

Forbidden Quest

Hypnotic Journey, Book 1

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Chapter One

“You’re not going? You know what I’ve got invested in this project, and you’re not going?” Nicole asked. A crimson glow rushed across her face. She thrust her free hand out to her assistant and shook her head so viciously her short brown hair whipped from side to side. The assistant disappeared quickly through the office door. Nicole plopped down in her desk chair clutching the receiver with fury. “The deposit is non-refundable, we can’t cancel, and we can’t reschedule. Dr. Strong said it had to be this weekend, Tom. There are no other slots available.”

The raspy voice of her latest romance, Tom Norton, answered calmly, “Niki, I’ve got viral meningitis. You don’t fool around with something like that.” Nicole suddenly imagined him lying in his bed, still wearing his musk cologne that was part of his morning routine as much as brushing his teeth. Her tone began to soften at the thought of his sweaty dark brown hair making his deep brown eyes even more prominent.

Tom rolled over to grab the bottle of painkillers his doctor prescribed, “Dr. Maan said to go to bed and forget about the rest of the world for the next week. I am surprised at your response and hurt that you don’t seem to care. You sound more upset about losing the deposit instead of missing out on the weekend with me.”

Resisting the guilt that threatened to wash over her, Nicole took a deep breath and shifted her chair so she could reach her computer while they talked. “Tom, it’s not the money and you know I like spending time with you. It will take months before I can manage to weasel another free weekend out of my boss. Besides, we must have four members on our adventure team. If you drop out, then the whole thing is off. Sarah and Todd have gone to a great deal of trouble fitting this trip into their schedule. We will not get another shot at this. Dr. Strong said he was pulling out of Landon and moving to Miami in a few weeks. He is the only hypnotist in the country offering these group fantasy sessions. It’s the next big trend in discount vacations.”

“We can afford a trip to Miami. St Louis is in the middle of the country, Nicole. You can get a low-cost flight to almost anywhere from here,” Tom said, sinking back into his pillows

“Contrary to what you might believe, I don’t get a bonus when I win a case. The District Attorney would prefer to take his best Assistant DA to bed rather than give me a bonus or time off.” She thought of how similar the DA was to her father, a man who chases anything in a skirt, even her college roommate.

“Ok, ok, I’ve heard all this before.” Tom winced, “I asked Jack to take my place. He was bumped off his flight to St. Thomas this morning and has some spare cash.”

“Absolutely not!” Nicole dug her pink, perfectly manicured nails into the keyboard.

“Come on, it won’t be that bad. You’ll be under hypnosis all weekend.” Tom sighed as his eyelids began to close.

“Anyone but him, Tom.” Nicole moaned in resignation and shoved hard against the desk. Her chair slammed into the wall behind her with a sharp whack. “I know he’s your friend,” she said tapping her fingernails against the arm of the chair with such force Tom could hear the clicking on his end of the call. “But the man is a complete washout. He has no ambition, no ethics, and no morals. If you think he’s going to pay you the money you put down on this trip, you are out of your virus infected mind.”

“Niki, he was just here. He took me to the doctor this morning because I couldn’t drive. He paid for my share of the deposit and headed home to grab his bags,” Tom answered running his palm over his face. “Give him a break, he’s a free spirit. He didn’t have wealthy parents to pave the way or get a full ride to Yale as you did. He’s doing the best he can with what he’s got.”

Looking out the tiny cracked window of her small, dreary office, she could smell the nauseating grease of the nearby fast food chain. Her foot began to twitch as she envisioned a weekend with Jack’s annoying smile. “Maybe we should cancel. I’ll throw a few things together and nursemaid you through the weekend.”

Tom chuckled at Nicole’s monotone attempt at compassion, and immediately regretted it as pain shot through his temple. “I appreciate your offer, Niki, really I do. I know it would kill you to sit here all weekend and watch over me. So let’s not pretend your heart is in that gesture.” Tom smiled through the pain, keeping his eyes closed against the blinding sunlight that crept

through the drawn blinds. “The bed’s starting to float and I haven’t had any sleep in about 32 hours, so I better go. Jack will fill my spot nicely. He and Todd are practically brothers; we were the Three Musketeers all through middle school. Take it easy on Jack, brown eyes, he’s a good guy. It’s surprising how complicated he is, you’d find that out if you gave him a chance.”

“I did that once, remember? He made a pass at me,” Nicole snapped.

