

Part I

Chapter 1 - The Story of the Finder of Caves

The Southern Mexican jungle surrounded the KulWinik village. The air was humid and it remained hot, an hour after sunset, as a group of people sat around a rectangular, white plastic table outside one of the thatched huts. A single kerosene lamp burned on the table. Its light did not worry the darkness passed the people's faces. Moths and other insects gave the light busy attention.

Yax K'in smoked a pungent, hand-made cigar oblivious to the expectations of the five Westerners. His flat, almost-simian face showed the wear and care of only seventy of his one hundred years. His unkempt jet-black hair brushed the top of his shoulders. He was dressed in a cotton tunic that covered him from his neck to his wrists to below his knees. If his tunic had been washed it would have been white but it was a shade of grey from the smoke of cooking fires and dust and mud from labouring in the milpa, the field cleared from the jungle where the KulWinik grew their food.

Yax K'in was the last to remember the time before regular contact with Westerners, before missionaries tainted their ancient beliefs and almost destroyed the KulWinik's way of life. He looked at his late-teenage daughter and then to each person sitting expectantly around the table. His eyes came to rest on the lamp and the busy cloud of insects.

'Pep'Em Ha will tell the stories,' Yax K'in said, addressing the lamp.

Arthur Dawkins looked at his two friends, Michelle and Hamish and then at Hamish's late-teenage grandsons, Jim and Harry, to make sure they they were paying attention and

were ready for the story telling. He had heard that Pep'Em Ha was as good a story-teller as her father.

Yax K'in noticed Arthur drawing in the audience and smiled at his friend. He hoped Arthur would not be too upset. Yax K'in had withheld the stories from Arthur during their forty year friendship.

Pep'Em Ha leant a little forward and looked sideways at her father. He did not return her gaze as he smoked his cigar and looked through his exhaled smoke at the flame inside the kerosene lamp. He had passed control of the performance to her. He would not interfere, unless absolutely necessary. Pep'Em Ha stared at her father as if confirming that the performance was hers to begin. She was relieved that she could finally tell the secret stories. She spoke in the ancient Mayan language used by the KulWinik.

"The greatest hunter from the time before Kings, travelled for many days through the ancient jungle searching, unsuccessfully, for game. She," Pep'Em Ha paused for a second. Michelle responded immediately with a short intake of breath and shuffled in her seat. As Pep'Em Ha resumed, Arthur turned his head to look at Michelle and, only then, realised the importance of what Pep'Em Ha had said.

"She had cornered an ancient and dangerous animal. An animal that no longer exists, as large when it walked on its four legs as the shoulder of a standing hunter. She failed to kill it. Even the greatest hunters know failure. Even the gods make mistakes. The animal tore along the length of her leg with its claws and teeth. The hunter's injury was deep and to the bone. The hunter's prey threw her and violently struck her under her chin. Her mouth

filled with her own blood as her teeth pierced her tongue. She lost consciousness when she landed heavily on the ground. When she woke, she was soaked by her own blood that pooled around her. She was in great pain. She expected to die.”

Pep’Em Ha changed the tone of her voice as she provided a commentary that was part of the story.

“This story is from a time when Hachakyum lived among us. It was a previous time. A time before there were kings and scribes. It was a time before ritual. It was a time before worship. A time before our people created stone cities. It was a time when people lived simply. They lived in ignorance of their own past. They lived before all our stories. The story of the Finder of Caves is the first story.”

Pep’Em Ha continued the ancient tale.

“The hunter dragged her broken body through the jungle as she tried to return to her village. She travelled for many days. She was disoriented from her pain and weak from her loss of blood. She became lost. She moved in no common direction and she no longer cared, as her only hope for survival was to find help or a source of easy food and shelter.

During the first nights of her ordeal she feared an attack from jaguars or other large predators. Each night she found a place where an attack could only come from a single direction and she would prop herself watching and waiting in the blackness. As the days blurred into a single repeated one of agony and weakness she gave up her defence against attack and each night she lay on the jungle floor wherever she fell and slept through the dark hours.

She knew her life was near its end.

She lost clear vision. She hallucinated, caused by her weakness from loss of blood and lack of food and water. She thought she saw a stark white shape, sometimes appearing as a desiccated ancient tree stump and sometimes as a robed man. It remained nearby, shouting its uniqueness in the jungle of greens and browns. She would stare at it to make the vision disappear but the shape shadowed her as a companion until her strength was almost gone so that she no longer registered its presence.

