



Kachina Dawn
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Enjoy!

- Gregory Bernard Banks

AHOTE WAS STILL unaccustomed to the tingling.

For the last six months, his nerve endings had been constantly afire. The parched 48° C air seemed to grate against his skin, making the sensation even worse. The wind blew hair into his face. He brushed it aside, scowling at the lone silver lock trailing down from his left temple, a birthmark forever reminding him of his former life. He stared briefly at the back of his hand. Before the Rebirth, his skin had been like the dry, flaky bark of an elephant tree. But after the Rebirth, it was as soft as the petals of a summer poppy. Even as he crossed the Arizona desert now, his body was constantly repairing any damage from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

Ahote stopped, every muscle taut. The large sack slid from his shoulders and fell to the ground. Something moved off to his left—a small snake writhing beneath the roots of a scraggly bush. A faint shadow passed before him, and he looked up to see an eagle soaring to the north. He relaxed, reminding himself that the only person both knowledgeable and foolhardy enough to come after him was long dead. Ahote glanced skyward, even though he knew Saquasohuh, the great Blue Star, wasn't visible during the day. He closed his eyes and thanked him for his continued guidance and blessings.

The air was as stale and rank as an ancient grave. Ahote bent down and scooped up a handful of sand. It was dry, powdery, as if composed of crushed bone. He felt like the only living soul in the valley of the dead. He glanced toward the ruins of Polacca, behind which three high mesas jutted up from the desert floor. The city represented a time when his people had been finally catching up with the rest of society. But then the Third World War broke out in 2071. The surviving Hopi fled back to their former refuge atop First Mesa. They shunned all technology and resumed their old ways, preparing for their ascension into the prophesied Fifth World. Foolishly, they were still waiting, isolated and alone, over 170 years later.

Ahote's gaze wandered further. The desert's kaleidoscope of browns, greens, and golds stretched as far as he could see until blending into the faded blue sky. The sun's yellow disk, well past its zenith, rapidly sank toward the west. While time had not healed the world, it had hidden many of its scars, leaving behind very few remnants from the "Rain of Fire".

As a child, Ahote had thought himself blessed to live in such a beautiful land. Before her death while giving birth to his little brother, his mother told Ahote that he was destined to do wondrous things. Mansi

said that the time of ascension was near, and had dreamed that Ahote would lead his people into it. Ahote drunk in every word, envisioning himself upon the threshold to the Fifth World, his people spread out behind him. When the doorway opened, he would proudly lead the Hopi forward. From that moment on, they would worship him as both their king and god.

He thought of his lover, Tansy. She was much like his mother, with her passion for life and her boundless dreams. Her beauty had enchanted him since they were toddlers. And even now, after all these years, Ahote could still feel her pressed against him, remember every blemish on her skin—the few that there were—could recall every hair on her body... .

He snatched up his bag and moved forward, each step coming faster until his boots barely imprinted the sand. It took him another hour to reach and cross the Polacca Wash, the only nearby source of water for the Hopi people. Upon arriving at First Mesa, he found a spot at its base to bury his sack. It wouldn't do to have its precious contents exposed before it was time.

Ahote then ascended the steep, rock-hewn Walpi Stairway. It had been just over twenty years since he'd left this place. While he had spent a little over half his life on a road filled with heartache, fear, and much pain, he had no regrets. Ultimately, the Rebirth had been worth it all and a thousand times more.

He paused before the city of Walpi. The pueblo stood several stories high, its buildings like stacks of crumbling toy blocks left behind by a giant child. Doors and windows dotted the structures like hollowed-out eyes, and ladders leaned against the pueblo in various places, providing access to the inner rooms through the upper terraces. The acrid smell of cooking fires intermingled with the stench of the dogs, chickens, and goats wandering around the plaza. There was much activity going on, both in the plaza and along most of the terraces. His father and brother were likely down inside the kiva along with the other snake priests, in their twelfth and final day of seclusion before the upcoming snake hunt.

Ahote hesitated. His pulse raged in his ears like the pounding of drums, his stomach feeling as if it housed a drove of butterflies. He had divorced himself from these people years ago, so why should he feel such anxiety now? He searched the darkest recesses of his brain for memories that might explain this, but found none.

Taking a deep breath, Ahote strode forward. Numerous eyes followed him as he moved through the plaza, and a chorus of murmurs enveloped

him like a fog. Some looked at him as if he was a spirit of some kind, but none dared to approach him or directly meet his gaze. His attire likely drew some of the stares, since the nano-enhanced material often shimmered from one shade of brown to another, the cloth of his shirt and pants adjusting itself to accommodate his body's needs.

As Ahote moved through the courtyard, he saw only a few faces he didn't know. However, the complete absence of children stood out in his mind. He knew that the birth rate among the Hopi had slowed even before he'd left. But surely, he thought, there must be some youngsters lurking about somewhere?

He crossed to the other side of the plaza, stopping atop a wide, timber-floored area. A ladder protruded from an opening in its midst, reaching up from a chamber below. He knelt beside the opening and peered inside. Firelight danced along the floor and circular walls. Chanting drifted up to his ears, and within it was his father's deep, gravelly voice. Ahote wondered why the elders held on to this worthless tradition. It was obvious that no rain had fallen in months, and prayers to false gods were a waste of time. In his travels, he'd learned who the true masters were.

"Ahote?" a voice said from behind.

He stood and turned slowly. Tansy's beauty had diminished little over the years. Her hair still looked as if it was spun out of midnight, her face as perfect as a synthalline gem. Even her complexion had weathered the harsh conditions well. She wore a white, cotton manta, which unlike the traditional dress of old, covered both shoulders and the upper part of her arms.

"Been a long time, my love," Ahote said.

"We thought you were—"

"Dead?" Ahote finished for her with a grin.

"Yes." Hesitantly, she reached out and touched his chest.

"You see? I'm very much alive, perhaps even more so than ever before."

"What do you mean?"

Ahote moved closer. He stroked her right cheek with the back of his fingers.

"We can discuss that later," he said. He quivered at the memories of her body against his. He leaned in, his mouth coming within millimeters of hers. Tansy tried to step back, but Ahote grabbed her gently by the wrists. He tried kissing her once more, but she turned her face away.

"What's wrong, my love?" Ahote asked. "Isn't your betrothed worthy of a welcome home kiss?"

"Please don't call me that."

"But, Tansy--"

"I'm married, Ahote."

It felt as if she had torn out his gut. The possibility of Tansy having married another man never crossed his mind. He remembered every second they had spent together as if they were only hours before. Neither the ordeals he'd been through, the passage of time, nor the Re-birth, had lessened his cravings for her.

"Who is it?" Ahote asked.

"What does it matter?"

"Who is your husband?" he demanded.

"Chu'a..."

Ahote flushed in anger, his pulse and heart rate jumping to levels that might have endangered the life of any other man. Chu'a had been his childhood rival, and he'd always felt that the boy was appropriately named, since Chu'a meant "snake" in the Hopi tongue.

"Why him?"

