

Chapter I

AN AWAKENING

THERE WAS THE darkness. It prevailed over everything: over light, over feeling, over thought, over being—over the *rhythms* of life. Nothing else seemed to exist. The darkness seemed complete. It seemed absolute: without awareness, without essence, without illumination. If there was a true void in the vast existence that we call the Universe, then here was a fair example of it. Perhaps, though, such absolute darkness somehow comes from the collective memory, from the last moment when the Maker and Nature were alone in the great void with All-That-Would-Be contained in a great sphere of Their making, moments before They both blinked and caused that sphere to explode with a great flash—the big bang: *let there be light*. Indeed, Who else could have made that sphere, *and* then, make it explode?

At the same time, all life, as we know it, is confined to luminous spheres dotting a boundless, ebony background that is fairly absolute in its own right. More, that life is a rhythm—ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, increasing and decreasing, pulsing and contracting. Indeed, that rhythm is how we *know* that we are alive; not merely *dreaming* that we exist. That rhythm is akin to the flutter that makes stars twinkle; it is what tells us that the Universe itself is alive. Perhaps, that throb is a product of the rippling shock waves; those ongoing, reverberating echoes from the powerful life-giving explosion of that great sphere. It is, indeed, through that throb: that we realize what *is*; that we then become aware of what *was*; and that we then find faith in what *will be*. Our divine sparks, the tiniest of lights, touch us deep within, and so, we *know* the love of the Divine—are *ever* in touch with the Pair—no matter *how* we know Them!

Yet, from that, we also know a realm of possibilities; a realm that is just as limitless. We also know, as was suggested, that us, the stars, the planets, the animals, and the plants are all interconnected, be it by DNA, the thread of life; by gravity, the great binding mechanism; or by some phenomenon that has yet to be identified. Indeed, the more and the better we understand that connection, the more and the better we are prepared for dealing with further discoveries. To be sure, there are some who might attach a magical quality to that preparedness—never mind if there are some who would *dismiss* magic, altogether! Those are the ones who would never see the Universe as a place of both order *and* randomness—just one *or* the other, they cry!

Otherwise, it follows, then, that an absence of rhythm might imply that one is ready to occupy a long, pine box. How easy it would be to suppose that that lack means that there is a new candidate for the daisy pusher garden. How easy it would be to conjecture that the person in question can be likened to a doornail. How easy it would be to consign that person to the dust from which we all arose.

Yet, death has a twin. We call it sleep, and the deeper the sleep, then the more death-like it is. Sleep is not only a cure for weariness, or even for great injury, but also for much that ails a person. Only when all else is at rest can the body's defenses concentrate on the affliction. It follows, then, that the deeper the sleep, the more the body—if *not* the soul—is in need of healing. Yet, even if a person is held in the absolute darkness of a coma,

there is a pulse; a simple reminder that Death has not triumphed; a throbbing of a tiny light to confirm the continuing presence of life—the presence of a *rhythm*.

Otherwise, that absolute darkness is the state in which we first find Jim Connors. He is medium height, a bit on the husky side, dark-haired, and otherwise well maintained in person, a hallmark of his just-finished tour in the U.S. Army, and of his determination to maintain the fitness he acquired during basic training. He is in the black sleep of unconsciousness, although that state is rapidly ebbing, and while he is thus unaware of all of that, he also is unaware of his *ethereal* consignment to that particular moment...*and* to that singular place!

Indeed, in the next moment, the ebbing complete, Jim perceived a motion. Gently, he was being rocked back and forth. He recognized the motion in the next instant and quickly sat up, as if alarmed.

"There-there, rest easy now, stranger," a young woman quietly urged, as she settled on the side of the bunk; and when he had lain back down, she again laid the wet cloth on his brow, something she had learned from the old cook Marta.

He smiled with admiration for her pleasant manners that finely enhanced her auburn beauty. Long hair in loose ringlets framed her smooth, cream-colored face. Yet, there was a telling sadness in her emerald eyes that alerted Jim to go easy with her. Of course, his upbringing had instilled in him the need to always be proper with any woman, as long as she continued to be proper in return.

Sitting up and leaning back against the pillow, the lad ventured, "Sure, I'll rest easy. But, tell me, who are you?"

Playfully smiling, the lass replied, "I am sorry, but Mother has stridently taught all five of us to never talk to strangers."

"Well, sure, I can appreciate the caution in that. But who would be a stranger to... To *you*," he then wondered. After briefly considering that, Jim abruptly asked, "Oh, you mean, *who* am I? Well... Well, I'm... I'm..."

Yet, when it became clear that the young man was struggling with the most basic of questions, the maiden instantly regretted her tease. She had heard of amnesia, but seeing it strike the poor lad before her, deeply saddened her. She was ready to take his hand and even beg his forgiveness. Yet, that appendage suddenly waving up and down in triumph got her to stay her own actions.

"Jim—my name *is* Jim!" he replied with a nod and a grin. Then, with a playful glint, he added, "Call me Jim."

"Jim?" she mused and thought of mentioning how odd a name it was until she decided it would be more prudent to not add to the poor fellow's misery. "Well, then call me Lenore," the Princess added, preferring to disclose her title at another time, while it was clear to Jim that she was merely echoing his phrase, likely because she had not read Melville's great work about a white whale.

Just then, a frowning older man appeared in the cabin's doorway, and noted with a dark tone, "Ah, so, he *is* aroused! Good—the King *prefers* meeting his unwanted guests when they are awake, lad! Why he wishes that, is beyond my comprehension, but then, he can afford to waste time—I am not permitted to!"

