

“WHEN THE MORNING STARS SANG”

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CHAPTER ONE

Mark was a singularity, a point, the center of everything, in a world that glistened under a silver sun and a sky the color of ice.

He was the center. Everything else came to him. At first it came as pattern, shadows crossing a field of light. Some patterns persisted, others changed. Color began. The sun was a giant yellow disk in a blue sky. The sounds of the shore came to him in overwhelming concert,

He was essence only.

He learned sequence, that high tide followed low, sun followed storm, one season passed into another.

Mark was a singularity around which a field of energy grew in complex ways. As his world came to him, he absorbed it, abstracted it and learned to manipulate the symbols.

He found that the visualization of a straight line to a distant point would result to his coming to that point. He practiced the art until it became reflexive, then used it, moving in linear fashion, to explore everything around him. He began to know what was beyond the shoreline. To the south, cliffs rose perpendicular to the sky, forming inland valleys, a dense wilderness of trees and green plants and full of the sound and motion of animal life.

Mark knew his world in two ways. In the first way he knew it immediately, sensually. He entered the green factories of leaves, working with them under the power of the sun. He moved into an outcrop of rock and made a crystalline passage through its structure. He crossed the boundaries of snowflakes as they grew and moved with them as they branched into hexagonal forms.

There was a second way he knew his world. Along with the immediacy of sense came the realization of pattern and process. He could objectify these and abstract the equation that described it.

He observed the widening cracks in a rock wall, judging when it might split from the mountain, and, at the moment it did, he would enter it and free fall to the ground. He judged the constant acceleration, differentiated the equation twice. And understood gravity.

Mark moved on to explore the plant and animal forms. He liked the warmth and liveliness of the mammals best, their nervous energy, the quick and lusty matings, their will to live.

After a time he triangulated journeys into the trees and rode accipiters into the sky, plunging with them to the ground to take prey. Predation was intoxicating but not without guilt. He took it as a hard necessity, and did not flinch from bonding with the prey as well as the predator.

He had come to know life extinction but thought himself immortal. Because he lived sensually and mathematically, he came to know and understand the structures, living forms and natural laws of his world and took joy in all of it.

Perceptibly, it began to change. One small loss merged into another. The world no longer rushed at him with kaleidoscopic impact. He, who had mastered the science of controlled passage at great speed, now moved in slow measured steps, anchored to the earth. Everywhere there were limits. He saw things only in part. Trees became objectified. One hill blocked the view of another. The sun was very far away in a pale blue sky, warming him in his new confinement. Mark knew what it was. He had acquired a boundary.

His height was limited. He looked down as he walked, seeing, partially, what he was. He could see his hands. They were animal-like. His feet were encased in leather.

He looked for a pond, some stillwater, so that he could see himself. He had looked before, trying to discover his image, but could see nothing. It would be different now.

Everything had boundaries here. He walked on grass that bent away and earth that resisted his foot-fall. Shrubs snagged the fabric that covered him and trees refused him passage. What little he saw of the world vanished when he closed his eyes. In his mind he could see his destination- a clearing, a complex where there would be structures of concrete and glass and brick. He willed himself to be in it, to know it, but could not. Mark continued his walk, one step at a time.

It was morning of her first day.

Jessie looked up. She was sentient, self-aware, without boundary. She saw how sunlight filtered through spaces in the roof of the forest and how the air moved leaves into ever-changing patterns of green. The leaves vibrated with color and motion, inviting her.

The linear translation was immediate and she was there, balancing and dancing with them. For a long time she moved to their rhythm and sang slight melodies in counterpoint to the restless windsong. She was motion, she was color, she was joy.

The transport ended.

She was confined, standing upright on the ground. Her mind was a web of graphs, lines and numbers. Facts moved along the lines and made the numbers dance. She had a program. She knew who she was and where she should go.

She touched her clothing, khaki shorts and a white t-shirt. She wore hiking boots. The forest, cool and green, was all around her. And the leaves rustled in the wind. How wild and beautiful it had been- she thought. How beautiful it still was.

She could sense her body. Quick and graceful, she moved over the forest floor. Shadows deepened the blue-green of her eyes. Her short, brown hair curled and clung close to her head. Her mind followed the program that led her on. Far from this place there would be others like her. She felt compelled to seek them out.

