

## One Hand in the Abyss

### Chapter One

The gust of icy wind slid around the outcroppings of granite and ice and it stripped away the weak warmth around Vic's nose and mouth. Above the ten thousand foot level of Mt. Manaslu, a climber's best bet is to go slow, cut a sidelong ascent and hold close to the mountain face. Vic looked up and snapped a mental image of his intended path along the jagged cut of the mountain, its solid face caught the last orange light of sunset. He clicked in his cam and slipped the rope through the next quick draw. He crunched the steel spiked crampons attached to his boot into the statuesque ice flow alongside him and leaned back on the rope. His harness bunched tighter around his thighs.

A moment of rest. He was alone, thousands of feet above the Nepalese village. Above the celebration. Vic closed his eyes and listened to the frozen ice.

Crickle. Crick.

The ice warmed and refroze all around him, constantly. His ear perked at the hollow wail of the wind. It whistled through a dark crevasse below him, a place where the mountain face had cracked and split. Some crevasses were large enough to swallow a person while others barely fit a gloved hand. A climber's danger, where breaking a wrist or ankle in a crevasse could be the end of any climb. Possibly the end of life.

“Manaslu.”, Vic whispered. Crickle, crick, the ice answered. “How many spirits are you home to?” Vic felt his crampon slip incrementally. Then what sounded like a faint voice reached his ears, as if lightly drifting in with the cold. The wind whistled louder, replaced the ethereal call with a mournful

musical note that pinched Vic's throat with emotion. Instinctively he gripped the rope tighter.

“Chaya.”, he murmured, “I really miss you.”

His ice hammer swayed and clinked against the biners, carbon clips, hanging from his harness. He knew the ice would've started to melt around his boot. The friction of his weight heated the ice.

Clouds of vapor from his lips swirled in the icy wind.

Vic's weight shifted. He reached for the rope with both hands. The ice fractured with his change in gravity. Suddenly it splintered with a sickening crack. Vic's grip on the rope was solid but the ice screw alongside him slipped further out of the ice. And his rope was connected to that ice screw.

“Wait! ... Not *now!*”

The shape of the ice changed. The screw snapped free with a shower of frosted ice.

Vic fell ten feet before he realized it. A noise escaped his lips. He twisted. He hoped to fall closer to the mountain. Any chance was a chance.

Rope zipped through his quick draw. The next cam broke free of the ice. The rock and ice a meter away slipped by in a blur.

“Wasn't time...”, thought Vic “... supposed to slow down?” He reached out.

His right arm slipped neatly into a crevasse. He heard his arm snap. In two places. A jolting pull along his shoulder wrenched his back against the rock. Vic screamed from his gut, a blood freezing sound that bounced off the rock face, echoing, intensifying his dread.

But ... he'd stopped his fall, in one of the worst ways possible.

He hung limply against the mountain. Precious seconds of consciousness passed. The sky slid sideways as his eyes rolled in his head. The pain in his shoulder flashed brightly and he felt a warmth spreading in his chest. He refocused his eyes. The pain brought him back into the present. He lifted his head and looked at his arm, which had wrapped around backwards, threaded through the rocky crevasse.

“Uh shit... that hurts ... just right ...”

Adrenaline flushed through his blood, so he reached around with his good arm and gripped the edge of the crevasse trapping his arm. A new round of pain seared through his shoulder and chest. The

rock face swirled and Vic had to let go. His body went limp, completely out of his control for a moment. As he fought to refocus, something just outside his peripheral vision moved. A dark shape. It stuck close to the mountain side, hunched over. It moved, no, slithered closer.

Vic breathed out into the cold. He craned his head around. "That arm is gone." He looked down and vaguely watched the lower band of clouds wrap around the mountain. Then to the rope still attached to his harness. Vic pulled some of it loose and locked in, so his rope wouldn't unexpectedly slide any further. He became a fixture on the craggy mountain face.

He took a fresh look at his situation.

The final cam, just half a meter above his head, had stayed securely latched into the rock. The cam above that one had frayed loose but he estimated it would still hold twice his body weight. Only about four meters of rope kept him secured to the rock face. That and his broken arm. He partially unzipped his jacket and moved aside the inner thermal liner. His thick gloves forced him to blindly search for the leather straps that criss crossed his chest. His teeth involuntarily clenched.

A voiced near his head startled him.

"That's really the best thing to do." A female voice. Crisp. Clear. No mistake.

Vic looked. He could see the granite rock through the transparent face of a type of woman just a half meter away from him. His good hand gripped solidly on the rope but his jaw dropped.

She wasn't latched into the wall. She had no climbing gear. In fact she was simply 'stuck' to the rock face with nothing but her bare hands and feet. Her body slanted upwards away from him and seemed to fade into the rock, like fog. Its the oddest thing, like a ghost story.

She seemed familiar. Like the spirit of someone he lost?

"What are you doing here?", he asked, his voice a hushed conspiracy tone.

