

PROLOGUE

As the full moon rises above the eastern horizon, Tawaka begins his ascent up the forested slope of the mountain. The light from the stars above is blocked by a thick canopy of leaves. He travels in total darkness, navigating from memory alone, feeling with his hands and feet for familiar landmarks. The physical demands on his aging body are considerable and more difficult to ignore each time he makes the journey. A younger person would be more capable, but this is a duty which falls to him, and him alone. The responsibility has been passed down from father to son for several generations, maybe hundreds of generations and thousands of years, for all he knows. When the day comes that he can no longer climb the mountain, or if he should die, hopefully his son will be ready to take his place, so the tradition can continue. The future of the tribe is dependent on the Chamala plant and the successful harvest of its fruit.

Halfway up the slope the musky odor of fungi and bat guano wafts from the opening in the side of the mountain leading into the hidden cave. The opening is barely three feet in width and covered by thorny vines. He slides on his belly through the opening, then crawls on hands and knees to reach the central chamber, a cavernous room where the ceiling rises to a height of twelve feet. It is so dark he can't see his hand in front of his face, but that will change the moment the moon is positioned at the perigee of its orbit, the point when it is closest to the earth. He rests his tired body and lets his mind drift back to the first time he came here, when he was just a boy and his father led him up the steep slope of the mountain to the mouth of the cave.

"I'm afraid," Tawaka said to his father, when he was told to crawl on his belly through the small opening.

"I was afraid the first time, too," his father, Kiniki admitted. "But, something wondrous is about to occur."

A low crackling noise coming from somewhere in the chamber, draws Tawaka out of his reverie and back to the present. A subtle change is taking place. The air grows warmer. A shaft of moonlight enters through a fissure in the chamber's ceiling. In the center of its beam the single stalk of a Chamala plant grows out of a crevice in the cave floor and stretches upward until it is as tall as he. At its tip is a large teardrop-shaped bud. The petals forming its outer shell begin to expand and separate. A glow emanates from the center,

increasing in intensity as the bloom opens. Then, another stalk appears beside the first, then another, and another after that, until there is a total of eight stalks with a bloom apiece. The flowers unfurl and in the center of each is a cluster of pea-sized luminescent berries. He picks the berries and carefully places them in a special pouch he's brought with him for this purpose. The glow from the flowers fades as the moon moves away. The Chamala plants wither and sink to the cave floor. His task completed, he crawls from the cave, retraces his path down the mountain and returns to the village where he stashes the Chamala berries in his hut.

In the morning, the three-day celebration of the successful harvest will begin. Every man, woman and child in the village will participate. The tribe's elders will recount the many battles fought by their ancestors, all of which ended in victory for the tribe, due in no small part to the mystical power of the berry. The celebration culminates with the cutting of a few berries into tiny pieces and dividing the bits among the people.

As Tawaka sleeps, his son, Payou takes two berries from the pouch and hides them. If he is caught stealing them, the penalty is severe, but having something so valuable to do with as he pleases is too tempting to resist. Several kilometers distance from the village, there is a well-traveled trail. Though he is forbidden to venture that far from home, he has been there once. From a hiding place in the undergrowth, he watched with great interest as people passed by carrying all kinds of goods. They carried weapons, shields, masks and exotic foods—things he had never seen before then, and has coveted ever since. All he has to do is wait there for the right person to walk by.

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The Global Federation of Botanists' annual symposium is a can't-miss, mark it on your calendar two years in advance, max out your credit card on airfare and a room kind of affair for its members and their guests. The venue changes from year to year, but it is always held in a lush tropical setting with varied and abundant vegetation, so when the attendees aren't listening to one of their brethren giving a presentation on plant systematics, taxonomy or nomenclature, they can enjoy the indigenous flora on a trek through a nearby rainforest.

Libby attended the year before last as a guest of Walter Adams, a member and recently widowed—only a month before—older gentleman, who spent the entire week of the event trying to coax Libby out of her panties. She managed to fend him off, but regrettably never received another invitation after that.

This year the symposium is taking place in Mahé, an island off the east coast of Africa, in the archipelago of Seychelles. And not only will she be attending, Doctor Liberty Belle Corcoran will be a featured guest speaker, which means all expenses paid, plus an appearance fee to boot. No way is she going to miss out on an opportunity like this, but it's going to take a lot of shuffling around of her busy schedule and a fair amount of careful planning to pull it off.