Alan and Sara came to consciousness synchronous with each other and became aware of each other in that same moment. They were not limited by a boundary- individual or shared- and their sudden mutual discovery was intoxicating.

The world was bright and new and filled with light, but they did not attend to it. Having no form, they could not approach each other or speak, but it was not necessary. They knew each other's mind as if it were their own- Alan, without guile, intense, passionate, unyielding to a fault- Sara, a being of sweet affection, intelligent, caring and vulnerable. Their enjoyment of each other was charming and innocent.

They were on a beach so extensive that the far distance was shrouded in mist, where water, sky and sand became one. In this arena of light and sound they began to speak to each other mentally. They began to play with words and phrases- all constructed logically and projected with proper linguistic style- only to dissolve into a shared emotional state without words. One would create humor, the other receive it. There was affection, delight, surprise and a wonder at what had happened.

The surf thundered ashore, arrived in full force, then retreated, more quietly than it came. For a time there would be silence, then the ocean would lift and the waves return. It was in one of these quiet moments that the other change took place. It was sudden, incomprehensible. They realized that they were separate, each confined by structure. They stood, bewildered at their embodiment, seeing each other in a different way, objectified, like the land, sea and sky around them.

They had form- a man and a woman- clothed in casual garments, standing on an isolated beach. They were both slender. She was of average height- he somewhat taller. He had dark hair and eyes, in strong contrast to his fair skin. Sara was blonde and fair. They looked at each other. Each felt a sense of loss and confusion.

He came close and touched her hair. He spoke to her mentally. *"You're so beautiful to me- still so beautiful-"*

Trembling, she pushed his hand away. *"I don't understand,"* she said, *"Help me understand-"*

He touched her face. *"Something has come between us. I don't know what it is, but it has made us different, somehow."*

She turned away. *"How- why- all of this? My mind is spinning. There's darkness between us. Is that what you mean?"*

Startled, he drew back and did not attempt to touch her again. *"No, I wouldn't call it that- but- perhaps- a disjunction. I realize we are separate and I feel the loss. It makes me sad. And there is this new information."*

"Information?"

He frowned. *"Facts- pressing in on my mind- knowledge without understanding- small facts- tumbling about, somehow amusing, as if they have a reality all there own, as if somebody placed it all there to no purpose. And I must order it. It's important."*

She nodded. *"It's true for me, too. It's as if a thousand files are opening in my mind."* She grew pensive. *"I'm afraid-"*

"Of what?"

"Of forgetting you- of not knowing you anymore."

"That won't happen. We'll always be together" He looked around. *"Let's walk along the beach."*

For the first time since the change, she smiled. *"Then take off your shoes."*

He looked down. *"Oh, these- of course- Why on earth would anyone want to wear them?"*

With deliberate speed, Jessie moved through the forest, slowing down only where the undergrowth was heavy, then breaking into a run in the more open spaces. With little rest, she walked and ran for several hours. In time she came to where sparse vegetation grew in packed, sandy soil. There the sun was ever-present and hot. She paused to take stock. The marine air was new to her senses as was a new sound- the muted thunder, swelling and diminishing in the distance. She continued on, coming, finally, to the edge of the beach and her first sight of the ocean.

With a quick intake of breath, she gazed at the immense expanse of moving water. Infinite!- she thought- magnificent!

The cries of marine birds filled the air. There was a taste of salt on her tongue. Through the haze of sun and water she saw a man and woman walking together along the edge of the sea. It appeared that they wore clothes similar to hers but had taken off their shoes. Her thoughts reached out to them.

The two stopped, turned to her and waved.

Jessie's boots made walking in the sand difficult, but she pushed on, eager to meet Alan and Sara. Somewhat breathless, she reached them and spoke aloud, feeling it more correct somehow.

"Hello, I'm Jessie," she said.

They walked together. Jessie was barefoot now, delighting in the feel of the surf. As they grew to know each other, they began to talk mentally. Only a rogue wave, catching them unawares, would cause them to cry out aloud.

They talked about their first moments of awareness, the rapid changes they had undergone and the new knowledge they had of the world. Alan and Sara were curious about Jessie's experiences and her store of knowledge.

"Don't overestimate what I know," Jessie said. "I started with very little- a set of directions, mental maps if you will. My journey out here was difficult. I wasn't at all sure that I would find others like myself. It was part hope and intuition that brought me to this place, where I found you."