Her injured leg became infected and she lost sensation from it. She woke one morning and could not stand. She crawled through the jungle, dragging her useless leg. She did not stop. Each morning, when she surprised herself that she was still alive, she would continue her struggle.

The last morning she woke and lifted her head from the earth where she lay prostrate and saw the jungle lightened ahead. She crawled in that direction. The jungle fell behind her. She collapsed and lay on the edge of a milpa. She released tears of relief using the last moisture in her body. She let her head fall onto the earth. She slept again.

She woke in the same place. She opened her eyes and heard a voice.

'I've been watching you for some time.'

An old man sat with his back against the last tree of the jungle, looking out over the milpa. He was dressed in a white tunic that covered him from his neck to his wrists and to his ankles. His feet were bare.

'You will not give up, will you. Even as you are now. At the very end,' he said. He turned his head to look at the hunter lying on the ground and then looked away again.

'Why is that?' he asked, not looking at her. 'Why are you so strong? You are so different from the others.'

He spoke calmly as if he was chatting and passing the time, after a day of rest and a good meal. She was angry and indignant, as well as in agony. She did not understand why he did not help her. She tried to swallow so that she could speak but it was impossible.

Coherent words could not come through the coagulated blood in her mouth and the stricture of her throat. She wanted to make some sound of annoyance. She was hindered by her swollen and infected tongue. She croaked an inarticulate sound.

'Will you help me?' was what she had hoped to say.

He slowly shifted his gaze from the milpa to stare at her. She lifted her head from the earth. She looked directly at him. She could not move from where she lay and if the old man did not help her she would die on that spot. He stared at her, his eyes calm, without concern.

'Will I help you?' he repeated the question she had intended to ask but had not spoken.

He looked away from her and over the milpa again. 'I shouldn't,' he said.

She had no more words and no further thoughts. The strength holding her head from the ground failed and her face fell, resting on its side.

'Maybe I will,' he said as if he had convinced himself after a silent argument. 'I can try again.'

He stood and walked the few steps to where she lay. He looked down at her.

'You are strong. I will grant you that,' he said.

He watched her. Her head could not be lifted on its own again. Her eyes were the only sign of life in her and they blazed anger and pleaded pity. He smiled at her as he weighed the fateful, irrevocable and horrifying decision he was about to make. He would live with its consequences for tens of thousands of years. Until the end of the world.

'Yes. I will help you,' he said softly.

She lost consciousness again.

She woke inside a hut, lying in a hammock, swinging gently near a three-stoned cooking fire. It was smouldering. She tentatively moved her head. The hut was large compared to hers. However, her attention was distracted when she realised she was not in pain. She moved her hand and touched her chin and then poked out her tongue and touched it as well. She felt no pain. She looked at the finger that had touched her tongue and there was no blood on it. She attempted to swallow. She swallowed easily. She was not thirsty, and she was not hungry. She reached down to her injured leg. She grimaced in anticipation of touching her wounds.

She felt no pain. Her injured leg was whole. She raised her head and looked down the length of her naked body. She was as uninjured as the day she had left her village to begin

her hunt. She swung to a sitting position in the hammock and felt no dizziness or discomfort. She placed her feet on the ground and then stood. She kept one hand holding the hammock, assuming that her legs would fail. She let go and did not fall. She felt strong enough to start a hunt of many days. She walked to the entrance of the hut and looked outside. She saw a milpa growing maize, squash, chillies, tobacco and manioc. She had never seen such an abundant milpa. She assumed it was the same milpa where she had met the old man.

‘The old man must have saved me,’ she thought. She looked at her body again and touched her chin, again.

‘But, I am more than healed, I have been returned to how I was before,’ she thought.

She felt a little weak as she thought, ‘Perhaps I have died. Perhaps I have not been healed. Perhaps I have not been returned to how I was before.’

She walked out of the hut into the clear area in front of it. She turned and looked back. She breathed deeply. She could smell the smoke from the fire. She raised the back of her hand to her nose and smelt the familiar smell of her own skin. She felt the beginnings of a normal hunger. She felt stirrings in her bowels. She knew she must be alive. Those mundane parts of living would be wasted on the dead.

