



RICH SHAPERO
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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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Island Fruit Remedy

Balcony of Fog

Rin, Tongue and Dorner

Arms from the Sea

The Hope We Seek

Too Far

Wild Animus

THIRTY YEARS BEFORE

Was it the land of the living or the land of the dead?
Or a place of transit between?

A black woman emerged from the darkness, bare-foot on a dirt road. She wore a patterned wrap and balanced a metal tub on her head. Before her a giant moon, white and round, had risen above the world. The woman's steps took her through puddles, where frogs the size of toe bones hopped and chirped. The road bent at a spindly tree. She yawned as she made the turn, and moonlight gleamed on her pearly teeth. A large lizard hung from a branch by its tail, and as the woman passed, it followed her with rotating eyes.

Beside the road was a weathered warehouse, patched with planks. It had a shed roof of corrugated zinc, and moonlight was flowing down it. Through an open transom, two men were visible inside. One held a lantern with an amber flame.

Craag raised the lantern and squinted. He was bald and

short, in his sixties. The dancing flame blotched his red English skin. He started through the warehouse, sliding between two stacks of crates.

The man who followed was half Craag's age, tall and clean-shaven, dressed in white cottons. "It took me an hour to get past the roadblock," Wiley said. He had a high, dark hair-line with receding indents on either side. His eyes were deep and his jaw strong. "Checkpoints in all the wrong places."

Craag wasn't listening.

A large geode appeared in the lantern light, two feet across, like a broken egg. Its lip gleamed with druse, its insides glittered with angular crystals. They circled a hill of rock, blue and gold. Labradorite. And beside it a hill of white quartz. Piles of amethyst and river agate.

They were headed toward the rear of the warehouse, winding through chest-high sections of petrified log. A chicken had settled on one. To the left, open crates were balanced atop a scatter of boxes. Wads of packing material were heaped around unloaded pallets. The warehouse was always crowded, with hauls coming and going, but Wiley had never seen it in such disarray.

Boxes of flame carnelian appeared on the right, and beyond them a rank of giant ammonites. "These are something," Wiley stopped. The fossils were three and four feet in diameter, standing on edge. Their spirals were thick, and the rims were knobbed like off-road tires. The opalescent shells glittered and irised as light invaded their translucent coils. Wiley imagined the creatures swimming in primeval waters,

dark and fathomless, a place where the face of man had never been seen.

He looked at Craag. "What's this about?"

The floor shook. The ammonites shifted, and the *boom* of bombs echoed at a distance. The shelling had been constant for days. How much longer would it be before the rebels stormed the city?

"Are you alright?" Wiley asked.

Craag nodded absently.

Boom, boom—

Craag pointed toward a corner of the warehouse.

"You've got buyers waiting?" Wiley said. "Things are stacking up." He drew a persimmon from his vest pocket and a knife with a clip point blade from the sheath on his hip.

Wiley cut the persimmon and offered him a slice.

Craag shook his head. "My guts aren't right."

Wiley peered at him. Typhoid, malaria, bubonic plague—

Craag turned away.

"What's going on?" Wiley pressed him.

Craag exhaled. "I find things. That's what I do."

"You're missing her," Wiley said. "I do too."

"I visited her grave yesterday." The words caught in Craag's throat. "She was my life jacket."

Moonlight filtered through a dusty window. Craag closed his eyes. Wiley watched grief teeter him, like a children's game of cans and stones.

"We had a long talk," Craag said. "It was her idea. 'You need to see Wiley.'"

Wiley set the persimmon down, sheathed his knife and put his hand on Craag's shoulder. A year before, the couple had a thriving export business; Craag was a respected gem hunter, mentor to Wiley and other traders on the troubled island.

Craag leaned closer, eyes meeting Wiley's then slipping away. "Something impossible has happened." He rubbed his hand across his forehead.

"I've found a new gemstone," Craag said.

"New?"

"No one's ever seen anything like it." Craag glowered and laughed, then his expression sobered. He clenched his jaw, turned and stepped forward, holding the lantern before him.

Wiley followed, past boulders rising beneath tarps, past rusted shelving crowded with rocks and chisels and augers. Their shadows shifted over the clutter.

They were approaching a dark corner at the back of the warehouse.

"Alright," Craag sighed, as if conferring with someone else.

They passed a rick of picks and shovels, and a barrel full of mud-covered posts. Then Craag halted. He set the lantern on a shelf above a worn packing trunk.

"This is it."

Craag took a key from his pocket and knelt.

He inserted the key in a padlock and turned. *Click*.

He removed the padlock and raised the lid slowly, pursing his lips, eyeing Wiley while the hinge squealed.

“One of my boys comes from a village on the Sahamalaza Peninsula. He brought me a fragment. And another, a few months later. I had him scour the area. He found where they came from.”

Craag reached into the trunk and hefted a rock the size of a coconut.

Wiley knelt beside him.

“Look at those things,” Craag said.

The rock was lumpy, but where a spike had struck, it had fractured, and the surface was smooth as glass. You could see through it. Inside, the rock looked watery, with tiny islets and tendrils of froth. Suspended in the water was a mass of orbs, each the size of a small pearl. And they too were translucent. Each orb had multiple shells, one inside the other, perfectly centered.

Craag reached into the trunk and retrieved another fragment. A small one, oblong with waterworn edges, the length of a finger. He pulled at Wiley’s shirt pocket and dropped it in. “Don’t show that to *anyone*.”

Craag rose, cradling the coconut-sized chunk in his arm.

Wiley rose with him.

“The moon wakes them up,” Craag said, turning toward a cracked window.

Wiley saw moonlight flash on the glassy fracture. Craag tilted it and the light beamed deeper, reaching orbs hidden within. They were all sided with silver crescents that seemed to jitter and turn as Wiley watched. The orbs were like fireflies in the Buru jungle—each had its own pulse. And the

concentered circles were radiating now. The watery rock was like a pool, and each orb was where a drop of rain had fallen.

“Quit your job,” Craag said. “Work with me.”

Wiley looked up. Craag’s expression was grave.

“Raffia is hopeless,” Craag said. “You’ll never make any money. If there’s a coup, your co-op will go up in smoke. With these gems you’ll have a future. We’ll split everything down the middle.”

“I’ll do what I can to help. But—”

Craag’s eyes grew wider. “When I’m gone—”

“Gems are a mystery to me,” Wiley said.

“I’ll handle the mining. You’re a trader. You can manage the business. And use what you know about textiles to get the rocks out of the port. No one will expect them to be packed with cotton and raffia.”

“You’re serious.”