Her ten-acre compound in the Miranda Canyon outside of Taos, New Mexico, is the site of one of the most sophisticated botanical research facilities in the world, consisting of a laboratory, an office building, several greenhouses and grow light enclosures, as well as her living quarters. She employs a staff of ten to handle the day-to-day management of the operation and her client list includes major pharmaceutical companies, large-scale commercial farming operations and wholesale plant nurseries in twenty-seven countries.

Besides spending several hours a day in the lab examining specimens under the microscope or preparing a patent application for a new hybrid plant, she makes guest appearances on TV and radio garden shows at least once a week. On top of that she endorses a number of herbal diet supplements and skin care products, which leaves her with very little spare time. The closest thing to a vacation she's had recently was last month when she slept through her

alarm and didn't get up until nine, all the more reason she is going to this symposium, no matter what.

With less than a week to go before the trip, her mind is already ten thousand miles away in Mahé, thinking about a sunny beach, ocean breezes, and a tall handsome Austrian telling her how good she looks in her tiny black bikini. He called the day before while she was in the flower greenhouse enjoying the fragrance of hybrid azaleas and roses in bloom.

"Hello Libby, zis is Gunter Schneider, calling from Austria. Do you remember me?"

Her heart skips a beat at the sound of his voice. Do I ever, she almost says, but she doesn't want to appear too eager. Gunter is tall and charming with blonde hair, blue eyes, a strong jaw and a dimple on his chin. She met him at the previous symposium and might have jumped his bones the second they met, had Walter Adams not been attached to her arm like a tick the entire time she was there.

"Gunter Schneider...?" she replies, as if trying to recall the name. "Oh yes, we met a couple of years ago, in Bora Bora. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, zat is correct. I see you will be speaking at zee symposium in Mahé. I will also be there and would like to have dinner with you one evening. Zat is if you are traveling alone."

Her pulse quickens at the prospect of an evening alone with him. She inhales the aroma of the greenhouse and lets the breath out slowly to calm herself before answering, "That's nice of you to ask, Gunter, and as a matter of fact I will be attending the symposium by myself. Where will you be staying? Can I contact you there once I get in and know what my schedule will be?"

"Of course, Libby. I am staying at zee Four Seasons. You can leave a message for me, if I'm not in zee room when you call."

After disconnecting, she fist pumps the air and exclaims excitedly, "Yes!"

"Who was that on the phone?" says someone nearby. The voice is coming from Quentin, who's been napping behind a cluster of bushes since before Libby got there. "He, or she sure seemed to give your spirits a lift. I hope this means you'll be getting laid, soon. Lord knows you could use it."

She follows the sound of his voice to find him stretched out on the ground. A sky blue rose clipped from one of Libby's treasured experimental bushes rests on his chest. It has taken years to develop a plant which produces a bloom of such a rare color. Her hazel eyes flash with anger at the sight of her precious flower slowly wilting on his chest. His total disregard for the time spent nurturing the hybrid rose bush appalls her, but his lack of respect for her privacy bothers her more.

"Quentin! What are you doing lurking around, eavesdropping on my conversation? Don't you have work you should be doing?"

“I’m on a break. Geez, doesn’t anybody around here ever think about anything but work? I mean heck, I’m on the job twenty-four seven as it is. Now I’m supposed to be working every minute I’m here.”

Libby starts to respond, but checks herself. What’s the point, anyway? Talking to Quentin about something as archaic and mundane in his mind as work ethics will prove as productive as discussing quantum physics with a rhesus monkey. She’s come to think of Quentin as sort of a company mascot, a kind of entertainment for her employees—albeit not as cute as one of those NBA team mascots who prance across the court between periods.

Four months earlier he wandered onto the property saying he’d work for food. She let him do a few odd jobs, expecting he’d be gone before the end of the day, but no such luck. Her mother had warned her against this very situation when as a six year old she brought home an abandoned kitten.

“If you feed it, it will never leave, and you’ll have to take care of it for the rest of its life.”

“Quentin, I have a ton of things I need to attend to during the next few days. The last thing I need is you underfoot. If you’re not going to do something useful, then at least do your goofing off somewhere else.”

“Goofing off! I can’t believe that’s what you think of me. After all I do for you and what do I get in return? Nada, zilch, no medical insurance or other benefits, and no paid vacation.”

“Don’t start with the vacation thing again. For the umpteenth time, you are not going with me. No way, no how!”