‘However,’ she thought, ‘I have been healed completely.’ She did not understand.

She walked further from the hut, stopped and stood. She slowly turned in a circle, on the spot. She called loudly, ‘Hello?’ to each of the four directions.

There was no answer. She heard insects, birds and monkeys in the jungle trees surrounding the milpa. She heard the rustle from close-by maize plants rubbing together in the breeze. There were no sounds of people.

She was unsure what to do next. She could wait. There was food in the milpa and although she had no weapons to hunt, hunting was not necessary for survival. She assumed a source of water would be close by and there was the hut for shelter. She looked again at the hut. She thought through her predicament. Someone had built the hut. Someone had set and lit the fire that still smouldered. Her thoughts returned to finding the old man, or someone else, and not of waiting.

She decided what to do and walked back to the hut and went inside. She would search for clothing, for weapons and for signs of recent occupation, anything that may help her find a way to return to her people.

The old man sat next to the fire, he was smoking a hand-made cigar. He exhaled smoke and watched it join with the rising smoke from the smouldering fire.

She stopped when she saw him. He made no sign that he had noticed her entrance. She was silent for a long time while she stared at him.

‘Did you heal me?’ she asked eventually, when she was sure he was not an apparition.

The old man looked with pleasure at his cigar. He moved it closer to his eyes and gazed at it as if it was a loved one.

‘These are the best things about this place,’ he said.

He did not look at the hunter when he answered her question, 'Yes.'

'How long have I been here?'

'It is the afternoon of the same day.'

'How?' she asked. She frowned. She was confused.

'I said, I will help you. And, I have.'

She had too many questions and was unable to decide what to ask first.

'Thank you,' she said in a soft voice.

She decided on a question. She was bold with her request. She asked firmly, 'Can you also help me return to my people?'

'No,' he said quickly.

'No?'

The old man said nothing in reply as he exhaled smoke to again merge with the smoke from the fire. He had not looked at the hunter and she became annoyed at his inattention.

'No? You won't help me?' she asked again.

'I have helped you,' the old man said quietly.

'I know. I am thankful. I was asking for more help,' she said.

He turned his head and looked at her like he was her father and she was, again, a child asking permission. She was a hunter, some called her the greatest hunter. She was exasperated.

The old man felt her exasperation. He explained, 'You cannot return to your people. Those people no longer exist.'

She was shocked. Her hands moved to her face. 'Are they dead? How do you know?' she asked quickly. The ends of her fingers covered her mouth.

'No.'

'No, what?' She became angry. She was frustrated with the old man's answers.

The old man turned away from her and looked again at the smoke rising from the fire.

'No, they are not dead,' he said slowly as if he was explaining the obvious.

She did not know what to ask him next. She was not asking specific enough questions, she thought. She stared at him. He exhaled, again, from his cigar.

'I have re-made you,' he said as if that answer should satisfy all her doubts and should answer all her questions.

She sighed, she gave up expecting sense from the old man. 'I'm sorry old man. I appreciate what you have done. You do not make sense. I do not understand you.'

'Of course you don't.' The old man smiled, with compassion. 'I re-made you. This world has a new beginning. I created a new world when I helped you. The world begins with

you. It exists because of you,' he said. 'It had reached a point where I was,' he thought for a moment, 'dissatisfied. Without your suffering, without your strength, this would no longer exist,' he gently extended his hand that held his cigar. She did not know if he meant the whole world, the contents of the hut or simply the cigar in his hand.

His smile remained on his face. 'I am grateful, you gave me an excuse. I am fond of this place. I have not believed my creation was a complete failure. As I have been told. You are the proof of that, although you were an amazing exception. With you remaining in this world, this time it will be better. I am sure,' he spoke carefully, methodically, as if he had forgotten the hunter was there and was justifying his actions to himself.

The old man stared at the fire. He said, as if it was not something that would interest her, 'I re-made your people. But not in the same way as I re-made you. They do not remember. They are not the same as you.'

She stared in silence at the old man as if he had spoken a language she did not understand. She decided to not ask for further explanation. She was the greatest of all hunters and she knew there was a time to give up on a quarry and start the hunt again.

'When can I return to these re-made people, as you say?' she asked. Her voice was firm and there was no confusion. Her question was unequivocal.

