

Chapter 1: A Most Unusual Occurrence

The snow and sleet slashed down from dark, ominous, forbidding clouds that blanketed the sky so heavily that no sun could shine upon the little village of Terrormaysu. This was nothing new. In fact, this poor little village was so cold, dark, remote, and downright frightening that only the very unlucky who were born there, or those who followed Rigor C. Mortis, the walking death messenger and owner of the mines, dared to live or visit in Terrormaysu. This was all about to change. But, would the change be for the better?

On this particular day, as the sleet beat on frosted windowpanes, there was born a serene and beautiful girl child that brought promise to some, and chilling fear to others. This tiny baby, newly born to overworked and tired parents, caused something very rare to happen on the day of her birth. What happened would be talked about for days and days as everyone tried to figure out if this was a weird coincidence, or rather some omen that the fortunes of Terrormaysu were about to change.

On the day of the child's birth, recorded as 3/3/3:33 p.m. for six minutes, six whole minutes, the sun glimmered from behind dark clouds, and then all of sudden, it blazed light over the mountains and across the sky for exactly three minutes. This had never, ever happened in Terrormaysu before! Every adult resident, every visitor, every child playing the game, Life or Death - Dare You to Slide Across the Ice, halted what they were doing and cast their eyes towards the blue, never before seen, illuminated sky. A sound of awe and wonder escaped the lips of most children, and quite a few of the adult residents too. But, this event had a very different effect on the followers of Rigor C.

Mortis. They began to wail and scream, and running crazily in circles shielding their eyes, they bumped nastily into anyone nearby.

As quickly as the event happened, it seemed even quicker when the moment passed and the sky grew cold and dark again. The snow and sleet resumed its steady descent on the little village, and a mean and bitter wind joined it with a whipping howl. Everyone scurried towards their homes, and the only sounds besides the whipping wailing wind sound was the slamming of doors, and the banging of locks being thrust into place against possible intruders and... even more concerning, Rigor C. Mortis, himself!

In a little red brick house nestled on the side of Mt. Protector, the tallest mountain peak in a chain that surrounded the little village of Terrormaysu, the beautiful baby rested peacefully, unaware it seemed, that her birth had caused such a wondrous and terrible disturbance just a short time ago. Sarah, her mother, and Luke, her father, began discussing what to name their daughter, and if indeed, it should be connected to the most unusual happening to ever occur in Terrormaysu. Sarah felt that it was important and an omen as women often do. "Luke, listen to me," Sarah said with tears in her eyes. "Nothing like this has ever happened in this horrible, cold, miserable, gray village that I can remember. Surely, you must believe it too! We must name our baby girl a name that is significant to this occurrence," Sarah pleaded.

"I understand how you feel Sarah, I really do, but we agreed to name our baby after my grandparents, Matilda, if it was a girl, and Henry, if it was a boy. I think that we should stick to our plan."

"NO!" Sarah yelled. "We can't, we just can't, I feel it in my bones! If we don't name our baby girl something significant we will be making a dreadful mistake!" Now Sarah never shouted, it was not her

nature, and Luke was caught totally off guard. Usually, Sarah just did what Luke suggested, and that was the end of the discussion. Sarah's reaction definitely caused Luke to pause and think it over before responding.

"Ok, Sarah, what do you think that we should name her?"

"Well... I did have a name in mind... it just seemed to enter my head of its own volition, and then it just felt right in my heart," Sarah spoke quietly and hesitantly sensing that if she did not push Luke might just give way on this.

"Well? Are you going to tell me?" Luke was growing impatient with Sarah. He was tired, very tired, and it was getting late, almost 9:00 p.m., and usually Luke was fast asleep by now since he was up before dawn.

"I think that we should name her Destiny Hope," Sarah said softly. "That is the perfect name for her. She is going to change life in Terrormaysu, I just know it." Sarah was getting more excited as she spoke, and her voice pitch was getting higher with each word as she began speaking faster and faster. "What happened today was not a coincidence; it was a sign, a sign that our little girl is here to change this awful town into something different, something miraculous! Her birth has brought hope to a town that has been enshrouded in darkness for as long as anyone can remember. It is the first time the light has shined down upon this miserable little town! It is a sign, I just know it! Please, Luke, just this time..." Sarah's voice began to fade as she laid her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes, struggling to get her breath. The color seemed to drain from her face like a watercolor left in the sun for many, many years... something that never happened in Terrormaysu.

"Sarah, Sarah... Sarah, talk to me," Luke pleaded, fearing, realizing, that the life force seemed to be slipping from Sarah with every second that was passing.

"Luke," Sarah said so softly that he needed to lean close to her mouth to be sure that she was breathing, speaking at all. "Luke, promise me, promise me, that you will call her Destiny Hope, please... and I," Sarah went silent, a death rattle echoed in place of her voice.

"Of course I will Sarah, but please, please don't leave me," and at the same moment that Luke uttered his plea, it was overshadowed by a loud banging, banging, on the front door, and the wind picked up with a fierce howl causing the windows to rattle in their frames. Luke knew, as a shrill whistle pierced the star-less night that the deathwalker had come for Sarah's life. Everyone would know by dawn- for when Rigor C. Mortis sent his deathwalker for collection, a horrible red X remained carved in the victims' front door... dripping unexplained blood for three days. Then, as suddenly as the mark appeared at the point of death, 9:00 p.m. exactly in Sarah's case, the door returned to its normal state, except... the faintest shadow of a scar in memory of the death remained.

Luke lay upon his bed and wept bitterly unable to comprehend the meaning of this miraculous and yet death filled day. Finally, mercy was given, and Luke fell into a fitful slumber. The little girl baby slept through the whole ordeal of her mother's dying, but from that day forward she was known as Destiny Hope, a strange and beautiful name for an angelic little girl living in such a horrible village.

The years passed by slowly, slowly, because it seemed that nothing changed in Terrormaysu. The skies remained dark, the air frigid cold, and the death mark with dripping blood appeared on doors more and more often. If anything, it seemed that things grew worse than before

Destiny Hope's birth. The sky appeared just a little darker everyday, if that was possible. The howling wind blew more and more often. The death mark seemed carved deeper in the front doors of those desperate to know some small measure of merriment. Everyone, well, almost everyone, seemed to grow paler and more joyless. There were no more festivities, not even on Christmas. People just stayed in their houses with their shutters clamped closed, their bolts snugly fit into place except when they were forced to go out to work in the mine.

Chapter 2: The Cryptsum Mines and a Dark Time

Cryptsum stones from the mine were in high demand in a 21st century outside world that the people of Terrormaysu never saw. The pale people of Terrormaysu chipped away day after day, but they saw little reward for their efforts. They were given meager lodgings, enough food to survive, and their children were left unschooled. There was no point in educating the children. Their fate was already foretold.

At the age of nine, each and every child, no matter girl or boy, no matter if deformed or handicapped, all went to work in Rigor C. Mortis' mines. At first, the children were taught to shine the mined Cryptsum stones. Hour after hour, children aged nine to eleven polished the stones until they sparkled perfectly when examined under a gigantic ultra-violet light. This was the only time that the children of Terrormaysu saw brilliant colors for it must be remembered that they lived in a cold drab little village in the middle of nowhere. It seemed to the children that the colors danced to a sweet melody as the stones, nestled in purple velvet, revolved around and around, and the deathwalker supervisor looked for little spots of dirt that the children might have missed. For this reason, the brilliant colors, the

children looked forward to their ninth birthday and going to work at the mines. Even Destiny Hope, now approaching this prime age, looked forward to joining her fellow children that left for work in the icy dark well before dawn allowed a pale shadow of gray light.

Certainly by now you are wondering... what of the change that was going to happen? Is it simply that things got a little bit worse? Surely, this cannot be the change... and most assuredly it is not as you are about to find out. The key to the change was the day that Destiny Hope turned nine, and the day that she entered the mine for the very first time.

Destiny awoke in the dark on the day she was to turn nine. She felt very strange inside; she felt a weird fluttering feeling that was hard to truly describe. She pondered the unusual feeling as she remained tucked under her threadbare blanket that tried to ward off the cold.

"Destiny Hope, hurry, or you will be late for your first day at the mine," her father called from the tiny kitchen where he stirred the porridge one last time before pouring two small servings into chipped bowls. "Hurry, I want to give you a special birthday present after we eat, and then we need to be on our way."

Destiny Hope pulled off her nightgown while still under the covers. Her little body shivered uncontrollably until she pulled her flannel shirt over her bony shoulders, and quickly pulled up her black mine overalls. *That's it*, thought Destiny Hope, *It is because I get to go to the mine today for the first time. That is why I feel so strange inside.* Slipping on her wool socks and work boots, Destiny Hope went into the bathroom and rinsed her face with icy cold water from the ceramic basin. She ran a bristle brush through her blonde waist long

hair and brushed her teeth with salt and baking soda before heading into the kitchen for her meager breakfast.

"Today is a special day," her father said. "You turn nine and get to go to the mine and see all the brilliant colors in the polished stones." Luke was trying to make it sound exciting, but he knew better. The polishing job assigned to the youngest children was not so bad, but it got worse with every level of growth. Luke now worked in the bowels of the mountain. The air was even colder below ground and the dampness down in the darkness seemed to seep into the pores and stay there chilling the marrow inside the bones. Luke hoisted his pickaxe in the same repetitive motion for 10 hours a day with only one 30-minute break where the hardworking men were served weak tea and one slice of gray meat between two slices of hard stale bread. *Still, Luke thought to himself, there is no point in telling Destiny Hope what she has to look forward to. It is better to let her believe, if just for a little while, that she is beginning an exciting new chapter of her life.*

"Destiny, honey, here is a special gift for your ninth birthday." Carefully, Destiny Hope took her gift out from the brown paper bag her father had used as wrapping paper.

"Oh, daddy," Destiny exclaimed, "I love it!" In her hand Destiny Hope held a beautiful purple velvet ribbon with a small crystal heart attached to make a necklace. It was rare to see any color in Terrormaysu, and a purple velvet ribbon and sparkling crystal was unheard of. "Where did you get it daddy?" Destiny Hope asked with reverence as she stared at this treasured gift.

"Well, honey, this ribbon and crystal was your mother's, and before her, her mother's, and before that her mother's. It is very special, and is always passed to the oldest girl. I don't really know how far back it goes, but I do know that it is always passed as a gift

when the oldest girl turns nine and goes to the mine for the first time. It is very important that you never show this to anyone, but you must always keep it with you. Here, let me tie it securely, and let's tuck it inside your shirt where no one will see it. If you are ever afraid just put your hand around the crystal. I'm not exactly sure what it will do, or if it will help, but your mother told me about this when we were married and I can't help but wonder if she had kept it on while you were being born if she might still be here with us today... So, please, never ever take it off except to take a bath, ok?"

"I promise daddy," Destiny Hope said with tears in her aquamarine eyes.

Chapter 3: Inside the Mine

The strange and unusual feeling that Destiny Hope experienced upon waking did not diminish as she approached the mine with her father. If anything, the feeling was stronger than ever which surprised her, and it started getting her even more nervous than she already was about the big change on her ninth birthday - starting work in the mine. Destiny Hope had felt sure that when she identified the feeling and gave it meaning (that it was attached to her first day polishing stones) it would go away. This had not happened. Instead, the fluttering grew stronger the closer she got to the triangular common grounds where the entrance to the mine waited to engulf the workers. "Daddy, I feel really strange inside. It's as if my stomach is doing flip flops, and my heart is beating really fast."

"That is normal, sweetie. I remember my first day going to the mines. I was so afraid that I would do something wrong that I felt like I was going to throw up," Luke told his daughter trying to reassure her

that everything was going to be fine. "Just remember to do exactly what they tell you, and keep on working no matter how tired you get. Our food and fuel rations are determined by how much we accomplish each day at our jobs and your contribution is very important if we are going to have enough food, and enough wood to heat our house and cook our meals."

"I will work hard, really hard, and maybe if I am really good we can get you a new pair of work boots too," Destiny Hope told her father trying to ignore the strange feeling that kept beating and turning inside her. Destiny did not have a chance to think about anything else for in the next moment a shrill whistle pierced the air, and the workers began racing towards the common grounds where role was called and materials for the day were distributed to the workers. Destiny joined the other children, age nine to eleven, in the left-hand corner of the common ground to begin her first day of taking orders from a deathwalker worker.

"Aye, yur new to our little crew, ain't cha?" the deathwalker worker eyed Destiny Hope with a malicious gleam in his eye. "Well, we'll just see what cha are made of, now won't we? Here's your polishing rag, and ya better not lose it, or that'll cost ya from your daily tally, hear me girlie?"

"Yes sir," Destiny Hope spoke in firm voice wanting the man to believe that she was not afraid and that she would work very hard. In fact, Destiny Hope was trembling inside, and she was wishing that she could have remained at Miss Crumpet's Kiddies Care. True, it was always icy cold there, and the watery soup and stale crackers for lunch were not so good, but still, at least she could play with the other kids, and there was not a deathwalker worker looking to find fault with her.

Destiny Hope, along with 17 other children, were hustled into the gaping mouth of the mine by Mr. Crater, and then they were rushed down a long corridor into a vast and damp cavern filled with shadows and gloom. In the corner were gray metal carts filled with stones of all shapes and sizes. Destiny Hope followed the other children as they formed a line, and one by one, each retrieved their stone from their cubicle. Finally, Destiny, who was last in line, was standing before Mr. Crater waiting to be given her first stone to polish. "Aye little girlie, what's yur name?"

"Destiny Hope, sir."

"Destiny Hope, is it? What kinda name is that? Yur must think yur somethin special, now doncha? Well, here's a stone that's perfect for ya," he said laughing wickedly as he handed her a stone the size of a basketball. Destiny stumbled under the weight of the stone, but managed not to drop it and give Mr. Crater the satisfaction of laughing again, or even worse whacking her with his scalding stick. "Now go on and join the other kiddies at E table and make sure yur polish that stone right good, or yur be workin for nuthin, got it girlie?" Destiny moved as quickly as possible considering the weight of the stone and joined the five other children at E table. Nobody looked up at her when she took her seat; every child knew that you could not talk, or stop polishing, unless you wanted to get the bad end of Mr. Crater's scalding stick.

The day seemed to last forever as Destiny Hope stayed stooped over her gigantic stone. Hour after hour after hour, Destiny Hope polished the stone... here, there, roll it over slightly and begin the tedious task all over again. Her aquamarine eyes felt gritty and it was getting harder and harder to stay focused on the horrible task of cleaning her huge stony basketball. It seemed all the other kids had stones the size of fists, and they would come and go, come and go. Every time they came

back they had a smile on their face and a sparkle in their eye still in wonder from seeing all the brilliant colors as their stone was examined under the ultra-violet light in the glowing inspection shed at the back of the cavern. Even the 15-minute break for lunch did not lift up Destiny Hope's spirits. Everything felt dirty and gray - so gray, grayer than she ever remembered even though she had been raised in this colorless and drab little village. She almost wished she still had the feeling that had woken her up this morning. Anything was better than this overwhelming numbness and grayness.

"Well, well, girlie it looks like ya didn't earn anythin today," Mr. Crater cackled in Destiny Hope's face so that his foul breath and yellow tobacco stained teeth was all she could smell and see. "Yur right lucky I don't give ya a scolding with my scalding stick ya lazy think yur somethin special girlie," he said with glee in his voice. "Guess ya'll be workin on that same stone again tomorrow," he said as he put a zero tally next to Destiny's number: 93939, and then he shuffled back to his high wooden tally desk with the bare light bulb hanging over it. Shortly after, the shrill end of day whistle sounded and Destiny Hope went out to the triangular common ground to wait for her father.

Now, you may again be thinking you are being deceived that change occurred on the day that Destiny Hope turned nine and started work at the mine, but the start of change did happen on that day. It happened three minutes after Destiny Hope stepped out of the mine while her eyes searched eagerly for her father in the crowd pushing and shoving each other in hopes of getting home before a deathwalker's toll. Destiny felt a strange heat against her chest where the crystal heart was resting hidden under her tattered jacket and threadbare flannel shirt. At the same second that she felt the warmth, the strange and unusual

feeling that Destiny Hope had experienced upon waking returned even stronger. More unusual still, the snow beneath her black galoshes began to melt until she was standing in a circle of muddy ground. Even more strange was that nobody seemed to notice at first; everyone was too busy looking for family members, or rushing off to find the safety of homes where locks could be bolted and comfort could be found. Nobody noticed at first, but unfortunately for Destiny Hope, the first person that did notice was Mr. Crater.

"Whats tha matter with ya girlie? Did you pee yourselves sos ya melted all the snow neath ya?" He walked over to take a closer look, but as he came within 3 ft. of Destiny Hope the strangest thing of all occurred. Some unseen force swept Mr. Crater's feet out from under him and he hit the ground with a loud thud. Stunned, he sat in the sooty snow looking up at Destiny Hope with such an evil look in his eyes that a shudder ran through Destiny Hope beginning at the nape of her neck and exiting at the base of her spine. "Ya'll pay for this, I swear ya will," Mr. Crater snarled as foamy spittle dripped from the side of his mouth. "If it's the last thin I do I'll see ya put inta Fissure Prison for this, mark my words!"

Destiny Hope was speechless as all Mr. Crater's evil spewed forth on her. She seemed to be standing in a cold vacuum, frozen in time as swirls of black vapor danced around her like dervishes out of control. Everyone in the triangle was now staring at Destiny Hope and Mr. Crater. Time was moving in slow motion as Mr. Crater began rising up, up, up to his feet advancing towards Destiny Hope all in one motion. His lips were blue and the hair on his head was standing on end; his claw-like fists were clenched and raised in the air prepared to strike a deadly blow. Whoosh, Mr. Crater was flung back by a powerful thrust of warm air, whoosh... pushed back again, and again, and again until he

turned and began to run as fast as his spindly legs would carry him. The warm air followed, leaving melted snow in its wake, and Mr. Crater and a muddy path vanished around a bend in the road.

Just like statues that had been unfrozen, people finally began to move slowly and were saying little; all had looks of shock and wonder plastered on their faces. Destiny Hope was the last one freed from the spell of the experience, and only then because her father was speaking to her, calling her back. "Destiny, Destiny, come, we need to leave before deathwalker's get to thinking and start asking questions." Luke scooped up his daughter, placed her on his broad shoulders, and began walking briskly towards home.

Chapter 4: Destiny's Truth is Denied

"Destiny Hope! What in the heck happened out there with Mr. Crater?" Luke grabbed a hold of Destiny Hope by her shoulders and glaring into her eyes confronted his daughter as soon as they arrived home and shed their jackets and galoshes. "I saw everyone staring at the two of you, and then Mr. Crater was running out of the common grounds. It happened so fast, and I was late getting out, but I hope, I sure do hope you didn't do anything to make Mr. Crater mad at you! That won't be good for you, and it sure won't be good for me either!"

"I... I don't know for sure what happened daddy. I was standing there and Mr. Crater started coming at me. All of a sudden he was on the ground and saying terrible things at me. And then... swirling black vapors surrounded me... and then, well, I don't know... I was surrounded by the most beautiful colors. The colors were soft and bright, still and sparkling; I have never felt so safe and peaceful. Oh, daddy, it was so

wonderful, and then the next thing I knew you were calling me and the colors disappeared and you were picking me up."

"What did you do to Mr. Crater?" Luke asked his daughter harshly letting her know that he was not buying the story, and any more foolishness would not be tolerated.

"I told you - I didn't do anything!" Destiny was now getting as upset as her father. "I can't believe that you don't believe me, that you think I am lying!" Destiny was exhausted. Her first day at the mines had been a complete disaster. She had not earned any tallies for rations, Mr. Crater had it out for her right from the beginning, and then to top it all off something horrible *and* wonderful had happened and her father was calling her a liar! "I don't care if you believe me! I didn't do anything, and Mr. Crater is a nasty old skeleton that likes to pick on little children. He's mean, and he smells terrible like rotting garbage... and I don't care - I'm never going back there!"

"What did you just say?" Luke asked his daughter incredulously. "I'm sure I didn't hear you right, but if I did, just remember this. If you don't go to work, you will go to Fissure Prison, and there's nothing, nothing at all that I can do about it! You know what?" Luke said throwing his hands in the air and turning on his heel to head to the tiny dingy kitchen to stoke some wood into the cook stove... "I can't take any more tonight! Go to your room and you can forget about dinner until you start telling the truth and realize just how many choices you have - which are exactly none!" Crying, Destiny Hope turned on her heels and stalked away to her closet-sized room.

Chapter 5: Luke's Effort a Little Too Late

With a gentle knock on Destiny Hope's door, Luke entered carrying a plate with a small measure of gelatinous beef stew and a hard tack biscuit. "Honey, I'm really sorry... it has been a rough day, and to tell the truth... well, it has been strange just about every birthday from the day you were born. I guess it's time I told you about that day, so why don't you eat up and c'mon out when you're done."

Destiny did not even bother answering her father, but just sat there with her with her body stiff and rigid looking down at her stuffed fuzzy brown bear picking at the one button eye left on his tired face. Luke felt his impatience and irritation rising again like a flood reaching high tide and quickly set the plate on the scarred dresser. Stepping out of the room before he exploded, Luke thought to himself, *Damn, that child can be difficult. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was put on this earth just to test my patience.* Luke haphazardly cleaned the few dishes and pans from dinner, and decided to just let it go for the evening when Destiny Hope appeared arms now wrapped tightly around her chest.

Destiny Hope's surly attitude was obvious as she spoke. "So, now you're blaming me that it was a strange day when I was born? I guess everything is my fault including that my mom died because she had me!" Destiny Hope's voice had escalated to a high pitch by the time she was finished.

"I never said that honey. Certainly it is not your fault that your mom died, or that it was a strange day. It is not even your fault that every birthday is so weird, but sometimes I guess it just feels a little bit that way... what can I say... that I'll try harder to remember that you're just a young girl, and that it is hard for you too. I know

it is... I really do. Now please, just come sit by the fire and let me tell you the story about the day you were born." Reluctantly, but slightly more open, Destiny Hope moved to a hard backed chair near the fire stove and prepared to listen to the story about the unusual events surrounding her birth.

Chapter 6: The Man in the Purple Robe

Later in her room, at the edge of sleep, Destiny Hope mulled over what her father had told her trying to make sense of it all. *Really*, she thought to herself, *what does any of it matter. Nothing is going to change the fact that I have to go back to that horrible mine tomorrow.* A chilling shudder ran through Destiny Hope at the thought of facing Mr. Crater. Suddenly, Destiny Hope remembered what her father had told her about the crystal heart maybe helping, and carefully she reached inside her dressing gown to grasp it in the palm of her hand. She began thinking about her mother; the mother that she had never really known. The crystal heart started to grow warm, and warmer still, and Destiny Hope felt herself drifting into a wakeful sleepiness. Inside of her mind she saw a vision of herself standing and all around her a colorful misty vapor swirled clockwise. The colors were muted pinks, blues, greens, purples, and yellows all mixed gently together moving fast, but quietly, moving and moving, drawing her deeper and deeper in a silent pinpoint of herself. It seemed that she drifted off and lost seconds, but then she was no longer seeing the vision; she was within it.