Her mouth moved in time with her words but it took a while for the sound to register in his head. "I'd give you a hand ... ", she said. The area along her 'forehead' crinkled with confusion.

Vic couldn't help himself. His deep laugh replaced the pain in his chest.

"Ha ha ha!" The pain returned, his laugh cut short, replaced with a grunt pressed through clenched teeth. "Give me a hand ... ha ... you always could be very funny." Did he know her?

She simply smiled. It curved up more on one side, which almost seemed like your basic ordinary smirk.

Vic's smile faded. He attempted to readjust his position, using the locked-in rope and his legs against the rock. He pulled himself into an upright position, his good hand straining on the rope. It snizzed a few inches through his gloves as his hand slipped momentarily.

“I gotta get these straps off.” This new thought was a welcome distraction. He breathed out slowly, an effort mixed with pain. He glanced at her, not exactly as if asking for her help, but wondering if she was going to ultimately help or hinder his survival. One strap snapped free from around his chest.

“You don't seemed surprised at all by any of this?”, the ghost like figure asked.

“Why should I be? I've been seeing that face ... your face ... for months now. The last time I saw your face was when you fell. It was real. After you fell, your face has been on every nightmare demon I've encountered since then. When I sleep. When I'm awake. Always your face.”

“I do remember you.” Her statement came out mixed with the sound of surprise, like the trailing end of a thought that unexpectedly makes sense.

He reached further into his jacket liner for the final strap, unbuckled it and watched his entire arm disconnect from his shoulder. Still attached by rope to the mountain, he swung away from the crevasse and pulled down on the rope. His momentum too him out from the rockface. A few seconds later he bumped lightly against the rock, a few feet away from his limp, broken prosthetic arm still threaded through the jutting trap of the crevasse.

He took a moment to breath. The pain in his right shoulder was gone, the tension across his chest subsided. Vic closed his eyes and he hoped that when he opened them, everything would be back the way it was 10 minutes before.

“It still looks like you need a hand.”

“Why?” Vic closed his eyes, shook his head and let his face crack the frost near his mouth into a smile, “That's something she'd say. Why are you saying things she used to say? She's gone. The mountain buried her.”

“I don't know why. Words just come out that way.”, she seemed deep in thought and looked at Vic. “I haven't been using English for very long. Everything I hear myself say is still new.” A burst of frigid wind howled and died down to a pitiful whine. Vic shivered. He opened his eyes.

The girl/ghost was gone. Just the cold granite of Mt. Manaslu filled his vision. He looked around, shocked. “They never just disappear that quickly.” He let out a long breath and watched it swirl.

“Up here.”

Vic looked up. She'd moved a little higher. She crawled sideways a meter or two. Effortlessly. Unafraid. Confident. “I have a weird feeling that I know where you're going.”

Then the realization washed over him and he understood. Why he'd imagined her again, on this part of his climb. And in such vivid clarity.

His brain warned him he shouldn't allow his thoughts to go there. The guilt threatened to push fresh tears out of his eyes but he knew they'd freeze within seconds, causing momentary blindness.

He knew why she was here.

This apparition. She was a manifestation of his promise. In the months since his daughter's death, he'd become trapped by his guilt. So he tried to jump off a bridge but he knew that was far too simple a death. So he sulked for months until hitting on the idea. He promised he'd return to the mountain that claimed her life, climb to this very spot and meet her in the afterlife. He'd practiced exactly how he'd pull out his knife. Slip the razor edge along the rope. Listen to the strain of the threads as each section of rope was sliced. Then he'd fall to his death, hopefully landing exactly where his daughter had fallen and died.

Yes, he already knew his sanity was as precariously balanced as a child on a pogo stick on the rim of a thousand meter deep crevasse.

Four days ago when he began this climb, the emotion came flooding back. The guilt, when he'd reached the point where Chaya fell, overwhelmed him. Despite his labored breathing, his missing arm and questionable sanity, he would follow through on his promise.

He would die here.

He reached up. Found a handhold and pinched in. His muscles strained. He started to reach for his knife. Slow. Labored. Uneasy but determined. He fixed his gaze on the girl's face.

A shiver went through his body.

The rock face shifted under his body. Drifts of dislodged snow from above tumbled past him, some landed on his helmet. He felt a new tension in his climbing arm. It seemed like the handhold in the rock had moved a few centimeters away from him. He felt the shiver again but it wasn't from his body. The rock beneath him had moved. Shifted. His imagination was worked overtime.

"Mountains can't move.", he reminded himself.

Almost instantly, the girl/ghost was right next to him again. She'd swiftly climbed back down. A look of concern etched her face, making it seem more solid than before.

"I've never seen my subconscious so concerned before.", said Vic. He shifted his arm to relieve some of the tension. He couldn't reach his knife from this position.

"There's something about you but I can't put my fingers on it", she said. The rock shifted again.

"What going on?", asked Vic as he looked around.

