

SPLINTERED LIGHT / Chapter 1

Rainforest, Waimanu, HI | Sunday 1703 HST

The girl pounded down the forest path into deepening darkness. The bottom of the cloud ahead had lowered almost to ground level. A part of her mind sensed its moisture condense, its droplets form and gather and grow heavier. Rain would slicken the trail, slow her down. The storm was coming on so fast it seemed unnatural.

Did he make it happen? How?

Another part of her mind ranged outward, seeking the dark thing in pursuit, calculating distance and direction, estimating his intercept time.

He's gaining!

She picked up the pace, running flat out on the uneven ground, feet finding purchase with the instinct of a mountain goat. Her mind made another reflex calculation as lungs and heart edged into the anaerobic zone.

I can't keep this up. He's too damn fast.

The cloud bottom ruptured then and the rain came, torrents so heavy they hammered through the triple canopy as if it were tissue paper. The mental radar that let her detect him went chaotic, its signal degraded by the rain. But that would work both ways: *he can't pinpoint me either.*

The girl skidded on a wet stone and slammed against a tree, ripping her shirt on the rough bark, scraping skin off her shoulder. She swore with a hard grimace and spun off the trail.

Yes! A little fork... maybe... if he'll just buy it...

She ripped a second piece of sleeve, broke a branch and snagged the cloth on it, stepping on rocks and tree roots to avoid leaving footprints. She edged down the side of the trail, wet feet in the streams of water that would erase signs of her passage, then took flight again. The rain came down harder. Sudden torrential downpours were common enough on this part of the island, but this one? *Just too incredible.*

Lightning flashed. The compression wave followed instantly, slamming branches and debris into her back, knocking her down. She rolled as she hit the mud, then flipped upright and staggered onward. Her cheek was numb and she spat blood.

Did he cause the lightning? Could he have that kind of power? Here, of all places? How?

Fruitless questions now. The cards had been dealt, the dice rolled.

Too much power!

Fear began to build on that possibility.

And I'm totally turned around! How can I be lost in my own forest?

The fear rushed toward panic. She forced it down by reaching out to feel the forest with her whole mind. The interconnectedness flowed through her, its unity triggering commands from her mind to her body. Glands reacted, neurochemicals flowing into her brain's blood, a complex orchestrated balance of pain suppressants and stimulants.

Adrenaline-laced strength flooded back into her wobbly legs. She resumed running down the trail, feet again anticipating each unevenness and adjusting instinctively. Her mind filled with the confidence that she was truly a creature of this forest: adaptable, resourceful, agile, powerful. Calmness returned.

The rain stopped abruptly as she ran out of its shaft into sunlight and onto a dry trail. Yet the joy and calm proved fleeting; with the rain behind she sensed the distance between them had been halved. He was following her like a homing missile.

How can he do that? Through that downpour!

Panic flared again and she almost tripped.

Think! Make a trap? No, that would take too much time; he hadn't bought into the decoyed path, so he'd be on her before she could fashion anything damaging.

Sisters, help me!

Images of white-robed women flashed across part of her consciousness as she ran. *Face your fear, child*, stern voices invoked, *stop running. Turn and fight.*

Thunder roared behind her, as if the storm would spin on its heels and drag her back. She ran toward the late-day sun. A familiar tree flashed by, and she was no longer lost; the trail dead-ended not far ahead on a volcanic headland overlooking the bay.

I will face my fear. But on my battleground, not his.

Seconds later, without slowing her headlong pace, young Eva Connard hurled herself off the cliff and arrowed down toward the sun-speckled waves of Waimanu Bay a thousand feet below. A vortex formed in the bay as she plunged toward it, and spun a waterspout upward to greet her.

Merauke, Irian Jaya / Monday 1303 JYT

A gaunt face stared back at him in the mirror, a face he hadn't seen in eight long years. *The lines are deeper. The hair is shot with gray.*

Slowly, he realized the time in captivity had enhanced his appeal rather than diminished it. He smiled at his reflection. *Yes, that will do nicely. The very image of a prophet.*

A man entered the washroom behind him, froze, and stared into the mirror.

"Mahdi!" the man gasped. He went down on one knee, head bowed.

"Yes," Muhammad Zurvan answered. He ran an admiring finger down the harshly handsome plane of his own cheek, but suppressed elation. *I must appear humble.* Zurvan turned away from the mirror and let the old skills rearrange his expression accordingly.

"We thought you were dead," the man glanced up, a sidelong frightened look, then lowered his eyes again. "Seven years, Mahdi..." he murmured.