The old man turned and stared into her eyes. She had the strange sensation that he approved of her question.

'Now,' he replied softly.

'Right now or soon? What do you mean?'

'Now,' he repeated.

The hunter turned away from the old man by the fire and walked outside the hut. She hoped her action would force him to follow, so that he could lead her back to her village. Or wherever he understood she was to go.

She stopped immediately outside the entrance to the hut. She was back in her village and the setting sun was shining in her eyes. She turned and looked back inside the hut. The hut was her hut in her own village. Or, at least, looked like it. There was no sign of the old man or the milpa.

Her brother came out of the hut and stared at her.

'I'd thought you'd gone?' he asked with irritation.

Her brother brushed passed her and out into the village centre. 'And where are your clothes?' He said brusquely. He did not wait for a reply."

Yax K'in broke the flow of the story telling and interrupted the trance Pep'Em Ha had caused in her audience with a sharp, pronounced intake of breath.

'Pep'Em Ha!' he said. His voice was raised.

Arthur had never heard Yax K'in speak to his daughter in that way.

'That is enough,' Yax K'in said. He looked sternly at his young daughter. 'The story is well told. However, the story does not need your additions. You have not told the ancient story.'

Yax K'in turned away from his daughter as if by not looking at her he would diminish his disappointment. He stared at the light from the kerosene lamp, as if he was alone. 'I promised Arthur and Michelle that they would hear the stories of Hachakyum. They are not here for entertainment,' he said strongly. 'The Story of the Finder of Caves is from a time before there was maize.' Yax K'in swung his head and looked at Arthur and then Michelle. 'It was a time before there were milpas, before our people lived in villages, before we made shelters like these.' Yax K'in waved his arm at the village huts. 'It is a story from a creation before ours, a time that no longer exists, a time of which all trace has gone. All that exists are the stories.' He looked at Pep'Em Ha and his eyes made her ashamed. She looked down at the surface of the table, she studied the marks and scratches from years of use. 'If the stories are not accurate then they are lost.'

Pep'Em Ha had altered the story. She had added the character of her own brother to the ancient tale of the Finder of Caves, she had described the milpa of the old man so that it was the same as her family's milpa, she had made the hunter's village resemble her own, she had made the intervening god in the image of her own father. She liked to associate herself and her own times with the hunter in the story. She said nothing in reply to her father's interruption.

'We must be careful,' Yax K'in continued, 'and accurate. Accuracy is paramount, Pep'Em Ha.' Yax K'in added in a softer voice, 'Inaccuracy has caused many problems, I believe.'

Yax K'in drew on his cigar and as he spoke his voice was illustrated by his exhaled smoke, 'We must be careful since what is added for entertainment will remain with the story. Stories too easily become other stories.'

Pep'Em Ha's audience sat quietly and listened to the sounds of the night. They waited for Yax K'in to decide if Pep'Em Ha would continue story-telling. After a short time, Yax K'in inclined his head and Pep'Em Ha continued the ancient tale.

"Many years passed since the world was re-made. The people of that creation aged and died, however, the hunter remained unchanged from the moment she had been re-made. She thought often of the old man. The few words he had said to her became clearer as the years passed and her wisdom increased. She ruled her people. She was the first ruler. She provided for her people. When she hunted far from her village she looked for the place where she had been healed but over countless hunts, over countless years, she never found it.

Years passed that counted more than many lives.

Game was scarce and she ranged further from her village than usual because her people depended on her skill. The hunter had been on a hunt of many days, and she was alone in the jungle, when she failed to kill a peccary and its tusks had gored her leg.

In the long years of her life it was the second, and last, time she had known failure while hunting. She always provided for her people.

She had lost a lot of blood and her leg was painful but she continued to track the injured peccary. She cornered it against a rock wall. She allowed herself a moment of triumph

before she killed her prey. Although she was weak with the loss of blood, her skill would prevent a second escape. However, before she could make the killing blow the peccary turned and disappeared. She waited, anticipating its return, but it did not rush at her from out of the rock. She approached the rock wall and saw that it was not whole. There was an opening through which the peccary had vanished.

She did not hesitate, she had to provide for her people. Her people depended on her.