Destiny Hope was standing in a field of endless tulips in every color imaginable. Puffy white clouds gently floated by and the soft breeze caressed her cheek. In the distance she saw verdant green hills and valleys speckled with picturesque cottages. In front of the horizon

turquoise waters rippled as sailboats floated to and fro. A single bird hovered unmoving in the sky; the silence was so quiet it seemed to be loud. The colors were somehow different too. They were so much richer than Destiny Hope had imagined them in her cell of a bedroom back in dreary Terrormaysu. They were brighter, yet softer, and they seemed to be denser too. The air had no deathwalker smell in it. This was what caught Destiny Hope's attention the most. The air was fragrant with scents that Destiny Hope vaguely remembered; she did not know from where. She breathed in deeply again and again trying to ignite her memory so that she could put names to the sweet smells that surrounded her. Words began to float in her mind like cinnamon, honeysuckle, moss, and baking bread. Soon, Destiny Hope became overwhelmed by words and senses. Odd sensations moved through her body that she had never experienced before. She was incredibly peaceful and excited all at the same time. She felt quivery like the ripples of the water were rippling through her too. It seemed that she stood for a very long time just drinking in the warmth of the sun, the perfumed scents, and the colors that flowed in and out of her skin. She felt both solid and liquid. It was then that she met him for the very first time.

He did not just appear in full form all of a sudden. At first, Destiny Hope only noticed a shimmering light about 3 ft. in front of her as it began pulsing growing larger than smaller, larger and smaller. It sparkled like millions of diamonds in the sun; Destiny Hope imagined it as one of the polished stones under the light that the workers harvested from inside the mine. The light seemed to settle and then expand; it no longer grew smaller again. Slowly, like a movie coming into focus, a man in a majestic flowing iridescent purple robe materialized before Destiny Hope's eyes. Strangely enough, Destiny Hope was not frightened or startled by this occurrence; it was like a long

lost friend returning but from where she could not even fathom. He stood there, just stood there, giving Destiny Hope time to get used to the idea that he was before her. Although he was not talking, Destiny Hope was picking up thoughts that flowed from him to her. He seemed to be reassuring her that he knew her and that he was there to help her in some way. They stood looking at each other for quite awhile until the man extended his hand. Wholly trusting him, Destiny Hope reached towards him and at the same moment, as if by magic, a cobblestone walkway appeared. Together, hands clasped, they started walking towards the hills and valleys and turquoise waters.

Chapter 7: The First Remembrances

After many moments of walking in sweet silence, the man began talking without looking at Destiny Hope while he continued walking as if he had not a care in the world. His voice was soft but strong as if he knew everything and only wanted to make Destiny Hope aware and comfortable in her new surroundings. "You are doing quite well with the transition from Terrormaysu to this new dimension that is before you. You should be well pleased, I imagine, finding yourself outside of the gray and dreary place that has kept you prisoner for all your life. Do you have any idea where you are, or why you brought yourself here?"

"I didn't bring myself here," Destiny said quietly. "I'm not even sure how I got here."

"I'm quite sure you believe that to be true right now, but after the remembrances are awakened you'll see that in fact you did bring yourself here and can do so at any time. All of this was written to be a long time ago by you. It is your destiny and I am honored that you

chose me as your teacher on this plane. I will be serving up your remembrances and guiding you on your journey here and in Terrormaysu."

"Remembrances... journey... this doesn't feel like a dream, but it must be because I have no idea what you're talking about. I wonder if I'll wake up and forget everything," Destiny stopped walking and looked up at the men questioningly. "I will, won't I?"

"I promise you that you will remember everything quite clearly upon waking, and even though you will be back in Terrormaysu - you will return here as well again and again," he said softly with love and care shining from his sterling-colored eyes.

"Really, truly, I will get to come back here? This is like a dream come true! It is so beautiful and peaceful and I really feel like I know you even though I know that can't be true."

"You do know me. You have known me for longer than time exists, and I have always known you too. You may not remember yet, but you will." Hand in hand, Destiny Hope and the man began walking again until they soon approached a whitewashed cottage with a thatched roof. Smoke was spiraling from the chimney and the front yard was with filled with daffodils and roses.

"Why are we stopping here?" Destiny Hope asked expectantly.

"There is someone I want you to meet. This person has been waiting patiently to see you again. You may not remember her at first, but instead of questioning or wondering... let your heart be your guide in remembering. Do you think that you can do that?"

"I'll try," Destiny Hope said softly as her heartbeat began to flutter with anticipation and unexplainable joy. At that precise moment, the door to the cottage opened and out walked a beautiful lady surrounded by light not from above her, but from the inside out.

Chapter 8: The Reunion

As if gliding on air, the shining woman walked gracefully towards Destiny Hope. She did not rush forward; she did not hold back. She moved forward as if the motion was as natural as a river flowing into the sea. As she reached Destiny Hope, she knelt before her and placed each of her slender hands on Destiny Hope's shoulders. Silky blonde hair framed her face and her kind jade eyes stared into Destiny Hope's aquamarine ones that were looking back at her with hope and wonder. The woman began singing in a hushed and clear voice, reaching her pitch upwards and down, sharing a story about another place in time. Destiny Hope was mesmerized. Everything and everyone seemed to disappear and the only two left in both of their realms of consciousness was Destiny Hope and the woman with the beautiful voice. As the song ended, the two remained still and silent for what seemed the breath of eternity. Destiny Hope stared deeply into the woman's eyes and in a whispered voice said three words: "I remember you." The woman wrapped her arms around Destiny Hope and drew her close.

"I love you so much Destiny Hope and I will always, always be with you wherever you are.

"I know," Destiny Hope thought the words into her mother's mind.

"I know that you know," her mother answered sweetly and silently in reply. Destiny Hope's mother slowly un-wrapped her arms from around her daughter, looked deeply into her eyes, and sent her a message that she would see her again soon. Placing both hands gently on Destiny Hope's cheeks, she gave her a sacred kiss on the forehead and turned Destiny Hope towards her teacher patiently standing by the ivy-covered gate.

Chapter 9: Important Remembrances

Destiny Hope joined her teacher and they began walking back towards the field of tulips. "So, what have you remembered since you arrived here?" Her teacher continued walking as if the answer to the question was not important, but instead was just a curiosity.

"I remembered my mother even though I never met her. It was like I had always known her," Destiny Hope responded with wonder. "It is hard to imagine never meeting someone, but still knowing and trusting them. She filled me with love and hope, and made me feel safe. I also learned that you don't always need to speak words in order to communicate. We talked to each other using only the thoughts in our minds."

"Destiny Hope, that is not something you learned, but something that you remembered. In fact, there is nothing to learn; it is only to remember. You have *forgotten* more than most people will ever know. It is my job to awaken these memories and give you greater understanding than you would achieve alone. Try not to think in terms of your worldly age, but instead realize that you are eternal and that all knowing is available deep within you. You need only to recognize that, and call upon that wisdom in times of trouble."

"I'm not really sure I understand. How can I know everything when I feel like I don't know anything?" Destiny Hope spoke with a touch of sadness and confusion in her voice.

"Don't worry, Destiny Hope. Just begin allowing yourself to fill up with trust. You will then discover answers without even looking. They will come through your experiences. When you are ready and open you will begin receiving the answers you need and want."

"I'm not sure I understand... but I will try," Destiny Hope still did not sound real sure about herself and her ability to remember rather than learn.

"Destiny Hope, listen carefully. You don't need to try. Trying is not doing. Trying is trying expecting to fail. You need only to allow and do what you do. The rest will follow naturally - you'll see, I promise you. Remember, you did not try to figure out who the woman was that was kneeling before you singing a song you never heard before. The remembrance simply came to you as you needed it and wanted it to." The teacher paused and looked directly at Destiny Hope to make sure that she was absorbing his words and then he continued. "Our moments together on the eternal time line of now are running short. There are a few more concepts we need to discuss before you transport yourself back to the world of Terrormaysu."

"Do I have to go back there? I hate it there. All the people are so unhappy and everything is drab and ugly... and I'm scared to go to work tomorrow," Destiny Hope was on the verge of tears. "Mr. Crater is there, and I just know that he is going to do something horrible to me! Please, please don't make me go back there!"

"Destiny Hope, it is not my decision to make. You wrote the course you would take. Being born to your mom, Sarah, in Terrormaysu was what you compelled you to do. Once certain plans are written in light and stone they cannot be changed except through the course of earthly time. I know that this is hard for you, and frightening too, now that you are a child living there, but I promise you, you have everything you need to complete your role in transforming Terrormaysu."

Destiny Hope was beginning to get angry and her voiced was raised as she retorted, "What are you talking about? I don't have any idea what you mean. You're talking about transforming and things being

written... that I will remember when I need to, and that there is nothing to learn. I bet I don't even remember this when I wake up! I never remember my dreams!" Destiny Hope was shouting at the top of her lungs by the time she was done, and her little fists were clenched and her face was red. "You are just as mean as Mr. Crater making me go back there and I don't like you any more! I don't!" The teacher simply placed the palm of his hand on the top of Destiny Hope's head and she fell silent. Moments passed and then she looked up at him with wonder and a little smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"I think I get it now. Every time I think about what I don't know and I get really afraid I block the possibility of understanding much of anything at all. My mind begins to fight it and my heart gets angry. I just need to listen and believe and when I need to know something it will come easy... well, easier... if I just let it, and don't worry about it."

"Good, Destiny Hope... now just relax and be at peace. Don't be frightened about your tomorrow in Terrormaysu, but have faith and believe that you have everything you need deep within you to succeed. Tomorrow when you wake up there will be a bird perched outside your kitchen window. He will look right at you for several minutes and then he will fly away. You will often see this same bird and you will know him by the white spot between his eyes. It will almost seem as if he is following you. This is to let you know that we are within you and you are not alone. It will also help you believe and remember that this dimension is not a dream. This is all you need to know and remember... we will see you again soon... hold onto that thought and look for us inside the polished stones." With that last thought the teacher was gone, and Destiny Hope was surrounded again by the muted-colored mist swirling clockwise and drawing her in.

Chapter 10: Another Dreary Day in Terrormaysu and a Few Surprises

It seemed that almost nothing had changed when Destiny Hope woke up before dawn in the dark and dreary village of Terrormaysu. It is true that the night had brought a new snowstorm that completely covered the footprints of workers walking to and from the mine yesterday, but in reality this was nothing new; storms happened almost every night in Terrormaysu. Destiny Hope felt the usual frigid cold, and she changed into her flannel shirt and black mine overalls under the threadbare blanket that covered her small twin bed. She brushed her teeth in the chipped and rust-stained ceramic basin as usual. In the kitchen, she sat down and ate her lukewarm portion of watery porridge mulling over Luke's words of caution. *I have to leave early to clear a path to the mine. Eat quickly and follow as soon as you can. And.. whatever you do.. don't make Mr. Crater mad! Try hard, and I'll see you at the common grounds after work.* "Try hard.. I tried hard yesterday and look where that got me!" Destiny said aloud to herself. Just as she started getting bent out of shape about the whole thing, a remembrance came to her: *Trying is trying expecting to fail.* This did seem to make sense, and at the exact moment Destiny Hope was contemplating this thought, another thought drifted in. *Doing brings success if I believe that it can, and never, never accept giving up - it will only come back round again!* Destiny Hope wondered where the "doing brings success" part of the thought had come from. Her teacher had never mentioned anything to her about doing by never giving up. Destiny Hope took a moment to ponder the possibility that this was what the teacher meant when he told her that she would receive remembrances when she wanted or needed them. Grabbing her jacket and galoshes, Destiny Hope carried this idea

with her out the door and onto the icy path that led to bowels of the mine.

When Destiny Hope arrived at the common grounds, most of the workers were already gathered. Dozens of well-worked rusty shovels lined the outside wall of the main building waiting for residents to clear a path back home again if necessary - as was often the case. The workers mulled around trying to stay warm by stomping their feet and shaking their arms. The shrill whistle pierced the air calling everyone to their assigned deathwalker manager. Destiny Hope was not sure what made her look up moments later as she got closer to the evil Mr. Crater, but look-up she did and her eyes fell directly upon a brown sparrow perched on a sign post. He seemed to be looking directly into her eyes, and in the middle of his forehead was a white dot of light. It was at that instant that Destiny Hope realized she had never looked out her kitchen window. She had completely forgotten about the bird that would follow her. Glancing back over her shoulder to look at the bird one more time, it seemed that the bird spoke words into her mind. "It's OK Destiny. We are here. Now go do what you do, and let the fear leave you." It seemed that a weight lifted and as she came to the spot where Mr. Crater waited; Destiny Hope no longer felt frightened. Instead, she came to a stop in front of the evil deathwalker manager and looked directly into his murky brown and bloodshot eyes.

"Whatcha ya lookin at girlie?" Mr. Crater snarled at Destiny.

"Nothing sir. I am just waiting for my polishing rag so that I can start on my stone again," she said with a smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"Well, then... here ya go," he said in a somewhat flustered tone and he handed her the soft gray rag. "Maybe ya can do better today," he said in a voice that seemed a little nicer than yesterday and herding

his laborers, he rushed his crew of 18 into the mine. This was the beginning of Destiny's second day of work polishing stones in Rigor C. Mortis' mines.

Chapter 11: Destiny Discovers the Power in the Stones

Destiny Hope quickly collected her stony basketball. Strangely enough, Mr. Crater said nothing else to her besides having let her know earlier that he expected her to do better today. It was almost as if Mr. Crater was afraid of her but he did not want to let it show. Hobbling under the weight of the stony basketball, Destiny Hope moved quickly and took seat number nine labeled in red on the wooden bench that flanked one side of her assigned table. Quickly, without hesitation, she began polishing her stone, turning it here and there, she worked diligently to make headway on the little specs of dirt trapped in the crevices. This monotonous task continued until the noonday lunch break, but for some strange reason Destiny Hope was not so hopeless as she was yesterday. Destiny Hope felt different inside, and if someone had asked her why (which of course no one did) she would not have been able to explain the difference except to say that today she was not trying, she was doing determined to complete the task at hand as rapidly a possible. This attitude of determination seemed to make the task a little more interesting, and she believed that today she would earn the tallies that she and her father so desperately needed. At 3:00 p.m., Destiny raised her hand for approval to take her stone to the inspection shed.

Destiny Hope watched as Mr. Motley, the pre-checker, waddled towards her. Destiny Hope realized she rarely saw a fat person in Terrormaysu. It seemed awfully odd and Destiny Hope wondered why it was

that Mr. Motley was different from almost all the other people. He approached like a slug and a cow combined as Destiny Hope continued to watch. A silver trail was left on the floor as he swung his head from side to side, slowly loping across the concrete floor. Finally, he stood directly across from her with his hands held out like a person waiting to be handed a baby. "Let's see what you have Destiny." The words came out slow too, and he seemed nice for a deathwalker worker. Destiny was unsure what to make of Mr. Motley, and so she mutely handed him the huge stone that had taken almost two days to polish. "This is quite a stone," Mr. Motley commented as he turned it round and round.. almost caressing the sleek surface. His beefy hands held the stone like a loving father of a newly born baby - gently yet firmly. "It looks good out here Destiny. Let's take it to the shed and see what Mr. Crater has to say." Destiny Hope followed Mr. Motley silently and realized that she was feeling serene and solid inside. This surprised and pleased her.

The closer they got to the shed, the better it felt inside of the mine and inside Destiny Hope too. It seemed to take forever as Destiny Hope took baby steps behind the sluggish Mr. Motley. Destiny Hope thought it was really kind of Mr. Motley to carry her stone. She could not even imagine carrying the stone and moving at this pace. She knew she would have dropped the stone by now. For a split second, her thoughts went to that ugly place and she saw in her mind's eye a flash of a crash and then silence so loud with all eyes staring and Mr. Crater charging towards her. Just as quickly, she heard a voice in her head say, *Stop thought!* The image slid quickly away and was replaced by a focused intent in her head as they entered into the glittering light of the shed. Destiny visualized her stone passing inspection with "flying" colors! This was the moment when the power inside the stone

first began to weave its magic inside Destiny Hope's mind and heart and soul.

Everything was silent inside the shed. Not the heavy silence of dread but a light airy silence that sparkled and shimmered and altered Destiny Hope's perceptions. Mr. Motley carefully placed the stone on a fluffy bed of soft deep purple velvet and the colors sprang to life. Mr. Crater flipped the switch and the light from the stone started revolving around the room flashing wonderfully brilliant colors that covered every inch of walls and floor and ceiling. The three onlookers became mesmerized within the display. The colors became stronger... moving, moving and pulsating, moving in and out and around everything and everyone. Destiny heard Mr. Crater and Mr. Motley talking even though their cracked lips were whispering with heads bent close with their eyes fixated and following dazzling points of color looking here and there and everywhere. "Ise has nevea in my life seen anythin like this," Mr. Crater's words entered Destiny Hope's mind.

"Neither have I," Mr. Motley replied.

"Is it the girlie or the stone that's makin it so different? Whatchya thin, Bob?"

"I have no clue, but maybe you better hit the switch and open the door and let the darkness in."

"Yeah, thatsa good idea." Mr. Crater was already moving before the words were finished processing within Destiny Hope's mind. Quickly the switch was thrust downward and the door flung open; all the magic seemed to evaporate and the moment was over. Mr. Crater acted like nothing unusual had happened except he was more reserved and businesslike. Mr. Motley picked up the stone and in slow motion carried it over to the weighing station.

"It weighs nine kekos," Mr. Motley announced without emotion.

"Well, Destiny... that earns ya nine tallies, good fur ya girlie," Mr. Crater stated with what was supposed to be a smile but was actually more of a grimace. "That's more than most kiddies earn in a week. Whatcha gonna do with yur tallies, heh?"

Destiny was not sure if Mr. Crater actually wanted her to answer so she spoke under her breath, "I'm going to get my dad a new pair of work boots, sir."

"What's that ya say? Speak up sos I can hear ya." It seemed Mr. Crater did want an answer.

"I'm going to get my dad a new pair of work boots," Destiny said boldly and loudly - now letting Mr. Crater know that she was proud of her accomplishment.

"Well, good for ya. Now go picks out 'nother stone an gets back ta work," he said turning from her and marking his tally book. It seemed strange that nothing bad had happened inside the shed. Instead, Mr. Crater had been civil and she had earned nine tallies.

Dad is going to be so proud of me, Destiny thought to herself. She felt so good... maybe better than she had ever felt before. Destiny surveyed the stones. There were stones in all shapes and sizes and she was allowed to pick one all on her own. Destiny thought about what Mr. Crater had said about most kids not earning nine tallies a week and decided to again pick a large stone. Maybe not one as big as the last one, but not one of those fist-sized stones either. She decided to pick a stone that was bigger than a softball and was shaped a little like the heart she wore securely tied around her neck. She guessed that it weighed about four or five kekos, and it seemed just the right size to polish by the end of the day. Walking sprightly back to her numbered seat, Destiny sat down and set to work.

Just as Destiny Hope was about to raise her hand to get a pre-check approval, she thought she saw something move within the polished stone. At first she was uncertain, but as she proceeded to look she recognized the face of the boy who sat two seats down from her on the opposite side of the table. *How strange*, Destiny thought as she continued staring at the stone. *How is that possible? It certainly cannot be a reflection.* Glancing to the side and across the table, Destiny Hope noticed that the disheveled boy was staring into his stone as well, and then he raised his head and looked directly at Destiny as if asking a question without words. Destiny shook her head up and down ever so slightly to let him know that she too was "seeing" inside the polished stone and then looked back to see what else might appear there. Out of nowhere, three words appeared in purple lettering asking Destiny Hope her name. *What in the world am I supposed to do now?* she pondered. Then she thought her name to herself just to see what would happen. Again - words crystallized inside the stone, only this time they seemed to begin a conversation between the boy and her. It must be remembered that the children of Terrormaysu were never taught to read, but both Destiny Hope and the boy seemed to be communicating in spite of this supposed obstacle.

"Hi, Destiny. My name is Merlin. I have never seen anything inside the stones before today," he said with thought that then materialized inside Destiny's stone. Before Destiny could think another thought, the end of the day whistle shrilled and the image disappeared as fast as it had come. Destiny put her stone in a cubicle that now had her number on it, and then she lined up for dismissal directly behind Merlin. She was hoping for a chance to actually talk in person but the opportunity never materialized.

Chapter 12: Destiny Faces Death for the First Time

As usual, the children moved at an extremely brisk pace exiting the mine as quickly as possible. Families reunited on the triangle and began the tedious march home as blustery wailing winds wrapped their brute force around the weary worker's legs making the trek home all the harder and disillusioning. Destiny waited all alone and her concern and distress began mounting with every second that now passed. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Mr. Crater making his way towards her. *What now?* Destiny thought. *As if it is not bad enough that my dad hasn't showed up, now I have that awful manager heading straight at me.*

As he got closer, Destiny realized that he seemed more pre-occupied and his evil disposition had taken a back seat. There was a different look in his eyes; a look that Destiny had never seen before. "Ah, hmm, well, Destiny, there's been an accident in tha mine today. Yous dad was taken ta the infirmary rights afta lunch. I'se guess yous betta go over there an sees if he's alright, an geez it's really too bad..." Destiny barely heard the last words before she was racing down Terror Lane towards the towering and dirty mud brown building that housed the injured workers.

Breathless by the time she arrived, Destiny ran up to the scarred wooden counter and panting and huffing asked the ancient dark skinned nurse about her father. "My dad, Luke, was brought here from the mine today. Is he OK?" she asked in a shaky, pleading tone.

"Well, now, young lady, I can't give that information out to just anyone. There are rules and regulations that I must follow as you should well know by your age."

"I told you - I am his daughter, Destiny Hope," she answered in a stronger voice than the last time.

"I heard you the first time missy!" the nurse replied in an even more authoritative and irritated tone than the first time. "But, I need to see some identification before I am allowed to give out that information. Now, are you going to show me your mark or not?"

"Oh, alright," Destiny Hope replied, and then she reluctantly pulled up her shirt sleeve and showed the nurse the tattooed mark, DH333, that was permanently inked on the inside of her right wrist.

"OK, wait right here while I go into the records rooms and make sure that your mark is registered and not one forged on your wrist in attempt to get information that you have no right knowing." With that, the primeval nurse that smelled of formaldehyde spun around and stalked off. Destiny was left standing all alone once again and a shuddering premonition wracked her tiny body. Every good thought and exciting event that had occurred today was forgotten as Destiny paced back and forth in front of the information counter wondering if her dad was going to be alright. It seemed forever until the nurse returned, and the look on her face when she did was brooding and grim.

"Come with me, miss," the nurse said without preamble or kindness. "Dr. Scalpel is expecting you and needs to see you before you can go to your father." Those simple words sent another chill shuddering through Destiny starting at the roots of her hair follicles and exiting out the tips of her toes. How she managed to follow the nurse and not collapse she would later look back on and wonder, but for now, Destiny did as she was told in dreaded silence. It seemed that the two, Destiny and the nurse, careened through a maze of corridors, and even with all of the fear and confusion racing around Destiny Hope's mind, she wondered if she would ever find her way back out. Finally, they arrived at a stainless steel door that soared towards the sky. Nurse Cratchet pressed the large round circle located in the exact middle of the door

and an eerie sound erupted before the door swung open groaning on its hinges. Both proceeded forward until they were standing before another information desk, except this one was made out of shining steel just like the door.

"Destiny Hope is here to see Dr. Scalpel; he is expecting her," and with that the nurse exited from the same doorway they had just entered.

"Come with me," the male attendant said. Quickly he moved down another hallway of blood red walls. "Mr. Scalpel, the child is here to see you."