Craag put the coconut-sized rock back in the trunk. A rill of sweat dribbled past his ear. He raised his fingers, but his wipe missed, and the rill continued to his jaw.

“I can’t do this by myself,” Craag shook his head. “I can’t.”

Weariness seemed to unfocus his eyes.

“Men wait their whole lives for a chance like this,” Craag said.

Wiley felt the weight of the fragment in his front pocket. He glanced at the trunk. “How much is there?”

“Enough,” Craag replied. “The source is on the coast. In a cove.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“I pitched a tent on a dune and dug my heart out. For twelve days. I reached it. I touched its tail, at the surf line. There’s a vein of the stuff, under the beach. Millions of them, flowing together.” His gaze wandered, following the path of a horde of orbs.

“Where’s the cove?”

Craag nodded, as if to say, “Where. That’s the question.”

“Are we partners?” Craag asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he pulled a folded paper from his shirt pocket. It was dog-eared and grease-stained.

He regarded Wiley for a moment. Then his chin tucked. Was he laughing?

Craag groaned and swayed, reaching out. His knee buckled—

Wiley circled his waist. Craag was sturdy and muscled, but his body was like a sack of flour now, loose and slumping. It sent them banging against the shelving. The lantern shattered and the flame sputtered out.

Craag convulsed, choking, gasping. Wiley sagged, letting Craag’s weight lower them both. The bald head rolled against Wiley’s chest, the shaking torso lay across his hips.

In the moonlight, Craag’s face looked chalky. A large shard of lantern glass rose through his shin, and a thread of blood trickled down. Wiley’s mind raced—a parasite, Craag’s heart, the plague— He raised his shoulders, shifting Craag to the side.

“No. Please.” Craag turned, grabbing his shirt front. His lips jutted. A groan emerged.

“I’m going for help,” Wiley said, finding his feet.

Craag lunged, trying to pin Wiley beneath him. “Stay with me,” he said, jerking as if something had stabbed his chest. “Stay—” His body was rigid, he was staring at Wiley. But he seemed not to see him—

“Are you there?” Craag gasped.

“I’m here.” Wiley held on to him.

Craag’s eyes closed. The rigor passed from his frame. One hand still gripped Wiley’s shirt, but as Wiley watched, Craag’s mouth went slack and his breathing slowed. A grim acceptance seemed to invade him. All the things that had troubled Craag moments before appeared to have fled.

Another stab shook him.

“I’m ready to leave,” Craag said.

The air around Wiley seemed suddenly dense, heavy and humid. His vision went dark, completely dark, as if it was joining Craag’s. The warehouse unmoored, he felt everything tilting—

A sound, hard and sharp, startled him. Like a hundred nuts cracking.

Wiley’s eyesight returned. Directly before him, orbs were rising out of the trunk into a slab of moonlight beaming through the transom. The mass glittered and rippled, each orb centered, like a stream on which rain is falling.

I’m unconscious, he thought. Dreaming— Where is Craag?

A weight crushed Wiley’s waist.

He looked down. The older man lay across him. His eyes

were closed. His features were taut, struck with the same shock Wiley was feeling. Craag's lips parted. Was he going to speak?

An orb appeared inches from Wiley's nose. A second emerged from his shirt pocket. He caught a scent, sweet, floral, like crushed violets. Wiley struggled for breath, disbelieving, chest clinched.

Craag's body was no longer convulsing. His eyes opened, his rigid features relaxed. He seemed calm. He was watching the orbs.

They were gathering around them.

The orbs began to circle, a glittering vortex, descending to the floor and rising back up.

Wiley's legs felt numb. His face was tingling. The swarm wheeled closer, the spherical jellies packing around— A sigh, like foam. A frothing sound. A ticking like bubbles bursting. Silvered by moonlight and lit from within, the orbs crowded his mouth. Were they drawn to his wind? Or his sight— Like a muffler of silk, they rode over his eyes. Terror, choking and blind— But instead of constricting his breath, the orbs seemed to free it. Instead of blocking his sight, Wiley saw things he might not have otherwise seen.

The orbs were pulsing as one now. The whole galaxy throbbled, its luminous mass swelling and contracting. A sheet of pearls had slid between the two men. More and more crowded into the space.

The orbs were pulling at Craag.

The pressure on Wiley's hips faded, but he was still holding on. A new odor stung his nose. Raw. Metallic. The odor of blood.

Scarlet threads were flowing out of Craag's body. Their numbers grew, like long locks, a bloody shawl flowing back. Craag's bare arm had divots. In the ghostly light, it looked pitted.

Craag was torn from his grasp. The pearly orbs were lifting him. And from his pocked flesh came scarlet orbs. They bobbed and mingled with their pearly brothers. Craag's clothing was gone, and so was his skin. His flesh was luminescent, bubbling with scarlet orbs.

As he rose, Craag looked back.

Nothing had prepared Wiley for what he saw.

Craag's face was a scarlet mask, bright and beaded. But his eyes were lucid, wide with wonder, deep with peace. His expression was blissful. Joy seemed to be welling inside him—the joy of his youth, or the joy he had known before his wife fell ill.

No, Wiley thought. This is something he's never felt.

A new joy was announcing itself, a joy that had been a mystery to Craag all his life.

His lips moved. *Wiley*, Craag mouthed, and his gaze matched his voice, blissful, unearthly, free from the ferment at last.

"I'm with them," Craag whispered.

Then his body was lost in the bright pulse.

As Wiley watched, a sheaf of the pearly mass peeled loose, and the whorls with Craag at their center became a scarlet river with the silhouette of a body within. The river circled the warehouse, rushing, its front and sides frothing with silvery orbs while it gained height. Then, all at once, the orbs and the river absorbed the body they carried.

The front of the flow reached the open transom and passed through, into the moonlit night. Its bright tail whipped and vanished.

Wiley's vision blacked. The floor heaved beneath him, a ship's deck in a storm. The air was thick as gravy—

Then, slowly, the choking damp leached away. His breath returned. The rushing faded and the warehouse settled.

Wiley lay still. Then he tried to rise.

Something heavy weighted his hips. Craag was lying on top of him, the shard of lantern glass stuck through his leg. The burden was leaden, unyielding. Wiley shuddered and tasted bile. They were on the warehouse floor. The folded paper, dog-eared and grease-stained, lay two feet away on the planking. The lid of the trunk was open.

Wiley put his fingers to the sweaty neck, hoping, feeling for a heartbeat.

Craag was gone.

1

At the head of the stream, water emerged from solid rock. The flow had scooped the sandstone, giving its pinks and tans the appearance of flesh, and turbulence had dug a pool with a surface as green as a lizard's back. On the pool's downstream side, a giant cottonwood had rooted.