Her words seemed to get stuck in her throat for a second. Then he realized she was searching for the right ones.

"**They!** I don't have a word for **them**. They know you're coming and they want to bring the mountain down on you. To stop you, if they can, and they definitely can." Her voice quivered.

Vic pulled on the handhold and moved a half meter higher along the mountain. He felt another shiver in the rock. "Unless you can do more than just float there, please shut up. You're making me paranoid." He snapped in another cam and quick draw.

"I *can* do more but it has to be done right now!", she seemed out of breath. Scared maybe.

Vic's boot slipped off the ice and he felt the rope tighten on his harness. He drew out a long breath and looked down. He watched the drifts of snow as they fell below him. He blinked. Then squinted to get a better look at what the crevasse, where he'd left his prosthetic arm, was doing. It was

shifting. The rock literally changed shape. Then the crevasse snapped completely closed and he watched as the arm came cracked loose and fell down the mountain side. Disappeared from view.

“What the...”, Vic gasped, “the hell?” His chest tightened and caught his breath in his lungs.

“They can move through the mountain. They don't know exactly where you are yet but they can sense an energy about you. The same thing that drew me to you before they could find you”, she said.

“Who in the hell are they?”

“Manaslu. The Spirits of the Mountain.” She was practically on top of Vic by now. He started wondering if she might be more than just his subconscious mind manifesting itself as a hallucination. “Vic, either climb faster or fall off the mountain. With enough time, they will find you.”

“I've got one arm and I'm injured! My breathing isn't so great either from all this stress!” He reached for his backpack where he kept his asthma control inhaler. He pulled on his necklace to loosen it and took a deep puff of medicine. The ampule of ashes on the necklace clicked against the button of his parka. Another shiver went through the rock.

“No!” His body quaked with the mountain. “I came here to die! I want to be with my daughter. This is the only way I can to keep my promise.” He gripped his knife and slipped it from the sheath.

Mt. Manaslu groaned. Ice cracked free of the shifting rock. He pushed his legs against the rock and steadied himself. He looked around. His breath ragged.

“I came up here to die anyway.” Vic said as the tremors rumbled closer. He put the blade against the rope. The ghost girl moved closer, interested.

The rock under him moved. Literally flowed like water ripples. New crags grew out while the creases drew back, deeper. He let go of his handhold and gripped the rope. A sharp crag pushed out against his rope. He shifted the rope around the new piece of growing rock. He couldn't trust the mountain anymore. Every time the mountain moved his survival instinct kicked in, momentarily overriding his desire to kill himself. IT was confusing.

A deep breath of resignation. She stayed close to him, unsure what else to do. She reached out and lightly touched his arm. A feeling of intense happiness expanded Vic's chest. He felt no pain. His fear was gone. His guilt faded to a dull ache.

“What the f--?”

“This will be a bit weird for both of us but it's time.” She instantly flowed over him. He started to feel as if her weight was on his back. He tried to shift his body. Something was pushing against him. She was pushing against him. He dug his boots into the ice. It was solid enough for now. “You're fighting Vic. I can't get in.”

“What in the hell?”, said Vic.

“Let me *in*.”

“I don't even know what's going on!”

“I feel an empty darkness inside you. Imagine me like a waterfall. Now think of moving through it. The water just separates for you, right? You move through it. Think that for me!” The image came instantly into Vic's mind's eye. He could imagine/feel the water parting, letting him pass to the other side. It felt refreshing, like a warm shower on a frozen winter afternoon. He relaxed.

“*Ok, I'm in. Climb! NOW.*” Her voice snapped with authority. She sounded like him. The him he *used* to be.

Vic opened his eyes. “What??” He was frozen.

He saw the cam scratching free from the rock. It wouldn't hold. The crack widened. The rope vibrated. He looked around for the girl ghost. He looked at his body.

It seemed new. Full of determination. Not his aching guilt-ridden former self. He'd forgotten what happiness was like and his promise was fading from memory. No! That wouldn't happen. He started to cut the rope.

“*I know why you're here Vic. You want to be with your daughter.*” Somehow, Vic could feel her uneasiness.

Vic didn't stop cutting. The tight fibers woven into the nylon resisted but, in time, each would eventually be cut.

“*Vic, please climb now. I need you to move with me.*”

The knife cut through the last of the rope.

He fell.



A feeling of calm came over Vic as he saw the top half of the rope spring upwards. His weight pulled him down. After a few seconds he closed his eyes. An image of his daughter, smiling filled his imagination. Then a ghostly face replaced his daughters and he snapped back to reality.

He smacked against the rock and rolled over.

Instinctively he reached out with his hand and touched the mountain. His fingertips seemed to instantly glue themselves to the rock .

He stopped falling and stuck to the rock.

Trying to pull his hand free, he stayed solidly connected. Even through his glove, his fingertips adhered to the rock. He lifted his foot and stepped into the ice. His foot stuck solidly, just like his fingertips.