"He's changed, Ahote. Chu'a is not the spoiled, witless child we grew up with. He's now kind and loving, an excellent provider, and a wise leader. He's fiercely loyal to both his people and to me. He would do almost anything to protect us."

"But is he a better man than I?"

"At least he was here," Tansy replied, her eyes defiant.

"I told you I would return."

"That was over twenty years ago,. How long did you expect me to wait?"

Ahote closed his eyes. The thought of Chu'a even touching Tansy, let alone... His grip tightened until she cried out. He quickly released her and stepped away.

"I should go pay my respects to Father. Perhaps we can talk again later." He turned and descended into the kiva. Every intimate moment he and Tansy had ever shared plagued his mind.

Shadowy forms encircled the kiva's central fire pit, their heads bowed as they chanted in low, rhythmic tones. At one end of the room was a dais upon which many sacred items stood, including an assortment of kachina masks from past ceremonies. Depictions of many of their greatest kachinas adorned the walls, while behind Ahote was an opening in the floor representing the sipapuni, the entrance through which all life had emerged from the Third World.

"Is that really you, Brother?"

A wiry figure approached. Kele was only seven when Ahote last saw him, but even then, he had known the boy's frame would be like their mother's. Kele stopped before Ahote, now a head taller than his older brother. Despite having become a man, Kele's eyes were filled with the same youthful exuberance, and the slight puffiness of his cheeks cast a cherubic air upon his face. The two embraced.

"I knew you'd return," Kele said.

Ahote looked over Kele's shoulder to meet his father's gaze. Yuma's hair was dirty gray now, except for the silver streak running down from his left temple. His shoulders were slumped as if they had borne a great burden for far too long. His face was like the desert, dry, parched, acutely lined and scarred. His large, dark eyes were drooped, as if sorrow had taken up permanent residence in his soul.

Ahote disengaged himself from Kele and stepped up to his father. The two peered at one another, rekindling the pain Ahote had felt when they parted twenty years ago.

"So, you're really leaving?" Yuma had asked as Ahote stood near the top of the Walpi Stairway, his steady gaze piercing Ahote's soul. "What would Mansi think?"

The first hint of dawn was visible off to the east. In the distance, light glinted off the solar-shield bodysuits of the Bahana explorers as they headed back to their domed city. Ahote had decided to follow then, intending to leave without facing this final confrontation with his father. Saying farewell to both Tansy and Kele had been difficult enough.

"Mother would understand, Father, and I wish that you would too."

"I understand, Ahote. The Bahanas have poisoned your mind, and now you're ready to toss aside everything I have taught you about the ways of our forefathers, the Hisatsinom, just to follow them."

When the Bahanas, with their sickly pale skin, had first arrived, Ahote believed them to be some new form of kachina come to lead the Hopi out of the Fourth World. During their brief stay, they had regaled Ahote with tales of a mystical power known as "science" which allowed their people to project images across great distances. They also told him that they could use something called "nanotechnology" to create anything they desired, and even possessed the ability to seek out the stars.

"No, Father. What I've chosen is to seek out the truth."

"I've given you the truth!" Sparks of anger ignited in Yuma's normally cool eyes.

"What truth, Father? That I should be content to live out my days in this godforsaken sandpit?" Ahote paced before his father. "Or that I

should be thankful for the meager helpings of corn that we manage to grow each year, and the few drops of water Nature spits upon us whenever she's so inclined?"

"It's not up to us to question the Creator's plan, Son. We must be patient—"

"You can be patient until your marrow rots. Now I know there is more to life, and I'm going to find it." Ahote headed for the Stairway.

"Ahote!" his father shouted. "Don't do this. You will find nothing but ruin in the Bahanas' world."

"I see nothing but ruin here." Ahote turned once more to leave, but his father grabbed his arm.

"Son, if you must go, then remember this: 'in order to plant a straight row of corn, one must never lose sight of where one started.'"

Ahote shrugged out of his father's grasp and descended First Mesa. He headed southwest, the direction the explorers had gone. The faces of Tansy, Kele, his mother, and his father, hovered before him. For the first few miles, it felt as if he were swimming against a powerful current desperately trying to sweep him back to Walpi. But eventually his desire had won out, and he had gone onward to his eventual fate.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Yuma asked. Light from the fire pit chased shadows across the old man's face.

"Yes, Father. Everything and more."

"Tell us about it, Ahote," Kele said.

"No, Kele," said Yuma. "Not now. We still have many preparations to finish before the snake hunt tomorrow."

"Perhaps Ahote will join us?" Kele said.

"Wait!" a voice commanded.

A large, round-shouldered man with thin lips, a wide, flat nose, and bright, piercing eyes stood just behind Yuma. He slowly appraised Ahote, his head cocked to the side. He moved closer, pushing between Yuma and Kele. Adornments around his neck and head indicated that he was the Chief Priest of the Snake Order.

"Chu'a," Ahote muttered.

"Ahote," Chu'a replied.

Ahote envisioned Chu'a groping Tansy, a triumphant grin smeared across his face. Ahote's jaws clenched and his nostrils flared. His arms lifted slowly, and his fingers flexed in eagerness. But Chu'a made the first move.

He hugged Ahote.

"How are you?" Chu'a asked. "You have been greatly missed."

Ahote took several long breaths to calm himself, then stepped back to peer into Chu'a's eyes. He searched for the slightest jitter of his pupils, the briefest wavering of his stare. But Chu'a's gaze was steady.

"I am well, Chu'a. And you?"

Chu'a glanced at his feet.

"I should tell you that I am married now."

"Really?" Ahote replied, wringing the anger out of his voice. "Who is the fortunate woman?"

"Tansy."

"I see," Ahote said. He could hear the grinding of his own teeth.

"You were gone for so long that we thought that you were—"

Ahote clapped a hand to the man's shoulder and squeezed. He ignored the urge to slide it over to his throat.

"It's all right, Chu'a. I... understand. Tansy is far too beautiful to wait around forever."

"Yes, she is."

The eagerness in Chu'a's tone, the mocking shadow of a smile on his lips, disgusted Ahote. He appeased himself for the time being with visions of Chu'a's broken body lying at his feet.

"Can my brother join us for the hunt?" Kele asked.

"It is somewhat irregular," Chu'a said, his gaze wandering to the various faces standing near him. "He hasn't been here for the required days of prayer and fasting. However, I think we can make an exception this once. Do we all agree?" Chu'a glanced at the other priests surrounding them. Most nodded. Kele simply grinned. Yuma remained stoic, yet tilted his head slightly in acquiescence.

"It is settled then," said Chu'a. "You are welcome to rejoin the Order, Ahote, and to take part in the hunt and subsequent dance, if you so wish."

Ahote stared at each of the faces around him. Their invitation seemed sincere, and it touched him somewhat that they would so willingly embrace him again. Besides, regaining their trust would only aid his plan.

"I have had a long, difficult journey. If I may have an evening to wash and get some rest, I will be happy to join you tomorrow."

Chu'a grasped Ahote by the shoulders and shook him affectionately.