She crawled through the opening with her weapons ready in her hands. The opening was wide enough to crawl unimpeded but its height did not reach the hunter's waist, if she had been standing. It sloped gently down. She was wary but the scarcity of game forced her to continue. The light dimmed quickly as she crawled along the passageway. She decided to give up her hunt for the injured peccary, and start a new hunt, but then the passageway dipped sharply. The rock surface was slippery. She lost her grip and began to slide. Her hands were full of her hunting weapons. She reluctantly let them go as she slipped further. She tried to grab hold of the rock floor but it was too slippery. She grasped frantically at the rock above her. The rock vanished from beneath her. She was suspended in a dark space. Her skin shivered with the undisturbed cold of a large enclosed area. She was falling but could feel nothing. She struck the bottom of the cave and lost consciousness.

She woke. She did not know how much time had passed. There was a dim light as the daylight outside the cave beamed through the narrow entrance. Her eyes became used to the darkness. She saw the source of the light as a beacon, suspended on the cave wall, far above where she lay. Her leg shivered in silver that she knew was blood that had flowed

from the re-opened wound. Her other leg rested at an unnatural angle. It was painful. She had broken it. An arm caused a similar pain. It was broken also. She lifted her head to look around the cave. An intense pain shot through her mouth. She felt warm blood stream and eddy down and over her chin. She saw its sticky shine on the rock underneath her. She knew that pain. It was same pain she had endured during her only other unsuccessful hunt. She had, once again, pierced her tongue with her teeth.

She saw the form of the dead peccary. It had fallen further into the cave, carried there by its speed. She tried to move, to gather it, to return with it to her people. Her pain was too great. She could not move. It was only then that she thought of her plight. She could not climb to the entrance with a broken leg and arm. She was weak from loss of blood. She would die next to the peccary. Her pain and suffering was great. She hoped her death would be quick. She lay her head back on the rock floor and waited to die.

She had fallen into a sacred place. What separates our world from the world of Xibalba, the abode of the gods, is thin there. Her suffering called to Xibalba. She was answered.

The dim cave light coagulated, it formed around a single point, then it extended into a sinuous stream of smoke. It expanded into the shape of a serpent. She lifted her head, although her pain was intense, when she was aware of the change in the cave.

The shape moved and grew. A serpent's head formed on the changing stream and its mouth split and opened until the open mouth filled her vision. She watched with fascination as if she saw her approaching death. She was not afraid to die. She was the greatest hunter, of any creation.

Her suffering had summoned a Vision Serpent, the way our people communicate with the gods and with our ancestors.

She saw movement within the mouth of the Vision Serpent. A shape was moving closer. A young man stepped out of the mouth of the serpent and into the cave. She stared at him. He looked like a king although the days of the Story of the Finder of Caves were before there were kings. She lifted her head further to look at him as he approached. He stopped next to the dead peccary and looked down at her as she lay on the rock floor of the cave.

She knew him.

She tried to speak. Her voice garbled with the blood that pooled in her mouth. Each word she used, each breath, added to her pain. She fought the words like they were adversaries.

‘Where have you come from? Why are you here?’ Her breath failed on the last word. She was braver than any person had been or would be, she could suffer agony in silence but she was afraid in the presence of great power. She, also, knew his compassion was arbitrary. He had watched her suffer before. He could do nothing and have no concern as to consequences.

His answer surprised her. ‘You brought me here,’ he said softly.

She struggled with another word but it came out of her mouth easily. ‘How?’ she asked.

She tried to speak more words. ‘How could I have brought you here?’ she said clearly.

'Your suffering summoned me. When pain becomes all of you so that there is nothing else, when you believe death is all that is left and you face it calmly, then you are close to Xibalba,' he said quietly. 'Then you are close to me.'

'Why are you so interested in watching my suffering? You have no compassion!' She exploded with anger. Her fear made her angry. She was familiar with fear and she had learned how to overcome it. When she hunted dangerous prey she attacked. She did that with him.

'You watched my suffering,' she said with explosive anger in her voice. 'That's twice now. You only helped me, reluctantly, after I pleaded. I am a hunter, I do not accept help easily. It is demeaning to ask for help. You changed everything. You explained nothing. Not in a way I understood. Not with any sense.' She listed her grievances.