“Oh shit. What's happening?”

*“Stop acting like this is the first time you've ever climbed a lousy rock.”*

“WHAT is going on?”

*“You and me are one. What I can do, YOU can now do.”*

“You're inside me. You're doing this! Get OUT!”, Vic screamed.

*“We're way past that. You need to climb. If the Spirits get to us they'll kill us both. Do you want us both to die??”*

“I came here to die.”

*“Did you come here to kill me too in the process?”*

Vic felt a twinge of guilt. Why? This ghost girl wasn't even real. Most likely she was a figment of his imagination. Even if that were true, it still didn't explain why he was stuck to the mountain by his fingertips.

*“I can tell you understand. You're meant for something more than suicide. Make a difference and let's climb this mountain.”*

“What's up there?”

*“Further up the mountain is a cavern. One that's been hidden for hundreds of years. The first Tibetians found this cavern and opened it. They didn't know that the cavern was a gateway to the Other*

*Reality. When they did their reality and the Other Reality touched forming a crack in your world. Left alone, that crack will destroy everything including us. Because I'm not fully real, I could never enter the cavern. Now I can, with your body."*

"IF I do this for you, then will you let me die?"

"Yes."

"Fine. I'm still one arm less than I was. Only one person in history has ever climbed with only one arm and it wasn't me."

*"Use my arm."*

He knew what she meant. His amputated arm was still gone but he could feel something there. The nerve impulses to move his phantom arm and hand were still there, had always been there even after months of physical therapy. Those impulses were how he had manipulated his prosthetic arm before he lost it. But his new phantom arm became immeasurably better, if it acted in the same way as his good arm was now.

He couldn't explain it.

He knew he now had two functioning arms.

Vic heard her voice in his head. *"You can do what I can do.,"* she said. *"I'm a part of this mountain, so control me and you control this mountain!"*

The mountain cracked open.

He climbed. He also knew her name, or maybe he subconsciously gave her a name once she was inside him. **Kihia**. He also gave her a word for what she had earlier called 'the spirits of the mountain'. **Guardians**. He **climbed** faster than ever before, because he understood he was part of the mountain too. He moved on it as if he was running along the street.

The seemingly solid mountain shifted. Crevasses formed. He hopped over them. Craggs and ledges shot like fists towards him and he leapt across. His hands and feet latched directly to the rock. His mind cleared. His heart pumped. Adrenaline rushed throughout his body. He felt alive.

This was guilty fun.

As he hopped and spun like a spider gymnast up the side of the mountain, his head cleared until

he could let other thoughts into his head. Other perceptions. He understood more about what this spirit girl might actually be. Though he could feel that some of *her* thoughts and experiences were still separate from *his* thoughts. She kept parts of herself hidden from him.

She was an individual. A Spirit of the Mountain. A Guardian. And dangerous.

He could see most of what she'd experienced. He knew why she wanted to help him. Needed to help him. He saw, through her minds eye, the last person that she tried to help, to join with. A Potential Guardian that didn't make it up the mountain.

Kihia had been afraid to join and the Potential Guardian and died.

Vic took his eyes off the rock and looked up. A golden light shone directly from and through the rock. As if the rock were transparent and whatever brightness behind it, was powerful enough to wash right through.

Vic heard Kihia's voice, stern, inside his ears, "Yes."

"You're thinking about ...", Vic grew quiet as he organized the jumble of thoughts. "What's an 'Orb'? Why is it being 'cracked' making you so concerned?"

He felt her pause.

*"English is my first and only language."* She searched for the best words. *"The unusual affects of the Orb on your world are naturally contained by this mountain.* She paused again. *"Yes, Guardians! Seems a well chosen word. The Guardians keep the effect of the Orb contained inside this mountain."*

"What does that mean?"

*"If the crack in the Orb comes all the way open, reality shifting energy that should not be in your world would shatter this part of your planet's continent and it will sink into the ocean."*

## Chapter Two

*“Up ahead is a part of the mountain that has been my home. A place.”*

Vic/Kihia could feel how tired they were. A hour straight of climbing.

They got to a flat section of the mountain. A place to rest.

They both stood there, one inside the other, and the ledge seemed solid. Vic brushed some loose snow off his parka and looked back from where they'd come from. The rock face still changed shape behind them with a ferocious roar. Loose granite crumbled off and trickled down the mountain. The ledge under them seemed to stay the same shape. Everything here was calm except for their thrumming heart.

Vic/Kihia looked ahead. The mostly flat ledge opened up to a passageway about three meters away and into the sheer rock. He didn't remember seeing that particular passageway on any of his previous expeditions up Manaslu. With his eyes, he followed the cave opening until he noticed the overhang of rock. At this end of the ledge there was enough space for him to lay his backpack down. It bounced and vibrated with the mountain's shifting.

He felt her inside his body, moving along his nerves.