The Old Y had two thick boughs, one arching toward the redrock cliff, the other toward the valley below. Its trunk was gray and tawny and deeply furrowed. Its ranging branches stood leafless in the Utah winter, strands of wild vine tangled among them.

A woman in her thirties, swarthy-skinned and darkly dressed in Indian cottons, halted where the tree's roots knuckled through the red soil. Long black hair circled her face, harnessed by the shawl around her shoulders. The tall man behind her, in a beige coat and white pants, removed his cap.

Wiley passed the woman his walking stick. She leaned it against the Y's trunk, put an arm around his back and, supporting his elbow with the other, helped him over the roots, into the net of shadow cast by the branches. Wiley's clothes hung loose, and his skin was pale and paper-thin.

They stood hip to hip, raised their hands and placed them on the bark.

"The Old Y gives us another day," Wiley said.

He could feel the rough ridges beneath his palms, twisted like basketry. The trunk smelled like a wood fire recently quenched. A bird *churred*, another *tinked*.

"Sapwood, heartwood," Wiley intoned. "One life, one center."

She lifted her hand and set it on his. "As strong as ever."

Wiley faced her. Her cheeks and brow were golden brown, and her large brown eyes were wide. She laughed and they softened, waving their feathery lashes.

"Nadja," he sighed.

How many more mornings like this, he thought, would they walk the canyon, trying to warm his bones in the winter sun? All life's gifts, its treasured sensations, earthly, inconsequential— Her calves' tapering sleekness. The ineffable lightness of her step. The musical lilt of her voice. Her delicate fingers— And now the clasp, firm and reassuring.

Nadja helped him over the Old Y's roots, retrieved his stick, and they started back along the trail.

The banks of the stream were brick red, and the water glittered like an aisle runner woven with jewels. The path was red

too, and it wound between spans of fallen redrock. Wavelets *chucked*, finches *cheeped* from the shrubs, and a collared lizard did push-ups on a slab as they passed. The cliff rose from the opposite bank, redrock blocky and bulging, divided by vertical cracks. Its castellated heights looked like ramparts.

As they rounded the bend, a lone climber appeared. He was dressed in blue fleece, halfway up the cliff, following a seam.

“Scaling the walls of Zion,” Wiley said.

As the trail descended, the valley broadened; the cliff receded and the stream’s banks laid back.

The way led through a stand of velvet ash, and the leafless branches were drooping with wafery seeds. Nadja skinned a handful from a twig and halted. Wiley did the same. Together they gave the seeds to the breeze, watching them fly a few yards and settle on the stream.

She squinted into the sun, then she turned and squinted at him. “Are you tired?”

“No,” Wiley said.

So Nadja held the scrub aside, and they left the trail.

They struggled up a modest slope and traversed the bank till they reached a discolored block. Wiley removed the knife from the sheath on his hip. The blade was tarnished and pitted. He sank to his knees. Nadja watched.

The block had a diagonal groove, and Wiley moved his knife into it, using the point to chip away rock. The groove was scarred where the blade had dug on mornings past. After an interval of patient carving, Wiley removed an object the

size of a hazelnut and put it in his coat pocket. “It’s the last,” he said.

Nadja helped him rise, and they headed down the slope. As they reached the trail, the alert on Nadja’s phone sounded. She drew it from her pocket.

“Right on time,” she said. “He’s on his way from the airport.”

“Good with directions.”

Nadja saw the humor in his comment, then caught herself, eyeing him with suspicion. “He knows what to expect?”

Wiley made an innocent face, a smile lurking.

Around another bend, a branch in the trail appeared. A path lined with small rocks climbed the slope. As the couple ascended, a wing of the stone refuge appeared. Then both were visible, large and two-storied, projecting on either side of a central structure with a rosette window and gable roof.

Though Wiley knew his visitor from messages, phone calls and a long video conversation, this first in-person meeting would be challenging. There was a lot to disclose, and the man would be surprised. Be ready for that, Wiley told himself.

They passed through the orchard, a grove of small trees with empty crowns, standing among the withered grasses. Farther, the gardens appeared. The plots were winter-blown. Amid the remains of autumn asters, someone had planted a white crucifix. It was waist-high, and its slats were battered.

Keep the financial reward in view, Wiley thought. And the glory of the prize—that will matter to him. As they

climbed the stair to the patio, Wiley reviewed the things he was going to discuss, and the order in which he would discuss them.

He opened the French doors, and they entered, moving through a sun room with potted plants, carefully tended. They passed a sitting area with a fireplace built of river rocks, stepped down a hall paneled with burgundy wood, and paused before a doorway. The door was half open.

“Beautiful morning,” Greven smiled, waving them into his office. “You have something for me?” He peered through his horn-rimmed glasses, looking trim and cheerful in his white lab coat and bow tie. The part in his black hair was perfectly straight.

“I do,” Wiley said, reaching into his pocket, charmed as always by the doctor’s dapper manner. He was like a tightrope walker with a top hat and umbrella.

The office had a woven rug, raised wainscoting and a broad window facing the highway. Greven stepped from behind his desk as the couple approached.

Wiley held the object he’d carved out of the rock and turned it before Greven’s eyes. For as little time as they’d spent together, they might have been boyhood friends.

Beside his desk was a large display case. Greven opened the glass door. The shelves were crowded with fossils and Egyptian artifacts.

“You do the honors,” Greven said.

Wiley stooped and added the vertebra to the end of the reptile’s spine. On one side of the spine were two carved jars,

and on the other was a statuette of Anubis. The god's keen eyes peered out of a jackal's head, and his hands were extended, palms down, to calm whoever had come before him.

"He's here," Nadja said.

She was at the window, looking out. Wiley closed the glass door and stepped beside her.

A black pickup truck was turning into the gravel lot. Despite the winter chill, the cab window was down and a man's bare arm hung out. The truck passed a half-dozen parked cars facing the building, reached the lot's corner and stopped.

The cab door opened and a man sprang out, his sandy curls jouncing like coiled springs. He gazed at the stone building, fished in his back pocket and retrieved a scrap of paper, checking the address. Nadja glanced at Wiley. The man faced the building again with a puzzled expression. Then he slapped the dust from his jeans and started forward. He was average height, but his carriage belonged to a larger man. He swayed from side to side as he walked, as if he was used to uneven ground. Not yet forty, Wiley guessed. In the prime of life.

"That's Roan?" Greven asked.

"Let's go," Wiley said.

As the three of them reached the entry, the chime sounded. Greven took hold of the iron grip and swung the door wide.