"Ok, that will be all Dante." Destiny found herself before a giant of a man. He was the tallest human being that Destiny Hope had ever seen. His eyes were a steel gray and for endless seconds he just stared at Destiny as if he was trying to penetrate her mind or soul. His next words surprised her. "Very well, I can see clearly that you are mature beyond your years and that you can handle what I am about to say. And, since there is no other next of kin... I guess that I have no choice but to tell you, although you must prepare yourself, for the news is grim, very grim indeed. Before Destiny had a chance to prepare herself mentally, or any other way for that matter, the doctor proceeded. "Your father is gravely injured. We do not expect that he will make it through the night. As you well know, you are now nine, so you will not go to the orphanage, but will be allowed to live on your own and continue your work at the mine. I will allow you to see your father briefly to say your good-byes, but recognize that you are expected at work tomorrow at the crack of dawn and no excuses will be accepted unless you want to spend time in Fissure Prison."

Destiny simply stood there rooted to the spot - unable to move and unable to react. She wondered if Dr. Scalpel had infused her with an

emotional Novocain before telling her the news because in that moment she felt nothing, nothing at all, except an icy coldness in all of her extremities. "Yes, I did transmit a dose of mental medication to assist you through this difficult time. It will not wear off for a day or two and by that time you should be able to process your loss more effectively. Until that time, your mind will remain emotionally blank because the neurons that fire during emotional distress have been incapacitated for your best interests." Destiny hardly had a moment to process this new information before Dante, the attendant, appeared and took hold of her arm (not so gently considering the circumstances) and led her out of Dr. Scalpel's office.

She was once again escorted through the steel door and through the endless maze of hallways until they arrived before a door labeled: The Soon To Be Departed. Dante turned away and left her standing all alone once again. The aloneness was becoming a reoccurring theme, and in that moment she realized that the theme was about to become her life, or so in that moment she believed. After standing before the door for an indeterminate amount of time, Destiny finally had the courage to ring the bell for entry into the death ward.

Chapter 13: A Final Goodbye

Upon entering, Destiny heard a cacophony of clicking and whirring noises. She supposed that this was the sound of machines keeping injured workers alive until the next of kin had come to say their good-byes. A silent attendant led her towards Luke's bed. Her first thought was that his face looked the color of ashes grown cold in the hearth when the fire had burned permanently away and all that remained of the night was the hours before work again. Moving closer, she realized that

her dad looked peaceful in spite of the gray tones and the horrible machine that was attached by a snake-like hose into his arm. Slowly she reached out. His fingertips were icy cold to her touch and he did not move or acknowledge her presence. She remained standing by his side for a long time, and just as she was about to turn and go, she heard his voice talking inside her head. It did not have volume like a voice spoken aloud, but still Destiny felt sure that he was trying to communicate to her even though he was already very close to death. *Destiny, you are not alone. I understand now what I could not understand when I was alive. We will meet again soon, I promise you, and when we do, you too will understand more than you know now. Be patient. Be brave. You have a special mission and I did too. I know that now. I love you, my little girl, so young, but now a woman. I love you...* and then the sounds of machines feeding life before departure returned and nothing more did Luke say. His soul was gone; he was only waiting to say his final goodbye to the little girl he rarely understood, but had always loved.

Destiny was not overcome by tears or hysterics; apparently, the emotional novocaine administered by Dr. Scalpel was very effective. Strangely, what Destiny Hope was feeling was a strength and a sense of something new about to begin in her life. If she had been asked to explain what she was sensing - she could not have put it into words. It seemed beyond explanations especially considering her terrible loss and the truth of her aloneness. She carefully placed Luke's hands one on top of the other over his soul, and then she turned and left leaving the sounds of life-less machines behind.

Out in the dark windy night, Destiny heard the death shrill sound through the streets as she made her way home. It came as no surprise to see the X carved on her door dripping blood and staining the dirty snow

a burgundy red. Closing the door behind her, she stepped into complete and utter silence. Her first action was to place logs into the hearth and bring a fire to life to warm her body and make her house feel like a home. *Yes, now it was her house. It was her home now and hers alone. She would never see her father making porridge. She would never hear him tell stories. She would never know what it was like to grow up with parents that loved her.* All these thoughts went through Destiny Hope's mind, but they were thoughts without emotional charge. It was like making a grocery list or a to-do list that served a purpose, but that did not have any emotional content to it. She realized that she was glad that Dr. Scalpel had administered the medication even if he had done so without her permission. She could not imagine what she might be feeling without it, and she had responsibilities to attend like feeding herself and clearing the path to work after night-time snowstorms. Hastily, Destiny made porridge for dinner, gulped it down, washed herself with the icy water, changed into her ratty nightgown, and snuggled under the threadbare blanket. Her last thoughts before falling into a heavy sleep were about moving from her room into her father's room and what should she do with his few personal belongings. It seemed she had so many responsibilities and decisions for a girl of nine that had only been working for two days in the mine. It was all too much to think about anymore on this grim and cold, dark and dismal night. Instead, her soul took flight to the only place that offered respite. The colors began whirring and her soul moved into the light.

Chapter 14: New Beginnings

When Destiny came into focus within her vision, after spending time within the swirling muted colors, she found herself not standing before

a field of tulips as before, but instead, she was facing a suspended building surrounded by azure blue space with twinkling lights. The lights were not all stationary, although some remained in place, but many were moving and joining while other were shooting across the endless but loving abyss. Each and every one seemed to be filled with an embracing sensation that enveloped Destiny Hope and held her even though nothing was beneath her bare feet.

Destiny Hope was now attired in an opaque cream flowing robe with multi-colored iridescent lines flowing through it. She naturally started floating forward towards the columns that indicated the entryway into the glistening and shimmering building. A memory found its way to the forefront of her mind; she remembered entering this ancient Greek temple many, many times. As she reached her hand to touch the column and feel its cool smoothness, her hand simply passed through it. Before she could think upon this, she floated inside and her form touched down on polished marble. Although Destiny had never in her living life seen anything like it, it was as if she had walked upon it for most of her soul's existence.

Instantly, her teacher was before her. With a gentle and radiant smile he simply extended his hand for her to take; she did so without question and the word-flow from mind to mind began as simply as the rustling of tree leaves by a gust of wind.

"This is the most ancient of learning temples. This is your true home of enlightenment on this plane. We simply felt that the tulip field in your earlier living dream would be more comfortable for a first re-visit to the Planes of Eternal. A most unexpected day in your earthly existence, but it was always written that way."

"Are you saying that my dad's dying was meant to happen?"

"Yes, Destiny, I am. Another word for it would be pre-ordained."

"But... why?" Destiny Hope asked feeling something akin to sadness for the first time.

"Come; let me show you something first." The two proceeded forward in what appeared a walking movement, but in fact it was just an illusion as was much of the external architecture of the building. After quite awhile, they exited out the opposite side of the temple and entered a garden of immense proportions. Flowers were fragrantly abundant and a lake of turquoise water could be seen in the distance. Destiny and her teacher continued on until they came upon a man with his back turned away from their arrival. Within the time it takes to take a breath, Destiny Hope knew that it was her father.

"Dad!" her thought flew from her mind and at the same time her father turned towards her with open arms. Destiny found herself encircled by his energy arms and remained embraced for what felt like an eternity worth of everything loving and powerful. Finally, the two forms separated and Destiny's teacher approached the two.

"Now, you understand that everything is real and everything is an illusion too. It depends what you place your focus on," the teacher spoke softly inside Destiny Hope's head.

"I'm not sure I get what you mean," Destiny Hope said with a quizzical expression implied by the energy the words conveyed.

"Ok, Destiny, let me ask you a question. Can there only be one truth and one reality?"

"Well, I don't know. My life on Terrormaysu definitely seems real and true, but this does too."

"Could they both be true?"

"Well, I guess, if I had to pick... my life on Terrormaysu is real and true, and this is just a dream I get to do."

"How do you know that Terrormaysu is not the dream, and when you dream you are actually living and learning in the real and true dimension - or at least as close as you let yourself remember it upon waking?"

"I guess we can't really know that our life is not really the dream just because it seems so real. I have dreams that in the moment I'm in them seem totally real to me too."

"Exactly, Destiny. So let's now take what you have and take it a step further. Either one or the other is the real truth and reality, or... both are true and both are reality... Or ... is there another choice that you can think of?"

"Well, there is one. What if... it all depends on what we choose to allow ourselves to believe? What if, what we choose to believe is our reality? Well, at least for as long as we believe it anyway?"

"Excellent Destiny! As earth spirits would say... you hit the nail on the head!" and with that her teacher disappeared like a foggy mist that drifts away; she realized her father too had vanished into the ethers... somewhere along the way.

And... Destiny thought to herself, *Am I alone again?* as she awoke before dawn in a cold house without the sound of her father stoking the fire or preparing her porridge. It certainly seemed that way in the cold dark moment of another day.

Chapter 15: Life after Death

Destiny Hope remained in bed thinking over the experiences that were colliding in her head. In her solitude, Destiny Hope became her own sounding board and started a conversation out loud seeking an understanding of life and death. "My father is dead. Well, yes and no.

He is dead, but I believe that there is life after death so is he really dead or just not here with me which is different than gone forever? I wish he were here. I am alone. Maybe my teacher wants me to believe that this isn't real, but it sure feels more real than my dreams at night. I wonder why?"

Realizing that she had to get moving if she was going to get to the mine on time, Destiny Hope hoisted herself out of bed. As fast as possible, she put on her flannel shirt and black overalls before the bitter chill froze her determination to stay out of Fissure Prison and survive on her own. Quickly, she started a fire to boil water to add to corn meal and make her morning porridge. She checked out the window to see if she had to clear a path for work and was relieved to find that on this rare occasion no snow had fallen during the night. Rapidly completing her chores, she tugged on her black galoshes, heavy jacket, tattered scarf, and black mittens and without looking back left her home and marched forward.

Luckily, the wind had taken vacation along with the snow although the air still remained bitter cold and stained Destiny Hope's cheeks a scarlet red as she trudged up the road to face her first day of life after death. Again, Destiny thought kindly of Dr. Scalpel as strange as that might sound. At least she was not overwhelmed by sorrow and as a result being transported to Fissure Prison because she had failed to get out of bed and to work as instructed. She wondered how long the Novocain would last and if she could get another dose if she really needed it. After deciding to "stop thought" and think about something else, Destiny Hope's attention was drawn to the side of the road when she heard a voice inside her head say, *look right*. Not two feet away was a sparrow with a white dot of light between his eyes. The bird was hopping around and then became still; it stared right at Destiny as if

wishing to make sure it had her attention. That is when she heard a simple statement. "Remember, your dreams and your waking are only different points of focus. Focus is in the moment and that is where reality lies," and with that the bird flew away.

Destiny raced the rest of the way to the common grounds and arrived just as the whistle blew for workers to gather. Destiny Hope joined her group and they were ushered into the bowels of the mine in the usual fashion. It was as if the accident yesterday had never happened. Destiny Hope went to her cubicle, got her stone, took seat number nine, and began her polishing. After a few moments, Destiny realized she had pretty much finished this stone yesterday and raised her hand for pre-check approval. It was only in that instant that she remembered her experience with Merlin yesterday. So much had happened since then. Immediately, she pulled her hand from the air and looked inside the polished stone. Sure enough - the face of Merlin was looking back. As soon as Merlin realized he had her attention and that the events of yesterday had not been a fluke or an illusion, he sent a thought her way. "I am so sorry about your dad. My father was talking about it all last night. Your dad was the only one that did not survive the accident and he just kept saying... why do the worst things seem to happen to the best people?"

"It's OK Merlin. As hard as it is I know that I have to stay focused on the moment if I am going to make it through this time. So in this moment let's "stop thought" about my dad and let me ask you something. Have you ever communicated with anyone else using the stones?"

"Never. I never even thought something like this was possible, and I am not really sure what is happening, but it does make the work a lot less boring."

"I wonder if the stones need to be thoroughly polished for us to be able to communicate through them? How far along is your stone?"

"I'm done. I was just waiting to raise my hand because I wanted to see if I could get your attention first."

"Ok, let's do this. After we turn our polished stones in and get our new ones, let's try to communicate before we clean them up. That way, we will know if any stone will work, or if they only work after they are polished and pure."

"Sure and... Umm, why don't you turn yours in first? I know you need the tallies a lot more than me with your dad gone and all..." Merlin said feeling a little embarrassed being nice to a girl.

"Thanks, Merlin. Hopefully, we can talk again soon, and make sure that you don't get a stone too big just in case they do need to be polished before we can communicate again." With that, Destiny Hope put her hand in the air and it was not long before Mr. Motley created a silvery trail as he headed towards her and her stone.

Destiny Hope followed at a snail's pace behind Mr. Motley. He did not offer to carry her stone, but fortunately for Destiny she had chosen one that was considerably smaller than her last one. After what seemed an interminable amount of time, the two arrived at the inspection shed where Mr. Crater was waiting with a determined look upon his face. "Ise thinks I'll check this one by miself ," he sharply stated as he abruptly yanked the stone from Destiny Hope.

Immediately, Mr. Motley's face became splotchy and he stumbled over his words, "Why? I... umm... always get to see the stones after they're polished and shining with color and light."

"I'se think its betta if I'se do it misself," Mr. Crater answered quickly while turning towards the door. "You both just wait here, I'se won't be a minute," and without further explanation he slammed the door

shut and both Destiny Hope and Mr. Motley heard the dead bolt rammed into place.

"It's not fair," Mr. Motley moaned to Destiny. "Seeing the stones all nice and polished is what makes this job so special. He's never done this to me before. It's not fair," Mr. Motley kept repeating over and over as his head lolled side to side every time he spoke the phrase. Destiny Hope just stood by silently ignoring Mr. Motley's complaint. She simply wanted to get her approval and tallies and select a new stone so that she could test her theory about whether the stones needed to be completely polished before she could communicate with Merlin again. It seemed to take forever before Mr. Crater came out from the inspection shed and declared that the stone was well polished and that Destiny Hope had earned four more tallies bringing her total for the week to thirteen so far.

"Go pick yourself nother stone, Destiny. Ya did a real nice job today specially with what happened with yours dad an all." For a second, Destiny wondered why Mr. Crater was treating her so agreeably, but decided that getting her stone was what was important and let the thought slip quickly from her mind. Rushing over to the pile, she picked a stone slightly larger than the last one, but not so large that she could not complete it before the shrill whistle announced the end of another long workday.

Destiny Hope worked diligently on her stone pausing every so often to stare within it hoping to communicate with Merlin again. Nothing could be seen within the stone as time and time again she felt the excitement of the possibility fizzle into nothing but boredom; her rag resumed its digging in the crevices of the hard cold stone. She began to feel deepening disappointment that nothing unusual was happening. As the day progressed she not only felt depressed by the realization that

she might not communicate via the stones with Merlin again, but she literally felt within her body (from shoulders to abdomen) a sensation that was like fire and snow mixed as one. The feeling was rolling in waves washing up a grief that she had not known that she harbored. It took Destiny almost the whole afternoon to make the connection. She was so busy polishing and attempting a connection to Merlin, and simply thinking that she could ignore it or deny it, that it was not until the split second that she knew the problem that she realized that she did. The blocker that doctor had mentally injected was wearing off. In fact, the emotional pain was becoming almost unbearable. If at that exact moment Destiny Hope had not looked downward and within her stone, she might literally have been wracked with a grief so overwhelming as to cause her to make a horrible scene. It was only the distraction and accompanying realization that Merlin was looking at her from within the stone that saved her from her own human misery. Merlin's thought came immediately clear, "Are you all right, you look kinda of strange?"

"I feel horrible inside like death is a scorpion stinging my soul." Destiny was immediately perplexed. Where had such a thought come from? What was even stranger than the thought was Merlin's reply.

"Oh, your dad's death is crawling up inside you. Do you think that you should get another blocker from the doctor?"

"I don't want to ever go near that place again!" Destiny Hope mentally yelled. "It is really, really creepy with its blood red walls and steel doors that lock you in and make you feel like you will never breathe real air again." Destiny Hope could not believe the conversation that was taking place between Merlin and her. It seemed so natural but at the same time impossible. *Where had the vocabulary and figurative language come from? How was she using terms like vocabulary and figurative language;* it seemed like everything was spinning in and

out of control. Her mind was racing so fast she momentarily forgot about Merlin because she was so involved with the conversation taking place in her own mind. She had never heard of such words - yet alone used them as easily as a child saying momma and dada.

"Destiny!" Merlin seemed to be shouting from the stone and inside her head as well. It worked. Destiny Hope's mind flew in Merlin's direction. "I'm Ok. There are just so many thoughts competing against one another inside my mind."

"I know what you mean," Merlin calmly replied as if nothing at all unusual was occurring. He seemed to be the calmest of boys that had ever lived in Terrormaysu. "The whistle is going to screech any minute now so there is one last thing I need to say to you today. I don't know how I know this, but I do. You will gain healing tonight for your broken heart and sorrowful soul; I really believe that you don't need another blocker from the doctor. Tonight expect and believe that the healing will begin and don't doubt or wonder how or when. If you doubt, you might not allow...." Merlin was abruptly cut-off and shutout by the horrible sound of the whistle bringing one of the few glad tidings the residents of Terrormaysu knew. No more work for today. It was finally time to go home and rest a weary head upon a bed.

Chapter 16: The Darkness Brings Light

Destiny trudged home with her head bent down to ward off the bitter chill carried by the howling winds. It was almost time for darkness to completely descend again, and Destiny wanted to be well behind her locked door before then. She looked to the skies and knew that she would have to awaken early and clear her own path before dawn's early light if she expected to get to work on time. The sky had

the eerie cast of an impending storm getting ready to blow more snow down on the miserable workers of Terrormaysu. Right before the bitter day was completely erased by a pitch-black starless night, Destiny Hope thrust the bolt into place and secured her miserly home. No sooner had this occurred than the deathwalker toll began to sound in threes and Destiny Hope knew that another blood red X was carving itself on some poor soul's door. Destiny rapidly stoked a small fire and lit the lantern. Glancing in the cupboard and icebox, she knew that she must get to Tallies' General Store with the first light of Sunday morn. She needed wood, coal, and rations to sustain herself and she could not possibly work all day and then stop at the store and get home before dark all on her own. It was simply too much for one little girl to do. Until then, she would have to ration her supplies carefully and make due with corn mush mixed with water, hard tack biscuits (there was enough mix to last several days), and boiled radishes. She fed herself without ado, brushed her teeth, changed, and climbed into her father's bed.

Destiny Hope could still smell her father's scent on the coarse pillowcase and this gave her both comfort and a deep ache and longing. Bittersweet tears began to slowly wash her face. Occasionally her tongue reached out and licked at the salty taste; she did not even try to abate the sorrowful stream. Her little body began rocking back and forth in an effort to find comfort like an infant in its mother's womb. As she clutched the pillow, she breathed in again and again the memory of her father's love. Destiny's misery eventually ran its course and the release invited the first stages of her healing process. She gently placed her palm around the crystal heart and felt herself drifting, drifting, light and lighter, spinning colors, whoosh and rising. This process continued until once again Destiny Hope was no longer alone in

a cold and lonely room without a soul to hold or love her, but instead she was seated in a velvet-cushioned seat in a vast amphitheater. She craned here and there looking around until she realized that there must be thousands of people surrounding her that were seated in ascending rows; everyone was listening to the man on the stage giving some sort of lecture. She turned her attention to the speaker's deep but gentle baritone voice.

"It is important to understand that there is a purpose for everything. At the time it may seem to have no meaning. It might even feel like a punishment for some deed not done with clear or good intentions or as the result of terrible choices. When one recognizes that there are reasons for everything that are not judged as good or bad, but simply used to serve the advancement of the participants - the advancement quickens. Does this mean that advancement is guaranteed? Absolutely not! Advancement or lack thereof is completely up to the individual and is determined by engagement, awareness, and effective processing of experiences. The speaker paused as if allowing his words to sink in. In fact, after due course he repeated them again and then simply rested back on his stool and viewed his audience like he was watching a movie unfold. This gave Destiny Hope time to study the speaker. She was trying to remember from where she knew him.

A voice inside, not really a sound but spoken words none-the-less, said softly, "Trying... hmm... how's that working for you?" Destiny felt a smile climb up inside her for the first time in several days. She knew who the speaker was even though he looked nothing like the person she knew him to be. She called him friend in spite of the fact that they had never spoken an agreement of such or spent much time in each other's company. It was a knowing and it filled her with peace. Destiny listened to the rest of the lecture. When the man finished, the

listeners sent a light filled energy wave of appreciation equal to raucous clapping and a standing ovation and then slowly began to drift away. The speaker approached Destiny Hope. "How is your sorrowful heart in this moment?"

"I had forgotten that I carried a burden as I allowed myself to live within the moment. How did you come to be here?"

I am as you, and I am different from you too. I got here because I could... and I am there because I chose to... as you did and as you do. We agreed to join so that I could be your lifeline during your lifetime living in the horrible place called Terrormaysu. Where there are two that stand with integrity and walk with peace and love... the power of possibility grows stronger. It is an electro-magnetic force of attraction against the coldness and darkness of evil forces that wish to gain power and stature by controlling others. Your light has the possibility to change so many lives if you allow it to."

Destiny questioned her friend with a puzzled expression on her face, "Do you remember that you were here when you return there? Do you remember speaking to large groups of people like you are their teacher? Are you?"

"Here I am a teacher and I know this now although I did not know - not so long ago. Sometimes, I remember, but rarely, and for most of my life in Terrormaysu I gave it little thought. For a long time, I just believed that they were dreams even though they felt real when I did recall my sleeping experiences. The more my world began changing there and here, the more I seem to remember the "dreams" and the more alive this world is becoming. It is as if the two worlds are fusing together inside of me.

"Me too!" Destiny exclaimed with delighted wonder. The two friends exchanged an infusion of energy that warmed them like only a hot bath

can do on a freezing night. "What purpose do you think today served?" Destiny Hope asked not with the voice of a child but with the voice of all ages mixed together into profound wisdom and lovingness. Her words were like liquid mercury moving up naturally as a result of her current atmospheric conditions and changes.

Her friend answered her as if he too belonged to the age of always. "I am your lifeline. We are joined so that you may fulfill your destiny and infuse hope into the darkness. In truth, it is still unknown if you will succeed. The deed is great with the weight of density that pervades Terrormaysu. The smell of despair and fear lingers always in the very air and is spread by human ugliness upon howling winds that seem always to blow there. Only this am I certain about. In the end, you shall be freed and uplifted for this daunting task you have undertaken. It may not seem possible right now that Terrormaysu can be transformed, but we must believe in the probability no matter the worldly odds that seem to deny it. We must believe that all things are possible. We must always know that nothing is impossible!" They joined energy and the friendship deepened as they held one another and their molecules melded. It was almost as if they were vibrating to notes playing as one inside their very beings. They remained as such until at some unknown point on the time continuum they drifted back to their sleeping forms reposed in cold bedrooms on hard beds in a town where all anyone remembered was fear, freezing and misery... everyone except... Destiny Hope and Merlin; together they were remembering everything.

Chapter 17: Misery and Magic and the Unexpected

Destiny Hope's eyes flew open upon waking and she found herself immediately alert and in full awareness. She remembered every detail of last night's sojourn to the other dimension. She wrapped her arms around herself and felt Merlin's friendship giving comfort to her. She was not as alone as she had believed. In fact, in some ways, she was less alone than when her father was alive. It all depended on her point of view. Today, she knew, knew without a doubt within her, that Merlin was there to love and assist her through her ordeal of living alone in Terrormaysu. Destiny got eagerly out of bed and began her morning routine. Before the light of day she had shoveled a path, washed, dressed, and fed herself. An inner strength seemed to be developing with each of her independent accomplishments. Grabbing her galoshes, coat, scarf, hat, and mittens, Destiny Hope bolted her door and briskly headed to the triangle where the worker's would gather. Fortunately, today was Saturday and tomorrow the worker's were off. Even in Terrormaysu the worker's were given a day of rest, or at the least, a day to complete all the chores outside of work that needed to be done to sustain their lives.