"Good! Why don't you pay Tansy a visit? It is getting late, but I'm sure she would be pleased to see you. Perhaps she'll even fix you something to eat."

"I don't know... "

Chu'a leaned close so only Ahote could hear him.

"It's all right, Ahote. I know you still have some feelings for her. I can see it in your eyes. But we're all adults now." A sly smile crossed his face. "Tansy has chosen me over you, so I am not concerned."

Ahote looked away to hide his disgust.

"If you insist, Chu'a."

"Wonderful!" Chu'a exclaimed. "Oh, and would you please tell my wife that I miss her, and am looking forward to holding her in my arms again once the dance is over?"

Bile crept into the back of Ahote's throat. "Of course," he mumbled with a shrug.

Chu'a moved back, and Kele and Yuma approached once more. Kele offered his hand to his older brother, and they locked palms.

"I look forward to finally hunting alongside you, Brother," Kele said.

"So do I," Ahote replied.

Yuma peered at Ahote a moment before speaking. "You are different," he said. "What have the Bahanas done to you?"

"They've given me hope, Father," Ahote replied. He patted his father on the shoulder, then turned and climbed the ladder.

Night had fallen, and except for the few torches burning here and there, the darkness was complete. A glance skyward revealed the universe in all its moonless, star-laden glory. Saquasohuh was nowhere in sight, but Ahote knew the blue star lurked up there somewhere. The Hopi believed that Saquasohuh, in kachina form, would appear amongst them one day and reveal his true face. This act would bring an end to all ceremony and signal the beginning of their ascension to the Fifth World. The Hopi Elders believed that this day would come soon. Ahote thought of the precious item he'd hidden in the desert.

He smiled.

* * *

AHOTE FELT REFRESHED after bathing in the semi-cool waters of the Polacca Wash, whose flow had diminished over the years, but fortunately for the Hopi, had remained somewhat strong. He sighed as he stood on one of the pueblo's uppermost terraces looking toward the southwest. A faint glow peeked over the horizon, and Ahote longed to return to the great domed beauty of New Phoenix. Although his final act had closed that door to him forever, it satisfied him that the Bahanas now feared him. They realized too late what he had become, and after he learned of their treachery, they had tasted his wrath. Besides, most of the Bahanas wouldn't dare leave their domed dwellings. They were frail,

and without proper protection, the sun would blister their skin. The resulting cancer would quickly devour them.

He walked over to Tansy's door and raised his hand to knock, but the pungent smell of lye drew him to the window instead. Inside, Tansy knelt beside the fireplace, dipping a cloth into a pot of heated, soapy water. She then used it to wash the day's toils from her bared skin. The tingling of Ahote's body intensified; his nails dug into the stone windowsill. Just when he was about to leap through the glass, Tansy saw him. She quickly slipped on a dress, then ran to the door, threw it open, and peered outside.

"What are you doing here, Ahote?"

"I'm sorry. It's just... Chu'a suggested I come... that you might provide me with something to eat... ." Ahote glanced away, unable to face her intense stare. The heat of her anger drifted to him, feeding his yearnings.

"Did my husband also tell you to spy on me?"

"I was going to knock, but then I smelled—never mind. I shouldn't have come." Ahote headed for the nearest ladder.

"Wait," Tansy called.

Ahote faced her. While her gaze remained firm, the muscles of her jaw relaxed. The corners of her mouth curled slightly.

"You're here now, so I might as well feed you. Come on." She turned and went back inside. Ahote followed.

The apartment was pretty much as he remembered. The mud plaster covering the stone-fragment walls was fresh, but otherwise the benches and the lone table in the center of the room were the same. The kachina dolls Tansy had been given in her youth hung in a row along one wall, and over her sleeping pallet swung a ring made from woven fiber. Twine netting filled its center, and three strings adorned with brightly colored feathers dangled from it.

"Banished any bad dreams lately?" Ahote asked.

Tansy stared at him questioningly until he tilted his head in the direction of the dream catcher.

"Yes, with Chu'a's help," Tansy replied with a sidelong glance. She removed the pot containing her bath water from the hearth, then replaced it with one holding the remains of the day's meal. The room soon filled with the scent of dried corn stew. She hummed as she worked, reminding Ahote of his mother once more.

Minutes later, Tansy placed a bowl of stew and a roll of piki bread in front of him. He dipped his spoon into the stew and took a bite. Its wild,

non-synthetic flavor shocked his taste buds, but also brought back more memories of Mansi, like the all-encompassing warmth of her touch, the hypnotic timbre of her voice, the lofty aspirations she'd had for her son. She inspired Ahote to become the man he was now, and even though his father had done his best to make up for her loss, Ahote had never felt quite complete afterward, except when he was with Tansy.

"Ahote!" Tansy shouted.

He absently looked up at her.

"Yes?"

"I asked if you were all right."

"I'm sorry," Ahote replied. "I'm just... distracted."

"Memories?" she asked as she reached out and squeezed his right hand. Inwardly, he shivered with delight.

"You always know my heart," Ahote replied, setting down his spoon and putting his left hand on top of hers. Their gazes met briefly, then Tansy pulled away. She stood and walked over to the window, peering at the empty plaza below.

"So, tell me about your journeys, the wonders you must have seen. What is the Bahanas' world like?"

"They are violent, greedy, and always fighting amongst themselves over the most trivial things. And yet their creations possess more beauty and power than you could ever imagine. It would truly take a lifetime to explore them all."

Tansy glanced over her shoulder at him.

"If it was so incredible, then why did you leave?"

Ahote tore off a piece of bread and put it in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment before picking up his spoon again.

"I had my reasons."

Tansy walked over to the table and stood next to him.

"What secrets are you keeping from me, Ahote? And don't tell me there are none."

Ahote leaned back and looked up at her.

"Many things happened, glorious things that opened up new worlds to me. Just as I always believed, the Bahanas hold the keys to the universe, but their corruption and warlike nature blinds them. I joined them, worked alongside them, learned all I could from them." Ahote's eyes took on a dreamy air. "Because of them, I have been reborn. But once they realized what I had learned, what they had made me into, they were frightened." His grip tightened on his spoon. "That's when they tried to kill me."

Tansy gasped.

"So that's why you ran away."

"I did not run!" Ahote's fist struck the table with such force that it split the skin below and to the side of his pinkie. A lone drop of blood fell onto the table.

"I came back willingly, to share my knowledge with its rightful heirs. But first I showed the Bahanas the price of their betrayal." Ahote's breathing became heavy. Sweat trickled down his brow.

Tansy reached for Ahote's injured hand, but then hesitated. Instead, she retreated to the other side of the table. She sat down and stared across at Ahote.

"What's happened to you?" she said. "You were always driven by your need to know more, but now—"

"I'm different?"

"Yes."

Ahote smiled.

"And so I am."

"Meaning?"

Ahote got up and walked around the table to stand behind Tansy. He laid his hands on her shoulders and began massaging them.

"Let me show you."

"Stop it, Ahote." Tansy tried to shrug off Ahote's touch, but he maintained his gentle but firm grasp.

"Is Chu'a really the one you want?" Ahote asked.