Roan stood on the threshold, looking from the door—a dozen feet tall, carved with crests and shields—to the man in the white coat.

“I’m Dr. Greven.” The doctor extended his hand.

Roan spotted the name badge on Greven’s chest pocket. He shook the doctor’s hand, lip snagged by a silent laugh, wondering at his circumstance. He could see the couple standing a few feet behind the doctor.

“I’m here to see Wiley.”

“Of course.” Greven motioned Roan to enter, passing him a clipboard and a pen. “I wanted to welcome you and introduce myself.”

Roan wrote on the visitors’ log.

“Feel free to enjoy the grounds while you’re here,” Greven said. “Our backyard’s a sight.” He smiled, looked at Wiley and Nadja, and retreated.

They stepped forward together.

“Recognize me?” Wiley said. He took Roan’s hand. The fingers were calloused, knobby as ginger roots. “This is Nadja.”

When Roan offered Nadja his hand, he averted his face.

“We’ve just come from the canyon,” Wiley said. “You know the rock?”

“The Kayenta Formation. I thought this was your home.”

“It is,” Wiley said.

Roan’s crow’s-feet trenched as he looked around. The entry was paneled and lit by a chandelier with faceted crystals. To one side a wide staircase rose, its banisters draped with native tapestries.

“Shall we?” Wiley motioned.

Roan laughed and shook his head.

They stepped through the lobby and down the hall. There was an oxygen tank on a metal dolly, and a nurse in a white uniform was exiting one doorway and entering another.

“You’ve been ill?” Roan said.

Wiley nodded.

“Have you been here long?”

“This is a hospice, Mr. Roan. No one is here for long.”

Roan regarded him. His lips parted, but nothing emerged. His eyes were mismatched, Wiley saw. They were both sage green, but one had an iris spoked with gold. “We’ll talk in the library.”

They proceeded down the hall, past three closed doors, into a room with books on shelves, floor to ceiling.

Nadja settled Wiley into a chair and laid the walking stick beside him. Then she removed her shawl and draped it over his thighs. Wiley kissed her cheek, and she returned the kiss. He’s watching, Wiley saw, thinking her lips were too ripe for an old man like him.

Nadja turned to depart. Wiley motioned Roan into the chair across from him.

“This is what life does.” Wiley spread his arms. “I’m proof there is no escape.” He smiled. “Thanks for coming.”

As Roan seated himself, Wiley saw him eyeing his old hands. They were liver-spotted and spindly.

“Sorry for the delay,” Roan said. “There was a quarantine in Jakarta. A diphtheria outbreak.”

Wiley waved the information away.

“I took my travel out of the deposit you sent me,” Roan said.

“Fine.” Wiley reached into his shirt pocket, feeling for the waterworn rock. The cold air had chilled it.

When he opened his hand, Roan saw it, like a thick finger and about as long. Wiley passed it to him.

The fragment was polished on one side, and it was there you could see the embedded orbs. There were five of them, each the size of a small pearl. As Roan turned it, the light caught hints of purple and red, green and gold. Wiley watched him run his thumbnail across the orbs. The polish exposed their concentric rings.

“The photos you sent,” Roan said, “don’t do it justice. But I’ll stand by my guess. It’s chalcedony. Both the orbs and the matrix look agatized. The reds are iron oxides. The plasma, the greens, are probably amphibole or chlorite.”

“I’m not interested in the chemistry,” Wiley said.

Roan read his irritation, but he didn’t react. “The orbs look like they’re sealed in the matrix.”

“They do look like that, don’t they. You’re a master of calm. Are you being cagey with me?” The last he said with some humor.

“I’ve seen rare gems before.”

“Not like these.”

“No,” Roan relented. “I told you on the phone. The orbs would be new to the trade. They’re unique. I wouldn’t have flown halfway around the world if they weren’t.”

Wiley leaned forward. “Straight talk. I’m an impatient man. You understand.”

“Maybe I will, once you’ve explained.” Roan handed the fragment back. “Now that I’m here, are you going to tell me where it came from?”

Wiley smoothed the shawl and set the rock on it. Then he reached inside his coat for a mylar envelope and removed a folded paper, dog-eared and grease-stained. It was yellow and brittle after thirty years.

“A small cove on a roadless peninsula,” he said. “On the northwestern coast of an island in the Indian Ocean.”

“You found it there?” Roan glanced at the fragment.

“It was given to me by a friend. I lived on the island.”

Roan was silent, waiting.

“I worked for a local collective. We exported raffia and cotton. My friend made his living the way you do. He dug things out of the earth.”

Wiley caught Roan’s eye and held it. “My friend—Craag was his name—had a trunkful of rocks like this. He found the vein they came from. But he died before he could mine it.” He offered Roan the folded paper. Roan took it. “The samples Craag collected— They vanished. All but this one.”

“Stolen?” Roan unfolded the paper.

“There was a coup,” Wiley explained. “They burnt the capitol and bombed the bridges. The new regime took everything Craag had. The *vazahas*—strangers—had to leave. That was thirty years ago. I never returned.”

“Thirty years?” Roan lay the map on his thighs.

The land was tan colored, and the sea was blue. A peninsula jutted out, and its coastline had a divot with an arrow pointing to it.

“Vato Cove,” Wiley said.

“You’ve been there?”

“No.” Wiley shook his head.

“You have a claim?”

“There’s no time for that. The government’s a mess. A claim could take months, and I’m not sure we’d get one.”

“Is the country stable?”

“A strongman’s in power, but there are riots in the capital and soldiers with machine guns on every corner. The orbs can’t go through customs. That means some kind of charter.”

“The operation would be in secret,” Roan said, “and illegal.”

Wiley nodded.

Roan looked around the room. The shelves had been treated recently, and the terpene odor was thick.

“Mining,” Roan said, “takes a team, equipment, provisions, vehicles. It’s hard to do that on the sly.” His brows lifted. “I’m sorry. If we’d had this discussion earlier, I wouldn’t have come.” He refolded the map.

“You’re the right man for this,” Wiley insisted.

“You’re mistaken.” Roan was handing the map back.

Wiley refused to take it. “You know gems. You’ve worked at the ocean’s edge. And you do things your way.”

Roan cocked his head.

“That’s what they say,” Wiley went on. “A gambler. A hot-

shot. He crashed a plane to be first in Mongolia. He fought pirates getting opals out of Peru.”

Roan laughed. “Look—your prospect isn’t promising. It’s based on hearsay thirty years old. Even if the trail was fresh, and you had a claim and a plan that made sense, I’d be a bad choice. I’ve never been to that part of the world.” He came forward in his chair. “I’ve got a job in Brazil that will take my summer. Maybe in August—”

“I’ll be dead by then.”