Maroon swallowtails topped a crisp white pullover shirt and black britches. A jaunty, wide-brimmed black hat with a low, flat crown topped his pate, while a gleaming scabbard and sword girthed his middle and completed his costume, which was enough to

make Jim gape in wonderment. Yet, the lad could not say *why* he had, in fact, stared in such a way. At most, all of that put him on alert, which as you will see, was a good result. Certainly, the man's unsmiling countenance was not that unusual.

As for the man's garb, it somehow seemed to fit with Jim's inability to remember more than his first name. Of course, maybe Captain Poorkind's ominous demeanor kept Jim from thinking of little more. As for Jim's full name and point of origin, he guessed that everything would come back to him in time; and with it, would come the reason for his surprise reaction to the Captain's uniform. He just had to be patient with himself until then, and he had to hope that others could be just as patient. Yet, the Captain's demeanor also compelled him to be alert.

"Jim, this is Captain Poorkind, master of *Red Dragon One*, the ship we are on," Lenore observed.

"Howdy, Captain. Thanks, for picking me up," Jim said and grinned, after touching his brow in salute, even though he had no idea of how he had gotten there—*another* missing shard.

"Actually, lad, the Princess was the one who insisted on our helping you."

"Princess," Jim wondered and looked at Lenore who nodded in the affirmative.

"In truth, sailor," the Captain continued, "she may have *doomed* you with her kindness. Apparently, King Jochanan has a deep disdain for strangers such as you. Likely, that's because your ilk is unwanted."

"Well, that's too bad, Captain," Jim said and sighed. "Some of us strangers can be downright gems if handled right. No sense going *overboard* about them, right, Princess?" he added with a wink.

"I see what you mean," she replied and winked back. "But, the *two lasses* I am travelling with might not agree."

"Yeah, I can see that. Well, okay, I'll go it alone, then. Just look for me at your *destination*."

"I wish you every success, then," she concluded with a hopeful, encouraging smile.

"Enough," the Captain suddenly roared, at last sensing the impromptu conspiracy between his two prisoners.

In the next moment, the Captain wondered if any of that really mattered. Jim was of little or no value to anyone, Poorkind reasoned, so *how* could the lad be a threat to the King's plans for the substantial island? At the same time, the Captain also knew how ruthlessly the King viewed failures; and he knew that as much as the King despised strangers, King Jochanan still wanted to *meet* each one. Captain Poorkind also sensed that that want satisfied something more than regal curiosity. Indeed, *it* did!

Believing he could still honor that regal want, while defeating any conspiracy between his captives by splitting them up, the Captain looked back down the hall outside the cabin and bellowed, "Drullkind!"

"Yes-yes, sir," his most junior officer stammered from somewhere to the right.

"Take our lost sailor topside and bind him to the mast," the Captain commanded. Then looking at Lenore he added, "Your Highness, *you* are, hereby, confined to your quarters until we reach Mirandon!"

"Sorry, if I brought that on you, Princess," Jim began.

"It is all right, Jim," she replied, touching his hand. "I know you mean well, and that matters more than anything."

"Well, just keep your clothes packed, because it won't be long before we meet again."

"I will," she said and laughed, while finding hope in the lad's words and manner.

"Enough!" the Captain grumbled again. "Now, get up, man!"

Waving his hand at the ship's master, Jim swung his feet over to the floor and sat there a moment sizing things up. Drullkind, similarly attired like his superior, had just appeared in the doorway. He was small-stature and nervous about being under the eye of the Captain. Standing, Jim then glanced at the Princess whose head was bowed with a new round of sorrow.

Lifting her head by the chin, he said, "Remember, hang in there until next time, okay? Won't do either of us any good, if you don't—*get me?*"

Blossoming into a smile of understanding, she nodded and agreed, "I do—*thank you!*"

"That's enough!" Drullkind said, trying in vain to emulate his master as he stepped into the cabin and took Jim's arm. "Let's go!"

"Your call, pal," Jim said and then smiled disarmingly, before he stepped through the door with the Ensign still dutifully attached to him. "Up these steps?" the lost sailor asked, pointing ahead.

Yet, without waiting for a reply, the newcomer bounded up the steeply inclined flight. As he emerged onto the main deck, Jim glanced about, noticed the bow ahead and the land just a mile to the left, to port. In the instant of that glance, he realized what he had to do. He had wanted to take Lenore with him, but the possibly dire fate of her travelling companions was reason enough to honor her desire to stay put. Then, to the amusement of several salts, Jim dragged Drullkind over to the port rail, while as he did, he noticed a buckskin-clad, horseback rider on the beach who seemed to be shadowing them; or at least, seemed to be looking at the ship with interest. Then, Jim looked over the side. As he did, a great file of oars swept up and fell back, before splashing into the brine.

"Hey, a galley," Jim delighted, marveling at that as if it was something come to life that he had only read about or seen in movies. "Well, sorry about your head, Drullkind, but if you wanta make an omelet, you gotta crack at least one *egg*, right?"

"Huh? What's that?"

"That's okay, you're about to *get* it!" Jim added.

Then, more firmly grasping the junior officer's hand, Jim flung him head-first into the rail, used the crumbling form as a footstool to vault up on the railing; and then, with a war-like shout cried, *Shy*, before he artfully leapt over the again-falling sweeps.