"He is my husband."

"That is not what I asked. What is it that you see in him?" Ahote's fingers continued to work, and he felt Tansy shiver with unwilling pleasure.

"Chu'a is a good man, Ahote."

"Are you sure?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I sensed arrogance in him. He seemed to enjoy rubbing his conquest of you in my face."

Tansy stiffened.

"Chu'a's pride is great, and I admit that sometimes he may appear overly proud. But he is a good man." She suddenly stood and faced Ahote, her eyes ablaze. "And I am no one's trophy! Who I choose to love is my business, and mine alone."

"Then tell me you no longer love me," Ahote said, "and I won't trouble you again."

Tansy's gaze faltered. She tried to look away, but Ahote's unwavering stare drew her eyes back to him.

"But—"

"Tell me!" Ahote insisted.

"Please," Tansy whispered, "don't do this... ."

Ahote swept her up in his arms and carried her to the sleeping pallet. He pressed his lips to hers, and she reluctantly responded, their tongues engaging in a sensual ballet. Her normally sweet kiss had a slight taint to it, and as they shed their clothing, waves of lust and loathing alternately singed his flesh. His pulse nearly deafened him, and his lungs fought to draw enough oxygen to satisfy their needs. He traced a familiar path along the buttery landscape of her flesh, and he wondered how often Chu'a's mouth had traveled the same route. Tansy's moans of pleasure urged him onward, yet he wondered if those cries were truly meant for his ears. As they explored one another, he feared he would melt into her supple skin and become lost in a swamp of lies. Their passions swelled until Ahote thought his heart would explode.

As their love crested then began to subside, they held one another, exhausted and content. Ahote listened to Tansy's heartbeat as she slept, savoring the caress of her breath against his face. He envisioned Chu'a's expression changing from one of triumph to defeat after learning of Ahote's seduction of his wife.

Ahote had known that Tansy could never love anyone else. He had always been superior to the other men in his pueblo. But now, after the Rebirth, compared to them he was a god. His eyelids grew heavy, and soon the gentle rhythm of Tansy's breathing lulled him to sleep.

* * *

AHOTE WOULD'VE SCREAMED, but the red, viscous liquid in which he floated filled his lungs. His torso, buttocks, thighs, the soles of his feet, and his scalp all itched, and he looked down to see a patch of skin slowly spreading across his chest. At first the sight of his partially developed body frightened him, but then he remembered that this was merely the final stage of the Rebirth. The "Life-Gel", as Dr. Parker had dubbed it, slowly churned around him. Cell by cell, millions of nanobots were constructing his new body from the genetic logs of the old. In a matter of hours, he would be an exact duplicate of the original, except that any of the scars, imperfections, or illnesses, which had afflicted his old body would be stripped away. The results of nearly 250 years of nanotech research would bless him with unmatched stamina and strength,

and a lifespan greatly extended, perhaps for all eternity. He would be the First in the new dawn of humanity.

A face pressed itself against the glass, its long hair a sun-bleached shade of black with a silver streak near its temple. Although the man was only in his late 30s, his skin showed signs of a harsh, troubled life. Its eyes exposed the vulnerability, weakness, sorrow, and regret lurking within his soul's depths. Ahote tried to look away, but those eyes drew him like an insect to a flame. Glimpses of both his past and present flickered in their hypnotic radiance. At the very core of this soul's being was the one thing Ahote feared above all else, the one thing he'd spent his entire life running away from.

Even now, like a wolf drooling on his heels, Death was never more than a heartbeat away...

Ahote sat up, his pulse racing and his body icy with sweat. He glanced up at the dream catcher slowly spinning overhead. He snatched it down and crushed it in his fist, feeling only minor discomfort from the nearly healed cut on his hand.

No matter how hard he tried to forget, the "Prime's" face always insinuated itself into his dreams. But that was not him, not anymore. The Rebirth had freed him from the prison of that body and the fate inseparably attached to it. He was no one's slave any longer. Death and destiny were merely puppets, and now, he was their master.

Tansy stirred beside him. He reached over and rubbed her shoulder tenderly, the way she'd always enjoyed in the past. As she approached wakefulness, she giggled softly.

"Chu'a," she murmured.

Ahote's skin crawled. He jumped out of bed and pulled on his clothes, then walked over to the window to peer outside. The morning was still in its infant stages, yet the pueblo was already alive with activity. Down in the plaza, people were tending their livestock. Tendrils of dark smoke poured out of nearly every chimney. Ahote heard the rustle of bedclothes, but he didn't turn to face Tansy as she got up and came over to him.

"Ahote, we need to talk."

"You still love him, don't you?" Ahote asked, struggling to keep his voice calm.

"Yes," Tansy replied.

"Then why did you sleep with me?"

"Ahote, I—"

"Why?"

Tansy hesitated.

"Because part of me still loves you too."

"Only part?"

Tansy touched his arm.

"Please, let me explain—"

"I have to go," Ahote said, throwing the door open and stepping outside. He looked back at Tansy.

"If he were gone, could you then love me completely?"

Tansy's slap sent a shockwave from his jaw to his brain. He staggered backward in surprise. Tansy's hand covered her mouth. Tears filled her eyes.

"I will not play seconds to the likes of Chu'a," Ahote said calmly. "You must choose between us. Now."

Tansy's gaze wandered to her feet.

"Then... I choose my husband," she said quietly.

Ahote turned to go, but paused.

"You never really answered my question from before," he said without looking back at her.

"What question?"

"Is he a better man than I?"

Tansy slowly looked up at Ahote.

"No one was better than the man who left me twenty years ago."

"And what about the man who came back?"

Tansy's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not sure I know him."

Ahote strode toward the ladder. He descended it quickly, then wove his way across the plaza, his ears deaf to the scattered greetings tossed his way.

He paused at the entrance to the kiva. A slight breeze touched his face, reminding him of Tansy's hot breath. He closed his eyes, but her image was etched beneath his eyelids.

"Ah, there you are."

Ahote looked down to see Chu'a's head sticking out of the kiva's entrance. The man grinned, his teeth bright in the early morning gloom.

"We were afraid you weren't going to join us after all," Chu'a said.

"I am here."

Chu'a stared at Ahote questioningly.

"Then come. It's almost time." He disappeared back inside, and Ahote followed.

The other priests, including Ahote's father and brother, were waiting. Their bodies were covered in red paint, which was the pollen of snakes, and their faces were silent and reflective. Even the normally jovial Kele was solemn, his eyes simmering in anticipation of the snake hunt.

Ahote nodded to Kele and Yuma, then walked to a corner and quickly stripped. Ahote squeezed his eyes shut, enduring Chu'a's touch while the Chief Priest painted his body. When he was finished, Ahote stared up at him. Chu'a's eyes narrowed slightly, and the two locked gazes. Finally, Chu'a flashed a brief smile, and then gestured toward the others. Ahote stood, putting on a loincloth and moccasins before taking his place among the group. Chu'a offered up prayers of safety and success for the hunt which would last four days. He gave each of them a bag, a small bundle of food, and an eagle feather whip. The Chief Priest walked over to the dais and chose a ceremonial dagger for himself. He glanced at Ahote as he tucked it into the waistband of his loincloth.