Roan made no reply.

Wiley met his gaze. The younger man floundered in the silence.

“Your time commitment would be brief,” Wiley said. “Find the orbs, bring them back; be available until you’re no longer needed, or until I’ve passed.”

“A venture like this isn’t cheap.”

“Whatever it costs,” Wiley said, “it’s worth it to me.” He lifted the fragment. “What price would you put on a river of them?”

“I’m no fool for treasure,” Roan said.

“It’s a treasure like none on earth. There are five orbs in that fragment. I’ve seen pieces with hundreds, densely packed.”

“How many do you—”

“Thousands, millions,” Wiley’s hand flew open. “More than you can imagine.”

“You’ve never seen them.”

“The man who discovered them did.”

“Mining the surf line’s a nightmare,” Roan exhaled. “Slow, hard, dangerous.”

Wiley let the quiet settle around them.

Finally Roan cleared his throat. “When a job is this speculative—”

“You can keep the rocks,” Wiley said. “Every orb you find.”

Roan stared at him.

“They’ll be yours when I’m dead,” Wiley told him. “I’ll put it in my will. Whatever you bring back, I’ll leave to you.”

Roan was speechless, utterly confused.

“That’s a fair reward for finding them at my expense. Don’t you think?”

Roan nodded slowly. “If there are as many as you say. They’d make a big splash in the gem markets. But— If you’re going to—” He was trying to soften his words. “If you’re going to die. And you’re offering to leave the orbs to me— Why are you so determined to find them?”

“I want you on a plane in forty-eight hours,” Wiley said.

Roan’s eyes narrowed. He’s wondering, Wiley thought, if I’m in my right mind.

“Forget about everything else,” Wiley said. “This is your purpose. Just this.”

“Who lives there? What’s the language?”

“A local tongue.”

“Any English?”

“They do better with French. You worked in Haiti.”

“I did,” Roan said.

“With luck, you’ll beat the monsoon.” Wiley felt a surge of energy. He was still a man of passion and action; his mind was sharp, and his eyes were clear. Surely Roan saw that. The sentence of death was upon him, but the noose hadn’t yet tightened around his neck.

Roan shook his head. “Why?” he asked again.

“Those orbs,” Wiley looked at the fragment, “are drops that fell from God’s fingertips.”



Wiley’s room was on the ground level. The headboard of his bed was against the interior wall, and the window gave a sweeping view of the cliff and the river. The floor was covered with pile carpet, ivory colored and soft underfoot. Pine sprigs and cones lay on the dresser and nightstand, scenting the air. On the chair by the bed was a quilt woven with gold thread.

Nadja helped him remove his coat. Then she braced his arm as he eased himself onto the bed. When his back was against the pillows, she unlaced his shoes.

“Don’t worry,” she said.

“Just when I think, ‘He’s with me,’ I lose him. He’s a doubting man.”

“Your intensity frightens him.” Nadja’s voice was soft, but she spoke with British precision, every word fully formed.

Wiley shook his head. “He distrusts me, but it’s more than that. He’s at odds with life. He’s divorced himself. It’s strange,

but— If I'd met him when I was younger, I might have been drawn to him. And he to me.”

“You're not as similar as you think,” Nadja said. “You've been connected to people all your life. Roan is alone. And he isn't comfortable with women.”

Wiley regarded her. “He couldn't look you in the eye.”

Nadja retrieved a remote control and clicked it. A motor hummed and the bed rose, halting at the level of her waist.

“I wanted to give him the whole story,” Wiley said, “but I didn't.”

“That's probably best.”

“What are you doing?”

“Combing your hair with my fingers,” Nadja said.

“I'm taking a nap. Why do you care?”

“I want you to look good in your dreams,” she laughed. “It's wonderful hair, thick and healthy—”

He caught her hand and kissed it. “All those years—”

“Let's not—”

“I had my strength,” he said, “and so much time. I would have found them.”

“Yes. You would have.”

For a moment he was back in the warehouse, staring at the packing trunk. Had he closed the lid before the emergency van arrived? He had returned for the orbs after Craag's body was gone. Hadn't he? He remembered standing in the road by the warehouse the following night, nerving himself to go in. He could have hauled the trunk away. No one knew it existed, except the boy who'd discovered the orbs. The nameless boy.

Five years later, every shack on that road had been pulled down. Someone had taken the trunk. But who? Where was it now? In a thief's closet? In an army bunker or a ministry basement? Did they have any idea what the orbs were?

"You're tormenting yourself," Nadja guessed.

"It would have been so easy."

"You were smart," Nadja said. "You got out alive."

"And then I let three decades pass. Not so smart."

There was sufferance in Nadja's eyes, but he couldn't share it. "I could have walked that shore. Surprised them where they live. I could have lifted them out of the earth with my own hands."

"I don't think you should worry about Roan," Nadja said. "I saw the way he looked at that rock. I know that look."

They filled the silence with their separate thoughts.

Wiley's comfort came from the orbs, his only hope. They'd been his only hope since that day in the clinic. It was etched in his mind—the naked walls, the sterile rooms and echoing halls. After days of scans and biopsies, they received the diagnosis together. Nadja held his hand while the oncologist delivered the blow. That same night, Wiley dreamt that it was he who the orbs had carried away; it was his life they grieved and his rapture they sought.

"They were with me last night," he said. "The orbs lifted me. The joy, the bliss—I could feel it inside me. There was light pouring out of my eyes."

Nadja stroked his brow.

“I was like some holy creature,” he said. “A martyr or a saint. I was an angel who’d walked the earth, and the creator was taking me back. I had a future that didn’t depend on my failing body. To the orbs, I was still precious.”

“You’re still precious to me,” she said.

“Craag was there, below me, seeing me off. ‘Your time on earth has ended,’ he said. ‘Your life with them is beginning.’”

“Shall I open the window?” Nadja asked.

“Sure.”

His ears followed her. The settle of her shoes, the *whisk* of her skirt, the *clink* of New Delhi bangles on her wrists. She was music to him, she was rhythm and life. As the window opened, a towhee called from the slope below the orchard.

“You know what Dr. Greven told me?” Nadja stepped back to the bed. “They’re going to have fireworks in the canyon. They launch them from the river.”

“When is this?”

“July fourth, you dunce.” Nadja tapped his head with her finger.

Wiley grasped her wrist and pulled, gently.

She sank onto the bed beside him.

“Independence Day,” he said softly, looking into her eyes. Tears welled where her lashes met.