'Then,' she continued. 'You say, I have been re-made. What is that? No-one knew me but they all knew my name. Then you disappear or you made me disappear from you. You leave me like that.' Tears formed in her eyes as her anger was overcome by sadness. She went on in a softer voice. 'You left me like that for years and years and years. Everyone aged and died. Over and over again. Then, you turn up looking like this.' She lifted her arm and let her hand fall, from his head to his feet.

She looked at her hand that hovered in front of her face. She then realised she had sat up while she was angrily arguing. She was no longer lying on the rock floor of the cave. She had no pain in her legs, her voice was clear, her mouth was clean and whole and her arm moved as if it had never been broken. She looked up at his face in wonder. He had not

moved from next to the peccary. In the gloom of the cave she saw a serious look on his face.

‘Compassion was not required,’ he said. ‘Not on my part and not at that time. I re-made you. I re-made your people. The day you found me was the first day of this creation. The time of the world is counted from that day. It was because of you. I did tell you all that. We shall see what happens this time.’

‘This time? What does that mean?’ she asked. She was less angry now that her pain had gone.

‘I have done this before. A long time ago and with methods that were,’ he hesitated and she thought she saw a bitter smile on his face. ‘They were catastrophic and crude. Perhaps, because of you, this time will be better,’ he said.

Her anger had gone. She said in a soft, contrite voice that still managed to transfer blame to him. ‘I could have died. I expected to die. Again.’ She wondered how his apparent plan for creation could proceed if she had died in the cave.

To her surprise, he laughed. His laugh forced on her an ecstatic joy, as if the world was wonderful. She had no choice but to share his happiness. It was not a contagious laughter, quite the opposite. It felt inappropriate, sacrilegious even, to add to the sound he was making. His laughter was a gift but not to be shared on equal terms. In the many years that followed, his laugh was brought out at unexpected times and she rarely anticipated its arrival. She never understood his temperament or his humour but, as he explained, she was not expected to understand.

'No,' he said when his laughter had subsided. 'Well, yes. You could have died the first time and the fact that you didn't is the reason for, well,' he hesitated to find the right word as if his vocabulary was newly learned. He said, 'everything. However, this time?' He looked like he was about to laugh again. 'No. You can't die.'

'You mean you won't let me? You're protecting me? I do not need anyone's protection.' She was upset again. She did not like how lightly he took her injuries, her pain and her suffering. Twice.

'Your current situation proves the opposite, I would have thought,' he said. 'I created this world because of you. You cannot die. Not by accident, disease and not from ageing. You are the ruler of this creation. Perhaps I have not made that clear enough. This world is yours. For as long as you want. I created this world but I do not rule it. That is for you.'

He waited for his words to be understood. He watched her face and was surprised to see that she did understand. Amazing, he thought, that she can understand so much. He knew for certain, then, he had made the correct choice. He also knew that he had made a mistake in leaving her alone.

He added, 'However, it is, perhaps, time I stayed with you.'"

Pep'Em Ha finished the tale. She drew her eyes around her audience as if seeking confirmation of a task well done. No-one spoke in the silence afterwards.

Arthur and Michelle glanced at each other. They knew the story was important. Arthur remembered his years living in the village. He had participated in the KulWinik rituals. He had heard the old stories. All of them, he had thought. He wondered, with some

disappointment, what else there was of consequence that Yax K'in had neglected to tell him.

Michelle was excited. She had also spent many years living, with Arthur, in the KulWinik village. Although those years were gone, they contained some of the fondest moments of her life. She also knew the rituals. She knew the stories, from Arthur and from Yax K'in. An ancient creation tale centred on a female leader was unprecedented. She wondered what else there was but with excitement and not disappointment.

Hamish was a retired geologist, a friend of Arthur. He listened to the silence after the story, revelling in the profound effect the story-telling had on him. He could visualise the relationship between the woman and the god she had summoned. He saw the scenes Pep'Em Ha described as if he had lived them himself. Her story-telling of the beginning of the world moved him as only a few good movies and books had done in his long life. He tried to remember the god's name. He wanted to know how the story of the hunter and the god would end.

Jim, Hamish's late-teenage grandson, was the first to speak. 'That was cool, Pep'Em Ha,' he said in English, which Yax K'in, alone among the people around the table, did not understand. Jim added, in KulWinik Maya, 'Will you tell us more?'

That was the question, for different reasons, everyone around the table wanted answered.