Zurvan studied the man. *The myth is being re-born. I must choose my words carefully, my actions as well.*

He spoke to the man almost in a whisper. "Long years. I wandered the wilderness. Now I return."

"Praise Allah!" The man quivered, gave another sidelong glance.

"I sought enlightenment."

"Mahdi!"

"I have spoken with the Prophet."

The man dropped his other knee, prostrating himself in the prayer position, gasping. Zurvan smiled at the top of the man's turbaned head. *I have him now.*

"I have met the Christ."

The man moaned.

"He is with us. He will pray with us, with the Mahdi. Speak it now."

The man began to sob, reciting the proper prayer. Zurvan stroked his beard, listening acutely, parsing the complex intonations. *Excellent! Years with no contact and they still remember the code, and the al-Mahama al-Kubra. Their discipline remains intact.* He erased elation from his face, making it thoughtful, humble, caring. Then he spoke.

"I have wrestled with Shaitan, in the wilderness."

The man jerked back up on his knees, shocked, and just stared.

"By Allah's grace, I overcame him."

"Praise Allah!" The man pulled off his belt and began to whip his back, weeping with joy, working himself into ecstasy. Zurvan watched for a bit, keeping his expression fixed.

Not too bright. But faithful; he stayed in place for years. He retained the code and came when I called.

Zurvan grabbed the man's flailing hand. "Peace, my son. What is your name?"

"Ahmed, Mahdi."

"Ahmed. Yes, I remember now. You were a boy when I entered the wilderness. You are a man now. And you remembered the code."

"I am your servant! As before. As always."

Zurvan reached out to grasp the man's shoulder. *If you can get me off this island you are. If not, I'll kill you.* He smiled at the thought. *So many years a prisoner of those wretched little creatures. I'm overdue for some killing.*

"Good. Ahmed, there must be no word of my return. Not a hint."

Ahmed's eyes widened, disappointment clear on his face.

"I overcame Shaitan once, Ahmed, but the devil is strong. His infidel armies are in the West. They have ears and eyes, all over the world, especially here."

Ahmed straightened, puffing out his chest proudly. "Islam will conquer all, Mahdi! It is foretold! The end time!"

"Yes, Ahmed. And that time is nearly on us. But Shaitan is clever, so we must be too. Clever and quiet, and building our strength unheard and unseen until we are ready. Do you understand?"

Ahmed nodded, silent, but Zurvan read the expressions fleeting over the man's face. *You crave to announce it, the great war. So stupid. Do I kill you now, Ahmed?*

"You must hold your joy close to your heart, Ahmed. No word of my return."

The man nodded.

"Not until my time has arrived."

"The faithful, Mahdi... your *Jaesh*..."

“Of course, my friend. A few must know. But very few; cell rules apply. And first you must get me off this island, to a safe place beyond the reach of the Indonesian government. It collaborates with the infidel.”

Ahmed stroked his own beard. “There is a place... East Timor, in the highlands, a Muslim retreat. You will be safe, and welcomed.”

One of my old ones, in the safety net. Yes! Zurvan kept his expression bland. Well isolated, but... so many years? Are they compromised now?

“The United Nations? Australian peacekeepers?”

“Not in the highlands, Mahdi.”

And that country is no friend to the Indonesian government.

“Good. Then arrange it, Ahmed. Quickly! And when you return, bring me clothing. And scissors.”

Waimanu Bay, HI | Sunday 1704HST

Eva Connard sucked in air as she fell, driving it into her lungs, commanding them to supersaturate her blood with oxygen. The waterspout caught and gently cradled her body as she'd intended, bleeding off momentum as they fell together toward the water surface. Her mind's radar sensed her dark pursuer launch from the cliff top, then the water closed over and she lost contact.

She smiled grimly. He can't match my skill. He'll have a much harder landing. And then we'll see...

As she dropped through the water she framed a second intention, a safety valve: *Attend me, my friends! I may need your help.* She sensed their instantaneous alertness as they forsook their game, turned as one and sped toward her from the deeper waters offshore.

How far out? She couldn't tell; water diminished her ranging ability almost to zero. *But they're coming if I need them. Good!*

Eva flipped and landed on the bay bottom, feet kicking up coarse black volcanic sand mixed with organic sediment. Fish flashed away, startled. The water was not as clear as it sometimes was, but neither was it murky. *No advantage either way*, she decided, but edged into the partial concealment of a rock outcrop anyway. A reflexive twist of her mind adjusted local gravity enough to counter buoyancy as she anchored herself to the rock. *Let him come to me; let him use up his oxygen and energy.*

Almost on cue, a pressure wave told her he'd hit the water surface ten meters above. She smiled. *Ouch! That must've hurt.*

And there the thing was, a formless shadow, almost invisible except for the distortion it caused in the water and the flickering around its edges. It twisted as it sank down.