“I feel like a coat.”, he said without sarcasm. He pushed on his parka sleeves, brushed off more snow and crumbled granite.

*“We're probably safe here.”*, Kihia finally said.

“You worry about being safe?”

*“That's true. I never worried about that before. For endless time, I've never felt what you call worry for myself.”*

A massive chunk of granite broke free and fell off the mountain, rumbled down. Vic scampered back. Instinctively reached for the cams and biners on his climbing harness. A subconscious reaction. “The F---!” His heavy breaths swirled around his head.

*“That tumbling rock really worried you! Can you feel when I worry? I know I'm not as good at it as you are.”*

A blast of icy wind whistled down into the passageway.

“Right, well I'm new to this split personality, demon possession thing.” He felt his lips going numb.

*“Demon?”*, she searched Vic's mind. *“I'm not some mythical demon, Vic. Demons possess and I'm letting you control me. Does that make you the demon?”*

Vic reached up and couldn't feel the glove against his frozen lips. “Whatever happened back there with us I can't explain another way.” He zipped up the front of his parka to cover his face. The wind had picked up. The chill factor dropped another few degrees.

*“Listen, just relax here for a bit. It seems they can't find us. We're half here and half not here.”* said Kihia.

“What?”

*“I could feel you wondering.”*, she said, *“When I moved into your body, I mixed with your physical body. I gained the advantage of being more solid. You gained an advantage of not being wholly physical. That's how we could climb so quickly. I hoped that'd happen.”*

“How does that even happen?”, Vic asked.

*“The more I experience your reality, the more of it's rules I understand. Only some of the physical rules in your reality actually apply to me. It's probably complicated but I'm not a ghost or a demon. I'm from another reality. In fact, the only way I can exist in your story reality is if I move around more like a spirit. That's the best I can do, according to these rules. Joining with you gave me some unexpected options and changed the rules.”*

Inside his head, Vic caught a gleam of clarity, as if he actually understood what she just said. Then it was gone. He shook his head. “Fine but while you're telling me that, I'm still expecting this mountain to jump up and kick 'us' in our collective ...”

*“I'm not entirely sure why they haven't.”*, she offered quickly. She could tell his patience was running out. *“Right now, I guess, we don't come across to them as completely one or the other. Solid or spirit. We're probably confusing them. But if you touched the mountain, they'd be able to tell you're the real one.”*

Vic looked down. “So they can only find ... us ... if I'm touching rock?” He jabbed his finger at where his boots touched the ledge.

“Right.”, Kihia said. “If I tried to explain that part, I'd sound like I'm just making it all up.”

“Well ...” Vic shrugged, “Just tell me that reality doesn't make any sense here.” He watched the mountain shift around him. “I'd believe that.”

“Go with that. And that we're in two places at once and without them knowing exactly where we are at any moment, it effectively hides us in both places.”, she said.

Vic bent over, picked up his pack and swung it onto his back “Thanks for getting me this far. Only seven thousand more feet to the summit.”

She spoke into his mind like always but this time Vic could almost hear her words as if she'd spoken normally. “Earlier we both saw light from the mountain.”

“Yeah, I remember the light. I felt drawn to it as we climbed.”

“That passageway leads to the Orb. The light in the darkness”, she said with confidence. She felt his resistance. “Don't you humans have an expression? Always head towards the light?”

Vic saw the faint outline of the rock where the golden light seeped through the cracks. He shook his head, waved off that idea. Remembered his promise.

“Forget it. I'm getting to the top of this rock and I'm releasing these ashes.” Vic/Kihia wrapped their hand around the ampule on his necklace. “That's it. I'm done after that. I'm not interested in your orb.”, Vic waved his hand. “After that, I appreciate your help, but I expect you to get out of my body.” Vic watched the rock shift around him. He didn't feel as confident as he sounded and he knew Kihia saw right through his bluff. Anyways, bluffs are useless if the other player can see your cards.

“You'll still need me then.” Her voice wavered a bit, a hint of sadness. Her emotion surprised him. How'd she learn emotions so quickly? Could she eventually be able to manipulate his emotions?

A raw tingle in his chest moved, like little insect legs crawling around inside. Vic felt woozy and leaned with his gloved hand against the nearest cascade of ice, to clear his head.

“Careful Vic!”, said Kihia. “You're becoming solid!”

The ice snapped, cracked and opened around Vic's hand like a snapping mouth. He pulled his hand back to his chest. “Dammnit, that effen ice nearly bit my hand off!”, he cradled his hand. He

realized that he'd subconsciously backed up against the opposite wall. Insanely, the rock and ice opened. The new crevasse formed within a second and it threatened to snap shut and swallow him/them.

She jerked their body. Vic instantly felt that same raw tingle in his legs and arms. They went numb. He felt his body shift. Kihia was using his limbs to push them further away from the snapping rock. He lost his balance on the debris littering the ledge. Tumbled forward. Their body fell to the ledge with a crunch.