Chapter 2 - The Story of the First Day

The hunter stood as she watched the man seated next to a smouldering cooking fire. They had returned to her people with the dead peccary. Others were preparing it to be eaten. He was dressed in a white tunic that covered him from his neck to his elbows to below his knees. His feet were bare. She silently looked over his appearance, his red hair and a large nose that drew attention to itself. She liked how he looked. He was strong and also gentle. His physical age seemed to be near to hers although she knew well how deceptive that was. She had stopped counting the years of her life.

‘Do you have a name?’ she asked. ‘Or is that also something I could not understand?’ She was wary and kept her distance like he was a dangerous prey. She spoke strongly as if she was not afraid.

‘Yes,’ he said.

She waited for him to say more. She sighed when he didn’t.

She spoke clearly and succinctly, asking a question with one possible answer, ‘What is your name?’

‘I have many names.’

She sighed with frustration. His conversation was impossible.

‘In this place,’ he said, ‘I have been called First Father, also, Hachakyum.’

‘You chose my name?’ she asked. ‘Are you the one who put K’ul Kelem into their heads?’ she asked as she waved her arm in the direction of the people preparing the peccary.

'Yes. It is a powerful name. It is strength, wisdom and authority.' He asked her, 'Do you not like the name I gave you?' He smiled.

Her fear and consequently her anger subsided. She looked at him without staring and said in a soft voice, 'It is a good name.'

She had questions. Her voice hardened, as if preparing for a battle with him.

'I am no older,' she said. She lifted her hand so it was in front of her face. She examined the back of it as if it was not hers. She held it before her eyes and marvelled at the thing that had remained unchanged for years. Her eyes slipped off her hand and fell across the space between them to meet his eyes. She felt as if her gaze met an unyielding force midway between them. She did not flinch.

She waited but he said nothing. She returned his silence like it was a game of strength.

'I still feel pain,' she said after waiting. 'I injure, I tire, I am sad, I am happy, I am hungry, I am sick. I am exactly the same as before I first met you.'

She waited again. He said and did nothing but he did watch her eyes.

'But, I am no older,' she repeated. She lowered her hand to her side.

She waited again.

'My family did not remember me,' she said. 'They had never known me as one of them. I had never existed to anyone I knew or,' she faltered and lowered her voice. 'Or cared for.'

He made no sound. She watched him watching her.

'They all aged and died. Babies aged and died. I had no-one. During all those lifetimes, I was alone,' she said. She remembered loved ones dying while her old life, before meeting the old man, remained unknown to them. She became angry again as she remembered those lonely years. It was his fault. She raised her hand again and examined it. This time she rotated it backwards and forwards to examine all sides of it.

'Do you own me?' she asked firmly. She switched her eyes immediately from her hand to him as if trying to catch him unawares. She said with anger, 'Is this yours? Have I no choice?'

'No,' he said.

'No?' she queried his answer. 'Are you sure? I'm not so sure that I do.'

'No,' he repeated. He spoke clearly and firmly, 'I do not own you. No-one owns you. No-one is owned.'

'Hmm,' she readied herself to argue with him. 'But, you made me. You named me.'

When he did not reply, she moved the hand she had been examining so that it pointed to the other people.

'They knew my name,' she said. 'The name you gave me, but they did not know me.' She placed her other hand on her chest as if to make sure he knew which "me" she was discussing. She remained standing in that confrontational attitude, with one hand pointing and the other on her chest. She wanted him to understand her fear and her loneliness. She wanted some compassion. She did not know what he felt, if anything.

'I do not own you,' he said forcefully. He was unused to being questioned and his answers not believed. He thought of his mistake, leaving her alone for so long, and he tried to show some of the compassion she hoped for. 'I did not make you or anyone else. I can't do that. I re-made you. I re-made your people. I own you less than a parent owns a grown child.'

She let her hands drop to her sides. A question burned to be asked.

She asked softly, as if scared of the answer, 'I can't die?'

He faltered. He recovered and then, quickly, gave her an answer she could understand.

'No,' he said.

'I'm immortal am I? I'm one of the gods.' She began to raise her arms but then let them fall. They hung limply pointing to the ground.

He remembered her intelligence and her willingness to accept after critical examination.

He had chosen her for those reasons as well as her determination and strength. He smiled and resolved to not underestimate her again.