“Please,” she whispered. “Don’t say that.”



Twenty minutes later, Nadja was seated in the chair by the bed, turning a page of the book in her lap.

Wiley was on his side beneath the covers, sleeping, breathing peacefully.

Dreaming of the orbs.

They were in another dimension—their home, their native space. An ethereal place, a fluid medium as translucent as they were.

Not a mob of them. Just a few. Pale and drifting. Perfectly round.

He had never seen them like this before.

They had a purple tint, a different hue than they did on earth.

The movements of each seemed random at first. But as you observed them, you quickly perceived they weren't independent. They had an affinity for each other. Each was faithful to its own impulse, but as they drifted, they remained together.

As on earth, they were soft. Deformable, like sea jellies. When they touched each other, they wobbled and clung. The orbs had an energy, a unity and a purpose that was impossible for a human to comprehend. Even at close quarters.

They were mustering their energy for departure, Wiley thought. Or huddling, ticking to each other, making plans for him. Or . . . just floating in sleep, dreaming about him the way he dreamt about them.



“It’s the time,” Wiley said. “Time makes waiting impossible.”

He was sitting up in bed, staring through the window at the immovable cliff. Nadja knelt on the bed beside him, a bowl of sudsy water in one hand, a razor in the other. “Hold still. I don’t want to nick you.”

“If I was there with him—”

“But you aren’t.” Nadja ran the razor down his cheek.

“I know—I have to trust him. But I can’t help worrying about the problems he’s having. And I don’t think I’m hearing the half of it.”

The day of his first meeting with Roan had been a long one. After Wiley’s nap, the two men talked into the night. Nadja had been right about Roan, and in the late hours, the lure of the orbs prevailed. They’d signed the contract Wiley had ready.

They began making arrangements the following morning, and before the sun set, Roan was airborne to Africa. He'd reached the island under cover of darkness on a prop plane from Cape Town. In the coastal city of Jangaville, Roan called and Wiley shared his advice and cautions. Roan managed to find a foreman, purchase supplies, hire a team and rent two boats without raising suspicions. They left the port before dawn, unobserved by the authorities, and reached the Cove without any mishaps. After they'd set up their camp, they began digging pits.

Roan had a satellite phone, and they spoke daily, using a video link so Wiley could see what was going on. The eight black men dug, while Imran, the foreman, watched. They worked when the tide was low, at midday and in the middle of the night, shoveling sand and earth from the pits, abandoning them when the tide swept in. There was no mistake—they were in Vato Cove. But a week passed without any sign of the vein.

Then the conflicts over the sat phone began. Wiley had asked Roan to call every day, and at the outset he'd honored the request. But at the end of the second week, he resisted.

"My batteries are only good for three days," Roan said. "To recharge them, I have to board the cruiser. It takes a couple of hours and burns my gas."

"You're all I have," Wiley said.

"It's a waste of time. There's nothing to report."

Wiley could see the blue water behind him, he could hear the hiss of the surf. Over Roan's shoulder, a black man

straightened and unloaded a shovelful of sand onto the beach.

“Be patient,” Roan said, and he disconnected.

Roan’s daily calls ceased, so Wiley made them himself. Sometimes Roan picked up, and sometimes he didn’t. At the end of the third week, the two had it out.

“Do you want your orbs or don’t you?” Roan said.

“Please. Humor me. I want to know—”

“One of the men found a floater,” Roan said. “Badly weathered, the size of a dinner plate. A few orbs were visible. We’re in the right place.”

“How is Imran doing?” Wiley asked.

Roan sighed and mopped the rain from his brow.

In their first calls, Roan talked about how helpful the foreman was, but more recently he’d said nothing. When Wiley pressed him, he called Imran “a difficult character.”

Roan was shaking his head. “I have to go.”

And the line went dead.

After that, Wiley’s calls went unanswered. Nadja advised him to stop, and he did. But the silence fed his fears.

“Let him do things his way,” she said. “He’ll call when there’s news.”

“Maybe tonight.”

“Maybe tonight,” she nodded.

The call came nine days later.



“We found it,” Roan said, speaking loudly over the rain and the chirping frogs.

Wiley stared at the screen, waiting, speechless.

Roan’s hair was wet and matted, his jaw unshaven. His brow dipped, then his hand appeared, holding an oblong rock the size of a baguette. As he turned it, orbs came into view. Scores of them, pearly and packed closely together.

“Good god,” Wiley sighed.

Nadja gripped his arm. They were sitting shoulder to shoulder in the hospice dining room, with the screen on the table before them.

“This came from the water’s edge,” Roan said. “The vein is headed inland. All we have to do is follow it. We’ll give it everything we can at low tide. Once we’re higher on the beach, we may be able to run a full shift in daylight.”

“How much have you mined?” Wiley asked.

“This is it, right now. There will be more the next time I call. I can’t speak for the quality of the material. I’ll know better once we’ve removed a few hundred pounds.”

“How large do you think the vein is?” Wiley eyed the image of himself as he spoke. His blue eyes still had youth in them.

“No idea.”

“Can you show me?” Wiley said. “I’d like to see it.”

“Most of the vein’s still buried. We have to trench around it.”

“I wish I was there.”

“No you don’t,” Roan muttered.

As Wiley watched, a scowl twisted Roan's mouth. This wasn't a man who'd just found a treasure.

"You look tired," Nadja said.

Roan nodded. "I could use some sleep. The rain won't let up. And the frogs—" His voice sank into the chirping throng. The sound was constant, like bad interference.

"—delirious," Roan's voice resurfaced. He swore and turned, avoiding the sat phone camera.

Something's wrong, Wiley thought, wrong with his words, wrong with his eyes.

"You're not on the beach," he said, raising his voice. There were trees behind Roan, and the leaves were dripping.

"I'm on the hill above, in the forest."

"How's your team?"

"Everything's fine."

"Tell me the truth," Wiley said.

Roan faced the camera. "Imran's gone."

"Where did he go?"

"Back to Jangaville, I suppose. He took the inflatable."

"Why?"

"Nonsense. Crazy fears. I'll sort it out."

Wiley drew closer to the screen. "I thought Imran was the only one who spoke French. How will you talk to them?"

"I said," Roan glared, "I'll sort it out."

The leaves behind Roan were moving. Wiley saw eyes, ghostly eyes, wide and watching. Lemurs, black and rust-colored, were descending the trees.

"I'll call you when I know more," Roan said.

“The monsoon’s coming,” Wiley warned.
But Roan had already disconnected.