The tingle subsided. A dull pain registered in his brain and he connected the feeling with the fact that his leg ended up pinned underneath his chest. Bruised.

“Ouch.” His brain reeled, still unable to decipher the signals his body was sending.

*“I can feel that! Was that ... unfair?”*, Kihia said with a hint of remorse. *“I took over some of your body functions ...”*

“Yeah, what the H!”, he rubbed his sore leg. “I’m starting to regret your help.”

He expected her to answer in some snippy way but instead she said, *“I just realized, I’m not here to help you.”*

Vic went numb. His legs crumpled like melting plastic . He felt himself fall. He expected another teeth jarring impact with the rock. Then his eyes told his brain something that couldn't really be happening. He stood up straight, his torso rigid, completely out of his own control.

His body automatically turned towards the passageway. He walked forward.

Vic sent a screaming message from his brain towards his legs, telling them to stop. He looked down and saw his body acting out. Miming actions he didn't control. Vic noticed Kihia's white hot focus on the Orb. He could almost see what it must look like from how intensely she focused on her mental image. Kihia's voice rang dully in his head again.

*“I know this seems unfair.”*

“What the hell ... what are you doing to me?”, said Vic with his own mouth. He looked around. Fear rattled inside his skull. He fully realized what she could do, Kihia could throw him off the ledge or stop his heart or force him to strip naked and freeze. But she seemed to also need him.

*“I feel such freedom! Protected! I can feel how finite your body is. It's not endless! It can ... what's die?”*

Vic/Kihia's body continued to comply, even though he screamed *no*.

He focused on the pain in his leg and forced the rebellious foot to stop a few centimeters from the threshold of the cave. Some invisible force, unnatural, emanated from inside. It felt warmer here. Unnaturally warm for being on a mountain of frozen rock and ice. Danger. Bristled the fine hairs on his neck. His phantom hand tingled as if it wanted to move deeper into the passageway, pull him down.

*“You're resisting. You're just a keyring, Vic.”*

“And what the hell are you?”, he spat.

*“I'm taking you inside.”*, she said, *“but I can't trust you with your body anymore.”*

Vic looked into the long passageway, it shimmered with a hazy cloud of snow. Sweat fell into his eyes and he couldn't wipe the sting away. His vision went blurry. Reflexively his eyes teared and the sting diminished.

Insanely, this gave Vic some hope.

*“There are parts of you Vic, that you keep locked up. Places in your soul that never stop feeling sadness. This place is neither here or anywhere but seems to occupy every part of your body. Pain wraps you in a blanket of distraction. Guilt. Is this how you feel all the time?”*

Vic couldn't form the words that would make her understand his rage at what she'd done. So he just felt that rage as intensely as he could. For a second, his body came back to him and then she snapped down her control.

*“Rage! It's sweet! Makes me feel like living!”* Her voice didn't waver.

Vic's legs, connected to his hips, which connected to his torso, continued to move. His hand slipped loosely on his wrist. Tied to puppet strings. His arm extended. Like a football linebacker



breaking through a tough line defense, pushing everything else aside.

“I’m gonna find a way to get rid of you!” Vic said through teeth clenched. His jaw filled with pain as he felt a slight sting of stomach acid on the back of his tongue.

Kihia kept Vic's body moving. Step. Another step. The cold wind of Mt. Manaslu faded and the calm interior of the passageway seemed out of place. The war inside Vic intensified.

*“I expect we’ll both be dead by the end.”*, said Kihia.

### Chapter Three

The seemingly solid sides of the passageway shook. A translucent haze of dust and snow filled the tunnel and brightened, far off into the distance. The floor descended at a slight angle but with all the debris, the going was tough. Solid footing hard to come by.

Even if Vic had complete control of his body, the first thing he'd want to do is walk nearest the walls. He couldn't think of the mountain as being a solid mountain. Not to mention it also wanted to eat him alive. So he actually felt glad that Kihia kept them to the center of the path.

“What will you do with me once we reach this 'orb room'?”, asked Vic. He said these words aloud to break the looming silence as they descended.

Kihia answered in his head. Of course he was glad for that because if she'd used his own mouth to answer, that would be entirely wrong. *“I don't know.”*

Her footing slipped on a loose set of rocks and he felt extremely off balance. His brain told his body to throw out his arms to try and regain his balance but nothing happened. “I thought you had a nefarious plan for me. Now you tell me that you have no clue as to a plan that might actually get us both out alive?”

*“That's right. In all the endless years I've spent on this mountain, watching the Orb, I never once had any doubt as to my purpose. I'm supposed to 'guard'. Do you know what that means?”*

“Yeah, it means you aren't doing your job if you're down here, wearing me like a burlap sack.”

*“That's right. I have no purpose if all that I've ever done is wait for something to happen to us. The Guardians never sleep and they never are awake. They just guard. They block outsiders from*

*getting in and they don't let things get out.” Vic felt a change in her tone. “That doesn't matter to me anymore. I'm as happy as a newborn. Where everything I reach for is a challenge and every color I see is a joy to experience. You can't imagine the freedom I feel! Being inside you has given me a chance to see more of reality.”*

“I'm not here to make you happy. You promised me you'd let me die!”