As Destiny moved towards the triangle, she felt a sense of excitement at the thought of seeing Merlin. What was strange was that the excitement felt like butterflies dancing in her chest to a sweet and melodic tune coming from some distant place. Destiny was not sure what the feeling signified, but it felt good; it felt so much better than loneliness and misery that she did not spend much time questioning what it meant but instead simply enjoyed it the way one might savor a rare treat purchased from Tallies General Store. Destiny Hope arrived at work and looked around for Merlin. He was nowhere to be found. The

wonderful feeling of just moments ago was once again replaced by a sense of dread and fear. *Where could he be?* Destiny tried to think of every possibility. *Surely he must get here soon.* It seemed within a matter of minutes, Destiny Hope had conceived of every horrid possibility that could have befallen Merlin. He was sick. He was dead. He had stayed in the other dimension and skipped out on life in Terrormaysu. He had skipped out on her too. Destiny Hope's fears churned inside her, but all her worrying changed nothing. In what seemed an instant, all of Destiny's hope and knowing drained out of her as if she were a container with holes punched into it. Her self doubts grew fast, faster than hope ever had, but she was left with little time to grab hope back because the workday whistle shrilled and she was pushed along in the worker's rush. Once again feeling alone and desperate, Destiny Hope began another day of polishing.

Merlin's vacant seat seemed to gape in Destiny's face. Her heart felt like lead and her mind could not remain on the job of polishing her stone. Without realizing what she was doing, Destiny ran her hand back and forth across the rough wooden table as if trying to erase the truth of Merlin's absence. Twice she was scolded and called back to the task of polishing her stone. Still, every now and then her hand moved back and forth across the table without her awareness. It moved faster and faster at one point and she could not seem to stop it as hard as she tried. Suddenly, a large splinter pierced her skin and drove itself down deep underneath the surface of her left palm. She shrieked and jumped up from her seat drawing everyone's attention in her direction. Quickly, Mr. Crater marched over. "What seems ta be the pablem, Missy?" he asked in his sharp and descending tone. It seemed what little niceness he had displayed yesterday had vanished overnight.

"I have... have a splinter in my palm," Destiny said in a quivering voice. Mr. Crater grabbed her left hand roughly and flipped it over to the palm side.

"Yas surely do," he said with a little cackle in his voice. "Go inta tha toilets and see if ya can pulls it out with these here twizzas," he said unclipping them from his work belt. "But minds ya don't be too long or Isa have ta docks ya for today... and yas have'nt earned any tallies yet," his eyes seemed to shine with merriment at this pronouncement. Destiny rushed towards the bathroom with tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. As she was slamming the door behind her, she heard Mr. Crater say, "Oks now, everyone backs to work, or it is the scalding stick ya'all will be feeling and Isa just hopin ya'll give me a reason..."

The splinter hurt badly, but not nearly as bad as Merlin's absence. In fact, the physical pain acted as a distraction from her internal agony. Destiny Hope spent precious minutes trying to grab hold of the splinter, but it was lodged too deeply and the exterior piece was too small to grab. It simply broke off on her third attempt. Wondering what to do next, Destiny sat immobilized on the toilet seat wasting precious minutes she could ill afford to lose. Finally, with no other recourse open to her, Destiny Hope exited the bathroom and made her way back to the table and raised her hand. After several minutes, Mr. Motley came over and asked her if she had a stone to be checked. "No sir," Destiny answered in a quiet voice as she looked down at the table. "I have a splinter in my hand and it won't come out."

"Well now, is that right?" Mr. Motley asked. "That's really too bad, isn't it?" he asked in a tone that did not convey concern but rather a pleased note as if she was getting what she deserved. "Well, I don't get to see your polished stones anyway so it is really no matter

to me," he said. Turning immediately away, he made his way slowly back towards the inspection shed. Destiny Hope reluctantly picked up her polishing rag with her right hand and began her cleaning like an injured cat that knows nothing else to do. This meager effort continued for the rest of the day and in a strange way was a blessing. As the pain increased from the splinter getting occasionally knocked and rubbed, Destiny forgot more and more about Merlin. By the end of the day her hand was raging with fire, her mind was numb, and her heart felt ice cold - colder than she ever remembered. Destiny was alone, in pain, and it seemed that there was no one anywhere in Terrormaysu that she could turn to. She made her way home with head and back bent forward and low.

Destiny Hope was startled and surprised to find Merlin waiting at her door when she arrived home. Her first emotion was not one of joy but one of anger. "Where were you today when I needed you? I thought you said you were going to help me!" she yelled at the 12-year old boy standing before her. "I was all alone and I got this terrible splinter and my hand is on fire and..." Merlin simply lifted his hand in a gesture for her to stop and stared in her eyes.

"I'm here now. Today was my twelfth birthday. I reported early to get re-processed and now I work conveying the carts back and forth inside the mine." As he spoke Destiny Hope noticed that indeed his face was covered with black dust. He had a gash across his forehead that was already scabbed with dried blood. Forgetting her own pain from the splinter, her heart filled with sadness for her friend.

"I am so sorry Merlin. Today was just so horrid. I was so afraid when I got to work and I could not find you anywhere. Then the splinter lodged in my palm and Mr. Crater and Mr. Motley seemed so happy that it

happened and ... are you all right? How did you get that gash on your forehead?"

"I'm fine. There are certain places where the cavern walls are extremely low and if you are not paying attention you run into them and before you know it... that's why so many kids have scars on their faces... haven't you ever noticed?"

"I guess not," Destiny Hope answered meekly feeling guilty for her self-absorption.

"Let me see your hand, Destiny," Merlin requested with the voice of a man and not a young boy. Destiny Hope extended her left hand palm up for him to inspect. "Let's go inside and I will take the splinter out for you," he said with calm self-assurance. "I'll get the fire going and boil some water. You check if your father kept any tweezers, salve, and bandages," Merlin spoke as he bolted the door behind them. Destiny Hope went about quickly collecting the items that Merlin had requested.

As Merlin worked on retrieving the splinter from Destiny Hope's palm, she asked a question that had been niggling the corners of her mind. "Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday and that you would be leaving the polishing room?"

"I really just forgot with everything else going on. I woke up and remembered and the first thought I had after that was that you would wonder where I was. I'm really sorry that I scared and upset you, but there was nothing I could do but report early as expected."

"I know and I feel really bad that I doubted you... it's just that everything is happening so fast and my emotions are like a kaleidoscope turning and changing faster that I can grasp their real meaning."

"It's Ok. Now hold still. You have been really brave and I am almost ready to grab hold of the splinter. Here we go... one, two,

three," and with that Merlin yanked the splinter free from under the skin of Destiny Hope's palm. He washed it well with warm water, applied the salve, and bandaged her wound as she remained still and quiet so that he could concentrate on helping her. Merlin then cleaned his own gash and filled it with the healing salve.

"I'll be here tomorrow morning to help you get what you need from Tallies. My dad even said that I could use a couple of my tallies to help you if you did not have enough to cover what you need. Don't be afraid. Don't let doubt take root and grow. You must, must believe in yourself, believe in me, believe in those that are greater than us. You must if you are going to set an example for others to emulate and follow." Merlin reached over and put his arms around Destiny Hope. "I promise you I will never leave you little one, but for now I must go. It is not good to be out after dark as you well know." Destiny stared at the door long after Merlin had shut it behind him.

Finally, the rumblings in her stomach compelled her turn away from the doorway and go scour for something to eat. After finishing her chores and climbing into bed, Destiny Hope decided to gently pull back the bandage and check on her wound. She only peeked at it at first, but when she could not see any injury she pulled the bandage all the way off. Her palm looked like it normally did. It was as if the injury had never happened. The last thought that Destiny Hope had before falling quickly into a deep sleep was a question. *Did Merlin's gash also heal as if by magic?*

Chapter 18: Everyday Life in Terrormaysu and More

As usual, Destiny Hope woke well before the dawning of another gray day. The pre-dawn morning was still as she stoked the fire and

threw on what little kindling she had left. She filled a pot with frigid water and placed it over the small fire to warm. While she was waiting, she mentally took stock of what she would need if she were to survive the coming week. This was the first time she had ever performed this chore alone. She knew that wood and coal were a priority to her survival. She was not sure, but guessed, that this would cost her six of the thirteen tallies she had earned her first week at the mine. She did not know if her dad had any tallies left at the store, but Destiny Hope wished it to be so. There was next to nothing left to eat. An almost empty bag of freeze-dried peas and half a banged tin canister of loose-leaf tea were all that remained in the shabby cupboard. Well, at least that was what would be left after Destiny Hope used the last of the mush for her meager breakfast. After eating, Destiny grabbed the shovel and made a path wide enough to allow her rickety rusty sled to pass through. Rushing back to the house, she grabbed her sled and quickly made her way to Tallies General Store.

Destiny Hope was not alone on the slushy road in the early morning shadows that loomed over Terrormaysu. Many residents were rushing towards the store hoping to beat still others rushing towards the store. It was not uncommon for the line to be more than a hundred customers long on a Sunday morn. This was the closest that anyone in Terrormaysu got to gathering together on their only day off. Turning the corner, Destiny Hope saw that today was no different than any other Sunday. The line wrapped around the building like a snake waiting to strike. All the people were jumping around trying to stay warm in the below zero temperatures. Destiny Hope quickly parked her sled at the sled rack with the multitude of others and walked as fast as she could to join the line. Looking to the right and the left as went, she did not spot Merlin anywhere in the crowd. Finally, reaching her place

about sixty people back from the door, she huddled close to the people in front of her to stay warm. The first time the line moved, it moved fast and gave the illusion that those towards the back would see the front in no time at all. The residents knew that this was not the case. The first group moved twenty into the store, but only after one resident exited could another one take their place. The day wore on and Destiny Hope wondered if Merlin was coming. She did not fall into the pitfall of fear again, but still she felt unsettled without him there. She waited. She moved forward. She waited. She moved forward. She waited. She moved forward until mid-day when she found herself three customers back from the oak door where a deathwalker worker watched that the exits and entrances of the residents and made sure that they were matched person for person. Destiny began getting concerned about Merlin. *Where could he possibly be?* she wondered in confusion. As hard as she tried to dam her emotion, the hurt began to fill her up once again. It felt like hurt itself might swallow her heart whole and never give it back. She placed her mitten-covered hands over her face trying to stay warm and hold back her tears. *I can do this*, she repeated to herself again and again, *I can*. Destiny Hope lifted her hands away and opened her eyes. She was now one person away from the next in line to go inside. Breathing repeatedly in through her nose and out through her mouth, she focused on the clouds of her breath as if the way were little pockets of promises saying, "You are here and you can do this." She had to do this. She had no choice. Destiny Hope began to accept what she needed to do. A voice not her own said inside her head, "You know that you can do it when you accept that you must do it. There is no other choice then. Accept and find your strength in the knowing."

"Ok, little missy, you're next," the worker said to her with barely a glance. Destiny Hope entered the store and found herself before the deathwalker tally counter.

"Number?"

"93939," she replied in a strong voice.

"Very well. You have thirteen tallies missy. Here ya go," he said handing her a slip of paper.

"Excuse me sir," Destiny asked in a voice not quite as strong as the last time. "My daddy died this week. Did he have any tallies left that I can use?"

"All tallies of the dead go back to Rigor C. Mortis to dispose of the body. Now move along," he said with a gruff shove to accompany his cruel words. Destiny Hope stumbled forward into the gloom of the store. She grabbed a flat bed on wheels the size of her sled and began collecting items. Every item was clearly marked. Wood: six tallies. Coal: four tallies. Porridge mush: half a tallie. That left only two and half tallies. She could make due with the tea that was left. Soup bone: half a tallie. Frozen pig broth: half a tallie - times two left only one tallie. What must she still get? Two rolls of coarse toilet paper consumed half a tallie and one pack of hard tack used her last half-tallie. Destiny rolled her flat bed to the exit door where her items and tallies were checked and she was rushed out to the cold again. She pulled the flat bed close to her sled and loaded her items as briskly as possible for a little girl of nine all alone. No one offered to help. It was clearly understood in Terrormaysu that no one took from another, but everyone looked out for themselves and their family only. Destiny Hope was not hurt by this. It was simply present day life in Terrormaysu.

Destiny Hope made her way home pulling her sled with all the might she had. *At least I'm warmer*, she thought as slipped on a patch of ice and quickly regained her balance moving forward once again. *I did it*, she thought and this reflection energized her. *I did it*, she said again to herself realizing that she was feeling a new emotion that she had not quite felt in the same way before. She felt proud of herself for providing what she would need to survive for the next week. This feeling carried her home where she unloaded her purchases and put up her sled until it would be needed again. She built herself a small fire and put a soup on to boil made with the soup bone (which she would save and use again), a small measure of broth, a few freeze-dried peas, water, and a dash of salt. Then she began sweeping the floor.

Destiny Hope was startled from her task of sweeping by a knock at the door. Rarely was there ever a knock at the door. The visitor was either related and simply entered, or it was bad tidings; a deathwalker worker was waiting on the other side with trouble as his accompanying messenger. Destiny hesitated. Should she answer it? Afraid, she worried what might be waiting on the other side. The next knock was softer.

"Destiny Hope, it's me, Merlin." Destiny raced to the door and flung it open. This time she was not angry but instead simply relieved and delighted to see him. She knew that Merlin cared for her and would have been at the store if it had been possible.

"Are you Ok?" Destiny Hope questioned immediately.

"I'm Ok. Let me come in - and close the door," he said as he pulled in behind him a sled with many, many items piled on it.

"Where did you get all that stuff?" Destiny asked in a quizzical voice. "I've never seen so much on a sled before."

"Last night I had a dream. I mean really a dream. I wasn't any other place, but it was like an answer to a question I had before I

fell asleep. I kept asking myself, 'What can I do to help Destiny? What can I do?' So, I dreamt that I went around asking everyone if they could just give something small to help you with your dad being gone and all. I asked them to imagine if one of their kids was left to fend for themselves with no one to help them. And... then I woke up and thought... why not give the people a chance to do something nice. It might be really important to bringing light into Terrormaysu. At least the people should be given a chance to warm their hearts by helping out someone without anything to gain but merely the feeling of feeling good about themselves. So, that's what I did and the people of Terrormaysu... well, at first they got a really strange look on their face," he said rambling on. "Some even asked if it was against the law. But, no one could remember any such law. The first person to put something on the sled was Fred's six-year-old daughter, Misty. She gave you her favorite rag doll that she takes everywhere. She said that it could be your friend so that you wouldn't have to be alone all the time. And then... people started giving a piece of wood or coal, an extra dish - even if it is one with a chip," he said holding it up with a smile, "tallow candles, a tattered towel, mush, and even, look, some dried cranberries. All of this is for you Destiny Hope; gifts from the people of Terrormaysu," he finished like an actor coming to the end of his soliloquy.

Destiny Hope sat on the stool simply staring - overwhelmed by the generosity and spirit of the people of Terrormaysu. Speechless, she remained motionless unable to comprehend the bounty she had just received. Finally, Destiny Hope shared in a soft voice filled with magic, "The change is beginning. The light is becoming brighter. Hearts are opening to the possibility that love can be greater than Rigor C. Mortis and his deathwalker workers. Destiny Hope's words flowed forward

like soft silk into the air. Destiny Hope seemed spellbound by the gifts from the benevolent people of Terrormaysu; the people of Terrormaysu had awakened inside Destiny Hope the light of the polished stone by their unconditional act of giving while expecting absolutely nothing in return.

Chapter 19: Truths and Legends Revealed

Destiny Hope went to bed on a full stomach for the first time since her father had died. Climbing into her father's bed, now piled high with not one but three threadbare blankets, she was warm and snuggly and felt safe for the first time since her world had been crushed by death and life's cruelties. She held the crystal heart in her hand and thought again of the generosity of the people of Terrormaysu. *I must follow my destiny and help these poor souls,* Destiny Hope thought to herself as she drifted off to sleep-filled with strength and belief that things could change for the better if she only allowed the change within herself to develop and deepen. It was not long before Destiny Hope was carried to a new location in another dimension where she found Merlin as the man with the deep and gentle baritone voice, waiting. There was a third person waiting for them as well. Destiny Hope's teacher greeted them with a gentle smile and words of praise.

"Welcome. It is wonderful how fast the two of you are growing and bonding in friendship. We have much to cover in this night of slumber so let us begin our lesson right away. Today we are not going to cover principals, but instead take an electro-magnetic journey together." Immediately, the three were transported to a circular room where they found themselves standing in its center. "We are going to learn the

history of Terrormaysu. Understanding what has come before will enable you to change the minds and hearts of the people living in your heartland," the teacher spoke quietly to the two. As he finished his words, the circular room came to life and the three stepped into the screens that surrounded them and a New World came into view.

Destiny Hope and Merlin found themselves in a place filled with hustle and bustle and strange sounds. People were rushing here and there calling greetings from time to time. The roads were a cacophony of beeping horns and screeching tires and buildings seemed to soar to the sky standing tall and majestic. "We are in a place called New Yorkshire," the teacher explained inside their heads. "In this city is the headquarters of Rigor C. Mortis. It is that one over there," he said pointing to a building taller than all the others where a stone was suspended on top revolving around and throwing off light. "It is here where all the polished stones come after they leave Terrormaysu."

"Is this in another dimension too?" Merlin asked Destiny Hope's teacher as he looked at the skyscraper in awe and wonder.

"Indeed not," the teacher replied matter-of-factly. "This building lies outside the mountain bowl of Terrormaysu about 500 clicks from where you live."

"How is that possible?" Destiny Hope asked in astonishment. "How is it that all the people of Terrormaysu never knew that New Yorkshire existed?" she questioned with doubt and curiosity.

"Ah, that is the rub," the teacher replied with a smile. "Let us find out how Rigor C. Mortis managed to create such a world filled with people completely dependent upon him. Let us go back to the beginning and take a trip with the great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather of Rigor C. Mortis."

Immediately the scene changed around Destiny Hope, Merlin, and the kind and wise teacher acting as their guide in this strange New World. The streets were no longer filled with beeping horns and screeching tires; in their place was hard packed dirt roads and people that rode on animals that pulled huge covered wagons. "What are those animals called?" Destiny Hope asked mesmerized by the strange and benign creatures.

"They are oxen and they convey people and property. This was one of the first means of hauling the stones once the original Rigor C. Mortis made his discovery. Come; let us listen in on the conversation taking place in the covered wagon."

"Sir, there is one more blast about to go off and we should be able to enter the mountain with our team of oxen."

"We better be able to do just that or it will be your head on a plate! Let me know when it is time to move forward and don't bother me again until then. Do we understand each other, son?" the man barked without looking up from the map spread before him.

"Yes sir," the younger man replied as he turned and headed out the flap of the wagon.

"Why is the man being so mean to his son?" Destiny Hope questioned her teacher in a sad voice.

"There is no love between the two. Even when people are related, they can miss out on life's greatest treasures... especially when they are seeking power and believe that power over others is the source of joy and happiness," the teacher replied in a voice as sad as the one that had asked the question. "Come; let's move forward on the time continuum and see how things evolved."

In front of the three stood a group of men with Rigor C. Mortis of generations ago drawing all the attention with his booming voice and

frightful presence. "You men have an opportunity to remain free from the prisons I rescued you from, but the only way that is going to happen is if you do exactly what I tell you to do when I tell you to do it. You now belong to me; I have purchased your freedom for a hefty price but it is certainly better than the gallows that were waiting to cut off your heads. If you fail to follow my orders, you will immediately find yourself at death's door without a reprieve. I will send you to the pits of fire without a second glance or second chance because there is always another waiting to take to your place. Without me, you are nothing. Nothing! Hear me clearly for your lives depend on it! You will work off your servitude and then I will pay you for your services, but I will hold your monetary reward in my bank until such time as I deem fit to give it to you. This will only happen when I know that your allegiance is without reproach for we are about to control two worlds and you, my soldiers with icy cold hearts, must do what I say if this is to be accomplished without delay. It is paramount that you understand that it is I that hold the future of the world in palm of my hand. Now take the oath of commitment by giving me your serum of allegiance and you shall one day finally have the money and power you so desire. In addition, I will give you a gift that you can only get from me. The gift of eternal life; you shall never, never die. You can enjoy the gifts eternally!" he finished with a dark flourish.

Destiny Hope, Merlin and the teacher looked on as each of the men allowed (six hundred and sixty six in all) a long blunt needle to be inserted in their arm. The needle was withdrawn and the stopper was pulled back at the same time in unison (rather than pushed forward as is common with injections). Immediately after the needle was removed, the skin color of each man changed from tan and ruddy to an alabaster blue white where veins became evident and evidence of a new breed of

men. All of their lips became blue and purplish as if permanently frostbitten, and their eyes changed from clarity to red corneas and bloodshot irises. It was then that Merlin and Destiny understood how the deathwalker workers had come to be. They were criminals with dark souls that sold what little humanity they still possessed in exchange for power over others and the promise of money with lifetimes to spend it.

"Yes, you are right. The needle did not inject anything but instead took something out that resides inside the body. But, there is much for us to see so let us move forward," and in the next moment, after the teacher had spoken, the three were transported further on the continuum time line. They found themselves in a session with sixty-six of the men that had taken the oath of commitment. They were in a large compound surrounded by razor wire in a room of complete darkness and the only sound to be heard was the voice of Rigor C. Mortis commanding his men. "You are the elite. You are the keepers of secrets and relish to live in hot anger and cold darkness. You are the chosen and you shall be rewarded for your devotion. You, you are the ones that have the power and control over all others. You answer only to me, Rigor C. Mortis." The session seemed to last for eons as the cold dark voice droned on again and again the same words over and over until Destiny Hope and Merlin almost became brainwashed and believers of the controlling and evil words being spoken. The horror of watching humans sell their souls for money and power was almost more than their own souls could bear. It was time to get out of there.

In the next second the trio found themselves before another compound called Rickets Orphanage. *What are we doing here?* Destiny Hope wondered to herself. She felt like she could not stand to look upon one more sad and lonely place, and as hard as it might be to believe, she

almost wished she were back in Terrormaysu where everything was familiar and where a spark of hope now existed.

"Hang in there, Destiny," her teacher said reading her feelings by the aura colors surrounding her being. "We only have a few more scenes before the history of Terrormaysu is clearly understood by the two of you." They were then looking in a conference room inside the crumbling gray stone building where Rigor C. Mortis was speaking to a room full of gentleman well dressed in suits and acting important.

"I can take the orphans and save you the expense and difficulties of dealing with the parentless children. I will take them to my city and provide for them as if they were my own," he said, making it sound like he was motivated by caring and love.

"Well, hmmm, it sounds good, but what assurance do we have that you will not kill or maim these innocent children. We could not abide that... you know... we do have the human rights issue to deal with," the governor said clearing his throat as if he was choking on the idea but tempted by it none-the-less. "The people would not be satisfied with the solution if they thought the children were going to be treated with ill will."