Eva pulled a null field over herself and watched her body fade into just a hint of waviness in the water, a wraith against the rock and sand. *Find me if you can.* Then she slowed her racing pulse, reducing oxygen consumption. *Let's see who runs out of air first, bozo.*

The amorphous nothingness drove through the water and splashed up a wave of sand and sediment as it smacked into the bottom twenty meters away. *Ouch, that hurt, too, I bet. Or...*

It was, in theory, possible to project a gravitational field outward from the body. A higher skill level than she'd yet achieved, but... maybe not beyond that of her pursuer. The possibilities flashed across her mind and converged: drive a gravity wedge ahead of you to decelerate, push it down through the water into the bottom. *Did I see what I saw?* Her mind played it back. The distortion in the water could have been a null field around his body, or it could have been a gravity wave. *Deception, a decoy. He's very smart. And he's not where I think!*

Eva's legs reacted instantly on the thought, pushing her away from the rock just as his energy blade slashed down on it from behind. She spun, her own hands flaring ovals of indigo light, and parried a sweep from his foot. Coruscations erupted where their energies met. She sprang backwards into the cloud of sediment his decoy had raised, and snapped off her blades. *I can deceive, too.*

Eva blinked away the searing afterimages on her retinas, turned at right angles and swam across the bottom to flank his position. Fear rose again but adrenaline and anger drove it down. *Dammit! I'm going to win this battle!*

But her determination wavered as she emerged from the sediment cloud and found him standing in front of her. If he had been stunned by impact with the water, or was running short of oxygen, he didn't show it. In fact -- she studied the flickering black nimbus around the emptiness of his null field -- *he's laughing! He's laughing at me!*

Teasingly, tiny energy blades grew from his hands, making figure eights in the water. More laughter, mocking.

Anger shook Eva and her hands reflexively flared energy blades, but then her training imposed the coolness of reason. *I can deceive, too.* She waved blades to mimic her enemy's, slicing bigger figure eights, the water hissing and vanishing into the planes of pure energy. *Just watch my hands.*

He did, crabbing sideways with lightning quickness, his blades elongating to match hers, but not engaging. He danced across the bay bottom, studying her hand motions, hesitating.

Now Eva laughed at him. *Cautious. As well you should be. But it's too late now, sucker!*

The dolphin slammed into his back, driving him hard against the rock outcrop. Another one caught him from the side as he bounced off the rock; it knocked him onto the bay floor. A third hit him again, on a downward trajectory, driving him into the sand and muck.

Enough! Her mind screamed the command and the rest of the school broke off their attack and gathered around her, chirping. Eva Connard petted the alpha female on her nose and framed the intention that they should return to their own dolphin games. *Thank you, my friends. Well played.*

Senate Office Building, Washington, DC | Sunday 2210 EST

The Capitol dome gleamed white under its lights. The Senator contemplated it for a few silent moments through the window of his corner office in the Russell Senate Office Building. Then he raised his hand off his considerable paunch, gesturing toward the dome and the flag flying off to its side.

"Power."

He's getting right to it tonight, the younger man thought as he suppressed a fidget. "I'm aware of that, Senator."

"But not enough, son. Not enough power for what's comin' at us."

"I'm aware of that, too, Senator." *He'll lead off with patriotism.*

The Senator examined him, then glanced back out the window. He spoke sonorously. "We need to control this new species, boy. Adopt 'em, make 'em our own. It's the only way America will be safe."

"A way to make America safe; yes, Senator."

"I hear a 'but' in there, boy."

"Control is the issue. I don't believe it's possible."

"You wet behind the ears, son? It's always possible; just need the right leverage."

"Right. A judicious application of power. So you've said, Senator. And I've heard."

"I worry about you, boy. Seems like you hear, but you don't listen."

The younger man placed his hands flat on the desk, spread them apart then turned the palms up expressively. His ring clicked against the desktop. "I don't know what more I can do at this point, Senator."

The older man's gesture invited him to explain.

"Where's our leverage?" he continued. "The world is quiet. The Mideast is peaceful for a change. Mainstream Islamics are clamping down on their radical cousins. No other big conflicts in the world. The economy's good, the market's up. There's just nothing we can create an issue around. Nothing we can spin onto *Nova sapiens* and then come to their rescue, bring them into our camp... no opening wedge."

The Senator tilted his chair back and inspected him.