The priests filed out of the kiva behind Chu'a. Yuma moved close and squeezed his son's shoulder before leaving. Kele embraced Ahote before following. Ahote waited until last, his mind still in turmoil. Despite the futility of this ritual, he felt obligated to participate in it. All of their fruitless pursuits will end soon, he reminded himself.

Besides, the thought of getting Chu'a alone in the desert was enticing.

* * *

THE EARLY MORNING sun bore down upon Ahote's flesh; the arid breeze greedily consumed any sweat that escaped from his pores. He stared at the copper-hued cliff rising before him while Chu'a finished his prayer. The Chief Priest tossed cornmeal into the spring running by their feet, then he and the other priests fanned out in all directions. Ahote and several others, including his brother and Chu'a, headed westward. The morning's sunlight somewhat blinded Ahote, yet it took him only a few minutes to find his first snake.

Its hiss gave it away. Unlike a rattler's tail, whose sound was keener and more insistent, the bull snake's hiss was low and seductive, like a reptilian siren's call. Ahote crouched and crept along slowly. He raised his left hand, partially shielding his eyes. He glimpsed movement just ahead and to his left, then stood and strode forward. Other priests, following his gaze, approached the spot as well. They pulled out their eagle feather whips, but Ahote didn't even pause to throw cornmeal upon it first. In one fluid motion, he dropped to one knee, snatched the snake up by its neck, and stood up while regarding it casually. Its nose was wide and flat like Chu'a's, its skin dry and cream-colored. Its body generated

no heat, and to Ahote this meant it was essentially as dead as everything else in this barren land.

Kele ran up eagerly, his grin wide and proud. Chu'a and most of the other priests exchanged wary glances. Ahote knew that look well. He'd seen it in the Bahanas' eyes once they realized his superiority over them. Hopefully, his fellow Hopi wouldn't act as rashly as they had.

Under the scrutiny of the others, Ahote hung the snake around his neck. It irritated him that he had to show such respect to this lowly creature, but he told himself that it was all for the greater good of his plan. The Hopi would surely not follow him unless he gained their trust.

Kele held out a bag, and Ahote gratefully removed the snake from his shoulders and dropped it inside.

"Very impressive, big brother," Kele said.

"Yes, very well done, Ahote," said Chu'a, his head cocked in that arrogant way of his. "You are even more adept at this than before." Although the inflections of his voice indicated otherwise, Ahote clearly heard Chu'a's unspoken question.

"I have many surprises to share," Ahote replied.

"So it would seem," the Chief Priest said, his gaze lingering just a bit too long for Ahote's liking. Finally, the man turned away, and the hunt resumed.

They caught many snakes that day and the next, with Ahote always proving to be the most prolific of them all. They captured more bull snakes, along with many sidewinders and diamondbacks. But the majority of the snakes they caught proved to be rattlers.

Ahote carefully observed his brother skillfully using his eagle feather whip to force each snake to straighten out, appreciated how catlike his movements were as he snatched up each snake and placed it around his neck. Pride swelled Ahote's chest. It would be an honor to spend eternity with Kele at his side.

As night fell on the second day of the hunt, the Snake Priests of Ahote's group gathered and formed a simple camp. Like the day before, they huddled around the fire talking quietly amongst themselves. Ahote sat apart from the others, having declined his brother's offer of conversation, saying that he needed to pray. In truth, falling back into the Hopi's tedious lifestyle had proved far too easy, and Ahote feared that if he spent too much time with them he would become mired in their world once again. But he reminded himself that he was in charge of his life's course now.

Ahote heard someone approaching, but kept his thoughts focused inward until the person spoke.

"I need to speak with you."

Ahote glanced up at Chu'a, whose broad silhouette was like an inkblot against the night sky.

"Perhaps later," Ahote said.

"No. We must talk now."

Ahote slowly rose to his feet, his jaws clenched.

"What do you want, Chu'a?"

"Come with me." Chu'a walked toward the northwest, and Ahote reluctantly followed.

Chu'a's gait was deliberate, his shoulders tight. They walked without speaking for at least half an hour until they reached the edge of a huge crater. A stray missile had created it during the Third World War.

"How long have we been friends, Ahote?"

"We've never been friends," Ahote replied.

Chu'a's laugh held little mirth.

"That's true," said Chu'a, draping an arm around Ahote. "You and I have always been rivals. We have competed for nearly everything, including Tansy's affections."

"No!" Ahote shouted as he shrugged out of Chu'a's grasp. "Not for Tansy. She was never yours to compete for."

"I suppose that's true. And yet, she wound up with me anyway. It must be hard for you, to know that in the end I proved to be the better man--"

Ahote grabbed Chu'a by the throat. He squeezed slowly, his arms trembling in his attempted restraint. His ears throbbed with rage. And yet Tansy's plea for her husband's life hovered at the edge of his thoughts.

He let go of Chu'a and turned to walk away.

"Wait, Ahote," Chu'a said between coughs. "I have one more thing to say."

Ahote stopped. He kept his eyes ahead, afraid that if he looked at this man's conceited smirk once more he would surely kill him. He focused his attention on the sky, looking toward Saquasohuh for strength.

Chu'a approached, halting just behind Ahote, his breath causing the skin on the back of Ahote's neck to crawl.

"I know that you still lust for my wife, like a jackal waiting in the bushes to pounce upon a helpless doe."

"If that's what you believe," Ahote whispered, "then you truly are a fool."

"Perhaps I was once, but thanks to you, I see everything with clarity now. Besides, you were the one who went off in pursuit of the Bahanas and their heathen ways. And now you've returned, reeking of them and their corruption."

"I learned much from them, Chu'a," replied Ahote, forcing reason into his voice. "I discovered things that will lift my people—our people—up from the ruins of this world and on to the glory of the next."

"You endanger the very sanctity of all we hold dear by your mere presence among us." The air was so thick with Chu'a's anger that Ahote could almost taste its sour tang. Ahote's patience was failing fast. Chu'a threatened all his plans, and there was only one sure way to deal with him.

"I came to offer you a better way," Ahote said, giving the Chief Priest a last chance at survival. "You just don't know what you're talking about. Let me teach you."

Chu'a hesitated, his feet shuffling with indecision. It would have been the perfect time to attack. Three quick movements and Chu'a would lay at his feet with a broken neck, never knowing what had happened. Such a death would be the most merciful thing to do. But Ahote felt little mercy at the moment.

Chu'a sighed.

"You are right, Ahote," he said. "I don't know everything." He leaned closer until his lips tickled the fine hairs of Ahote's left ear.

Ahote prepared himself to strike.

"But," Chu'a continued, "I have learned a few things."

Ahote heard leather slithering against metal just before the pain struck. His knees buckled, the blade like a sliver of ice as it dug into his spine. He seemingly drifted rather than tumbled into the mile-wide crater, the world a blur as it spun by. When he finally came to rest in a pile of ash, Ahote heard rocks scattering above and behind him. Soon afterward, Chu'a arrived at his side.