"Not to worry," Rigor C. Mortis said in a silky smooth voice. "You have my word that not one child shall go without what they need to live a better life than they are living now. As you know, I have no children of my own and more money than I could ever need. I want to give back and taking the children from this destitute life is a gift that I can easily give. Please, allow me to do this for the children as well as a benefit to the state. I will take all children nine and older and provide for them until adulthood. Then I will give them work in my mines and they will be well prepared to provide for themselves and to give something back in return. They will stay at Comfort House until

then where they can laugh and play as children should. You and your ministers can inspect the home and grounds at leisure any time you choose," he said as he displayed a rendering of a lovely village of cottages for the men to examine. Looking on, it was obvious to Destiny Hope, Merlin, and the teacher what choice the governor and his ministers would make. The saying, "if it is too good to be true... then it probably is," never entered their minds. Instead, Rigor C. Mortis' seemingly benevolent gesture was accepted by a unanimous vote and the future residents of Terrormaysu were placed under the care of Rigor C. Mortis and quickly transported to their new home.

Once again the time continuum line moved the three onlookers forward until they were witnessing the arrival of the first residents to Terrormaysu. As by now expected, the snow was falling heavily and visibility was particularly poor on this dreadful day. Ninety-nine children (some close to adulthood, for two years had passed and no one checked on the children any longer) were sleeping in wagons as the oxen pulled them through the hole and into the mountain. Each had been given a draught before leaving Comfort House to ensure that they would not remember the journey or how long it took to arrive at their new home. It would be hours before they would awake and by that time each and every one would find that they were in a bed covered by a blanket with a pillow under their head. The cupboard in their house would be filled with staples, wood and coal would be waiting stacked by their fireplaces. It would seem a glorious day to the children and young adults about to embark on their new adventure. It was only years later when all the children had become adults, when all the adults began to marry each other and have children of their own, that the life known by Destiny Hope and Merlin would eventually become the horror they now knew that it was.

One more scene flashed before the eyes of Destiny Hope, Merlin, and her teacher and the picture became complete of how Terrormaysu had come to be what it was now. It also explained why no one had ever tried to leave. It seemed the scene was called forward because this question had been nagging Destiny Hope for some time and she now had the power to call forth answers she wanted in this other dimension. This was what the three witnessed as they looked on.

A mother, father, and two children sat before a hearth with a warm fire burning. In a rocking chair closest to the fire sat a grandmother quietly knitting and telling a story at the same time. "Once upon a time, a long time ago, there existed many, many children without parents who were abandoned and left alone to fend for themselves. They most assuredly would have died if not for the help of a kind, kind man named Rigor C. Mortis. Winter was howling and spewing forth snow and the children had no food and nowhere to go. There were ninety-nine children in all. As death began to creep into their veins with icy precision, oxen and wagons appeared magically before them. The children were lifted up to the wagons and covered with blankets. They were given warm tea and biscuits and reassured with words of promise that they would be cared for at a place called Comfort House. They were promised that in a couple of years, after they had healed and proved their devotion, they would get to live in a wonderful town and work for Rigor C. Mortis. That was all that was asked of them for a childhood of safety and comfort.

As the children grew so did the love they felt for Rigor C. Mortis. For two years, they had a lovely life filled with fun, laughter, and all the food their bellies could hold at any given time. The children attended school once a week where they were taught the importance of gratitude and giving back to those that give to you. The

children became devoted to Rigor C. Mortis for all that he had given them. He had saved their lives, and now it was their purpose to serve the one, the only one, that had ever truly loved and cared for them.

The children grew to be kind and caring and each was promised that they would get to live in place called Terrormaysu when they grew up. They were told it was a magical land that only the special could ever hope to live in and that once they arrived they would never have to leave again. In fact, this town was so magical that once you arrived no one could ever leave it again. It was the only way to guard the secret and keep the magic intact.

One day the children found themselves as if by magic in their new home. In a new town. They began their work in the mines with devotion and commitment giving back to Rigor C. Mortis for all that he had given them. They did not question or grouse about the work. They were honored to be the chosen ones and you, my children, are the children of the children of the children... saved by Rigor C. Mortis, and it should be your honor to serve as did you ancestors before you, before me, back beyond where my memories travel. We are the privileged few that are taken care of when we serve our benevolent master. It is our only protection from a cruel, cruel existence where people kill each other, where there is no food to be had, and where plagues kill most all the people with cruelty and suffering as their only end."

The grandmother began folding up her knitting and placed it in a bag on her lap. She began slowly rising from her rocking chair as she was saying the final moral to the story that had been passed down for generations, "I know that sometimes life seems hard here, but as difficult as it seems, this is the Promised Land. It is your birthright to be here and there is nowhere else greater than this land we live in. We are the privileged few and our rewards are great here as well as

when we pass from here to join our ancestors in the heavenly Land of White." She averted her eyes as she finished her story for she did not want the others to see the doubt that was creeping up inside her soul about this land and about this life. That was something that you never, ever talked about to anyone. It was simply understood, without ever being spoken, that you kept your questions and doubts locked deep inside your own heart and your own mind. Looking back at her family, she gave a weak smile and then carried herself to bed on her worn and tired body.

"I know her," Destiny Hope said with confidence. "That is my grandmother, and the little girl sitting there was my mother, but who is the little boy?" she asked her teacher puzzled that she did not recognize him.

"That would have been your uncle, but he was taken at a young age before he ever had a chance to polish a stone or work in the mine. It was a blessing really, for he missed a life that would have been much worse than your own, but that is another story for another time," said her teacher before quickly changing the subject.

"What have you gained from our experience of viewing the creation of deathwalker workers and the life of your ancestors that brought them to Terrormaysu? "Wait!" he said holding up his hand and placing intent upon his next instruction, "Don't answer now, but think upon it in your days to come. It will serve you well in bringing the light to Terrormaysu," and with that the teacher was gone in a mist of vanishing light and Destiny Hope and Merlin returned to their beds moments away from facing another day in the cold and gloom of Terrormaysu.

Chapter 20: A Chance Worth Taking

Destiny Hope and Merlin met on the triangular common grounds a few minutes before the whistle was scheduled to sound the following morning. They stood close in the pre-dawn darkness not saying much at first, but simply feeling the comfort of each other's presence. They were both looking towards the sky assessing if there would be more snow today when Destiny Hope said softly so that only Merlin could hear her, "The sky seems different, but I'm not sure why."

"I know why," Merlin replied calmly. "It is clearer somehow. Look over above the building and let your eyes travel to the right. I don't think I have ever seen one before, but there is a star twinkling over there."

"You're right!" Destiny Hope exclaimed. "I wonder if anyone else noticed it... probably not. Do you think that there are stars from time to time but we just never see them because we stopped looking for them?"

"It's possible, or maybe, it is the first star to come, signifying that the change has begun. Let's make sure to check every night from now on. Oh, and by the way, I talked to my dad. He says it's Ok if I walk you home from work and help you a little bit each night before I head home. He doesn't say much, but it's like he knows that it's important that I help you right now. It's like he understands it is something I must do even though the people of Terrormaysu usually don't do things like that. I'll meet you here after work, Ok?" Destiny Hope simply nodded too overwhelmed with a budding love for her new friend to reply. Already, it was getting hard to imagine life without Merlin. The two gave a final glance at the star, squeezed hands through mitten and glove, and went towards their separate entrances at the whistle's call.

Destiny Hope retrieved her stone from her numbered cubicle and set right to work. The day moved rapidly along because Destiny Hope's mind was busy contemplating all that she had learned in her slumber last night. How could knowing the history of Terrormaysu help her to fulfill her destiny? She tossed the different possibilities around in her mind like a child bouncing a rubber ball off a wall again and again. It was becoming common for thoughts to enter her head from some other place than her own experiences and it suddenly happened again.

"Find the common points and connect the dots if you can." Destiny Hope let the challenge linger for awhile and repeated the words every few minutes as she contemplated what it could possibly mean. *What are the common points in the history of Terrormaysu? How are they connected? Maybe if I think about what is different, I will be able to figure out what is the same. Let's see... The deathwalker workers were purchased criminals and the first residents were orphaned children taken in and provided for by Rigor C. Mortis. The criminals gave up their souls to him for money and power and to escape death forever. The orphaned children became devoted because it seemed that Rigor C. Mortis loved and cared for them like a father when no one else would. The criminals were brainwashed by his sayings over and over and threatened with the fire pits... and the children were told over and over that they must show gratitude to him for gifts that were given and that they would get to go to the promised land... Wait...* it was if a red light went on - stopping Destiny's Hope's mind from moving forward so that she could make the connection. Destiny Hope focused on her brain's stop point. Both the criminals and the orphans were repeatedly told what to believe even if what they were told seemed very different in meaning. The desired outcome was the same. Both based their lives on truths that Rigor C. Mortis fed their brains again and again. Both the criminals

and the orphans believed that they were going to die before Rigor C. Mortis saved them and both were living in horrible conditions. Both needed a future they could believe in. Destiny Hope's thoughts were interrupted by a loud crashing banging sound that so startled her that she jumped up out of her seat. At the same instance, her arm swung out colliding with the side of her stone careening it off the wooden table onto the concrete floor with a thud. Quickly looking around, Destiny Hope realized that no one had witnessed what had happened because they were all looking in the direction of the commotion. By instinct, she immediately stooped down to scoop up her stone and get it back on the table before the situation changed. Grabbing her stone, she realized that three small pieces had broken off. Without thinking, she grabbed them and urgently put them inside her sock below her boot line. She then placed her stone back on the table and sat down as if nothing had happened. A child she did not know was then yanked by his arm out of his seat by Mr. Crater.

"Ya'll get backs ta work Isa warnin ya, or yas will be feelin tha scalding stick good an hards where it hurts tha most," Mr. Crater shouted over his shoulder as he harshly escorted the boy out of the room. No one said a word. They simply did what they were told.

Destiny Hope examined her stone closely and carefully to see if the damage was obvious. She turned it every which pretending that she was intent on her polishing to see if she could find where the pieces had broken off from the whole. There was only one spot where it might be noticed and then only if the looker knew exactly what it was that they were looking for. Still, it might be noticeable under the lights in the inspection shed. She just wasn't sure. She decided not to take a chance by allowing her stone to be checked today. It was expressly forbidden to remove a stone from the room, and if the damage were

detected she would be strip-searched. She did not know how she knew this, she just knew that she did. Although it frustrated her to not earn any tallies today, the people of Terrormaysu had provided more than enough staples to last her awhile, and she simply could not take a chance. If caught, she knew she would spend the rest of her days in Fissure Prison doing unspeakable tasks that were only hinted about but never really explained in horrific detail. The rest of the day passed slowly and by the time the whistle freed her from her seat, Destiny Hope was a bundle of nerves.

"Excuse me missy, but whys did'nt cha have a stone checked today?" Mr. Crater barked at her just as she was about to walk out the door to safety and freedom. Destiny Hope's heart lurched and it seemed for a moment as if something were lodged in her throat. "Whats a cat gotcha tongue?" Mr. Crater snarled and cackled at the same time. "I can see it was just beginnas luck them first two stones, yas just like all the rest of them... justa lazee no gooders... all a yas... go on Isa cantevea stand to look at ya no more." Destiny Hope could barely believe her good fortune and it took her feet a moment to get the message to move forward while the opportunity was available. After what seemed forever but was only a second or two, she made a hasty escape out into the common grounds without answering Mr. Crater or looking back even once. Fortunately, Merlin was already waiting and she was able to leave the common grounds immediately.

Destiny Hope and Merlin did not talk much on the way home. It was as if they had an unspoken agreement not to discuss the night before or what had happened during their day until they were behind closed doors. Upon arriving at Destiny Hope's house, they shared the chores as naturally as lifetime friends who knew each other so well they automatically went about taking care of each other without needing

words to know what task to perform. Merlin started a fire and Destiny Hope got out the tin canister of loose-leaf tea and two rock biscuits. As soon as their tea was made and flavored with evaporated milk and a sugar cube (luxuries given to Destiny Hope by the people of Terrormaysu), Destiny Hope told Merlin what had happened at work. Pulling the three small stones out of her sock she set them on the table for Merlin to see. Neither one spoke for several minutes. They just looked at the stones until Merlin finally picked one up. "You really took a chance taking these stones out of the workroom," he said without looking at her as he stared at the dime-sized stone resting in the palm of his hand.

"I know, but at the time, I didn't even think about it and once they were in my sock, there was nothing else I could do. I guess I could have asked to go to the bathroom and tried to flush them down the toilet, but the truth is it never crossed my mind. It was like I was meant to have them. The whole thing was crazy, but at the same time like a well-orchestrated event with a specific outcome already satisfied. I just needed to play my part. So... here they are."

"Well, put them away for now until we figure out what we are supposed to do with them. I want to talk to you about last night. Did you figure anything out about the history of Terrormaysu and why it was important for us to view?" Merlin asked Destiny Hope.

"Actually I think that I might have, but then all the commotion began and I never really had a chance to think it all through, but before that, a voice in my head said to find the common point and connect the dots. At first, I could only think about what was different. But, by looking at the differences, I finally came to some common things. Both the criminals and the orphans were afraid that they were going to die and both were living in horrible conditions. Rigor C.

Mortis told both the criminals and the orphans certain ideas and beliefs over and over - even if the ideas they were told were very different from each other. Both the orphans and the criminals believed what he told them probably because they were told it again and again and they were never told anything different from anyone else. Both the orphans and the criminals were promised something in the future that gave them hope even though they were promised different things."

"Well, it is certainly something to think about," Merlin replied hastily, realizing that it was getting really late and that he better get going before the curfew sounded. "Let's both think about those ideas and we'll try to figure out how we can apply them to our situation," and with that he stood up, gave Destiny Hope a brief hug, and rushed out the door.

Once again, Destiny Hope was left alone to take care of herself. Picking up Misty's rag doll, she sat her gently on the chair where Merlin had sat just a moment ago. True it was only a doll (and one made out of rags at that) but somehow that doll made all the difference; Destiny Hope hummed happily to the doll as she prepared her supper.

Chapter 21: The Bump, The Girl, and Her Face in the Stone

Destiny Hope worked diligently to complete her stone the following morning and raised her hand to be checked shortly after arriving at work. As usual, Mr. Motley sauntered over and checked her stone. The only difference this time was that he was sullen and uncommunicative. After turning her stone this way and that, he headed towards the shed keeping hold of the stone like a prized possession. Destiny Hope was not sure whether she should follow or not, but she got up out of her seat since that was the usual procedure when a stone was checked. Her

heart began beating a little fast and got faster and faster the closer they got to the inspection shed. Would they notice that her stone had been damaged... that there were pieces missing? She worried more and more with each step bringing her closer to possibility of getting caught in her theft. Finally, after what seemed an interminable amount of time, Mr. Motley and Mr. Crater disappeared into the inspection shed with her stone and she was left outside the door standing alone. It seemed this time Mr. Motley was not to be excluded. Destiny Hope wondered if this would change his attitude towards her the next time she raised her hand. That is... if there was a next time. The inspection of her stone seemed to take longer than the other two times. It seemed to take forever. But, since there was no clock for the worker's to look at or watch, Destiny Hope could not be sure if the time lapse was her imagination or truth of fact. The door was suddenly flung open and Mr. Motley lunged for Destiny Hope and pulled her abruptly into the room slamming the door behind him. "Ok, missy yous got somes explainin ta do!" Mr. Crater's face was a splotchy red as he continued, "Yous know we knows everthin that's happin in Terrormaysu and wes want ta know wahts yous think yous doin havin Merlin walking ya home at night?"

"He's just being nice to me sir because I'm all alone and there is so much to do and learn," Destiny Hope managed to answer all the while hiding her sheer relief that the problem was not the stone but her relationship with Merlin.

"Yer sure abouts that?" Mr. Crater asked as he stared her down with his red corneas searching to see in her face if her words were the truth.

"Why else would he be walking me home?" Destiny Hope asked innocently looking directly into Mr. Crater's horrible eyes.

"Wells, yous just watchit... tha both of yous cause wes be watchin yous. As fa as I knows thars no laws agains kids walking togethers buts if Merlin is caughts out afta curfew Isa goin make sure he gets whats comin ta him... yas understan whats I'm sayin missy?" Mr. Crater finished breathless as the cigarette in his hand dropped a long ash to the floor.

"Yes sir," Destiny Hope answered respectfully.

"Alrights then, gets yaself another stone and gets back ta work and yas got threes more tallies - not so good missy for two days work. Yas better get movin fasta or Isa gonna give yas whats yas really derserves and that aint tallies, yas got that missy?"

"Yes sir," Destiny Hope answered as Mr. Crater shoved her from behind and out the door.

Destiny Hope moved rapidly away from the shed almost unbelieving of her good fortune. At any second, she expected to be called or pulled back, but instead she found herself before the gray metal cart picking out a new stone. She decided to get a large one again just like the first one. The less inspections the better as far as she was concerned especially since the last two times she was not even allowed in the shed when the inspection occurred. Hauling her stone back to the table, Destiny Hope began the tedious task of polishing yet another stony basketball. Except for the fifteen-minute break for lunch, Destiny Hope worked non-stop like a worker bee preparing a hive. The day seemed to fly by and Destiny Hope was surprised when the whistle shrilled, and she realized it was already time to put her stone away. She lugged her stone to the cubicle and quickly donned her coat, mittens, and scarf and was just about ready to leave when she felt a bump from behind. Turning around, Destiny Hope saw a girl that appeared to be a little older than her standing right next to her. Before she had a chance to

wonder if it was the girl that had bumped her, the girl spoke barely above a whisper, "I saw your face in my stone today," and with that she turned and quickly walked away. At first Destiny Hope wondered if she had heard the girl right, but knowing in heart that she had heard exactly what she thought she had heard, she accepted it and rushed to find Merlin so that she could tell him about the day and the girl.

They again walked in silence and waited until they were locked safely inside Destiny Hope's house before discussing their day. Destiny Hope shared with Merlin how for several seconds she was sure that she was about to be hauled to Fissure Prison for taking the stones. She then told him about the bump, the girl, and her face in the stone and asked Merlin what he thought the new development meant.

"I'm not sure," he replied still in the process of thinking about it, "but my gut instinct says that she may be another lifeline just stepping into her role. Tomorrow watch and see if you can find her in your stone and try communicating with her like we do," he suggested.

"That's a good idea," she answered. "I will and I'll let you know tomorrow," Destiny Hope said excited by the prospect of having another person to talk with while she was polishing her stone. "How about you? Was your thirdday better than the first?" Destiny Hope asked Merlin with kindness in her voice.

"All I can tell you Destiny is that polishing stones is like a day of play compared to what I have to do now that I'm twelve," and he showed her his hands that were filled with blisters ready to pop.

"Oh Merlin, I'm so sorry. I wish there was something I could do to get you out of the dreadful place."

"Don't worry about me Destiny, I'll be fine. Let's just concentrate on making a difference and the rest will follow naturally. I better go so that we don't draw any more attention to ourselves than

is absolutely necessary. Do you think you would be Ok alone for awhile? I think we need to get them disinterested in us and the best way to do that is to stay separate until they stop looking."

Destiny Hope's heart immediately filled up with sadness at Merlin's words, but she understood the wisdom in the suggestion. "I'll be fine Merlin. I can do this and knowing that you're there and you are my friend makes it so much easier than I thought it would be... being alone I mean."

"Ok. Let's plan on getting together Sunday. We'll meet at Tallies and get you what you need. We can talk after that," Merlin said as he hugged her close wishing that he could stay with her rather than go home. "And... who knows," he said as he opened the door, "we might find ourselves together some night before then." His final words left a smile inside Destiny Hope and carried her through the rest of the night.

Chapter 22: A Near Miss and A New Friend

Destiny Hope rushed to work the following morning filled with hope. She saw Merlin across the common ground standing with his father and brother but she ignored his presence completely as planned. Instead, she looked up at the sky. There had been a light dusting of snowfall overnight, but now the sky seemed clear... clearer somehow... the same clarity that Merlin and her had witnessed the morning before when they had discovered the star. Destiny eyes now traveled the same path and, sure enough, there was the star sending hope and promise to souls that had forgotten how to look and now could no longer see. Except, of course, for Destiny Hope and Merlin. Pulling away from the wondrous sight, she looked to see if Merlin was seeing the same thing. Sure

enough, Merlin was looking up and then he looked over with a small smile and a nod towards the sky. Destiny Hope almost looked forward to getting to work as she turned from Merlin and headed to collect her polishing rag and new stony basketball.

As Destiny Hope began her polishing a disappointing thought occurred to her. She might not even get to test the theory Merlin had suggested. She had chosen a huge stone to polish, and as Merlin and her had discovered, the stones had to be polished to give them the magic of seeing and connecting without ever moving or saying. Destiny Hope put every bit of her strength and ability to the task now that she realized that magic could not happen without the work first. Destiny Hope wolfed down her lunch and was back in her seat working in less than ten minutes so intent was she to reach her goal and the girl; one and the same in this particular case. "Sees yas workin reals hard, missy. Good thin yas are learnin your lessins quickly... keeps its up ifs yas knows wats gud fur ya," Mr. Crater said real up close by her ear sending a chill down her spine that she did not dare shake off until he was a good distance away. Then and only then, like a dog shaking water off its back after a bath, did Destiny Hope shake herself - throwing off the shadowy threats that Mr. Crater had left surrounding her.

With little time left before the end of the day, the magic finally happened. Destiny saw a face in the stone looking at her with a questioning frown. "Let's see if she can read my thoughts or read words that are placed inside the stone. Destiny waited first to see if the girl might have heard her voice inside her head without thinking any thoughts into the stone at all. Nothing happened. Destiny Hope changed her focus and now stared inside the stone and sent a message asking the girl her name.

"I'm Laura," the girl replied right away as the frown disappeared and a look of wonder appeared in its place. "How can we do this?" she immediately asked.

"I'm not exactly sure, but there is a lot more than just talking through the stones," Destiny Hope sent the thought through the stone again. Immediately, the frown reappeared on Laura's face, but it was less afraid and more quizzical this time.

"What do you mean?" Laura said staring into the stone as if she could reach out and touch Destiny Hope as she asked the question.

"There's not enough time... the whistle is going to go off soon. If you can come to my house after the noon-day meal on Sunday... well, there will be more time and I can really explain."

"I don't know, I don't know if I can," Laura seemed to be getting upset at the thought.

"Well, just think about it. You don't have to decide anything and please, don't worry. It is something wonderful and it's amazing that you can see me and talk to me like my other friend."

"You...you have a friend? I've never had a friend since I started working here. What's it like to have a real friend?" Destiny Hope could feel the longing coming from Laura.

"No matter what... I'm your friend now Laura. We share something special now that bonds us together. Try to come Sunday, but if not, let's at least try to talk tomorrow. Listen, get a small stone next time. The stones have to be polished for us to communicate. A polished stone is the only stone that gives magic. Ok?" Destiny Hope finished just as the whistle ended another day. The magic vanished but the wonderful feeling of change and hope stayed with Destiny Hope as she walked home all alone. She spoke not another word for the rest of the evening... well, except of course, to one that did not answer. Sara the

rag doll, her other new best friend, was not a talker but she certainly was an exceptional listener.

Chapter 23: And Now There Were Three

It happened a little different this time. Destiny Hope did not feel destitute or alone. In truth, she felt more secure than ever before in her life. She had a strong sense now that she could take care of herself and do what was required to sustain her life. She felt that she was loved and protected by Merlin, her dear, dear friend and lifeline, and by those that lived in the beyond. She felt a ripple of joy and happiness as she climbed into bed and tucked Sara safely in beside her. She was truly looking forward to tomorrow for the very first time in her life.