Like a bug under a microscope, the younger man thought, but went on anyway.

"And, Senator, their own strategy is working beautifully. Those young incipient *Novas* are flying completely below the radar. No publicity, no hint of what evolution is about to do to the human race. None."

The Senator's inspection continued, but he pressed on.

"And we can't expose them. You said it yourself: too much downside risk. All our projections agree on the chaos that exposure would cause."

The Senator gave a reluctant nod. "They'd be up for grabs by anyone, if we disclose their existence. Yeah. Still..."

The younger man watched him consider that, and reject it yet again. *You should see what I see running across your face, Senator. Greed. Lust. I recognize them all too well. Patriotism is just your cover.* The Senator blinked and rearranged his expression before he spoke.

"Access is the first step. Trust is the second." The older man turned aside and contemplated the Capitol dome again. "I'm lookin' for the third step here, boy," he added softly, "the one that gives us control."

"They make their own decisions at that enclave in Hawaii, Senator. Control isn't possible."

"Um. Direct control... maybe not, son. But you're smarter than that. I've seen you in action. You're slick."

"I've been working toward getting control, Senator."

"Work on it harder, son."

The Senator stared at him.

I have to do whatever he wants. I know it. He knows it. But he still toys with me. Ah, power.

“You gonna do it, boy; for the good of our country, you gonna get control...” The Senator gave him a toothy grin, crocodilian beneath empty eyes and coiffed silvery hair. “Whatever, however, you gonna deliver those *Nova sapiens* kids to us, so we control their power.” He paused, then slammed his palm down hard on the desk.

“Or you gonna be fucked six ways from Sunday!” he shouted. “So go figure it out, boy! And God bless America!”

Waimanu Bay, HI | Sunday 1711 HST

Her blood-oxygen nearly depleted, Eva Connard strode across the bay floor, grabbed the flickering darkness out of the muck and threw it ahead of her to the surface. She shot upward and out of the water, gasping in buckets of cool clean air, and swam over to him as the null field decayed and his body became visible.

“Josh! You okay?”

Her big brother bobbed on the waves, paddling weakly and coughing out water. *Shit! Hope I didn't crack another rib. He hates that.*

Joshua O'Donnell groaned and vomited.

Eva swam under him and added some buoyancy as he spasmed and vomited again. She held him around the chest, feeling his pain and easing it. *No ribs broken. No lung perforations. Good.*

“Thanks, kiddo,” he gasped, “I needed that.”

“Hang on, Josh. Don't be the tough guy. Let me finish.”

As they floated on the cool waves, Eva ran her hand over his back, sensing. *He took some nasty hits; especially that last one. But... liver... kidneys... yeah, good. All good. He really is incredibly tough.* Relief poured out of her. She wrapped a healing intention around it and let it flow from her hands into his body. His gasping eased. He sucked in seawater to rinse his mouth and spat it out. Then he turned and smiled, his turquoise eyes the same color as the sunlit water. She watched those eyes flicker bright with a mix of pride and amusement.

“Nice improvisation, kiddo. Thought I had you there for a minute. Great ambush; never saw it coming.”

“That's three times, Josh... in a row. Can we quit now?”

“I know, Sis. And I'm proud of you. But all three were close games. Too close. So we keep practicing. Sorry.”

“Live fire exercises are dangerous,” she objected. “Even with the safeguards of this place. With my mind locked into the gaming I might hurt you beyond my healing capacity.”

“Life's dangerous, Eva. Especially yours. Or it will be shortly. You said that yourself, remember?”

Yes I remember that, Joshua. The waves rocked her soothingly as she contemplated him. *And I know this is just the calm before the storm. I'm grateful we're preparing for it together, and for the love that makes you risk yourself to prepare me.*

Her brother continued. “So every damn thing I can think up to throw at you, I will. Every Sunday.”

“You're the deadliest creature on the planet, Josh. Who out there is going to throw something worse at me than you can?”

“Remember Lao Tsu, Eva.”

She smiled at him. “Those who have knowledge, don't predict. Those who predict don't have knowledge. That one?”

“Exactly. Especially around the edges of chaos.”

Edges of chaos. Yes, you're probably right; the attack will come out of nowhere. Something we can't prepare for no matter what. She sighed, splashed him, then popped out of the water to stand on its surface. *Still, he's right; we have to prepare all we can.*

“Come on, let's go have dinner,” she said, laughing.

Eva Connard bent down, grabbed her big brother's hand and yanked him up to stand with her on the water's surface. Together they ran across the top of the gravity-flattened waves and up the black sand beach toward their enclave deep in the Big Island's volcanic rock.