"We're glad you're here," Alan said. "Can you tell us anything more?"

"I know we can't stay in this place, delightful as it is," she said. "We'll have to head inland, away from the south shore. We're to go back in the direction I came from and explore beyond that. We'll be going north and west." She looked up at the sky. "It's past noon. We have a long way to go." She looked at them and smiled. "I hate to tell you this, but we'll have to put our shoes back on."

Jessie did not spare them. The run back was demanding. The afternoon was hot. Sweat beaded their faces, shirts clung to moist backs and the boots chafed their feet. They did not know hunger but slaked their thirst at occasional streams. At intervals they would take a break, sprawling down on the ground. At one of the breaks Sara lay back, enjoying the coolness of the forest floor.

"It feels good to stop," Sara said.

"At least the woods are cool," Alan said.

"It'll be cooler yet," Jessie said. "South Beach is at sea level. We're going upland, through to the northwest coast. You'll find the higher elevation much more comfortable."

Sara sighed. *"But I liked the beach."*

"There are nice beaches where we're going," Jessie said. "They are small, more private, but beautiful. They move in and out between rock falls. They are wide or narrow and skirt the bottom of cliffs."

Sara looked doubtful. *"Tall cliffs?"*

"They are tall, yes, but easy to climb. There will be many of them, all along the coast. The height will vary. And there will be boulders in the sea. But before we get there we'll be going through a stretch of upland prairie- a grassy plain, easy to go through. We'll make good time."

"What's to the east?" Alan asked.

Jessie was quiet for a moment. *"There are very high ridges, almost blocking the sky. They are very steep and form deep ravines, crowded with vegetation and animal life. There are almost no beaches. The ocean currents warm the coast and the ridges take rain from the clouds."*

"And the North?"

"It's a broad plain that comes to the edge of the ocean, an extensive marshland, often inundated by the sea- few animals- scanty vegetation- and many insects and birds."

"It doesn't sound hospitable."

"No, Alan, it doesn't. But we won't be going quite that far. Our destination will be short of that, and it will be some kind of artificial complex, not too far from the cliffs to the west." She paused. "As you must have gathered, the ocean is all around us. Whatever direction we take, we will come to where sea meets land. We're on an island."

"How large is this island?" Sara asked.

"In miles- and I believe you know that measure- it's over forty five miles- not much more than that."

No one said anything. After a while Alan looked at Jessie. *"That's a lot to take in- such diversity- in such a short span of time and space."*

"I could be mistaken," Jessie said, "The ecosystem information that I have does not make absolute sense in such abbreviated parameters. But this is the program I've been given."

"Maybe-" Sara started to speak, hesitated, then continued, "Does the word 'representation' come to mind?"

Alan shook his head impatiently. *"O.K. You're saying we've been given a program where great distances and large magnitudes are the norm, but we are only allowed to follow the program on a limited matrix."*

Sara was stubborn. *"The point is- we can do it."*

"I'm not sure I like this," he said.

"It's what you've got," Sara said. She continued. "We're new at this. I don't expect to understand everything at once. But eventually I will. I'm sure of it. I just wonder how many changes there are going to be."

Alan was not to be mollified. *"It doesn't matter. It's obviously out of our control, pre-determined, somehow. Maybe we're not important in all of this. Maybe our beginning was a fluke, best not thought about, best forgotten."*

"Not forgotten- never forgotten-" Sara said. She looked at him, mischief in her eyes.

"I don't intend to forget," he said. He got up, pulling her up with him. "It's time to go."

She scrambled to her feet. *"You're too serious," she said. She looked up at him. "Tell me," – how do I appear to you? You have such a finely drawn face, such dark eyes. What do I look like?"*

He looked at her, briefly. “*”Your eyes are sky-blue and your hair the color of sunlight. You’re not anxious, are you? You are beautiful enough to turn my head and tall enough to reach my nose.”*

. They laughed together. Jessie glanced at them wistfully, then turned away. She looked inward, isolating her mind for private thoughts. We were to be four, she thought. Somewhere the lines must intersect. There will be one other like us, like Sara and Alan and me. She searched her mind. I don't know him, but I know his name. She whispered it quietly to herself. “His name is Mark.”

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