“He was drunk, and it was a joke. That’s just his way. He’s like a brother to me, and it’s important to Jack to approve the women I date. If Jack didn’t like you, he would be over here every possible minute trying to run you off. I’ve told you before; you’re the first girlfriend of mine in years that he hasn’t given a hard time.”

“If how he treats me is nice, then I’d like to see it when he’s mean.”

“Just relax for a change and try to have fun.” Tom yawned loudly as the painkillers began to work their magic.

“Right,” Nicole sighed, surrendering to a wrecked weekend. “Do you need me to drop anything off before I head to the airport?”

“No . . . and I canceled the flights, Jack’s borrowing a friend’s plane,” Tom added faintly. “He’s a pilot.”

“What?” Nicole jumped from her chair. “Oh no, Tom! I am NOT riding in a plane that he is flying! Are you insane?” Nicole’s answer was silence, followed by deep snoring.

The plane ride to the small Landon airport in Kansas proceeded exactly as Nicole suspected. Todd Hopper and Sarah Sims had dated since college. Todd was all too familiar with Jack’s last minute appearance or disappearance on Tom’s group vacations. As soon as Todd and Sarah arrived Todd gave Jack a bear hug and said, “Hey! Where’d you get the money for this trip? You still owe me \$500 bucks from our diving trip last summer!”

Jack laughed and offered, "I've got five bucks left in my pocket, and it's all yours! But for the life of me, I can't understand why a professional hockey star would bother shaking down a travel agent for cash. You make more in one season than I will in ten lifetimes." They proceeded to spend the next 30 minutes concentrating on Todd's Hockey stats, instead of prepping the plane for departure.

Nicole rolled her eyes as Sarah approached. Sarah hugged Nicole and said, "I'm sorry to hear about Tom. I talked to my colleague Dr. Kean, and he said Tom's lucky it's not bacterial meningitis, but the headaches are just as bad. He made the right decision to stay home."

Jack's laughter filled the plane as they took their seats in the small twin-engine plane. Jack said, "I apologize for not finding extra headsets for everyone." Then he proceeded to shout over the small plane's engine, telling one stupid joke after the other the entire flight. Prim and proper Sarah Sims blushed and giggled at the array of graphic limericks. Her blonde curls and blue eyes flashed in the afternoon sunlight as she politely corrected Jack's raw anatomical terms. Eventually, Jack began to comment that Sarah was in actuality not a nurse practitioner but one of his more attractive school teachers in disguise.

Todd squirmed in his seat just enough to take hold of the back of Jack's neck. A flash of warning filled his eyes, "Enough of the cheap jokes, Jack. Sarah is off limits."

Nicole rolled her eyes and clenched her jaw in an attempt not to scream at their idiocy.

Sarah snuggled close to Todd as he squeezed back in next to her in the narrow space. His large frame and muscles overflowed the tiny seat area. Nicole rolled her eyes as he wrapped his arm around Sarah to allow her closer to him.

She had the privilege of sitting next to Jack. His wavy brown hair and sky blue eyes enchanted most women, but not her. Never again, not after the night, Jack shoved his tongue down her throat when Tom wasn't looking. Sitting next to Jack was more than just mental agony. The stench of cheap cologne drifted over to her. Jack looked like he'd prepared for a luau with his brightly colored floral shirt, ragged cut off jean shorts and dusty sandals. All he lacked was a poorly constructed straw hat. His broad shoulders steadily jolted Nicole with each

peal of laughter. That, and the jarring bumps of the small plane made Nicole wish she'd stayed home to nurse Tom after all.

The Landon Airport was small and rural with a single landing strip snuggled in the middle of the field of corn. Their landing was a bit bumpy but uneventful. Pulling their luggage out from behind the back seat, they scanned the horizon for any sign of the shuttle. Sarah walked to the edge of the field and peered into the rows of corn. Todd came up beside her and said, "Baby, your hair is exactly the same color as the corn cobs." Todd cleared his throat. He struggled to find something romantic to say. The corn cob remark didn't come across as he expected.

Sarah turned and gazed at him, her expression filled with amusement.

Todd tried again. He reached out and picked a small blue flower from the top of the corn stalk. Turning back to her he added, "Now I understand what they mean when they say, your eyes are the color of cornflowers, because they are." He handed her the flower and kissed her. Sarah smiled sweetly; she knew he was trying. Suppressing a chuckle, she wrapped her arms around him and returned his kiss with fervor.

After forty-five tedious minutes of watching the sun sink in the sky, swatting bugs and watching for snakes, an old Toyota Minibus appeared on the dirt road at the far end of the field. The driver climbed out of the vehicle. His tall boney frame suggested he was as old and feeble as the bus.

