

3. PROBABILITIES, POSSIBILITIES, AND THEORIES

Darwin pulled himself away from the window and tried the door. It was definitely locked. He banged and kicked at it, rattling the door in its frame. “Let me out! Let me see my dad.”

For a while, the two men who carried him up and then stood guard just outside his door ignored him, until one of them finally broke, kicking the door so hard it almost buckled. Darwin jerked away and tripped over his own feet, landing on his back and sending more pain through his head.

He picked himself off the floor and moved to a second door in the side wall. This one opened easily and he walked into an executive washroom. No water came from the taps when he tried, and the toilet bowl was empty and dry. He left, leaving the door open behind him, and retreated to the window, lowering himself into a fancy mesh-backed chair, the kind all the high-tech firms brag about having, and swiveling to look out the floor-to-ceiling window. The sun had started to move behind the Quantum Labs building, casting a shadow across the parking lot.

The strangeness of what had happened sank its claws deeper in him. What he saw told him he was still in the Quantum Labs building, still at his dad’s work, but everything else told him the opposite. It felt and smelled different. The darkened hallway lights. The empty office. The lack of any movement on what should have been a busy expressway. By the shadows outside, it was past lunchtime, and he was already mentally and physically exhausted.

The moment he let the exhaustion take control he started to vibrate again. He closed his eyes, trying to control his ragged breathing. There was no one in the lab that he recognized, and he knew almost everyone working on the QPS project. Where was his dad? Darwin couldn’t see him leaving his son behind, no matter how desperate the work was. He wouldn’t leave his project either, especially to strangers. Not one that he had worked so hard on, that had done everything this one had. But . . . when he had yelled about the broken window, there had been no response. What if his dad hadn’t seen anything? What if all of what was happening was in his head?

He took his phone out of his pocket with an unsteady hand. There was only one contact in it, his dad’s. He unlocked the device and dialed the number. Nothing happened. He tried again before realizing there was no signal. What the hell was going on? There was always service here.

The pain in his head had turned into a dull throb, culminating in the bump. He tried the door again, quietly turning the knob, hoping the two men outside wouldn’t hear what he was doing. It was still locked. He slid down the wall beside the door and plugged his ear buds into his ears, old habits returning as if they had never left. They hadn’t, really. As the sounds of B.B. King slid into his consciousness, he could feel some of the tension ease from his body. Still, underneath the music, the faint buzzing kept on. He kept going over what was happening, trying to boil it down to the facts he knew, that he could verify. The only ones he had were what had happened to him directly.

As soon as Garth had started the QPS, his headache kicked in and the buzzing noise had started. That tied the episodes he’d been having directly back to the QPS. But how was that possible? And what did the episodes mean? The last one, the one in the lab, had been different than the rest. Different enough for his dad to take off somewhere and leave him behind?

None of it made sense. He was going crazy trying to figure out what the hell was going on. If he wasn't there already.

By the time his music stopped, he still hadn't figured anything out. It was as if the world had turned upside down and inside out, and he was the only one that had made it through.

He checked for a signal again before turning the phone off. In the distance, he could see a cell tower. Close enough that he should have gotten at least three bars, if not more. He turned his phone on again to double check. Maybe it just needed a reset. It didn't work, still showing no service. None of this was making sense.

He didn't know how long he sat there, watching the shadows creep across the boulevard and past the trees. Eventually, he got up and moved to the mesh-backed chair, his back stiff from leaning against the wall for so long. Every time he tried to figure out what was going on, he fell deeper and deeper into a funk. He did notice what it was about the view outside that bothered him so much, more than the lack of cars or people. Everything looked wild. Untamed. The once-manicured lawn surrounding the parking lot was tall and uncut. It had encroached into the parking space, leaving an uneven edge of dirt and weeds on the concrete. In places, he could still see the sharp edge of the curb through the green. Even the expressway wasn't free of the encroachment. Trees and grasses had taken hold in the small cracks, clinging to life in the harsh environment, and grown outward from there. And he was pretty sure there were more trees growing out of the roof of the office building across the gray expanse. Even some of its windows looked broken and empty. It was as if everyone had given up.

The sound of the lock sliding open behind him wrenched him from his near catatonic state. He heard the door open and shut softly. When the lock thunked home again, he turned in his chair and silently watched a man walk toward him.

“Hi, Darwin. I'm here to look at the cut on your head.”

The man's voice was deep and strong, the complete opposite to the tall and skinny frame it came from. He wasn't carrying anything. Darwin wasn't sure what he expected, but at the very least one of those white first aid boxes you could find in any office building.