*“Why would I let you die?”* Kihia fell silent for a moment then.

Vic breathed a heavy sigh and shook his head, “The only way to experience reality is to know the fear of dying.”

*“Vic, I can feel that your reality is dying. Everything around you is on the same edge of nothingness. The Orb is affecting your reality. It has to be sealed. Finally, I can make something change. I can be more than a Guardian, I can be traitor!”*

“Did you forget that you're using me? Am I gonna benefit from this arranged marriage?”

*“I can get you closer to the most intense pain possible in your world. I can distract you from your guilt for endless time.”*

Vic turned inward and felt his heart beating faster. Somehow his awareness had cleared enough that he had a way to feel the parts of his body that Kihia had previously taken control over.

The pathway eventually opened up into a large cavern that no one could imagine existed in the center of the mountain. Vic looked up. He saw that the crystalline spikes that descended from the cavern ceiling were enormous. Radiant showers of light prised through the haze and sitting half inside the sheer granite wall across from them was a sphere of light.

The Orb.

He felt a tug on his necklace. He looked down and saw his hand at his side. His gaze continued to the Orb. It shimmered, the amazing sight completely distracted him. From a distinct dark spot on the surface of the sphere ... a horse jumped out. Fully formed, brown with magnificently perfect muscles that contained beautiful strength. It brayed frantically as it flew, without grace, through the air. The hapless animal smashed against the sharp crystals with a force that shattered its body. Then within seconds, the mountain opened and swallowed the carcass, then scrubbed the spot clean. No trace of the animal remained.

“That can't be.”

“*It wasn't.*”, replied Kihia. “*Did you feel that?*”

“What?”

“*Something that happened to me before, months ago. I felt a little nudge towards that ... necklace ... of yours. What's is it?*”

Then a swarm of butterflies spewed from the dark spot and swirled about the cavern. Vic felt drawn to the beauty of the unexpected swarm until the mountain again did this ever dark work of scrubbing all traces of the event. Not a single small wing remained.

Vic caught his breath. “My daughters ashes are in this necklace.”

“*So you can carry her with you.*”, offered Kihia.

“Actually no one ever found her body. I had some pictures of the two of us, so I burned them. I took her birthstone she carried on her own necklace and laid the stone inside the ashes of the pictures.”

Vic could feel his stomach churning. Uneasy. His death was here in this cavern. Alone he wouldn't stand a chance against immortal Guardians. For the first time since the ledge, he felt relieved he wasn't completely alone. She was still inside him and it made sense for her to stay inside him for now. She knew more about all this than he could fathom.

“*What made the difference for you, Vic? Why do you give up now?*”

“I guess it's better to wander in the dark with a friend than walk a lonely road.”

“*Friendship?*”

He then felt nothing but empty regret that he'd wasted the last months of his life. His death would be too short to absolve him completely and he'd leave nothing behind. “Alright, I can tell what you're thinking and I hope this idea of yours works. I'll do what I can to help you but why do you need to get closer to the Orb?”

“*I'm compelled to.*”

Vic looked down and saw the pathway drop off into a short but steep decline. He watched his body step to the edge.

“Wait!”

Kihia didn't pause. He fell forward and tumbled against the rock. An outcropping cracked in two as he smashed against it, snapping some ribs in the rib cage he could now feel. The pain distracted him.

Kihia stood him up again. Part of the mountain groaned, moved toward him like a wave. Vic refocused his eyes and he could feel that his right knee was nearly shredded. He saw the cavern walls sliding past him as he ran towards the Orb. Kihia impelled him forward.

*"I guess I just realized something."*, said Kihia.

"There's no more time for anymore soul searching!"

A massive skyscraper emerged from the dark spot and crashed upwards against the mountain, as the granite opened up and absorbed the full form of it. The enormous noise of shattering glass and tearing metal in the too small cavern instantly forced Vic's ears to bleed. He looked into one of the windows that passed by and he saw the blood drained face of an old woman who frantically gripped the window frame in hopes of keeping her steady. She continued to violently shake. He locked eyes with this nameless victim for the few seconds she had left and watched as she disappeared past him in a red haze of exploding dust against the cavern walls.

"What in the world is going on in here?" Vic screamed.

*"The Orb is not part of your world. What you see is the attempts of this reality trying to repair the break between my reality and yours."*

Kihia influenced Vic to jump sidelong around an outcropping. Pain from his injured knee blasted Vic's brain.

"This is too much pain. My body wasn't meant for this!", he protested but he felt more bodily control as he experienced more pain. It distracted. It pushed his body further out of Kihia's control and more into his control.

*"When I attempted to join with your daughter Chaya, she said the same thing. Inside her head. It's how I learned english."*

"What?", said Vic completely blindsided by this new information.