Immediately upon settling in cozy and comfy, she heard singing coming from beyond the wind; it was calling, calling her to come. The colors surrounded her like multi-colored cotton candy and she tasted the richness of her brief journey. She floated into the new dimension and settled perfectly in place to survey the scene before her.

It was a huge pavilion nestled in the woods with towering and mighty oaks and golden birch trees. Destiny Hope could smell the scent of leaves and fresh rains in the pure air of this idyllic setting. Picnic benches lined the pavilion three rows wide and nine tables deep and each seat was filled with youth from the ages of nine to eighteen. Many were conversing on deep and meaningful topics. There were those that preferred to read and were in deep study. Destiny Hope saw Merlin seated at a picnic table as the boy she knew him to be in Terrormaysu. She was naturally drawn towards him and found herself within the next instance seated beside him.

"We meet again and so soon," Merlin said with an impish smile.

"I never really thought I would have to wait until Sunday to see you," Destiny Hope's smile matched Merlin's. "But, I did think that I would have to focus to come here and find you. Instead, the moment I was in bed, the sweetest voice started calling me here, and here I am... And here you are too."

"That's what happened for me too. It's like I know that I know and since I do... there's nothing I have to do now to make the magic happen." They sat for awhile and enjoyed their surroundings. The beauty was all the sweeter for these two because they lived their physical lives in Terrormaysu. They might have remained this way for much longer simply enjoying and absorbing the songs of nature if their attention had not been simultaneously drawn to Laura standing bewildered at the far side of the pavilion. Immediately, the two joined her in order to guide her into this dimension. Her presence and energy colors made it evident that this was new experience for her.

"Laura," Destiny Hope spoke the single word gently.

"Oh, Destiny... I'm so glad you're here. I have no idea where I am, but it all seems so real and maybe... maybe slightly familiar."

"Have you ever met Merlin?" Destiny Hope said looking over at him.

"We've... We've never actually met," Laura said hesitantly as if afraid she would give the wrong answer.

"We'll then - meet Merlin," Destiny Hope said with a little courtesy towards him, "he is the friend I mentioned today at work... so now we are three very close and connected friends," Destiny Hope finished with a joyful smile on her face. "Let's go sit down and we'll try to explain... wait... trying is not doing; trying is expecting to fail... we will explain the answers to any questions you may have."

After they sat quietly at the picnic table simply drinking in the sights and sounds, Laura began to get attuned to the environment. "I never knew that such an unbelievably magical place existed," Laura said almost breathless with wonder. "I wish my family could know of such a place."

"Maybe one day they will," Merlin suggested the possibility. "Nothing is impossible, you know," he said giving her a reassuring pat.

"How did I get here?" Laura asked already beginning to seek meaningful answers.

"You brought yourself here," Destiny Hope replied matter-of-factly. Laura did not question the answer; the minute it was said she knew the truth of it and quickly more truths and memories began to surface for her. It flew into her mind in bits and pieces not really giving her time to grab on to any one idea completely.

"I keep getting the sense that I am a lifeline, but I'm not really sure what that means; I just know that I am," Laura shook her head and laughed at how ridiculous she probably sounded, but knowing that it was the truth none-the-less.

"Don't worry, it will all make sense. The answers are all within you. Just let them come as they will and be willing to believe in the answers you receive," Destiny Hope spoke intently, looking directly at Laura.

"I thought you were going to explain?" Laura said as a joke, laughing because she already understood and could feel the connection. The details for now did not matter. Laura knew that she had made lifetime friends and that together they had something important to do! The hope and knowing was now evolving and expanding within Laura too; now they were three parts creating a whole; they felt complete and connected for the first time in their short and difficult lives.

Chapter 24: Parts are Whole

Destiny Hope was grateful, very grateful that she did not have to go to Tallies on the Sunday that Merlin, and hopefully Laura, would be coming over. Her cupboard was stocked, her wood piled high (for a home in Terrormaysu), her small coal bin was filled to just below the top, her dry goods enough. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined her life changing so drastically in a little over a week. It seemed that she had always been on her own, and yet at the same time it seemed but a moment ago when Luke had walked her to work for her first day at the mines. Destiny Hope could not help thinking that all the most important things in life changed in a moment. Good or bad it did not matter. First, it was one way and then it was another. This was often how the biggest changes in life happened. It really seemed to be almost that simple. It was not knowing when or what would be different that seemed to cause fear instead of wonder, and sometimes seemed to make things take forever. Destiny Hope pondered, *if you don't worry about the when, the what, the who, the where, but instead stayed right in the here and now doing the best that you could do... Is that the key to joy and magic?* In this moment, Destiny Hope realized she was actually and truly happy; she was experiencing a new emotion that had been very, very close to extinction in Terrormaysu.

Destiny knew that she had been consumed by sorrow not long ago when the blocker the doctor had administered had failed to keep her numb any longer. At times, she could still feel tinges of that sorrow trying to climb out its resting place like a colony of termites getting ready to cause great destruction. She took precautions. She would choose to "stop thought". She would focus on conversations with Merlin. She would gather her gratitudes. She would dispense with her disappointments.

Destiny Hope did her best to keep her attitude turned toward thankfulness and hope; she had to if she was going to fulfill her true destiny and bring change to Terrormaysu. She knew. She just knew what she had to do.

Destiny Hope's reverie was interrupted by a soft knocking at the door in a quick one-two, pause, one-two rhythm that let Destiny Hope know that it was Merlin. Destiny Hope rapidly unbolted the lock and Merlin slipped in quickly closing the door behind him. The bolt was thrust back in place before the two went to the table where Destiny Hope had tea and biscuits waiting. "How was the rest of your week?" Destiny Hope asked Merlin after sipping her tea.

"It's always the same. I don't know what I would do, probably go out of my mind, if my world was not bigger than the small caverns I have to squeeze through every day. How about you?"

"Laura and I have had some wonderful conversations. I'm pretty sure she'll be coming over. Anyway, I have been thinking about the three pieces of stones. Maybe, everything happens for a reason. Maybe it really wasn't an accident like I first thought, but instead, an opportunity. If that was true... it might mean that the stones are important."

"I was thinking about that too. Why don't you get them and while we're having our tea we can polish them. I brought a rag," Merlin said pulling it out of his pocket and tearing it in two.

"As if I don't do enough stone polishing," Destiny Hope joked over her shoulder as she went to get the stones out of their hiding place. Together, Destiny Hope and Merlin worked on polishing the stones while they sipped their tea and nibbled on their biscuits prolonging their pleasure and enjoying each other's company.

"STOP!" Destiny Hope exclaimed out of the blue. "Don't move the stone. They're small so I can't be sure unless you hold still. YES! It's true! Look in the stone Merlin; I am seeing you. Can you see me too?"

"Yes, I can!" Merlin exclaimed with startled surprise. I can't believe that we didn't even think about it. I guess because the pieces were so small, but it's true that size doesn't matter. Every part is still a whole!"

"You know what that means Merlin... we can communicate anytime we want now if you take a polished stone and I keep a polished stone and we give the other polished stone to Laura," Destiny Hope's eyes were wide with awe and wonder.

"Too cool," Merlin was equally delighted, but as usual calmer than Destiny Hope as he leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "Too, too cool. We will be able to talk all the time now, but we better come up with some kind of plan to make sure no one discovers that we have the stones. That's a free ride to Fissure Prison for sure."

"You're right," Destiny Hope replied, calmer and a little concerned now that Merlin had mentioned the down-side to the situation. Without waiting another minute, the two devised a strategy of precautions to make sure that their secret would never be uncovered.

The polished stones could only be used inside the house in a room without anyone else and behind a locked door if locking the door would not draw suspicion. The stone could never be carried out of the house anywhere or anytime, except, of course, the first time so that Merlin and Laura could get their polished stones home. The owners of the polished stones must find the safest hiding place possible as quickly as possible, and the stone could never be out of it's hiding place for

more than nine minutes at a time. The times for possible communication were set: 4:00 a.m. (most everyone got up between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m.), 9:00 p.m., or 10:00 p.m. (most residents were asleep by nine but just in case someone stayed up late). No risk was ever to be taken to see if a communicator was waiting. If there was any risk, any risk at all, the owner must forgo communication at that point in time. The three would take an oath of protection and agreement and if any one of the owners broke the pledge they must relinquish their stone to one of the others. It was at that moment when Destiny Hope and Merlin had just finished hammering out the terms of precaution that a rhythmic knock announced that Laura had found the courage to join her friends. It was the turning point of a dramatic change about to happen.

Chapter 25: Balloons Make Great Messengers

Destiny Hope gave Laura a hug and offered her a cup of tea and a biscuit. "That would be great," Laura replied, settling into a chair next to Merlin. After the trio had conversed on general matters - how have you been, did you go to Tallies, those sorts of things, Laura shared what had made her decide to join her two friends. "My life has been so lonely. My parents are always tired, and my older brother is courting Mr. Measley's daughter, so I am always alone. I have been so unhappy for so long and I didn't even realize it until I spent time with you two in the other dimension. Knowing that life can be different helped me muster-up my courage and come here. If I can help in some way, anyway, to bring a little happiness to this dark and horrible town, well, there really isn't a choice to be made. I just have to stay brave and do it. And... well, now I have you two... that makes all the difference," Laura said with a tremulous smile.

"Everything is going to be fine Laura. I'm not sure how I know; I just do," Merlin said, "And, we're not alone. We have the most powerful help possible. We have guides and masters from other dimensions pulling for us and helping us in anyway they can. We just have to be open and watch for the signs."

"We have a secret to tell you about, but you have to promise, I mean really promise, to keep it a secret," Destiny Hope looked intently at Laura. "The secret is wonderful, but it could also be very dangerous too... so you have to let us know if you want to know it too," Destiny Hope finished, hoping that Laura would be willing to take the risk and learn the secret that the other two already shared.

"Of course, I want to know it," Laura replied matter-of-factly without hesitation. "I know that anything we do now could be dangerous, but there are times in life when you know it is just worth taking the risk. So - what's the secret?" Laura asked seeming to get stronger within from each conversation and gathering.

"The other day when all the commotion was going on, I knocked my stone off the table. When I realized that no one heard the stone thud to the floor, and that nobody was watching, I rushed to pick it up and act like nothing had happened. When I reached to grab it, I realized that three pieces had broken off. Without even thinking, I stuck them in my sock and brought them home. I was so afraid that when they examined the stone they would know, but Mr. Crater never saw it," Destiny Hope said, wide-eyed still almost unbelieving that she had got away with it.

"Wow! That was way brave," Laura seemed astounded by her friend's courage.

"Not really... because honestly I never even thought about it. Coming here was brave because you had plenty of time to talk yourself

out of doing it," Destiny Hope explained wanting her new friend to know that she was every bit as brave as her and maybe even more so. Merlin quickly jumped in to share the next part of the story.

"When we were polishing the stones before you got here, Destiny realized that she could see my face in the stones. I looked and there she was looking back at me. It was really cool to realize that the parts are all wholes. We can communicate using the stones without working or being together."

Merlin then explained the rules of precaution that they had created for the safety of all of them, and together they took an oath of agreement and secrecy. Each picked the stone that seemed to be calling them like an old friend out of the blue. Laura's was the size of a dime. Merlin's was a nickel round. Destiny Hope's was a shiny quarter filled with light and promise.

"Oh," exclaimed Laura, "I almost forgot. I brought you a silly present," she said feeling a little shy again. Out of the pocket of her well-worn black denim pants she pulled two balloons. "This might sound kind of silly, but I put a special message inside of the balloons that I wrote especially for you two. It is so cool to be able to write when I never even learned to read. It feels like a magical gift to just know that you can. I just wanted to do something meaningful in return for the gift," Laura finished looking at Destiny Hope and Merlin with a little bit of embarrassment and a whole lot of love. "All you have to do is blow them up and then pop them and the message from within will be given to you," Laura said, feeling so excited by what she had created from her own imagination.

Merlin and Destiny Hope picked up on her excitement and began blowing up their balloons. When they finished, they tied a knot and then began bouncing the balloons up in the air. All of the kids that

lived in Terrormaysu loved the black balloons. It was one of the few playthings they were allowed and knew. Sometimes on birthdays, tiny pieces of sweet candy called Tic-Tacs were put in the balloons for the birthday child. It would make a really neat rattling sound as the balloon was batted around creating an unusually happy and festive affair. At the end of the birthday fun (yes, this was as good as it gets on birthdays in Terrormaysu) the birthday boy or girl would pop the balloon and get their birthday present in a scattering of clicking candy. More often than not, the candy was shared with all of the other people there because having candy, any candy was very rare. "C'mon," Laura said, "Pop them and read what I wrote you... please, I want to see if you like it."

Destiny Hope went over to the drawer below the cupboard and took out a sewing needle. "Ok," she said, "Who should go first?"

"It doesn't matter," Laura replied. "You each have a different message written just for you."

"Ok, I'll go first," Merlin said taking the needle from Destiny Hope as he placed his balloon on the small scarred table. He immediately thrust the point of the needle towards the darkness. POP! Merlin picked up the balloon and found the message that had been waiting within.

Merlin, your calm spirit weaves magic and settles souls. You are a master and a boy of twelve all at the same time. It is your ability to stay calm in stormy

"sees" that will enable Destiny Hope to live and breathe.

Both Merlin and Destiny Hope were speechless. It was like the very air in the room had changed. It was purer. It was like the other dimension had over-lapped the three sitting in Destiny Hope's tiny kitchen.

Finally, Merlin reached over and gave Laura a hug of love and appreciation for her thoughtful and creative gift. Next it was Destiny Hope's turn.

"Well, here goes nothing," Destiny Hope said a little more hesitant at thought of breaking the silence of the room with an abrupt pop. "Ok,..." POP! Destiny Hope's message fluttered to the floor for she had rested the balloon against her thigh instead of the table. She reached down and picked it up.

Destiny Hope... Within you is the promise of the light. It radiates within and without and back and forth again like a healing laser for all of mankind. You are the beacon, you are the teller, you are a master and a little girl and a wise one beyond linear time. You have lived forever and will remember more than any other has ever forgotten. You are the chosen one.

Destiny Hope remained still longer than Merlin had after his popping and let the precious words sink in. The silence was not broken for a long while. When it was, it was Destiny Hope that spoke. "Laura you have given us the key to spread our message throughout Terrormaysu without getting caught by the deathwalker workers or Rigor C. Mortis. We will spread our message of hope and promise by using the dark balloons."

"But..." Laura spoke cautiously not wanting to hurt Destiny Hope's feelings or "pop her balloon", "the people of Terrormaysu cannot not read," Laura finished with a disappointed sigh.

"I know," Destiny Hope answered unconcerned and confident about her idea. "We don't need to use words. We can do it with pictures. We'll make charcoal drawings on the brown paper bags we get from Tallies."

"I can draw really well," Laura said starting to love the idea and feeling her purpose as a part of the whole. "We can start simple and then build on the pictures. I can see it, I really can," Laura finished with a smile lighting up her face.

"It's a great idea," Merlin said calmly. "I will splurge two tallies on Tic-Tacs so that they will seem like the same type of balloons that all the kids get on special occasions. The rattle will hide the sound of the paper. Laura... you start working on some ideas for pictures," Merlin finished and at the same time Destiny Hope started speaking.

"Ok," Destiny Hope continued, "I'll get some balloons next week because I have so much right now that there is not that much I need, and I got two bags already from the people of Terrormaysu. That will be enough to give a balloon to every house."

Merlin, Destiny Hope, and Laura realized that they had lost track of time. It was the longest that any unrelated people of Terrormaysu had ever spent together, at least as far as any of the three of them knew. With quick hugs all around and a promise to check the stones whenever they could (Destiny Hope had the advantage living alone like she did), Destiny Hope's two guest departed. After putting her one stone back in its hiding place, she began heating water for her weekly bath and all the while her mind was moving like a kaleidoscope... reminiscing and building on the conversations that had taken place between the three friends.

Chapter 26: Regular Sunday Meetings - Same Place Different Times

The following week moved both fast and slowly. Destiny Hope and Laura had opportunity to converse through the stones at work. Looking

forward to the possibility with every new stone, the girls earned more tallies than all the other children. They became an example held up by Mr. Crater to taunt the others; a means to goad the tired children to work harder. Destiny Hope and Laura felt sympathy for the others for they did not know the rewards for their accomplishments as Destiny Hope and Laura did. Still, the example set by the two did motivate some at least to earn more tallies than if they had simply been left on their own; it was a weak silver lining inside the cloud of Mr. Crater's angry stormings.

Merlin's week had less to build upon. He was mostly left to his own devices in the bowels of the mine. It was backbreaking work pulling the heavy-laden carts through the small and dark cavern passages. His only silver lining was that he was getting stronger. The muscles in his arms were getting defined; his work put him on an advanced path towards manhood. His inner spirit grew strong along with his body as he pulled and pulled and stretched his soul and mind at the same time. In some strange way, Merlin almost enjoyed getting to know himself in the solitude of moving stones from one place to another place often climbing up hill. Sometimes, his mind traveled and it was like he was in two places at one time and his body here was on automatic. Still, the hours went by unbearably slow. He came to understand in some way that it was a blessing that the sun never shined in Terrormaysu. His eyes had a difficult enough time adjusting in the gray twilight of approaching night; it was hard to imagine exiting the mine into broad daylight. Merlin gave thanks of gratitude that it was Saturday afternoon throughout the day. The workweek was almost over and the three friends would soon join together again giving them a real opportunity to expand on their plan.

All three had met inside the stones only once during the week. There seemed little opportunity when Merlin and Laura were not being observed and could find a place to safely be alone - each on their own - as they took out their stone. Destiny became the go between and spoke twice with each of the others during the week. In their brief joint conference they agreed to meet at Tallies before the dawn and be, if possible, in the early group line. They would meet directly afterwards at Destiny Hope's house where she had left a key hidden should their timing not coincide.

All three made it to Tallies early where they were ushered in along with the other seventeen in the first group of twenty. They went about gathering what they needed for their sustenance with a few additional items for their plan and did not talk to one another what so ever during the process of shopping and getting checked out by the tallie counter. The other two went first to their own homes to dispose of their purchases and Destiny Hope reached her house well before the other two. She put the water on to boil for tea and took out several biscuits setting them on a plate without one chip; one of the rare ones in Terrormaysu. It was quite some time before the other two showed up several minutes apart from each another, and they talked generally about their week before getting down to the business of expanding on their original plan.

"I've had a lot of time to think about our ideas," Merlin told the other two. "A lot of time, and it's a great plan except we can't just go around giving everyone balloons, or the deathwalker workers are sure to wonder why suddenly all of the people of Terrormaysu are getting balloons from us. It always pays to look ahead and see possible problems before they happen. I mean... there are all kinds of

probabilities just floating out there. But, not to fear," Merlin said with a smile and feeling good about his idea, "I have a plan!

"Three Sundays from now is Inception Day, the day that all the children came to the promised land of Terrormaysu. It is the only day of the year when Rigor C. Mortis gives in celebration of the settler's arrival. Some legends tell it that in addition to the wood, and coal, and staples, the children woke to a balloon with a picture of a happy face and a home with smoke curling out of the chimney. Underneath the home was written their name and that is why the children can have a balloon on their birthday. Somewhere along the way, this part of the celebration fell by the wayside. So, here's my plan."

After Merlin had detailed his plan to the other two and each knew exactly what they needed to do, Laura unveiled her first drawings. Each picture message was on a piece of 3" x 3" brown paper and sketched in charcoal. They decided on the words that would go below each picture. They would put words to the picture in hopes that eventually at least the meaning to these words would be understood through the pictures. Merlin and Destiny Hope complimented Laura on the images she had drawn; they were really good and they could tell that Laura had put her "everything" into them.

Before ending their gathering, they took account of their supplies on hand. They agreed that they would need one more bag of balloons, and two more Tic-Tac packs. Each member of the group agreed to be responsible for one item. They set the next Sunday meeting for late afternoon and agreed again to talk inside the polished stones at the specified times and only if it was completely safe to do so. Laura let them know that she would be adding more details to her initial sketches. At Destiny Hope's suggestion they agreed that when the initial drawings were complete, they would divide up the images for

basic sketching and share the task of getting all the pictures done by Inception Day on May 4th. Laura would add the finishing touches to each one as the artist of the group. With hugs all around, the three friends separated and went on their way... soon to face another workday.

Chapter 27: The First Stage Put Into Play

The following Monday began just like any other Monday except on this Monday, unbeknownst to anyone but three friends, there was now a change brewing and percolating in Terrormaysu. The three friends did not stand together or talk as they waited in the triangular common grounds but they were all looking in the same direction - up. Merlin and Destiny Hope had shared with Laura about the morning star that had been there hanging in the sky like a petite diamond. It was only natural that these three would look up to see it again. No one else even considered the possibility, and so they stood as always in small groups, family members doing together what they always do... waiting mostly in silence with a few words thrown around now and again. With a thrill in her heart as if she had just been given the greatest of polished stones, Destiny Hope realized that now there were three stars forming a triangle in the northern quadrant of the sky. She was mesmerized and could not pull her eyes from the amazing sight that seemed to blaze towards her from the tranquil sky. Reluctantly, so as not to be noticed by a deathwalker worker, she forced herself to look first down at the ground. She then furtively looked over towards one friend and then the other to see if they had seen what she had witnessed. Sure enough, their eye contact said it all. It was like at times, they did not even need words anymore. The shrill whistle pierced

their connection, and each went to collect the tool they would need to perform their workday task for the remainder of the day.

It was at lunch that Destiny Hope had the courage to approach Mr. Crater and put stage one of the plan into motion. It was decided that rather than go behind the backs of the deathwalker workers and risk discovery, they would instead take the risk and outright ask permission to distribute the balloons. The three had discussed the best method for selling their idea until Destiny Hope was clear about how she was to convince Mr. Crater that it was his idea all along and really to his benefit to give each of the children a balloon on Inception Day. It would cost him nothing, which was a great way to "sell" their idea, and he, Mr. Crater, would get all the credit with Rigor C. Mortis for reviving the legend and renewing the people's rejoicing for their wonderful life in Terrormaysu.

"Excuse me, Mr. Crater, sir, could I please talk with you?" Destiny Hope asked in a shy and timid voice looking downward.

"What's it now, Missy," Mr. Crater replied, but not with his usual venom because Destiny Hope had increased his tallies substantially by her hard work and diligent attitude.

"Do you know... well, is it true what the legend says, that all the kids were given a balloon when they first arrived at Terrormaysu?" Mr. Crater was caught off guard by the question, and he even felt a little soft spot come up that Destiny Hope would come to him for answers.

"Well, that's what they says Missy, but I'm not so sure if its true or nots, why?" Mr. Crater answered thinking it not wise to commit himself until he knew why she was asking the question.

"Well, I have extra tallies and I'm a little girl and I don't need much... and well... I just wondered if ... well maybe if you could ask if I could give you balloons to give the kids on Inception Day?"' Destiny

Hope continued on before Mr. Crater could answer. "I was thinking," she said starting to talk faster, "they might work harder if they knew that they were going to get balloons on Inception Day. And well, maybe if you gave them... the kids might think that you would give more if they keep on working harder and faster... and that would be good, right?" Destiny Hope looked up like she was somewhat confused and that Mr. Crater was the one that could explain it all to her.

"Well, now missy that's seems like a kinda good idea, but whys do ya wants to spend yur hard earned tallies on balloons for other kiddies, huh missy?" Mr. Crater asked suspiciously. For a second, Destiny Hope felt stumped by the question and then out of the blue the answer came to her.