Two weeks ago he overheard Libby telling someone about going to this symposium on the island of Mahé.

He says, “You’re kidding, Hawaii! I would do anything to go to Hawaii.”

She says, “Mahé, not Maui. It’s not anywhere near Hawaii. It’s in Seychelles, east of Africa. Trust me, it’s not your cup of tea. You’d be bored out of your skull after one day.” That seemed to appease him, until he sneaked into Libby’s office to use her computer and Google Mahé, Seychelles. Then, he started up again.

“Think about it, I could be your bodyguard. Anyone tries to rip you off and I go bam, bam, bam.” He throws a series of air punches to demonstrate.

“Look Quentin, I don’t need a bodyguard and I can’t afford to pay your way. If the GFB weren’t funding the trip I couldn’t go myself. Besides the expense and inconvenience of taking you along, there are several other considerations. At the top of that list is the difficulty—no strike that—the impossibility of getting you on an airplane.”

“What’s that mean? I’m not afraid of flying.”

“Maybe not, but most of the other passengers might have reservations about flying with you. I doubt you can even get past airport security, given the number of body piercings you have.” She doesn’t bother to mention the

tattoos covering every visible inch of his body or the strange hairdo which consists of his head being shaved slick except for a two-inch circle on the top center of it, where a braided ponytail stands up like the wick of a candle.

“I’ve got piercings you haven’t seen,” Quentin boasts.

“Please, spare me the details,” Libby says. “That’s exactly my point, you have several pounds of metal hanging on you. You’ll sound so many alarms at the airport they might decide shooting you is easier than a body search.”

He doesn’t argue further, which surprises her. It’s unheard of for him to give up so easily, but with the day of departure drawing nearer, she doesn’t have time to worry about it, now. She continues through the greenhouse to her office, where she finds an email from the Global Federation of Botanists confirming her airline and hotel reservations.

As she begins to read it, Quentin burst in without knocking. She starts to rebuke him for the intrusion, but before she can he blurts out, “Percy needs you in the lab, right away.”

“Then, why doesn’t he call me? It’s much quicker than sending you to get me.”

“Hey, how would I know? Nobody around here tells me anything. Someone said to get Libby, so I did.”

She rises from her desk, shoos him out of the office ahead of her, and then locks the door before heading over to the lab. The second she’s out of sight, Quentin uses a spare key he swiped earlier to enter her office.

Seeing the email from GFB on the screen, he has an idea and types out a reply which reads:

There seems to be an oversight with regard to the airline and room reservations. There is no mention of a ticket or hotel accommodation for my assistant, Quentin Maddox, who will be traveling with me. Please correct this error ASAP. Thanks, Doctor Libby Corcoran.

He hits send and leaves the office through the other door to avoid running into Libby.

Libby is simmering over Quentin’s practical joke, if that’s what it was, as she reenters her office. This is the final straw. As soon as she gets back from the symposium she is going to have it out with him, once and for all. It’s over, no more free ride, no more feeling sorry for him, this is goodbye, adios, sayonara, get lost and don’t come back. In fact, if he pulls another stunt like this before she leaves, she’ll have him thrown into the wood chipper, and then use his shredded body as fertilizer.

“Why have you let him stay around for this long?” Libby asks aloud.

It’s a mystery she puzzles over often, and can come up with only one explanation. She’s intrigued by how his mind works. He’s like a rare plant

species she studies to determine how it responds to a particular type of manure or the absence of light. And, if she's totally honest with herself there's a certain quality about him she envies—his complete indifference toward structure, his disregard for rules or guidance of any kind. How nice it would be to forget about all her responsibilities, her business and clients, her schedule and commitments, even if only for a few hours.

Settling into her chair facing the computer screen once again, she rereads and prints the page of airline and hotel information, then quickly scans the other emails in her inbox. Seeing nothing that needs an immediate response she moves on to her daily planner looking for holes in it, fifteen minutes here or there to use preparing for the trip. She has to pack—no first she has to make a packing list, otherwise there's no way she'll get there with everything she needs.

Not far away, Quentin is going over his own list, and the first item on it is to intercept the email reply from the botany people, the one confirming an airline ticket and room reservation for him. The GFB is located in Amsterdam, according to the letterhead on the email, so their office is probably closed for the day. The very earliest they can respond will be noon tomorrow their time, which is four a.m. here. All he has to do is check Libby's email before she gets to her office in the morning, copy the information and delete it before she gets wind of what he's done.