They called Roan the next evening, and two days after that, but he didn’t pick up. Wiley had lots of questions—they worried his waking hours and surfaced in sleep. He shared them with Nadja. He wanted to see the vein where it lay, he wanted to know its length and depth. That rocky baguette—He wanted to examine it closely. He wanted to see the mating surfaces, the spot where it had come loose. Had the orbs shown any signs of life? Roan had said nothing about that. What had he seen? And the men doing the digging— Did they know or suspect? They were there in the Cove, and he was ten thousand miles away.

Nadja did her best to calm him. They kept to their morning ritual, descending the slope behind the hospice, taking the trail below the cliff till they reached the Old Y. Two weeks passed without a word from Roan, and the walk grew harder. Wiley’s legs were weakening. They quivered with every step he took. One morning they returned to find that they’d missed Roan’s call. Wiley was upset and regretful.

They were able to connect with him that night, and the report seemed promising. He’d forged some kind of relationship with the oldest native, a man named Henri. Using props, sign language and a few words, the two were communicating.

With Henri's help, the dig was progressing. They were running two shifts. The men were strong, doing good work.

In four days and nights, Roan said, they had found the vein's limits. When it was fully exposed, the trench was a dozen feet wide and the depth of three men. They'd been taking rock for ten days now, using hammers and spikes. With every incoming tide, the sea brought sand back into the trench, but they were felling trees to build a dam.

When the call ended, Wiley was shaking. With Nadja beside him, they paced the vacant hall, talking, gazing through windows, lost in hopes and speculations. Wiley couldn't sleep that night, and the next morning his exhaustion caused them to put off their accustomed walk till after lunch.

His cane wasn't enough. He needed her sure arms every step of the way. As they approached the Old Y, the trail narrowed, winding sharply around the fallen rocks. As slowly as they went, Wiley's legs were still unsteady. His stick wobbled and his feet crawled. When they reached the Y, he couldn't get over the roots, even with Nadja's help. She put her hands on the tree and spoke the words while Wiley stood at the trail's end, silent. He couldn't stop himself—he was thinking of Roan, the vein and the Cove.

On the return, Wiley felt a new distance between them. Nadja said nothing, drawn into herself. She seemed unaware of the trouble her pace was causing. "Please, slow down," he said. And then, humiliated by his frailty, he put the lash to himself. It was that—the humiliation, the distraction, the mental gap that had opened between them—

As they rounded a bend, Wiley's ankle buckled. He fell onto his hip, groaning, breathless, cursing his body. Nadja tried to raise him, but his legs wouldn't take his weight. She did what she could to make him comfortable and ran for help.

That was the end of their walks to the Old Y.

When Wiley woke the next morning, his legs were so weak, he needed Nadja's help to get out of bed.



"Here's a good-looking one," Roan said. The camera eye was circling a small boulder. "Orbs on every side." His hand appeared on the rock, giving it scale, then drew back, directing Wiley's attention to the size of the pile. The speaker popped, the screen image froze, and when it returned, the pile was gone. Wiley could hear the waves crashing.

"He's done it," Nadja whispered. She lay on the bed beside him, arm at his back, holding him up. Roan had woken them. In the window at the screen's corner, Wiley saw himself, hair mussed, cheeks stubbled.

"We've started to cull them," Roan said, stepping to another pile. "These are lower quality. Poorly silicified. In some, no orbs are visible." Drops were falling now, and they dotted the rocks.

"How much have you taken?" Wiley asked.

"A ton and a half. Gem grade, maybe six hundred pounds."

The screen image stuttered as he moved.

“How much of the vein?”

“Twenty percent, I’d guess.” Roan turned his camera eye, filling the screen with his face. “How are you doing?”

“I’m confined to the building now,” Wiley said. Roan couldn’t see the weight he’d lost, but his gaunt features were probably enough. His cheeks had hollowed. His lips had thinned and his jaw had shrunk. “I stumbled on the canyon trail.”

“It was my fault,” Nadja said. “We were rushing.”

Their walks to the Old Y were over, and so were their strolls around the hospice—visits to the sun room or the fireplace, time in the library, discussions with Greven and the other residents. Wiley’s life revolved around the orbs in the Cove.

“I’m ready to come back,” Roan said.

Wiley searched the younger man’s face. He looked worn, distracted. His lips lagged, and his gaze wandered.

“The monsoon’s a deluge,” Roan said. “The waves are too big. The dam can’t handle them. The men—” He took a breath. “Their lives are at risk. We’ve got a good load.”

Roan’s image flexed. The speaker sputtered. Wiley stared at the screen. What was it? he wondered. More than Roan’s weariness, more than the fear of physical harm. Wiley could sense the presence of something deeper, something arcane.

Roan’s image stabilized. Was it rain that beaded his features, or sweat? Was he in some kind of fever? Roan raised his hand to wipe his face. It was brown with grime. His sage

eyes lurched closer. The iris spoked with gold seemed to flash.

“I’m not sure how long I can hold this together,” Roan said. “I’m—”

“No.” Wiley came forward, making his eyes as large as Roan’s. “I want it all.”

Nadja grasped his shoulder.

Roan’s face drew back. The next moment, it smeared. Had rain fallen on his camera eye? Roan’s mouth distorted. His brow, his temple, his eyes—were swimming. Wiley could see his neck and shoulders, and the front of his chest. A spot of scarlet, the size of an orange— Blood was seeping through Roan’s shirt.

“What is that?” Wiley said.

There was no reply.

Then the screen went dark. The call had ended.



Pushing Roan to stay changed things. Wiley worried about what he’d done. The dangers in the Cove— How threatened was he? Nadja was agitated too. They agreed that Wiley’s craving for a blissful end didn’t justify endangering others’ lives.

He left his bed infrequently now, and only with Nadja’s help. His concerns for Roan troubled him in the daylight hours, and at night they entered his dreams. In one, Roan was feverish, out of his head. He knelt before Wiley, grimy

and shivering, sobbing and begging to come back to the States. But returning wouldn't help him now. He had crossed sanity's borderline.

Wiley woke, shaken. He didn't share the dream with Nadja. The next day, thankfully, Roan called again. There was no mention of returning. Pride sealed his lips, Wiley saw. And the strange spot of blood— Roan dismissed it. "An accident," he said, and he wouldn't say more.

Despite that, Wiley's ominous dreams continued.

Roan was on the rim of the trench, bossing. The natives halted and faced him as one, then they mounted the rim, raised their arms and fell on him together, attacking him with picks and spikes. Days had passed. The monsoon still raged, but the Cove was deserted. The trench was flooded now, and Roan's dismembered parts were floating in it. The natives had taken the rocks, returned in a boat to Jangaville and sold them all for a song.

