raising a fist here or kicking a calf muscle there to force a student into a wider stance, she kept an eye out for anyone entering the courtyard. Only once did a runner stop to relay a message to the class instructor and then hurry on. There was no acknowledgment whatsoever anything was different about her attire. Moving from courtyard to courtyard she would occasionally pause to inspect weapons-racks or watch the third-years spar. It wasn't until she reached the largest of the courtyards, where the advanced students were seated in neat rows before five elderly instructors, that she noticed the first iota of recognition. Master Cheng stood at the top of the steps with his advanced instructors looking down on the courtyard. He clapped his hands once as she approached the steps. All five ranking instructors, along with every student present, stood and bowed to Hayley. The Master clapped his hands again and the trainees moved to tighter rows in the center of the open area. From two directions, students came trotting into the large courtyard, Sarah among them, and made neat rows. With a grand gesture Master Cheng invited Hayley to stand at his right hand. She moved with deliberate strides to the spot indicated, then turned to face the filled courtyard as he spoke.

“This morning I ask you join with me in celebrating a remarkable event. The sash worn by Hayley Walsh has been passed down from master to master for hundreds of years for presentation only to individuals who have surpassed the Master of Shaolin while he is still fit. It has only been worn by two individuals in 14 centuries. This day, Hayley Walsh has earned the right to wear this sash. You all have been witness to her skill in defeating each of my instructors, and even her mastery at besting two of

my instructors simultaneously. That is a feat rarely accomplished, yet this very morning I proudly acknowledge she bested me in a contest. These four guardians are my witnesses. Please honor her for her outstanding and rare accomplishment.”

In unison, the assembly of teachers and students bowed yet again, then began to applaud and shout their congratulations. When the accolades subsided, he continued speaking.

“With this sash comes not only honor, but the great opportunity of opening her own school back in the United States, should she choose this path. To aid her in this task, I am offering her seven individuals to accompany her to her home in Texas. Those who would add their name for consideration will indicate so to your instructor. The final decision of choosing applicants will be Hayley’s with my recommendations.”

Sarah’s face lit up. This changed everything, she thought. As happy as she was to train at Shaolin, she also missed her sweetheart. On top of that, if Hayley opens her own school, Sarah would be a pupil with favored status. It also meant they would be leaving Shaolin to return to Texas soon. Very soon.