'No. You are not one of the gods. That is not something you can become. You will not die by accident, disease or by ageing. However, never, is too long to speak of with certainty,' he said. 'Everything dies. Everything comes to an end. Even my life will end. Even the lives of my race will end.' He spoke succinctly as he gauged how much she could understand.

She sighed. She looked away from his eyes. She attempted to understand. She did, a little.

Her soft exhaled breath merged into words, 'I am alone. It has been lonely.'

'I know,' he said. 'I left you for too long. Away from here, time is not,' he hesitated. 'It is not as linear as it appears. I made a mistake. I am sorry.' He stood and walked to her.

She remained where she stood, without flinching at his approach, knowing his power was beyond her comprehension. She did not stop looking at his face as he approached her. He stopped in front of her and lightly, gently, picked up one of her hands that hung by her side. He delicately lifted it by holding on to just a few of her fingers. He examined the skin on the back of her hand as if he too was surprised that she had not aged. He looked from her hand to her eyes. He saw in them her strength, her wisdom and her sadness. He relived the time he had been aware of her struggle for life in the forest. He remembered the instant when he decided that world would end. He held the reason for a new world, lightly and gently by a few fingers of one hand. He looked at eyes that, with no fear, returned his gaze. Amazing, he thought, after all she now knew and understood.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'I'm staying now.'

Chapter 3 - The Story of the First Night

She watched him acutely, critically, as he walked towards her. She lay, naked, on animal skins. Animals she had hunted and killed. It was night but she saw him clearly. He was illuminated by the glow from the smouldering cooking fire and moonlight.

Her eyes fell over his approaching body. He looked the same as all other men and, for a moment, she thought she may have been tricked. She may have been drugged to think the many years of her life, when she was alone, were an hallucination. She thought he might

be taking advantage of her, for the baseness of male pleasure. She was, momentarily, unsure of her life as the naked and aroused man approached. However, she was as aroused as he demonstrably was. She wanted him even if he was taking advantage of her. It had been too many generations since she had shared that part of herself.

He lay down next to her. He brushed her lips with his and then drew away. He gently captured her hand and brought that to his lips. He held her, barely, by the ends of a few of her fingers. She let him play with her hand and fingers as if they were things of great beauty and delicacy that could be easily damaged if careful attention was not paid to them.

He smoothed the skin on her hand although it remained perfect, it was unchanged by years of hunting and hard work. His touch was gentle, his skin had not been roughed by labour. She was aroused further by his playful stroking of her hand. More so than any stimulation of her breasts or between her legs. She was surprised how gentle a male could be. But then, she thought with anticipation mixed with fear, he was not simply a male.

He seemed to know of her fear and calmed her by brushing his lips across her hand. He returned her hand to her side like he was replacing an instrument back into its proper and safe place. He willed her legs apart by soft pressure applied to her knee. He traced a downwards line with his finger, beginning on the flat of her stomach and ending when he confirmed the line of separation between her labia. The same finger probed deeper as it began back along the same path and her inner lips parted and drowned.

He lifted himself over her and on top. He entered her, sliding inside her body with no resistance. He stopped when she felt the end of him against her cervix. She could not have accommodated a drop further of human flesh inside her. She looked for his eyes and found them watching her. He did not move inside her, he remained perfectly still as he watched her face.

She felt a pleasurable tingling begin at her cervix. She felt movement inside her. She felt a calming sensation twist and wind up her spine. She felt a part of that stream split off and wrap and cradle her heart. Her heart slowed but was made stronger. The main stream pooled at the base of her skull. She shuddered, opened her eyes widely and stared at his face as she felt the breach of her final defence. He was inside her head like he was another observer inside her own mind. He knew what she knew. He felt what she felt. He moved his penis inside her. He touched her exactly where and when she needed to be touched. While he was inside her, he was part of her. He shared her pleasure through to the final shudder and the satisfying, cleansed emptiness afterwards.

He moved off and lay next to her but he was still inside her head. In her mind he was standing next to her, experiencing and watching. She turned her head to look at him, just a little. She did not want to move too much, she wanted to preserve the fading feeling. He was in two places. She smiled at him, both with her lips and inside her head.

He laughed. She remembered his laugh in the cave and she experienced again that unbridled contagion of his pleasure. She knew she had yet to touch the perimeter of possible pleasure with him.
