

## *Chapter One*

On one of those crisp, sunny afternoons, Rica Spanavello was falling asleep atop her bed. The fluffy comforter and lifted bedframe, made her feel as though she was floating. A breeze wafted in through the window, scented by spring flowers and moist earth. The breeze picked up her hair and tickled her nose with it. Rica lazily pawed at her face, batting the strands away. She could hear the breeze at work, rustling leaves of the maple tree outside her bedroom window and imagined she was riding that breeze somewhere vast and serene, on the back of a delicate cloud which she sank into endlessly. Soon, she fell into deep, deep sleep....and emerged into vivid dreams.

She walked weightlessly through milky, pearlescent fog. It crept away, and left behind endlessly empty space. Suddenly, a brand new landscape fell on top of Rica. She felt dirt, pebbles, and blades of blue grass pass through her body and solidify beneath her feet. In front of her, large, weathered, moss-covered stones stood rooted into the ground at awkward angles. When she tried to look around, she found she was unable. So she walked in the only direction available to her.

Her feet propelled her forward enthusiastically and without her consent. As she strode on, she sensed the forest growing around her. Rica heard wood creak and groan, as trees reached giant proportions, steadily closing in on the ever narrowing space where she existed. But her feet continued to step and the forest continued to grow. Their pace quickened as she felt that the trees around her reach the apex of their growth. In a last desperate burst, they sprouted up toward the skyline and shot out branches and leaves, cracking under the force of their own violent growth. They splintered and fell around Rica, and simultaneously decaying into pulpy mulch that littered the ground. From the remains,

the next wave of seedlings grew voraciously skyward. And her feet matched the relentless pace of the forest. Once they reached their previous height, the trees broke and fell, they rotted and crumbled, and began to grow again. Rica's heart beat too fast as new trees snaked upward swiftly as she could--until they could no longer. She cringed at the sound of crunching branches and bark. Her insides churned, her heart raced, but her legs were unrelenting, even as the behemoth of trees came crashing down around her. She was moving so quickly that the forest was a blur, flashing between towering sylvas and leveled earth. And then, suddenly, everything stopped—her feet, the forest, her heart, and her breath.

Relief washed over Rica like fresh water. She looked down to realize that she was standing waist high in a luke-warm, clear lake dotted with tiny islands of moss. She waded to one of the many moss islands. Rica watched her hands sink unnaturally deep into the moss. She struggled to pull them out. Only when she gave up and relaxed, did they slip out effortlessly. She repositioned her hands and hoisted herself up onto the spongy surface.

Her head turned to the right to observe the horizon where black clouds rolled in swiftly towards her. But long before they reached her, the clouds bubbled up and out of existence. When Rica turned her head forward again, there was a woman sitting cross-legged in front of her, draped in loosely woven, cream-colored cloth.

The woman faced Rica with a peaceful demeanor, her closed eyes accented by swirling lines of darkened skin on her cheeks and forehead. Long bristles of blue-black hair stood up stiff in all directions and arched down the her back.

The woman opened her mouth and the words poured out--wrong. They were the wrong pitch, the wrong loudness, the wrong language. The woman's eyes shot open, including a third, sideways eye, the sight of which caused Rica to recoil. The blue, green-flecked, opalescent eyes stared not at Rica

nor past her, but directly into Rica. Her eyes closed again, the woman's words had adjusted into something Rica could understand, but barely hear.

“I asked to be taken to the one with the greatest probability of...”

Her voice was drowned out by the rustling of leaves.

“...but it seems...”

The wind roared.

“...found me.”

It didn't occur to Rica that speaking was an option, so she listened.

“...give you a gift...”

The woman's arms spread wide, revealing notches of bones protruding from each of her visible joints.

“...ter than any...”

She pointed to Rica, who could once again feel the warm breeze from her room. “...have on your globe.

“If you...”

Rica struggled to hear.

“...accept?”

The moss-covered world flickered into darkness. Then reappeared

“....do you accept?”

The woman stared at her, awaiting for Rica's response. Rica tried to piece together was said, but found herself staring helplessly back at the woman.

The woman pointed to Rica.

“We give you the...”

She pointed to herself and then back to Rica.

“...give you...most feared prison...”

The world faded away again into darkness, then fog. Rica fought to return. She remembered the feeling of the damp moss in her hands, and was back.

“...lease accept...”

The woman's eyes begged and she held out six spherical beads of different colors.

Rica was mesmerized by them.

“Do you accept?”

“Su—ure.” Rica heard herself say in a voice that was not quite her own.

The relief spread over the woman's face. Her eyes upturned and she smiled. With no forewarning, the woman pulled a giant, jagged knife from no discernable place and sliced open her hand which held the beads. A second lash of the knife cut Rica's stomach wide open and the woman thrust her bloodied hand into the wound. Rica was paralyzed and could only watch in horror. The woman withdrew her hand from Rica's abdomen and from behind her own back the woman produced a wooden box with cold, metal rims. She handed the box to Rica, who accepted it completely forgetting about the great gash in her abdomen. The woman held her palm in front of Rica, signing “stop.” She chanted loudly in her wrong words and a glowing sphere appeared around Rica and the box. The sphere faded away and the woman motioned eagerly towards the box. Rica lifted the lid and a flurry of teeth, fangs, horns, and eyes sprung out.

Rica gasped and her bedroom fell on her head.

Rica opened her eyes and was surrounded by familiar drapings: her cream-white walls with lilac

trim, off-white carpet with speckles of color to disguise dirt and litter, a standard white computer desk with matching chair. She spread her fingers out across her rose-patterned comforter; it was soft and it was hers.

Since she began her afternoon nap, the sun had sunk from its omniscient overhead position to a low glow that cast elongated shadows from the fixtures of her room and vegetation outside her window. The cool breeze that had rocked her to sleep was nowhere to be found, letting a sticky heat settle on her arms, legs and neck. Rica winced from the pain of that particular headache which always seemed to accompany the disorientation of waking up to less daylight than one had fallen asleep to; a dull ache pulsed above her left eye.

She rallied her muscles for the journey toward a glass of water. Jerky and slothlike, Rica dragged herself to the edge of the bed and swung her feet off the side. Instead of landing on the firmly coiled carpet, her feet hit a warm, furry lump. The lump let out an ungodly sound and Rica felt multiple small stabs into the sides of her legs. A yelp escaped her. And when she looked over the side of her bed, she saw the fury of the wooden, dream box removing its claws from her flesh.

To be continued...