He reached for his head, stopping his hand before it touched. It had been so long, he'd almost forgotten about it already. He forced himself to fight his natural desire to stay silent around people he didn't know. “What am I doing here? Where's my dad?”

The man sat on the edge of the desk, looking at Darwin with a grin on his face. “I'd say you're sitting in a chair and staring out the window. I can't be sure that's what you were doing before I came in here, but it fits the probability curve.”

Darwin felt his blood start to boil. Who the hell did this guy think he was, making jokes when he had been locked in this room most of the day?

“That's not what I mean.” His voice rose and he took a deep breath to get it back under control. “Why am I here? Why is the door locked? Who are you people? Where is my dad? What's going

on outside? Where is everyone?" As the questions tumbled from his mouth, his voice rose again. "I want answers."

The smile left the man's face. "Whoa, one question at a time. I'm not allowed to answer everything, but I'll do what I can."

"Not allowed?"

"Rebecca hasn't given permission."

"Who's Rebecca?"

"Another question? A wise man once told me you learn more by listening than by talking."

Darwin had his mouth open to ask another question, and caught himself, quickly closing it, no longer able to keep talking to a stranger. He leaned back in the chair, creating a wider gap between them. Who did this guy think he was, trying to tell him what to do? It was easy to bite down on the retort his brain had created. Instead of talking, he took the opportunity to study the man. The fact that he was tall and skinny was obvious, as was the mop of brown hair that fell over his face, but it was his eyes that caught Darwin's attention. They were a brilliant blue and seemed to hold a twinkle, as though he was just on the verge of telling a joke.

The silence in the room thickened as they stared at each other.

"My name is Michael." He paused as if expecting some response, and smiled when none came. "To answer some of your questions, I have no idea how you got here. It is beyond anything we've seen before. As for where you are, you should know. You're in the old Quantum Labs building, sitting in your father's chair."

Darwin's gaze swept around the office space. What the hell was this guy talking about? "This isn't Dad's office. His is on the main floor, near the back of the building. He always says he gets more work done if he's far away from his bosses."

Michael stood and tilted Darwin's cut toward the light. Darwin jerked back at the touch before deciding to hold still.

"Hmm." Michael's fingers probed around the bump and Darwin winced. "Hold still. The cut isn't bad. You've got a bit of a goose egg, but time will take care of that."

Darwin grabbed Michael's wrist and pulled his hand away. "What do you mean *hmm*? What's going on around here? Why haven't I seen anyone I recognize?"

Michael twisted out of Darwin's loose grip and crouched down so they were at the same height. His voice lowered to barely a whisper and the smile in his eyes turned to concern. "I can't answer your questions now. I simply don't have the information, and they may be listening." He threw a glance over his shoulder to the closed door. "Look, just don't trust them. The Qabal deal in shadows and deceit and lies. Do. Not. Trust. Them."

The last words were spoken through clenched teeth with a ferocity that took Darwin by surprise. He leaned forward to ask another question when the sound of someone at the door made Michael stand up, the smile coming back to his face.

“Who are you?” asked Darwin.

Michael pulled a small bottle of water and gauze from his pocket. So far, the only first aid equipment Darwin had seen. He wet the gauze and placed it on Darwin’s forehead, squeezing water onto the dried blood. He didn’t answer the question. The door opened and one of the men who had brought Darwin upstairs walked in.

“How long does it take to heal a cut?” the man asked.

Michael faced the man and a hard edge entered his voice. “When I’m done, I’ll let you know.”

“Well, make it quick.” The man stood in the doorway watching Michael clean up the blood.

“Hold still now, Darwin. I’ll just close the cut. The bump will be gone in a couple of days, and there won’t be any bruising.” Michael dropped his hands and his eyes lost their focus.

Darwin felt a sudden tingle around the wound. It stopped as quickly as it started.

“Here are a couple of pills. They’ll help with the headache. I had to fight to get those for you, they’re getting harder to find.”

Darwin took the pills and dry swallowed them.

Michael threw the wet gauze, now pink with Darwin’s blood, into the garbage can beside the desk and put the water back into the pocket of his blue anti-static jacket. Both men left the room without saying another word. Darwin was alone again. In the silence, he heard the lock drive home.

He touched his forehead and felt only the bump. The cut seemed to have disappeared. He pulled his hand away and stood, leaning into the window hoping to find his reflection in the glass. Outside, the shadows deepened. He thought he saw a flicker of blue at the edge of the parking lot, but when he looked at it directly it disappeared.

He raised his fingers to the cut again. Where had it gone?