"Howdy folks!" the man said, "I'm Fred Johnson, owner of this here farm. Nice to see Y'all! Dr. Strong asked me to git you downtown to his hotel. So off we go!"

Todd snatched up the ladies' bags and tossed them into the rear of the bus. Jack grabbed the rest and followed suit. He continued his comic routine during the drive to town, telling the best jokes from every country he had ever visited.

Once they'd arrived, Sarah looked up at the building and said, "This architecture is very unusual. It's the only large stone building in town, and gargoyles line the roofline. It looks like some European cathedral."

Nicole ignored Sarah comments, pushed Jack out of the way and reached for the doors.

“Cool off, Nicole!” Jack’s laughter boomed through the open double glass doors and echoed inside the lobby. He stepped aside and allowed Sarah to precede him, saying, “You’ve got to admit this place looks more like an oversized mortuary than a Hypno Clinic. After all it’s the only building over three stories high in this tiny burg. I bet it’s the only place in town that has an elevator.”

“Dr. Strong owns most of this tiny burg.” Nicole’s raised voice echoed in the large ornate lobby, “He selected us from more than two-thousand other applicants to participate in this adventure.”

Giant bold colored tapestries portraying ancient legends covered the towering walls. Dark gray marble floors accented tall pillars that separated the exterior of the room from the central area. In the center of the hall stood a plain wooden receptionist desk where an attractive woman sat staring at them.

She smiled brightly at Jack as they approached. Their eyes adjusted to the dim light and Jack’s grin turned into a full toothy smile as he got a good look at the enticing blonde greeting them.

“If he weren’t the only psychologist using hypnosis for fantasy journeys, I would never have allowed you to join us, Jack.” Nicole continued, “As it is, were lucky to here. So I’d appreciate it if you would act like an intelligent, respectable, human being until this weekend is over.” Nicole stepped in front of Jack to block his view of the distracting receptionist. “You are capable of that, aren’t you, Jack?”

Jack met her gaze boldly, his eyes flashing with a challenge. “You must be into the occult and all that, to want this so badly,” Jack said flashing a brilliant smile.

“I don’t believe in witches or ghosts if that’s what you mean,” she said. “This will be the new wave of recreation for the dedicated business community. It’s a week’s worth of vacation in the span of a weekend, and I want to experience it.”

“You want to invest in it,” Jack corrected. Dismissing Nicole, he darted around her to concentrate on the receptionist. “Hello, we’re the Waters group. We have a reservation.”

Nicole could have sworn Jack was addressing the receptionist's ample cleavage that heaved out of her tight low cut lilac dress.

As the receptionist leaned forward to greet Jack, Nicole stepped in front of him again and said, "Dr. Strong is expecting us."

"Yes, Miss Waters," the receptionist's voice dripped with sensuality. She turned a questioning gaze from Jack to Nicole. "The doctor left these dossiers for you." She offered the files to Jack while maintaining eye contact with Nicole. "Inside are your character inventories. Dr. Strong assigned each of you an identity according to your personality profiles."

"Thank you," Nicole replied, snatching the dossiers from Jack's weak grasp.

"You must be Tom, the barbarian," the receptionist cooed turning back to Jack. She leaned forward offering her hand while displaying her full assets.

"I'm not Tom, but I'd love to be your barbarian," Jack answered grinning with admiration.

A frown pushed the seductive look from her eyes, "Then you must be Todd, the warrior elf."

"I'm Todd Hopper." Todd appeared at Jack's side with Sarah at his heels. "Did you say I was going to be a warrior?"

The confused receptionist ignored the satisfied smile on Todd's face and studied the group, carefully. "Are you Nicole Waters?"

"Yes, and this is Jack Tyler. Tom Norton has taken ill, so Jack is taking his place," Nicole answered.

"This is unexpected," the receptionist declared pushing a small button near the edge of her desk. "I'll inform Dr. Strong at once about Tom's replacement."

A small, stocky man appeared from the shadows behind them. "Homun will show you to your rooms." The receptionist motioned him forward. "Please study the dossiers, carefully. Especially you, Nicole, you are the sorceress. Familiarize yourself with the incantations you will be using. Dr. Strong wants this experience to be as real as possible."

"Thank you, I hope we haven't caused any inconvenience," Nicole said to the receptionist then turned to follow the little man heading down a dark corridor to their left.

"I'm sure everything will be all right." The receptionist turned her attention back to Jack. "I'll notify you personally if Dr. Strong would like to meet you before the session. Will you be in your room?"