"You see, Ahote," Chu'a said, "one thing I know for certain is the smell of my wife upon another man's flesh."

Ahote tried to speak, to scream, to breathe, but even the thought of such things was excruciating. Chu'a knelt beside him, his lips twisted with hatred, tears filling his eyes. A haze formed before Ahote, draping the surrounding darkness with curtains of gray. Chu'a's voice was hollow and distant, and Ahote had to strain to hear him.

"I am the Chief Priest, Ahote. I have to protect my people, in whatever way I can. I truly wish things could've been different, but you gave me no choice. Perhaps when our souls meet again one day, you will find it in your heart to forgive me."

Ahote gathered all his strength for one last breath. He pursed his lips as if to form a single word.

He spit on Chu'a. The man stood and wiped the spittle away.

"So be it, Ahote. So be it."

Ahote heard Chu'a's struggles as he climbed out of the crater. Soon, there was only silence, except for the slowing beat of his heart. Darkness pressed in on him, crushing him with its formless weight. Despite the relative heat of the night, he shivered, his limbs dead. He imagined himself staring down at his own shattered body and shaking his head in pity. Although he knew the nanobots were desperately trying to repair the damage, the wound was deep, his lifeblood flowing from him in rivulets. Even they needed time to work, time he knew he didn't have.

The space between one heartbeat and the next became centuries. He heard a mocking laugh, parched and raspy, as if the very desert reveled in his misery. Death was approaching, and he cringed from its decayed stench. He'd been such a fool to trust in the Bahanas and their science. He'd believed that the Rebirth had washed mortality's stain from him, that he had found the doorway into the Fifth World, where he would forever lead his people in glory. Perhaps the Prime had been right after all... .

* * *

AHOTE AWOKE IN a bed that was firm, yet pliable, precisely conforming to the contours of his body. The sterile odor of the room sickened him, but after his first few breaths, his stomach calmed. His tender skin tingled so severely that it was hard for him not to squirm. The ceiling's ambient glow stung his virgin pupils, and he had to squint in order to see the rest of the room.

A virtual projector was mounted in the wall by the foot of the bed, its sound so low that he could barely hear its broadcast. Above him floated the holograms of men and women struggling against blue-armored officers carrying plasma rifles on their shoulders. The protestors, numbering in the hundreds, held their banners high as they stormed the needle-like skyscraper before them. A reporter stuck a microphone in the face of a lean, dark-skinned man with shaved head and mirror-black glasses. The screen caption identified him as Jascion Mills, leader of the protestors. Although his eyes were hidden, Ahote could tell by the tightness of

his jaw and the fervor in his movements that this man held a fanatical commitment to his cause. As the camera panned, Ahote glimpsed the sign in front of the tall building.

The New Phoenix Institute of Nanobiogenics and Cloning, it read.

"How do you feel?" asked a voice both familiar and disturbing.

Ahote turned to his right, staring into the Prime's large, dark eyes. The man's skin was badly aged, having spent far too long under the brutal rays of the sun. Despite being relatively young, the scars of time made the Prime appear far older than his 36 years. Ahote knew that this man had once dreamed of greatness, of leading his people out of their poverty into the riches of the Fifth World, where he could bask in their praise for all eternity. But even the Bahanas and their wondrous science couldn't give him what he wanted, at least not in the form he had intended.

"I feel... reborn," Ahote answered with a smile. The Prime said nothing. He simply stared, his body like stone, until he finally lifted a hand to brush the lone white lock from his own face.

"Is it strange?" the Prime asked.

"What?"

"Seeing my face—your face—standing before you."

"That is not my face."

"It is our face," the Prime said, "the face of Ahote."

"No! Mine is the true face of Ahote now. Yours is merely a lingering shadow from the past."

The Prime leaned back, his eyes wide. He shook his head sadly. He lifted the OmniNet pad in his lap and typed something onto its flat surface, no doubt sending a message to Dr. Parker, wherever he was.

"I knew this was a mistake," the Prime muttered, as if to himself. "I lost sight of my goals, just as Father cautioned me against, and I let them lead me down this cursed path. What have I done?"

"You've let the Bahanas give you a second chance. Now you can truly live forever, through me."

"And how do I share my life with my proxy?"

Ahote pondered this briefly before responding.

"I guess that you cannot."

"So how should we resolve this?" the Prime asked.

Again, Ahote considered his answer carefully.

"Only one of us can truly live as Ahote. Therefore, the other must die."

The Prime's gaze fell to his lap.

"I'm afraid you are right," he said. The Prime stood and left the room without another glance Ahote's way.

* * *

AHOTE WATCHED TIME pass through the narrow slits in his eyelids. The sunlight was blinding as it shone off the charred innards of the crater. The fingers of his left hand twitched slightly, and after a while, he realized that with concentration he could close them. The worst of his wound's pain subsided, and the numbness in his limbs was replaced with a dull ache. As the sun moved across the sky, he gained more strength. Soon he was able to sit up. He took one long, savoring breath, and then another. He swayed as he stood, his head light and his vision slightly blurred. He noticed a patch of fresh grass at his feet, growing from places where the scorched sand was stained crimson. Blood, his blood, had soaked into the soil, and the self-replicating nanobots had awoken the life buried beneath it. This was final confirmation of all that he'd ever believed. He truly was the key to unlocking the Fifth World!

With renewed determination, he began to climb, and after an hour of scratching, clawing, stumbling, and crawling, he managed to drag himself over the crater's lip. He rolled over onto his back and turned his face toward the sun. He was battered, weak, and still in quite a bit of pain, but he was alive.

He laughed until he fell asleep from exhaustion...

He soared through Tokpella, the endless darkness, darting between the sparkling dewdrops comprising the stars. He circled the Earth. An ailing brown hue had supplanted its once lush blues and greens, the aftermath of a drought that had descended upon the world long ago. Suddenly, a large star appeared. It crashed into the Sun, and great explosions ensued, rocking the very foundations of the Heavens. The two strove for dominance of the earthly skies for what seemed like eons, showering blue and gold flames upon the Earth, while cries of fear and death echoed from the ground far below. Over time, the Sun's golden light withered, and finally died.

While Saquasohuh, the Blue Star, was victorious, the death of its fellow star saddened him. His tears rained upon the Earth, and over time, the water washed away the brown stain, and the colors of life returned. Saquasohuh heard the joyous cries from below, and out of curiosity looked down. Where deserts had once been, fertile valleys now stood. The people of Earth begged to see the face of their savior, and Saquasohuh, being of kind and generous heart, decided to grant their wish. So with a finger of light, he reached up and peeled away his blinding aura, exposing the true face underneath. The people fell to their knees and

lifted their arms skyward. They cried out the name of their new god, Saquasohuh-Ahote... .