Along with the fear for Roan's safety, the dream revealed another—that his obsession might be self-defeating. His desire to have all the orbs might cost him the chance to have any.

A week of fitful sleep, then a nightmare again. He dreamt that Nadja insisted on visiting the Old Y, despite his incapacity. They left the hospice in the dead of night, and somehow he made it down the slope without her help. She was a dozen yards ahead of him. Wiley hobbled around the bends on his own, falling and struggling back to his feet. Finally the end of the trail appeared. The natives were there, and the Old Y

was no longer standing. The black men had chopped it down. They were crouched around a raging fire made of the tree's trunk and boughs. Roan was in the flames. They were roasting his body like a pig on a spit.



It was past midnight. The light on Wiley's dresser was lit. He was awake, sitting up in bed. He was hungry, and Nadja had gone to the kitchen to find him something to eat. Two weeks had passed since Roan's last call, and Wiley was expecting another soon. Maybe that night. The video screen and the dialer lay on the bed by his leg.

He picked up the dialer, then set it back down.

The calamities were imagined, he thought. Roan was fine. He had news, important news.

I should wait for Nadja, Wiley thought.

He stared at the dialer for a long moment. Then he grabbed it and made the call.

It rang once, twice, a third time— Roan didn't pick up.

I was wrong, Wiley thought. Not tonight. He put his thumb on the dialer to disconnect.

A snapping sound, then a buzz and the screen lit up.

An image appeared, like eels writhing in mud. It jittered and flashed, then slowly the image resolved. Wiley saw a black man's face. An old man, a man his age. His face was wet and dripping. His lips were thick, split and scabbed, and his nose

was large. The man wore a ball cap, and his gray goatee was braided in strands that hung from his chin.

“Salama!” the man said, peering at Wiley.

“Put Roan on. Roan. Roan—”

Rain pelted against the black face with a noise like raked gravel. The image slid sideways, the old man vanished. Wiley saw a pant leg, a bare foot and a stretch of sand. Then the face loomed back, filling the screen, eyes narrow. “Dyeen man?” the black lips said.

“Roan. I want to talk to Roan.”

The old face nodded. “Dyeen man.”

A strange sound reached Wiley’s ears. Rhythmic, forceful, like water churning. A throng of voices, rich with emotion. Chanting. The old man was turning, and the image turned with him.

Wiley was looking down from a prominence. The piles of orb rock came into view. Then he saw the trench and the men down in it. They were chopping with picks, swinging long-handled hammers. The wind whipped past, rain lashing their bodies, arms and chests and backs gleaming, stripped to the waist. Black, all black. All but one.

Roan’s pale body moved with the rest, hammer lifting and powering down, expression bitter, his eyes raging, unintelligible grunts and bellows emerging from his lips. Beyond the far rim, Wiley saw the green walls, impossibly high, curling and crashing, threatening to flood the trench and drown the men.

“Fish eyes,” a voice barked.

Wiley saw the old man’s face rotate back into view. The

wind whipped his braided beard, and his scabbed lips smiled. “Fish eyes,” he said, as if announcing some kind of celebration.

All at once, a torrent of rain poured down. The sky had opened up, and the old man was drowned. As Wiley watched, the image bobbed. Then it jarred abruptly. The connection broke, and the screen went blank. Only a mindless hissing remained.

The doorknob turned, and Nadja stepped into the room with a tray in her hand.

“What is it?” she said, seeing his bewildered expression.

Wiley shook his head, unable to speak.

After that, there were no more calls.



Wiley was climbing out of the trench with the others as the monsoon roared. Naked head to foot, they turned as one, waiting for Roan’s directions. The deluge was heavy and warm.

Roan left the rim last. He shouted and waved his arm. Wiley dropped his spike, and all the men’s digging tools fell to the ground. Roan faced Wiley, looking into his eyes with those sage beacons.

“The digging is done,” he said.

Roan spoke with command, and he spoke the truth. The trench was an empty grave. “She awaits us,” Roan said.

He motioned to the piles of orb rock that studded the hillocks.

She. Was it *she* then? That presence he craved. That holy mate.

Roan was leading, and they were following. They all knew Wiley's desire. Their hearts felt it, as if it was their own. And as they drew near, the piles smoothed or grew angular. One was a knee, one the wing of a hip or a thrust-back shoulder. An arm shifted. The head turned.

The random heaps were slipping together, and the reclining whole had structure and beauty. A woman, a maiden. The black men were chanting, and Wiley was too. The one they'd sought—the Maiden of the Orbs. She'd been waiting, ready but patient, and as they approached, she drew her legs in and rose.

Was the earth shrinking, or had Wiley grown?

The Maiden stood beside him now, shorter than he, but with a metal tub on her head. She was statuesque, barefoot, with a patterned wrap around her. She stepped forward, both hands free, tub perfectly balanced, hips shifting in time to the native voices. She had brown eyes, black skin and gleaming teeth, and her gait was buoyant, jaunty. An island woman, like any you'd see on the street or in an open-air market. But with a bounty that set her apart from every creature on earth.

Roan was beside him. As they followed the Maiden, Roan leaned closer, chanting louder, encouraging him. Wiley raised his voice, drawing from his heart, triumphant, exulting. He could see Roan's wound now, crusted and seeping, a hole the size of an orange. Around them, the natives were stumbling through the mud, still joined to the chanting. There was silver

light—from the stars, from a smear of moon—and it lit naked backs and limbs, and the Maiden in the midst.

Frogs hopped around her feet. Behind them, rivers of frogs were descending, pouring through the forests and over the hills. The black princess, the bearer of impossible gems, a gift rarely delivered, an answer to yearning so rarely fulfilled.

It was their mission to escort her across the deep.

As they reached the surf, tiny bulbed fingers gripped the rim of her tub, and a frog's head poked above it. Then the Maiden began to rise. She was floating over the curling waves, and the men were floating with her.

Orbs lifted from her tub, glittering, pulsing, concentered like eyes.

“Fish eyes,” a man rasped in Wiley's ear.

It was Henri, the old native with the big nose and the braided goatee.

The tub was a pot of boiling fish, and their eyes rose with the steam. They turned in the air, gazing at Roan and Henri and the other men. And then Wiley felt them looking at him. Their concentered rings pulsed—

They peered into his soul. They knew who he was.

The orbs were for him.

Was Roan still with him? Or Henri or the men?

He was alone now with the Maiden and the rising orbs. Lifted invisibly, as if they were weightless, the eyes were dispersing on every side. They were borne away through the wind and the rain, and Wiley went with them.