"Well, sir," she said shy and timid again, "you're my boss and its up to you how things go here for me. I just thought, well... maybe... if I did this, and I worked hard, and I did everything you asked... well, it would make my life here not so rough, right?" Destiny Hope finished and waited for him to explain if she was thinking clearly or not.

"Well, yur one smart cookie knowing that's if yur please me that life ain't gonna be so tough," Mr. Crater said pleased that she understood her place. Mr. Crater continued, "And yur going ta give me the balloons?"

"Yes, and maybe... well, I could put a few Tic-Tacs in them and the kids will be so happy and it will make them feel like they do on their birthdays... they will really want to work hard for you... would... would that be Ok?"

"Well now, missy, I didnts say that ya could do anythin, but I kinda like yur idea, sos I'll checks and lets ya know. Nows gits back to work, ya hear," Mr. Crater finished rudely returning to his true nature, but Destiny Hope could not help but notice he was like a cat

licking its paws before pouncing on its prey. The gleam in his eye was the giveaway.

Chapter 28: Hook, Line, and Sinker

It was the very next day that Mr. Crater made his big announcement. "Listen up kiddies. I knows some of use have been workin real hard tryin ta makes yur tallies," he said acting as if he cared and was acknowledging the children's efforts. Everyone, besides Destiny Hope and Laura, looked confused by these unexpected and never before spoken words coming from Mr. Crater. "Don't git me wrong, ya'll are still lazy, and yous ain't been workin as hard as yous could, buts use been doin a little better." Mr. Crater sounded more like himself, and the kids relaxed figuring it was going to be just another one of Mr. Crater's tirades. "Wells now," Mr. Crater continued, "Inception Day is in two weeks and Rigor C. Mortis wants yous to remember how hard yous ancestors worked sos that use could live here in this promised land. He wants ta give yous the same things as he gaves them if, and only ifs, yous are willing to works as hard as theys did. For use... he has the same gift. All the kiddies to the age of 18 is goin ta get a balloon with some of those thar Tic Tacs ya'all love. Ya'll git them on Inception Day at Tallies when ya'll pick up yur supplies that everyone gits on Inception Day." Mr. Crater finished and then started right again, "Ohs and bys the way... Destiny Hope it's yur job to gits those balloons to Tallies and gives them to the kiddies, yous understandin me?" he said looking her right in the eye.

"Yes, sir," Destiny Hope answered acting like she was slightly put out by having to do all the work. "Sir, could somebody help me... it

sounds like a lot of work?" Destiny Hope said pretending to the other kids that she was a little irritated but afraid to really show it.

"I will," Laura spoke softly and clearly, "Well, if nobody else will... even though I really don't want too," she finished with a little whine playing Mr. Crater.

"Ya'll do as yur told, missy," Mr. Crater barked at Laura, thinking at the same time that Laura was a good choice because she was a hard worker... almost as good a polisher as Destiny Hope, but not quite. "Yous both makes sures those balloons are there and that every kiddie that deserves one gits one. Is that understood?" Without waiting for an answer, Mr. Crater left the room after ordering the children to work harder if they expected to get a balloon on Inception Day.

It took a few moments for the children to move, so astounded were they by this turn of events. They were going to get a balloon filled with Tic-Tacs and it was not even their birthday. The air in the room seemed lighter for the rest of the workday and this lightness did not evaporate but only grew stronger as all the children filled with hope, and a promise, polished their stones harder and faster with each ensuing day. Mr. Crater was earning more tallies than ever before, and even he seemed to lighten-up on the children a bit, but not enough for them to forget who was the boss and in control of the scalding stick. However, Mr. Crater was not as in control as he thought for he had fallen for the plan hook, line, and sinker. The plan now had momentum and focus and because Destiny Hope and Laura were nothing more than children, it never crossed the minds of the deathwalker workers to suspect them of contriving and planning.

Chapter 29: Left To Their Own Devices

For the rest of the week, Destiny Hope and Laura were left to their own devices. Mr. Crater was so busy counting tallies that the atmosphere in the worker's room began changing and even Mr. Motley seemed not to notice, so dazzled was he by the continually flashing colors he was seeing more and more often. Certainly, the mood could not be called festive, but it was no longer the heavy weight that seemed to bear down crushing the children's spirits day after day. Some even found the courage for furtive whispers here and there when left alone, and a strange but unspoken camaraderie seemed to be developing between the kids.

Destiny Hope would notice one or two talking briefly together before the shrill whistle that started every workday. A few waved goodbye before they went on their way and even the adults were slightly more cordial for the word had spread that Rigor C. Mortis would be giving gifts to the children all thanks to Mr. Crater. Everyone was happier knowing that for the first time in longer than any living resident could remember something nice and different was happening in Terrormaysu and this, just the idea of it, lifted their spirits and they worked harder in hopes of an even brighter future.

The deathwalker workers either did not notice or were satisfied that in spite of the change, nothing, nothing at all was actually amiss in the town that they knew they controlled; they were as sure about that fact as they were about the state of their souls. Indeed, as strange as it might sound, the deathwalker workers were acting slightly different as well. The change in them was not brought about for exactly the same reason as what prompted the change in the residents of Terrormaysu, but was a by-product of it none-the-less, and the

by-product suited the deathwalker workers just fine. They were making more tallies than ever before. Their bellies of greed were so satiated for the moment that they were too busy enjoying their good fortunes to contemplate much but enjoying their new riches.

It was in this new atmosphere of hope and greed that Destiny Hope, Merlin, and Laura met on the following Sunday to work on their pictures and preparations. Laura had completed the final drawings. She had also completed an additional eighteen pictures that were ready to go into the balloons. Laura neatly rolled three pieces of brown paper with six pictures (one on each side of the paper) as tight as she could and pushed the group of images inside the balloon. Merlin then dropped nine Tic-Tacs exactly, not one more or one less, into the same balloon. Destiny Hope then blew the balloon up and tied a knot. Destiny Hope, Merlin, and Laura then formed a triangle standing about 3 ft. apart from each and other and batted the balloon around listening to the sound of the Tic-Tacs as they rattled inside. The sound was the same as always on birthdays; the paper images would remain undetected until the balloon was popped and the messages within fell were left waiting to be claimed. The group was satisfied with their plan and divvied up the work of completing the rest of the pictures by next week when all the balloons would be stuffed, ready, and waiting for giving on Inception Day, May 4th.

They did not dawdle or dwell enjoying each other's company but instead made haste to attend to their own tasks. They promised each other to touch base whenever they could (through the stones) and hoped that they might get another adventure together in the other dimension before they met again next Sunday. But, these thoughts and plans were sidebars and not near as important now that they were putting their plans into action. The three were much more focused on bringing hope

and promise to Terrormaysu; they were beyond being held spellbound by magical happenings. It was like a tapestry all woven together and as natural as breathing to these three believers.

Chapter 30: The Elders Advice and Nine Pearls

It was Saturday before the three friends found themselves once again together in another dimension. They had talked through the stones briefly several times during the week to measure their progress and reinforce each other, but it was not the same as joining together in each other's presence. Strange as it may sound, they all arrived at the exact same moment and found themselves seated in three chairs before an impressive looking conference table that was a semicircle made out of the finest woods of the forest. Seated behind the table were nine elders each one looking wiser than the next at first glance. Destiny Hope's teacher was the first to speak.

"Welcome once again," he said with a smile letting them know them know that it was not a coincidence that found them here all together again. "We are nearing the climax and it is important that all thought processes and actions be in proper order to ensure your success. You are now before the court of nine elders, and we are here to advise you before you proceed forward. Each one of us has wisdom to share and each one of you will receive three pearls placed within you before this council draws to a close. I will give the first pearl to Destiny Hope as she is my responsibility and I have loved her as a father does a daughter for eons and eons. "Destiny Hope, always, always know that there is nothing to learn - it is only to remember. You know everything already and will remember as needed to fulfill your destiny and bring light to Terrormaysu. This pearl I give to you," he said with love and

light shining from his eyes. Destiny Hope felt the well of love rise to high tide inside her soul.

"Merlin, I have been your master teacher since first you explored the world of magic," the next elder spoke intently and he looked directly at Merlin. "There have been times when you have used your powers unwisely, and so you have chosen to be Destiny Hope's lifeline to redeem yourself because of your desire to advance as a soul of magic and light. Due to your extraordinary accomplishments as Destiny Hope's lifeline in such a short time, it is not possible for you ever to veer from the pure path you have now chosen. Well done son, I am proud of you. You are now a master's magician and are graduated to wise elder. This pearl of accomplishment is given to you and you are now freed from all previous conditions," he finished conveying to Merlin that he was no longer the teacher.

"Laura," the third spoke in a feminine voice and her gentle spirit seemed hallowed in light as she continued, "For such a new soul you have traveled far and hard to advance rapidly beyond your soul's age. The artist within you is your guiding force and whenever you are uncertain let the pictures lead you to your truth." It is with great honor that I bestow upon you the pearl of courage and valor. Never forget that you are a strong spirit that knows you are an essential part that contributes to the whole... without you the whole is incomplete," she spoke with kindness and gentleness as Laura sat mesmerized.

The next elder that spoke continued to address Laura. "My dear, dear Laura, I was with you as you incubated in the soul's nursery. I have known before your spirit was completely formed and I watched as you chose the person you would become in this lifetime. There will come a time when you will have to let go of your two friends. Do not be sad

for they reside within you, and I promise you... you will be together with them again. Take this pearl and hold it dear when you wonder if all that happened was only meant to hurt you in the end; my pearl will always heal you when you most need it. This I promise and this pearl I give with the love of a mother," the elder finished hoping that Laura would remember the pearl when she most needed it in the not so distant future of linear time. It was then Merlin's turn again.

The fifth elder was different than the others that had taken human form to address their charges. The one that now addressed Merlin was a 5-ft dragon dressed in a purple coat and paisley bow tie wearing a bowler hat. If truth be told he looked rather out of place in the gathering and Merlin was finding it hard to consider taking this particular elder seriously. "Yes, I know," the elder spoke as little puffs of smoke came out his nose. "No one ever takes me seriously, at least at first, and that is the whole point of why I come as a silly miniature dragon dressed in this get up. My pearl to you is to remember to never take anything too, too seriously. When in doubt, find the humor in the situation and laugh your way through it when you don't know what else to do. Laughter is its own kind of magic, and being silly is a secret ingredient that has the power to change anything from sad to happy in the blink of an eye. This pearl I give you to remember that not all magic has to be extraordinary; some of the greatest magic is created from the silly and ridiculous." By the time the elder had finished bestowing his gift, Merlin was smiling ear to ear and loving this pearl even more than the last one. All kinds of goofy ideas were coming to mind even as the next elder began to speak to Destiny Hope.

Destiny Hope recognized this elder immediately even before she began to speak. "I am always within you. You are a part of what I am and I am a part of you. We are connected and the silver thread between

us although gossamer is stronger than the strongest glue ever created to bond two separates into one whole. I walk with you and watch over you with every step you take. I hold your hand in times of sorrow and run my finger through your hair as you sleep in the dark of the night as a measure of comfort. I am in the wind and the trees and the birds that talk to you as they perch on post and branch and outside your window every morning before dawn's light. My pearl to you is that you are never alone and always protected. Always remember that I am watching over you like a star suspended in the dark night that will chase away anyone or anything that shows ill will or seeks to do you harm." Destiny Hope's mother finished bestowing her pearl and the love that radiated between the two was almost blinding to the others in its strength and gentle intensity.

Three elders remained and they stood up in unison and asked that Destiny Hope, Merlin, and Laura do the same. "The final pearl for each of you is one and the same," The seventh elder explained.

The eighth elder continued, "It is the pearl of vision that will enable you to see in all directions with 360° degree insight and awareness... backwards in time and space, forward into future and most importantly... exceptional vision in the here and now of everything. You will be able to make connections that most souls cannot even conceive of in their understanding of spirit and reality."

The ninth elder completed the bestowing of the unified pearl that each was given. "And... most importantly this pearl can never been taken or lost; it is yours for all the rest of your eternities into infinity."

After his final words were spoken, a great silence filled the room. It was the kind of silence that was so supremely quiet that it seemed to be shouting louder than any words. It was a silence filled with texture and brimming with profound meaning. It was the highest

order of silence; it was the silence of sacred secrets and still unknown places emanating from a source and power so great that everything and everyone was filled and ascended by its light and magic. It lasted a moment and it lasted forever... and then true-false reality descended and the receivers of the pearls were awakening to the last Sunday before the Inception Day Celebration. As usual, there was much work to be done in Terrormaysu.

Chapter 31: Within

Destiny Hope awoke and immediately began to contemplate the dramatic changes in her life. It was Sunday; there was nothing critical she needed from Tallies, and so she did something she had never done before, a luxury not even thought of not so long ago by anyone in Terrormaysu. Destiny Hope stayed in bed until a gray sky replaced the black one. She spent the time just thinking over the meaning of, well, everything. The first feeling that entered her heart upon waking was a thrill as the journey of the night before washed to shore inside her head. She examined each of her pearls, one by one, and this reflection made her realize she had everything she could possibly ever need to feel complete.

Destiny Hope had a sense of belonging. She knew she was a part of a whole and connected to something greater beyond her wildest imaginings. She had two dear, dear friends that held her in their hearts as she held them with deep and abiding love. She was connected to them with a sense of joint purpose and this made the belonging all the sweeter. Yes, Destiny Hope was not alone. In her friendships she had found a home.

Destiny Hope was surprised to realize that while she seemed imprisoned in a life of limitations and control, cruelties, darkness, and cold... she was essentially free. She was free to think her own thoughts - no one could take that from her. She was free to believe what she knew to be true inside of her own heart. She was free to form friendships that held value and meaning. She was free to enact change; it only took courage. She was free to plan and act and she was free to decide the best way to do that. The only thing that could imprison her was her own mind.

The most profound realization that touched her the deepest was the recognition that she was enjoying her life now. Now that she had a purpose, now that she had a sense of belonging within that purpose, now that she knew she was free to care for others and free to allow them to care for her- Destiny Hope realized that life was becoming more than work. She enjoyed polishing the stones now that Laura and her could communicate through the stones - even if it was incredibly tiring and tedious at times. She loved the time she spent with her two friends, batting balloons with messages in them. It was fun. A memory of the 5-foot dragon wearing a purple coat and puffing smoke when he talked floated through her mind, and she could not help but smile to herself as she paused from her deeper thinking for a moment to enjoy some silliness. It was not long until her contemplation grew deep again and Destiny Hope began thinking about power.

Destiny Hope was amazed by the thought that she felt powerful. She believed that she could make a difference in some small or large measure. It did not matter the degree. What mattered was that she, a little girl of nine, in a terrible, terrible place where cruelty and depravation danced the Tango together... could and would make a difference. That was powerful.

Her mind drifted to all the people in Terrormaysu that acted powerless. People that had given up and given in and were herded like cattle and fed only from Rigor C. Mortis' silo. It was a sad thought. They had heard and repeated the legends and buzzwords for so long and so often that they did not even think to question them any longer. It never crossed their minds that there were other options. The act of numbly and mindlessly following the orders of Rigor C. Mortis and his deathwalker workers had zapped their power. The question was... did the people of Terrormaysu even know what they were missing?

Destiny Hope could not help thinking to herself how strange her thoughts had become. They were so far beyond what she had ever thought to think of just a short time ago and yet it seemed so far in the distant past when she only thought to survive. Now she was enacting the possibility of change. This thought made her realize that it was time to get up. This was the last Sunday before Inception Day and there were final preparations to make. With an excited heart at the prospect of seeing her friends, Destiny Hope climbed eagerly out bed.

Chapter 32: Final Preparations and Important Precautions

Merlin arrived in the early afternoon, before the planned time, so that he could talk to Destiny Hope before Laura arrived. It was not that he wanted to exclude her, but he did not want to upset her, and Merlin was concerned that the conversation might do just that. His first thought on waking up had been about one of Laura's pearls. It seemed that within the pearl was an omen that Laura would be separated from her two friends. Merlin found himself weighed down by the thought.

"Remember last night when one of the elders that addressed Laura told her that she would not be with us at some point?" Merlin

questioned Destiny Hope immediately after they were settled with their tea and biscuits. "It's really been bothering me. What do you think that the elder meant?" Merlin asked Destiny Hope with concern written all over his face.

"I'm not sure. To be honest, I never even thought about it when it was said. I guess I was so enthralled with everything that it never entered my head that something could actually be bad," Destiny Hope replied now getting as jittery about the idea as Merlin was. "Maybe... I don't know," Destiny Hope was surprised that she was drawing a blank; that rarely happened anymore.

"Well, we better come up with some idea because my guess is that it did not 'sail over' Laura's head, and she might be pretty upset about it by the time she gets here. Anyway, just in case, we better figure something to tell her to make her feel better because Inception Day is next week and all three of us need to be focused if we are going to get through this without seeing the inside of Fissure Prison," Merlin finished gloomily.

As the last word was out of his mouth, they heard Laura's rhythmic knock at the door. "Let's just see if she brings it up, and let's just hope we know what to say if she does," Destiny Hope then turned towards the door and unbolted it ushering Laura in.

To Merlin's and Destiny Hope's chagrin, it was obvious that Laura had been crying. Her eyelids were swollen and her whole face looked just a touch puffy and splotchy. Before they could say anything, Laura blurted out her feelings. "If I am going to lose you two because of doing this, well, I can't, I just can't! It's not fair! I won't, I won't do it," Laura was close to hysterics by the time she was finished.

Destiny Hope rushed to her friend and threw her arms around her. "It's Ok Laura, I promise it's going to be Ok," Destiny Hope tried calming her with gentle words, but Laura was entirely too wrought to allow herself to give it up.

"That's easy for you to say," she shouted getting louder. "They didn't say anything about you and Merlin not being together! You'll have each other and I'll have no one! No one!" she finished, with her arms crossed, glaring at her two friends like they were enemies on the other side of a battlefield.

"Listen Laura, we were talking about it before you came. We are upset about it too. We love you. But, there must be a reason that we are not meant to understand right now. It might not even be what we think. It could be something totally different. For example, we don't really know if Destiny and I will be together. Maybe, we are all going to be parted and you're the one that has the gift to help you. That is possible," Merlin finished hoping to calm her stormy seas by logic. "Or maybe," he continued trying to get her out of the emotional by reason, "maybe you are going to have a chance to leave here, but we won't be able to go with you and the pearl will give you the strength and healing you'll need to follow your destiny. We just don't know," Merlin's hands rested on her shoulders and he was looking deep into her eyes as he conveyed how foolish it was to let emotions make you believe in the worst of possibilities.

"I guess you're right," Laura conceded. "Maybe it isn't as bad as I first thought. It's just that I can't stand the thought of not being with the both of you. I just love you so much!" Laura's words and feelings wrapped around her two friends making them feel both sad and happy at the same time.

"We feel the same way," Destiny Hope spoke gently again. "We hate the thought that all of us cannot stay together forever, but honestly, that is true for everyone. We should gather our gratitudes that we are together today, best friends, and that we know we will be together again in some other time and space. How many people really know that without a doubt within themselves?" Destiny Hope posed the question to Laura with a small smile and a little bit of a fun loving challenge.

"Ok," Laura responded with a little laugh at herself. "I get it, I do. I guess I did get a little overworked about the future and forgot about today. Speaking of today, I guess we better get going, or thanks to me, we won't be ready." Laura was beginning to feel silly and a little guilty for her outburst and drama and wanted to quickly move on and leave the embarrassment behind her.

"We'll get it all done," Merlin said confidently. "Let's set everything up like an assembly line so that we can be really efficient, but before we do, give me ten balloons.

"Why?" Destiny Hope was perplexed by the request.

Merlin got that impish smile that was becoming Merlin's trademark to his two friends, "Because we have to be prepared for every possibility, or at the least, any possibility that we can think of. Here's one I bet you two never considered," he went on feeling good at charting the course ahead for all of them. "What if..." he paused a moment for effect, "What if, Mr. Crater or some other deathwalker worker decides to check out the balloons or takes a few for themselves? What happens then? If that happens then they will discover the pictures and we could end up in Fissure Prison. So here's what we are going to do. We are going to cut them off at the pass by offering them a balloon first. Sure, it will have the Tic-Tacs, but there will be no messages and we'll be safe and they'll be none the wiser. It is just a

precaution, but it is better to think about possible problems ahead of time and how to avoid them before the problems find you and it's too late. Are there any other precautions that you think we should take?" Merlin looked at his two friends wondering if he had missed anything.

"Not that I can think of," Destiny Hope and Laura said simultaneously and then they both started laughing at the coincidence. The sad air that had been lingering in the room vanished as if by magic. It was in a state of joy that the three friends worked together, and before anyone realized it the preparations were complete and now it was just a matter of handing out the balloons next week.

Chapter 33: A Week of Jitters and a Joint Effort

There is a fine line between confidence and doubt, Destiny Hope thought to herself. Now that it was only three days until the Inception Day giveaways, Destiny Hope found herself fretting and worrying about all the possible outcomes. Although she stopped thought many times, it seemed that fears kept distracting her like an itch that returned again and again even after being scratched multiple times. What if they gave a deathwalker a balloon with a message in it by accident? What if their pictures had little meaning to those that had forgotten thoughts of hope and promise? Had they done everything possible to ensure success? Had they overlooked a probability that could cause disaster? Destiny Hope reflected on the questions and listened to her own answers over and over again. The answers were the same. It did not matter from which angle she examined them. As far as she could tell, they had prepared well for their desired outcome.

Destiny Hope was not alone in getting jitters and nerves before the big event. Her two friends were concerned also that they had

overlooked something important. Mr. Crater was no better. He asked Destiny Hope and Laura every day in a doubtful tone if they were ready for Inception Day. But, in truth, not everyone was jittery.

The resident workers of Rigor C. Mortis, polishers and cart haulers, weighers and rinsers, pixers, and tunnelers, were filled with excitement that something different was happening in Terrormaysu. The idea of something just a little out of the ordinary was to these beaten people equal to presents piled high on Christmas Day. The idea of a Tic-Tac lingering on the tongue with a sharp taste of cinnamon was like apple pie and ice cream. The change was already happening just on the possibility of something worth looking forward to. None of the children minded working harder because they now had something besides tallies worth working for.

It was this fact that made the three friends all the more concerned that their ideas work as planned, and they discussed this in a joint meeting inside the polished stone one evening. "Is there anything that we did not think of," Merlin asked the other two staring intently into his stone.

"I can't think of anything although I've tried and tried," Destiny Hope answered her eyebrows knit as if still working hard on the question.

Merlin could not help himself from teasing her as his impish smile appeared inside the stone, "Yeah, well, you know how effective trying is...," he finished with laughter in his tone.

"Yeah, Ok smart aleck, what have you been doing to make sure that our plans a success?" Destiny Hope quipped back with a slight laugh but with more than a little annoyance as well because of her nerves about the upcoming event.