Ahote awoke. The night was waning, and the splinter of new moon was sinking toward the west. The first light of dawn peeked over the eastern horizon. He searched the skies, and believing he saw a faint blue glow, prayed to Saquasohuh. He cautiously got up, pangs of hunger cramping his stomach and minor stabs of pain shooting up his back. He headed northward, his eyes and ears alert. After a while, he spotted something small and white near a clump of weeds. Ahote crouched low, and holding his breath, inched closer. He reached out a hand, the rabbit's cottony tail only centimeters from his fingertips. Suddenly its ears shot up, and then it fled.

Ahote sprang into motion. He called upon every ounce of strength he had to drive his body forward. Every muscle felt as if it would tear, pain from his back robbed him of breath. And yet he continued to run, his footfalls light and quick, matching the rabbit's pace stride for stride. Gradually he gained on the hare, and just when Ahote feared he would collapse, he dove forward. He struck the ground hard, sand flying into his eyes and nostrils, his body weighted down with fatigue. He gasped for air as he pushed himself up onto his knees.

He smiled as he held the rabbit up by its foot.

It took Ahote an hour to find enough dry grass and brush to build a fire, and then to skin and dress the rabbit. By the time his meal was ready, the sun had risen, its oppressive warmth a comfort after eluding Death's cold embrace. He had no water, so he had to content himself with the rabbit's succulence. When he was done, he lay down for a few hours rest. Despite the burning sunlight, he sunk into fitful dreams... .

Alarms blared. His heart raced. Ahote tried to control his fear as he wove through the crowded halls. Doctors, scientists, lab techs, and executives surged toward the exits like a storm-driven tide. Smoke rapidly filled the corridors, enhancing the chaos and improving his chances for escape. If it weren't for his own imminent danger, he would've stopped to relish the terror in the Bahanas' eyes. When he'd learned of their plan to terminate the nanoclone project, Ahote had known what that meant for him. Trapped inside the highly secured NPINC building, he'd felt like a caged beast being prepared for the slaughter. But then he remembered Jascion Mills.

It had proved easier than he thought to use the OmniNet pad they had given him to contact the zealous Mills. Ahote supplied him with enough information to get him and his people inside the building to launch their

attack. Ahote even told Mills about the filthy clone they had created and where to find him. When asked how to identify him, Ahote told Mills to look for an old man with a lone silver lock near his left temple.

The fleeing throng swept Ahote down the stairs. As he neared the bottom floor, an explosion rocked the Institute and caused parts of the walls and ceiling to rain down on their heads. Men and women screamed, their terror so great they clawed at one another like animals. Ahote cringed from their touch, disgusted by their lack of courage. Fear was never an excuse to lose one's humanity.

Finally, Ahote emerged from the building, his first time outside of it in his reincarnated form. The dome over the city filtered the golden sunlight into a warm, bluish sheen, and the air had a sterilized tang, now stained by the smoke pouring from the building's side. As Ahote quickly moved away from the Institute, he envisioned the Prime being torn apart by Mills and his raging fanatics. He was surprised at the empathy he felt, though he supposed it made sense. Killing the Prime was in a sense like patricide, after all. But there could only be one Ahote.

And now, thanks to science, he would live forever... .

It was nearly dusk when Ahote awoke. Regret troubled him briefly, but he cleared his mind of such thoughts. Only the here and now mattered, and the future was plain. It was time to carry out his plan.

Ahote stood. His wound no longer hurt, and although he was hungry again, he felt stronger. His duty and destiny called to him, and he silently prayed to Saquasohuh for even more wisdom and strength.

As darkness fell, Ahote found another rabbit, this time managing to snare it before it could run away. He quickly prepared and ate it before beginning his trek back to First Mesa.

He walked slowly, deliberately, his mind consumed by the task at hand. With each stride Saquasohuh infused more of his spirit into him until he became so filled with it he thought he would burst. The night seemingly passed in seconds, and as the morning dawned bright and clear, First Mesa's silhouette loomed before him. Ahote then ran, his body feeling as if the Blue Star's fire resided within his breast.

He found the spot near the Walpi Stairway where he had buried his treasure, and quickly dug it up. His hands shook as he reached inside the bag and reverently lifted out the mask. Carved out of cottonwood root and shaped like a multi-pointed star, the mask was a testament to many days of hard work. After escaping New Phoenix, he had trekked across the desert for days, living off the provisions he'd stolen before leaving the city. At the time, he'd had no idea what he would do. But then

Saquasohuh had spoken to him in a dream, and when he awoke, he immediately began his search for the needed materials.

It took Ahote days to find them all and to prepare the clay and paints. But once that was done, he carefully shaped the mask from a block of cottonwood root, covering it in white clay dug from beneath a nearby mesa. After it had dried sufficiently, he used paints created from plant and mineral pigments to color the mask blue, adorning it with intricate patterns of white, red, turquoise, and yellow to represent the four cardinal directions. For the hair, he cut off several centimeters of his own and attached it to the outer fringes. Once done, he put it inside the bag that had held his provisions and began his journey to Walpi.

"Saquasohuh," Ahote cried as he lifted the mask high overhead. "Bless me with your eternal light and anoint me with your holy flame!"

"Brother!"

Ahote peered over his shoulder. Kele stood there, his upper body and legs partially smeared with pink clay. His face was painted black, except for his whitened chin. He wore a G-string, and around his waist was a fringed belt woven from brightly colored fabrics. Behind him hung a dried fox skin. The stench of the snake priests' "man medicine" was strong on him.

"Chu'a said that you attacked him, and that in the struggle you had fallen from a cliff. But in my heart I knew you were alive. I wanted to search for you, but he wouldn't let me. He said we should leave your body and soul to the Creator."

Ahote, now in the midst of Saquasohuh's glory, had no time for minor distractions.

"Is the Snake Dance going on now?" Ahote asked.

"Yes. Chu'a insisted that you would want us to continue with it."

"Good," Ahote said. "Return to the dance. I'll join you shortly."

Kele moved closer, peering over Ahote's shoulder.

"What do you have there?"

Ahote stood and faced his brother. Kele's eyes smoldered with a determination he never knew his younger brother possessed.

"Everything will be made clear soon enough. Now please leave me."

"Not until you tell me what you are up to," Kele insisted.

"Isn't it obvious, little brother?" Ahote mumbled.

"But there are no kachinas in the Snake Dance, Ahote. Where have you been the last two days, and why have you made this?"

"I'm planning a glorious surprise for our people today. Now return to the dance and wait for me!"

Kele stared at Ahote. Their eyes met. After several seconds, Kele stumbled back.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm your brother," Ahote replied, moving closer.

"No!" Kele said as he inched backward, staying just out of Ahote's reach. "You are kin to him in some way, but you are not him."

Ahote leapt forward, grasping Kele by the throat and lifting him off the ground. He quivered in anger, his flesh feeling as if it teemed with spiders.

"I am Ahote!" he screamed. His fingers tightened around Kele's neck until he could feel the blood flowing through his carotid artery. Kele's eyes bulged as he futilely clawed at Ahote's hand.

"Don't you understand?" Ahote shouted. "Our sacred laws are folly. The power has been in the Bahanas hands all along. I have learned the truth." Ahote's breathing was nearly as ragged as his brother's. His eyes were wild.