*"We are close enough."*

The ampule attached to the necklace around Vic's neck lifted towards the Orb, only two meters away. It pulled on the leather string and made it dig into his neck.

They pulled off the necklace. They held it in Vic's hand just as a massive burning oak tree emerged from the Orb only meters from them. Vic/*Kihia* rolled away and leaned against a boulder.

“Tell me what you meant about joining with my daughter!”, screamed Vic over the roar.

The oak tree flipped over him. Thousands of dry leaves ringed with flame. Its thick branches groaned, charred with orange ringlets of rapidly smoldering ash. The fierce red licks of thick flame touched the ceiling and a waves of black smoke rolled upwards. The crackle of the swiftly cracking crystals chimed and mixed with the deep rumble of the impact of thousands of pounds of oak.

*“The fragment you think is a birthstone, inside this necklace, is a piece of this Orb. I realize now that's what I've been drawn to. I couldn't touch it before, when I was drawn to your daughter. I realized I could join with your daughter only moments before the Guardians threw her off the mountain. But I kept some of her essence. Kind of an echo of her.”*

“It ... wasn't my fault?”, breathed Vic. He felt dizzy. “That's why you wanted me. That's why you seemed so much like her before. ”

The boulder behind Vic suddenly knifed outward in an attempt to catch some of the burning oak tree as it passed. *Kihia* noticed it nearly a second too late. She lunged their body away and the sharp edged rock cuts into Vic's abdomen, spilling some of his internal organs.

It's enough to kill him, eventually and quite soon. He has a small fraction of time left to come to terms with his wasted life after her death. His eyes unfocus. The sounds of madness around him mutes to a dry murmur.

Vic's body staggers.

*Kihia* tries to regain more control but Vic's brain automatically takes control of his internal systems. *Kihia* has no experience at keeping him from going into shock. Vic's body crumples and she can feel her own essence weakening as Vic dies. She forces Vic's body to crawl. The mountain crashes around them.

She animates his body.

The necklace still clutched in the nearly lifeless hand.

She lifts it. Slowly. The Orb tugs on the fragment. Brings it closer to the dark spot.

Suddenly Vic's body is sucked through the fragment and streams into the crack. His body folds and slips through the eye of the needle, threaded.

He's gone. Exorcised from her.

Kihia's ethereal body is left behind in the former shape of Vic. The fragment, sits in her palm as she seemed to retain the solid nature she gained while inside Vic. The fragment slowly starts to phase through her palm. Her solidity is fading.

She lifts it higher and connects with the Orb surface.

*"This is what a Guardian does."*

After a quick smile, she also siphons through the fragment and her essence flows into the Orb but this time the crack shivers. Vibrates. Becomes blurred, as if it occupied more than one level of space.

With that final sacrifice, she seals the crack.

The Orb dims. It's golden internal light fades. The entire cavern falls into darkness. She becomes only a shadow moving along the cavern walls until even her ghost is gone.

## ***Epilogue***

At the bottom of Mt. Manaslu, in the cold, drafty outpost, every scientist and one visitor stopped shaking and breathed a collective sigh of relief. The scientists stare in surprise and shock as the computer models dutifully mapped the intense tremors that rattled through the mountain. The visiting young girl looks out of the window and up at the darkened hulk of Mt. Manaslu. Her face is etched in worry.

As the rumbling slowly faded, the spikes of ink on the printouts coming from the computer also diminished.

The mountain calmed.

Then the youngest scientist steadied himself and meekly squeaked, "But how....?"

Chaya choked back a sob and rubbed her neck where her necklace used to be. “You're saying my dad climbed anyway, during all that ... and ALONE?”

“Yes, he left 4 days ago. We told him not to go”, someone said.

She touched the scars on her face and arms where she'd broken her bones months before from the fall. She remembered how lucky she was that some Sherpas had found her, half buried in snow, and brought her back to the village. When she was well enough to speak she asked how they'd found her. They had said the Spirit of the Mountain led them to her. She'd left the village a few months later and tried to track down her father for years. She'd found that he'd left his job and moved away somewhere. Finally she learned he was here at Manaslu, but she'd been four days too late.

“I'm leaving in the morning.” and she opened her pack to make sure she had all the climbing gear she needed. Food, water, emergency supplies, and thicker rope.

“The mountain is still too unstable. We can't let you go.”, said the team leader.

“You stay here. Monitor my ascent. I'll keep in constant contact with the base. Wouldn't you love to get first hand data about what's going on up there?”

The guys looked at each other and fell silent.

“My dad could be up there. He might need my help. I'm going in the morning.”

Only the computers beeped a reply as Chaya sat down next to the monitor with the satellite overview image of Mt. Manaslu lit in the gloomy darkness. Her thoughts drifted. She was terrified and happy that she might see her father again and if anything had happened to him...she'd never forgive herself.

**Fin**