Before Merlin could answer, Laura jumped in, "I have been doing something tonight that I think is a good idea. I thought of it from the pearl I got that said to use the pictures to help and heal myself. The elder never said that all the pictures have to be drawn, so instead, I have been visualizing inside my head. I have been picturing us giving out the balloons and people are giving us smiles now and then and saying thank you. Kids are running and I hear their laughter ringing out, something that is so rarely heard from children after they become workers. I see us taking our empty boxes and walking home together happy because we accomplished what we set out to do. And then I started picturing inside every house where they are blowing up their balloons and tying them off. All the balloons are then being batted around with everybody happy and laughing and sharing and forgetting about being sad, or tired, or beaten down by their life. After a while, they start popping them and I imagine that I can hear it happening. The candy starts clicking all over town and everyone is enjoying their candy and looking with wonder at the pictures. They are so excited and they start talking about what the pictures might mean. Before you know it they understand that the pictures are all about them making a choice to be happy and loving inside no matter what things seem on the outside. I keep picturing it over and over in my head as if... well, it already happened and it is already satisfied."

"Wow! What an amazing idea," Merlin could not help but be surprised that he had not thought about the power of the mind. He had been so busy looking at everything outside himself as a means of controlling the outcome that it had never crossed his mind that they could influence it from inside as well.

"I say that we all spend the next three days visualizing the results we want. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. It is

a great idea, Laura," Destiny Hope enthused continuing, "Whenever I start worrying, I'm going to start picturing just like you said," she finished relieved that she now had a plan to make any doubts vanish into thin air.

"Yeah, me too," Merlin was enthralled with the idea. "Let's start picturing sunlight and green buds growing from the earth after the snow is melted. Why not picture the whole transformation of this dark and dismal town into something opposite from what it has been... I mean, why stop at smiles, and hope and promise," he said building on Laura's idea.

"Ok," Destiny Hope replied. "But, let's make sure not to get too far ahead of ourselves. For right now, let's just make sure that the focus of our visualization is primarily in the here and now. We really need to pull our energy to make Inception Day a turning point that can't turn back on itself like a dog chasing its tail," she finished feeling a little bad for not supporting Merlin more in his enthusiastic and far reaching plans built from Laura's idea.

"I guess you're right Destiny," Merlin replied feeling a little foolish that he had let himself get so far ahead of where they were now. "But, let's keep it in mind and the minute we finish this stage let's move into stage two of our visualization and keep using it to build on our changing process, Ok?"

"Absolutely Merlin. I think that it is a great idea," Laura joined his enthusiasm letting him know that she appreciated how he had taken her idea and run with.

The three friends realized that it was getting exceptionally late and that they had better call it a night before they wore themselves out with ideas and had nothing left for the doing part. With warm good-byes and a promise to talk again before meeting at Tallies on Sunday,

each quickly hid their stone and climbed into bed. As they drifted off to sleep, each had pictures of joy and change dancing inside their head.

Chapter 34: A Day Like No Other

Destiny Hope, Merlin, and Laura, all three together, spoke only once inside the polished stones before they met at Tallies on Inception Day. During their conference, they confirmed that each was visualizing an outcome where the people of Terrormaysu, at the least, came again to believe in some small measures of joy and magic. It was probable that they would gain more. There was just no way of knowing for sure how much more and what the probability was that it would occur as a result of their current effort. In this regard, there was no previous history to draw upon, and therefore, it was unknown what the people of Terrormaysu might do with this experience. The three creators of the plan could not draw on the adage that history often repeats itself. For in this moment, history was being written; it was a first for almost everything. They would learn and build upon it; on this account, all three were certain. And... they would make gains today, and gain, any degree of gain set footprints into the future of a brighter, lighter, and more cheerful Terrormaysu.

When the three friends met at dawn, there was a most unusual occurrence. In fact, the three had never noticed or heard of it before in all the history and passed down legends. A faint rosy glow, the slightest touch of a burgundy pink, was illuminating from behind the otherwise dark clouds. The dark was at the forefront and standing guard, but the light was sneaking out and around the corners for those looking to see. It was an amazing and uplifting sight and they

immediately assigned it meaning. The light was entering Terrormaysu; the dark forces were ignorant and did not see it coming. They had never expected that out of the mouths of babes might come words of wisdom and winds of change.

Destiny Hope and Laura had parked themselves and their balloons outside beyond the tallie counter. They would hand out the balloons as the residents exited with their free wood, coal, and staples. It would be a gesture that the kids would give, and as they did, they would claim the praises of Mr. Crater and Rigor C. Mortis. Oh yes, they would let these two take the credit for in many ways... it well served their purpose.

It was not credit these three were seeking. Their egos were not involved wanting to be recognized and applauded. They were not seeking power or fame, or acclaim, or to become the figureheads of Terrormaysu. The benefits they would receive were much more subtle and much more powerful than these outward trappings. They would forgo credit for greater gains here and now and on the eternal plane.

The people began exiting from Tallies cheerful already for they had received the gift of plenty as compared to their normal status and state of affairs. As parent or parents, or older siblings exited the store, related children that were waiting raced to their side to collect their balloon. The children could not contain themselves and as they rushed forward, smiles radiated and many were laughing. It was a sight to behold.

The deathwalker workers were not affected, at least, not as one might have expected. More often than not, they seemed to be their same curt and sometimes cruel dispositions. But, every now and then, they seemed to shift without intent into a different character. The deathwalker workers appeared caught up in the energy, and it seemed

that they too could not help sharing just a little in the festive atmosphere. The tallie checker might finish his counting and say, "Have a great Inception Day." If this occurred, the checker would get a startled look, shake his head as if to free himself from some spell, and become his usual nature again. But several minutes later, he would blurt out another pleasant thought and be shaking his head again having already forgotten that it had occurred already only moments before. This was true of the entire deathwalker worker force out on this Sunday.

One observing the scene might think that things were out of control. Families were actually talking to people in front and behind them in line. Kids were running around playing tag. People were waving hello and goodbye, and while this was not completely unheard on Inception Day, it had never occurred to this degree before.

Destiny Hope pealed the praises of Rigor C. Mortis. "It is Rigor C. Mortis that gives you this balloon for working for him with all that you have to give. On Inception Day, in gratitude to your ancestors, and to you, he gives this balloon."

"It is thanks to Mr. Crater," Laura smiled singing her words, "that you are receiving this wonderful gift. Make sure that you thank him and let him know the love and appreciation you feel and work extra, extra hard for him next week," she finished and then began again as the next group of children stepped up to get their balloons.

"Hey theres missys," Mr. Crater's greeting stopped all the talking around the balloons. "Its goods yas tellin um who'd be givin them balloons. Use makes sure use do," he finished, but his voice was just ever so slightly softer and a small smile grimace was peeking out as he said, "Gives me one of them balloons."

"Yes sir," Destiny Hope immediately replied pulling a balloon out of her black denim pocket. "I made one special just in case you wanted a balloon too. I put a lot more Tic-Tacs in yours because it is all thanks to you that the kids are getting the balloons - Thank you!" Destiny Hope finished and realized that what she was saying was mostly the truth. Mr. Crater grabbed his balloon abruptly and turned away, but not before Destiny Hope noticed a sort of sadness enter his eyes like a memory almost forgotten but peaking its head up from somewhere long, long ago when life had been sweeter and things had been clearer.

The handing out of the balloons lasted for most of the day. Merlin watched from the sidelines smiling at all children and performing simple magic tricks to amuse them while they waited. For the kids, this was even more thrilling than the balloons that their older siblings were getting. He would make a piece of paper disappear and then it would show up behind one of the children's ears. The children laughed and laughed, and asked him again and again how he could do that, but he would never tell them - he only said, "bragging makes the magic disappear."

There were three message balloons left over as the day of balloon giving came to a close. Nine deathwalker workers had taken the balloons offered to them, and Destiny Hope and Laura were grateful that Merlin had considered the possibility. He had calculated the probability well. There was only one balloon left over with only Tic-Tacs and no messages waiting within it.

They each took one of the last three balloons and the fourth with only the Tic-Tacs would become their keepsake. Tired, but joyful, they each carried a box as they made their way home, and they promised each other to save their balloon popping until they were all together at next Sundays gathering.

Chapter 35: Looking Within and Theatre in the Round

It was tired friends that said goodnight and hurried on their way to rejuvenate through sleep in their own beds. It was not long before they were to meet again. Briefly after falling asleep, they found themselves brought together in the next dimension. Destiny Hope, Merlin and Laura greeted each other as they "landed within" a Theatre in the Round.

Each felt immediately refreshed as if they had been sleeping like Rip Van Wrinkles. Their smiles sent the feeling of laughter as they looked at each other and around in wonder. They were surrounded by a 360° blank screen.

Before anyone had any time to speculate what might be the next moment of learning and adventure, the screens came alive with three families in Terrormaysu. Interesting enough, not one sought to enter the scene, by silent agreement they watched it like a 3-D movie witnessing what their actions had created.

The first family drew their attention because they were the most raucous. Peals of laughter and shouts came forth as they batted the balloons keeping track of how long it remained in the air without hitting the ground. They counted every time a person served it over to another who would tap it to the next until it all started over again as each round of game came to an end. All things do; it is simply a question of how and how soon.

The family then decided to up the challenge and two balloons were now in the air at once and it was quite a taxing task keeping track of both counts at once. Fortunately, the residents of Terrormaysu were taught numbers and basic arithmetic; they could add and subtract, and a

rare few could multiple and divide as well. Understanding numbers played a role in the operations of Terrormaysu and so the residents were given the rudimentary lessons needed for serving Rigor C. Mortis and keeping track of tallies coming and going.

It was not long before the family grew breathless and tired and decided to sit for awhile. Destiny Hope, Merlin, and Laura decided to shift their focus to a very different kind of family. The three were drawn in by a feeling of calmness and a depth of appreciation different from the first family's fun. It was not the fun that was bonding the second family, but a feeling of belonging that kept this family tightly connected.

The second family was much more sedate and quiet in their experience. It was not that they relished the gift of the balloons less, it was more like they were savoring them. Two children sat on the floor as the parents looked on with peaceful smiles. They seemed illuminated by their children's happiness. It was a rare sight and it seemed to be more than enough. It seemed everything that had ever mattered to them had come to life in this moment.

The two children, a boy of nine that worked as a polisher like Destiny Hope, and a girl of twelve that loaded the carts that Merlin pulled... tapped, tapped their balloons up and down. The only sound was the rustle and click of the candy within. It would be days and days before the two sitting on the floor would pop their balloons for the sweets inside. They were savers relishing each moment. They would stretch their moments making them last and last until the last drop was all that was left.

The excitement in Laura's voice immediately caught the attention of Merlin and Destiny Hope, "Look! The third family is getting ready to

pop their balloons!" All three felt a thrill run through them like a current of electricity without the hurt but with all the power.

They were mesmerized as if it was all occurring in slow motion, as the dull sewing needle moved closer, than closer to the balloon in the hand of the thirteen-year-old girl. She placed the point and began to depress the balloon, but it seemed that she was almost frightened to make that last thrust.

"Aw, come on Janet," Little Jimmy whined, "I want to pop mine!"

"Alright," Janet's annoyance was obvious; she didn't want to be rushed, but anything was better than her snotty little brother's nasal voice and so with an intake of breath, she made the final plunge. POP! The candy came out clicking a dance on the table top, but so surprised was the family by the roll of papers slightly unfurling itself that the candy was all but forgotten.

"What is that?" Janet's voice sounded frightened as if the paper had the power to hurt her.

"It's just paper", Jimmy piped in. "What's the big deal? Why don't you just look at it already so that I can pop my balloon," Jimmy finished looking at his sister with boredom and disgust.

"Fine," Janet said taking her dignity back. "It's no big deal I'm sure," she finished as she unrolled the papers, picked one up, and looked at it first on the front and then on the back. She repeated this several times before Jimmy spoke again only differently because the pictures had caught his interest.

"Can I look at one," Jimmy asked politely. "Please?" So absorbed was Janet that she sort of just pushed one his way. Janet's mother, a quiet and wise woman, reached for the other. It was quite a few minutes before anyone said anything. Each would study one side of the picture and then the other. No one living in this dismal, cold and dreadful

town had ever received pictures before. It was the children's mother that spoke first.

"The pictures are numbered. We should put them in order. They must be numbered for a reason. Which one of you has number one and number two?" she asked sweetly.

"I do," Janet replied and she put the number one picture face up between them.

"Ok, since you have the first one, tell us what it is and what the picture means to you," Janet's mother began engaging her child.

"It is a picture of three hearts and it has a word underneath, but I don't know what it says," Janet answered simply without giving the answer much thought.

"Ok," Janet's mother continued, "Why do you think someone drew a picture of three hearts, or what do the three hearts mean to you?" the mother asked questions to lead her daughter to find some kind of value in the picture she had received.

"Hearts are love," Janet tried to find the answer again and waited to see if the answer satisfied her mother.

"Yes, Love," her mother repeated acknowledging that Janet's idea was a good one. "Why do you think there are three?" she questioned in a tone that suggested only her daughter could give her an answer to this very important question. This time the room remained quiet and Janet did not answer so quickly, but instead seemed to be taking her time to really think about it. Even Jimmy remained silent absorbed in the change and all that was happening.

"I have an idea!" This time Janet was excited and continued on, "It takes three to make a family because you need a mom, a dad, and a child!"

Her mother looked at Janet with a smile on her face, "Yes, whenever there are any three loving and caring people... there is a complete family," and she reached over and covered her daughter's hand with her own. After a brief moment of connection with her mother, Janet then turned her paper over to look at the number two picture. It was a picture of three trees. One was taller than the next and there was a word printed at the bottom. This time Janet needed no prompting.

"The tree starts small and gets big and tall. Trees grow," Janet said not quite sure where to go with it, but feeling like that was the meaning of the picture. It was Jimmy that surprised everyone when he spoke next.

"Most everything living grows. It goes from weak to strong," his understanding seemed to run deeper, but he did not go on.

"We now have words from the pictures," the mother kept the stream of thoughts going, "love and grow. Let's look at what the pictures numbered three and four show and the mother put number three where everyone could see.

Number three was a picture of people in a circle holding hands with a word under it. The mother felt a love rise and grow within her as she shared with her children, "This is all the people and we are all holding hands. This is a picture for friendship," and so confident was she of her meaning that she immediately turned the paper over to connect the dots.

Number four was a picture of a huge sun shining light upon a small village and a word under it. It was as if the whole meaning so far became clear in that moment in the mother's mind and heart. "And this one..." she paused for effect, "is light. Beautiful, beautiful light", she finished looking off mistily into the distance of a world unknown, but now imagined from inside her. In a dreamy voice that was none-the-

less clear as a bell the mother shared, "love and grow, friendship and light." It was really that simple; the message was clear. She had almost forgotten about the last paper until Jimmy claimed his turn.

"Number five is a big heart with the pictures of love and light, and grow and friendship within it and in that order." As soon as Jimmy finished, the mother spoke with a voice of clarity and surety that left little doubt in the children's minds about the truth of it.

"Of course. We must keep love in our hearts for that is where the light comes from. Our love must grow through friendship. What is the last picture?" the mother asked looking to Jimmy for the final key.

"The first four pictures are now inside someone's head and the head is inside a heart and the heart is inside an eye." This last picture was not to be explained so easily except the mother quickly knew the pictures in the head were actually placing them in the mind, but what did the heart inside an eye mean?

It was at that exact moment that the screens returned to blank and the three friends felt a pulling, a pulling, pulling them back once again into the world of Terrormaysu. Unbeknownst to them as they drifted back into sleep, these three wondrous and powerful friends with bonds deep and strong like roots of mighty trees that have existed for centuries would meet... all three together... for only one last and final Sunday gathering.

Chapter 36: Perceptions and Pops

Destiny Hope was exuberant at the thought of getting together with her two friends for their Sunday gathering. They had so much to share and talk about. This week in Terrormaysu had been like no other week that anyone could remember. It had not snowed for nine days, nine whole

days, and while the ground was a mushy sludge of brown in places, and sleds were not near as useful as they kept getting bogged down, everyone was ecstatic with the change. It was all that anyone had talked about as they waited in line. The change and what it meant for the residents living in Terrormaysu.

There was a rat-tat-tat at the door, and then a pause and the rat-tat-tat was repeated again. Destiny Hope rushed over, unbolted the door, grabbed Laura's hands laughing, pulled her in, and together they danced in a circle going round and round and being plain silly. Destiny Hope left the door unlocked no longer concerned that it had to be quickly bolted. Shortly after the girls stopped giggling, the rat-tat-tat process was repeated and Merlin joined his two friends. Out of habit, he locked the door before sitting down.

"Wow, this week was awesome," Merlin said after taking a sip of tea and picking up his biscuit. He waved and pointed the biscuit like a conductor's baton as he went on. "I can't believe all the people out today just walking around and talking. I even saw people going over to their neighbors to visit!" he exclaimed shaking his head as if even he could not believe what he was seeing with his own eyes.

"On my way over here I actually saw a deathwalker worker pat little Frank on the back," Laura joined in. "He told him that he had done a good job at pulling carts this week and that he should keep it up. I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing," Laura said with the same surprise in her voice as Merlin.

"Oh, before I forget," Destiny Hope pronounced, "I went to the other dimension last night and I was surprised that I didn't see either of you there. Did either of you go last night?" Destiny Hope asked her two friends.

"I didn't," Merlin answered quickly sounding rather disappointed.

"Me either," Laura replied right after Merlin, "I wonder why you went and we didn't?" Laura seemed more confused than upset. "What happened when you were there?" Laura asked curious to know if there was a reason that Destiny Hope had gone alone.

"I was sitting on a swing attached to a huge and mighty oak tree in an open field that seemed to stretch into forever. The only tree that I could see was the one that the swing was hanging on. For awhile, I was all by myself just kicking my legs and swinging higher and higher and reaching up as high as could be for me in that moment. It was then that my teacher appeared and waited until I could slow myself down. We began talking about the changes in Terrormaysu.

The first thing that he asked me was what I thought of all the changes taking place in Terrormaysu, and were they what I had imagined they would be. I told him that the answer was yes and no. He told me that we couldn't always see everything, but that we always see what is needed or what we are meant to. Anyway, he asked me what *did* happen that I had imagined and what *did* happen that I never expected.

I told him that we knew that the people would be happier and friendlier with each other. We expected more smiles and waves to one another as the people were coming and going. That *had* definitely happened. I said that I was not very surprised by the change in the residents working and living there, but there were two things that had caught me by surprise.

The first thing was that the snowing was slowing; it hadn't snowed for nine days. The temperatures had risen above the freezing mark. I thought that this was totally amazing. In places, the ground had actually thawed and while walking was messy it was so totally cool that the weather was changing. That was a by-product I never saw coming. But, that was not the change that amazed me the most.

I told him the biggest change that came at me from out of nowhere was the change in the deathwalker workers. That was a change that I simply did not understand and I wondered if he could explain how that had come to pass. He smiled at me and simply waited not saying a thing as if he knew that if he waited long enough that I could figure it out by myself and I eventually did!"

"I have been wondering about that too," Laura said. "How is it possible for them to be effected when they did not see the picture messages?" Destiny Hope was silent like her teacher had been with her and simply waited to see if the two of them could figure it out between them.

"Well, the deathwalker workers do not have a soul... well, at least as far as we know," Merlin contributed to the challenging question. "Could that have something to do with it?" he went on trying to puzzle it out by talking out loud.

"If you don't have a soul, or at least you don't know that you do, is that like a clean slate that can get anything written on it?" Laura pondered joining in the quest with Merlin to come up with the answer.

"Do you really think that the deathwalker workers have no soul?" Destiny hope posed the question to her two friends and then asked another immediately. "Can someone really take someone's soul or is it more likely that they simply strip the memory of the soul like a person that can't remember because they have amnesia? Instead of erasing the mind's memory, they wipe out the spiritual center somehow? It's kinda of like when things get so covered in crud, it gets so thick, that you can't even see the thing anymore. All you see is the crud."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Merlin jumped in, "What you're saying is that the soul can't be removed and that's not what we saw and it is not what went into the syringes so long ago! What went into the syringes

was memory of the soul, and then their minds were programmed to perform and act a certain way without any spiritual interference. Their minds are the crud?!" Merlin stopped and waited to see if Destiny Hope would confirm the validity of his thought processes.

"Go on," Destiny Hope stated without giving an inch towards the epiphany. Merlin built on his thoughts like a contractor facing a dead line.

"Do you mean that just like Rigor C. Mortis programmed the deathwalker worker's minds leaving crud to hide the memory of their soul... that all the people of Terrormaysu..." Merlin paused for a moment to think it through. "That all the people of Terrormaysu by their loving hearts, clear thoughts, and caring actions are activating the deathwalker's souls in this moment?"

"Bingo!" Destiny Hope shouted and then continued, "The deathwalker workers can't help but be affected. They don't understand it and they don't have control over it. It is just something that is by laws of attraction and the nature of expansion happening. Souls automatically respond to love and light even when they are unaware of what is occurring. It's sort of like a yawn being contagious or when you can't help yourself from smiling when every one is smiling at you. The deathwalker workers are growing, and without even knowing it, they are forming friendships with the residents of Terrormaysu."

The three friends sat back quiet for a time each absorbed in their own thoughts. Destiny Hope stared out the window at a sky that was not light, but it was no longer only shades of gray. It was hard to explain, but no one could deny that the sky had changed. There was no doubt that Terrormaysu had changed and that it was still changing, and changing for the better. The expansion of the light had started and it

was only yet to know how far reaching the changes for the better would become moving forward.

At the moment that this thought finished floating between the friends without words being spoken, Destiny Hope saw the bird with the white dot of light between its eyes perched on her windowsill. The bird seemed to be studying her intently asking if she was ready for the next big change. It hardly seemed possible that she could be reading the bird right; if anything, it seemed a time for repose; it was a time to allow the hearts of Terrormaysu's mankind to unfold. It was then that the bird affirmed her original thought and said inside her mind. "The next big change is about to happen. It is already set in motion. It is already satisfied," and with the ending words the bird flapped its wings and headed towards a sky that now held hope and promise.

Destiny Hope was uncertain whether to tell her two friends. She certainly did not want to upset them, and the bird had made it clear. Somewhere, the choice had already been made. It could not be changed. It was not about the choice, but instead, about what she wanted to do with it. It was at that moment that she recalled their agreement to pop their balloons together, and suggested to her two friends that they blow up their balloons and celebrate the change that had come to stay and was now living in Terrormaysu.

All three friends blew up their balloons and bounced them around for awhile honoring the child that still lived within each of them. It was starting to get late and all three agreed that it was time for the popping.

"Why don't we pop them all at the same time," Laura suggested thinking it would be fun and a symbol that they were all doing the exact same thing in exactly the same moment. Destiny Hope went and got the sewing needle, a sharp knife, and a pair of scissors - the only

three sharp things that she could think of that were in the house. Each of them sat poised and Merlin began the countdown.

"One... two.... three!" POP! POP!! POP!!! And... it was in that moment in complete joy and excitement that Laura looked up only to discover that she was standing alone in Destiny Hope's kitchen. Merlin and Destiny Hope had simply vanished. Vanished??!! Vanished????!!! Laura simply could not believe her eyes for a moment and slowly, slowly, like a wax doll melting, she sank to the wood plank floor. Her hands came up and covered her mouth as if no words could ever explain the unexplainable. It was simply too overwhelming to even put into words. She felt her heart start to swell filling up, up like a balloon with sorrow and fear and deep, deep despair. The moment had come. She was alone in Terrormaysu.

Laura closed her eyes to let the pictures and promises of the pearl come into her head and wondered... when and where would she ever see her two friends again? It was then... at that precise moment, that the pictures began dancing inside Laura's mind like a pre-recorded slide show. Her heart filled up anew - not with sorrow but with a hope and knowing - and so began Laura's journey to find her two friends and the ultimate power inside a polished stone. *They had to be somewhere.*