"My marrow holds the key, little brother. I can unlock the door to the Fifth World and lead our people through it. Then the Hopi will finally be free. Join with me, Kele, and I'll give you immortality."

Blood trickled from Kele's mouth as he tried to speak, but the only sounds he could muster were a few weak gasps. His lips moved, slowly forming an oval shape, then parting. But Ahote didn't have to read his lips to know his answer.

"So be it," Ahote whispered. He closed his eyes and squeezed until he heard Kele's neck snap. He loosened his grip and let the body slide from his fingers. He sank to his knees beside Kele's body and wept for a time. He forced himself to think of his little brother as he'd been as a child, quiet, innocence, his true sibling in both blood and spirit.

"Perhaps I was not the imposter," Ahote said. "Maybe you were."

Ahote got to his feet. He stripped both himself and his brother's body, putting on Kele's G-string, belt and fox skin. He picked up the mask and slipped it over his face. Euphoria nearly overwhelmed him, and he briefly felt as if he were back inside his dream, soaring among the stars. He took one last glance at his brother's body.

He shook his head before walking away.

Ahote began chanting to himself as he climbed the Stairway. Each step heightened his fervor, the faint rumor of drums seductively calling to him. When he reached Walpi, the pueblo was in a fury of activity. Dancers jumped and twirled as they circled the plaza with snakes dangling from their mouths. Their bodies were powerful, fluid, their passion for

the ceremony spreading amongst the onlookers like a disease. The snakes thrashed about like serpentine whips. Chu'a led them, his flesh drenched in sweat and his face contorted with the ecstasy of the dance. Ahote considered taking his revenge on the man right then, but realized the folly of such an act. Only one thing mattered now. Once his task was complete, all else would fall into place.

The intricate drumbeats seeped into Ahote's pores, and he began to sway like a willow in a storm. Ahote looked around, but his father was among neither the dancers nor the bystanders, leaving him to wonder where the old man could be. He spotted Tansy near the kiva entrance, somewhat separated from the others. Although she was a good distance from him, Ahote thought he saw redness in her eyes. Just the possibility that she might be mourning him was encouraging. Perhaps, once he revealed the truth to everyone, she would come back to him.

When the dance had reached a pivotal stage, Ahote rushed into the plaza with a cry. Everything stopped. Dancers, drummers, and spectators alike were transfixed upon him, their eyes and mouths wide. Ahote danced. For him, time suddenly held no significance; life was merely a dream. The universe was like a wheel with him as its hub.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Yuma emerge from the kiva with another figure in tow. Ahote moved toward him, knowing the time of revelation was at hand. With one last leap and shout, he landed upon the ground and curled up in a ball, rolling until he came to rest at his father's feet. He uncurled his body, his back snapping rigid as he rose up on his knees. He grabbed the mask and snatched it off his face, revealing a broad grin. Ahote found the collective gasp of the crowd satisfying, and he turned to his father to relish his shock. But instead, the man looked upon him with rage and disgust.

Unconcerned, Ahote stood, preparing to make the speech that would forever alter the lives of the Hopi. A man moved past his father and stepped forward. He appeared old, his flesh severely age-scarred, his long hair a sun-bleached black. There were also other kinds of scars upon him, as if someone had tried to carve him up with razors. There was a patch over his left eye, which was partially concealed by a lone white streak of hair.

"We meet again," the Prime said.

Ahote stumbled backward, fearing that he'd gone mad. The Prime was dead! He was sure of it. This apparition had to be a figment of his mind.

"Where is my son?" Yuma demanded, moving toward Ahote.

"I'm your son—"

"Where is Kele?"

Ahote's gaze fell to his feet.

"He wasn't a true Hopi. He didn't understand--"

Yuma grabbed Ahote by the shoulders and shook him. His eyes were wide with fear.

"What have you done with him?"

"I-I killed him, Father."

Yuma's punch rocked Ahote, but he stood his ground. When the old man swung again, he intercepted the blow. He lifted the man off the ground and threw him into the crowd. Tansy and Chu'a rushed to Yuma's side.

"I came to help you!" Ahote cried, turning around slowly to peer at the assemblage. "You don't have to live like this any longer. I bring you the key to the Fifth World."

"You only possess lies," the Prime said. "My lies. Lies I allowed myself to believe for far too long."

Ahote faced the Prime, his eyes narrowing. He slowly moved toward him.

"Shut up!" Ahote screamed.

"This must end now," the Prime replied.

Ahote cackled.

"And how do you intend to stop me? I'm practically a god now."

The Prime removed something from his shoulder and pointed it at Ahote. The plasma rifle's wide barrel trembled in his hands.

"I'm not afraid of your weapon," Ahote said, although he found himself easing backward.

"I once thought immortality would bring me peace," the Prime said, "but now I know better." He stared at Ahote with tears running down his cheeks. "This was not your fault. My arrogance and foolishness cost many people, including my brother, their lives. Now in return, you... we... must pay."

Ahote sprang forward, snatching the gun away from the Prime and tossing it aside. He threw him to the ground, then leapt on top of him. He began beating him, his blows raining down in a blur. Blood, the very blood that had given Ahote life, splattered his face. He faintly heard someone scream, but the fury of his pulse blotted out all other thought. The Prime's face was slowly obliterated, and yet he continued to pummel him. He would make sure that this face never haunted him again.

Suddenly, heat erupted across his back, quickly spreading over his whole body. Ahote shrieked as he arched his spine in agony. He looked

over his shoulder. Through the blue flames, he saw Tansy fall to her knees. She dropped the plasma rifle and covered her face with trembling hands. Ahote writhed as the fire consumed his flesh. Before going blind, he stared down at himself, seeing only ragged tatters hanging from sinew and bone. The pain was excruciating, the heat as intense as the sun's. He felt lightheaded as his life started to fade. And yet he rejoiced, his laughter echoing across the plaza even as he took his last breath.

For one brief second, he'd known what it was like to be Saquasohuh...

* * *

THE RAIN FELL in torrents, baptizing the desert with Nature's long overdue tears. The pueblo rocked from the thunder, and flashes of lightning nearly blinded Chu'a even though his back was to the window. He glanced at Tansy, who lay sleeping on their pallet. It was good to see her so restful after the difficult night she had been through. Her labor cries had been unbearable, and if it weren't for Yuma's patient counseling, Chu'a would surely have burst in upon the women as they helped deliver the child, only serving to get in the way of their work.

He heard the baby stir in its crib, and he went over and picked him up. Alo's mouth moved slowly, as if seeking his mother's breast. His eyes were yet to open for their first glimpse of the world.

Chu'a walked over to Tansy and stroked her shoulder. She moaned in pleasure, a smile crossing her lips. Although sometimes he wondered if she still longed for Ahote, for the most part he had decided to put that all behind him. She had chosen him over Ahote when it counted, and in the end, that was all that mattered. He had resigned himself to the knowledge that Ahote's shadow would forever loom over their lives.

Chu'a kissed Alo's forehead. He ran his fingers through his hair, playfully curling the child's lone silver lock around his forefinger.



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