The receptionist's pupils were so large Jack had a feeling she was stalking him like a jungle cat. The hair on the back of Jack's neck stood on end. Nodding his consent when no words came to him, Jack swallowed hard as a strange foreboding washed over him. Turning back to the group, he followed them into the corridor and caught up as they reached the elevator. Stepping inside, Jack felt somehow removed from the group, like he was watching them from afar.

Exiting the elevator without a word, Homun directed the group toward their rooms, pointing first at Sarah and Todd, then to their door and moving on. Realizing that she had forgotten to arrange for Jack's private accommodations, Nicole rushed forward to rectify the situation before they reached the door to their room.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Ho ... whatever, but Mr. Tyler cannot stay in this room with me. We are not together." She blurted this out with slightly more desperation than intended.

Homun stopped and turned to look at her with piercing black eyes. The two stood there unmoving, staring at each other. Jack peered over Nicole's shoulder at the little gray-haired man and then turned and glanced back at Sarah and Todd, who were entering their room.

"Hopper, we've got a problem," Jack called. He moved back down the hall toward them.

Nicole could not stop staring at the bellhop. As her eyes began to water from the effort, she heard Jack explain, "Nicole is uncomfortable with the sleeping arrangements and the, uh, bellhop isn't responding. I hate to split you two up, but it looks like the only way at this point."

Todd glanced at Sarah and pulled her closer. She in return nodded her consent. Todd missed her subtle sigh. He leaned in for another kiss. Sarah reached up and brushed a lock of his golden blonde hair from his eyes. Her eyes sank to the floor when Todd rushed past her to grab their bags. He shrugged his shoulders at Jack, "All right, but I warn you, I snore."

“Judging from the looks of this place, I’d say we won’t have to worry about getting enough sleep. It’s not even 8 o’clock, and they’re sequestering us in our rooms,” Jack sighed.

Todd gathered Sarah’s bags, and they followed Jack down the hall to where Nicole still stood locked in a staring contest with the bellhop. Jack patted him on the shoulder, “sorry to have ruffled your feathers, old man. Nicole and Sarah can bunk together down the hall. Todd and I will take this room.”

“Let’s put the girls in this one,” Todd objected. “It’s further from the elevators and should be quieter.”

“Who’s going to bother us, Todd?” Nicole asked. “The entire building’s owned by Dr. Strong, we’re probably the only ones here.”

“Exactly.” Todd locked eyes with Nicole then pushed past her, opened the door, took a brief look around and set Sarah’s bags on the furthestmost bed. Snatching his and Jack’s dossiers from Nicole’s outstretched hand, Todd turned to Sarah, “Call if you need me.” He kissed her quickly, and then headed back down the hall.

Annoyed at Todd’s chauvinism, Nicole entered the large room. She sighed as her eyes landed on the faded daisy wallpaper that was peeling off the far wall and tossed her bag on the nearest bed. “Is he always so overprotective?”

“Most of the time.” Sarah smiled contentedly, moving past Nicole to look out the window at the pink and orange hues of the sun as it set behind the large field of corn behind the hotel.

Sarah turned to smile softly looking past Nicole toward the door. “Good night Jack.”

“Good night Sarah,” he grinned at her from the doorway. “Oh Nicole, if you’re bored and would like to work off some of that aggression maybe we could head out on the town and look for mud wrestling bars...”

“Out!” Nicole spun as Jack disappeared down the hall, his laughter following him. Nicole turned to Sarah and continued their conversation without hesitation, “How can you stand it? Doesn’t he realize you can take care of yourself?” Nicole asked, pacing the length of the room.

“Sure he does, but I kind of like how he’s always watching out for me.” Sarah turned to smile softly looking past Nicole toward the door. “I’m going to be a fairy,” Sarah announced with a giggle, studying her file.

“What a surprise,” Nicole mumbled, closing the door.

Jack caught a glimpse of Homun disappearing back inside the elevator as he grabbed his bags and headed into his room. “Not exactly the typical bellhop,” Jack said to Hopper with a grin. “Then again, if the good doctor wanted to add some mystery to the weekend, that silent little man is just the ticket.”

Todd glanced up as he pulled his clothes out of a suitcase and pointed to the far bed. “That one’s yours,” he said to Jack and tossed his bag on the nearest bed, surveying the room. A large gold framed mirror hung on the wall. It was the only decorative ornament in the entire room except for the faded bedspread and matching curtains covered with giant purple tulips. Jack grinned, “Remember when I went on vacation with your family to the Bahamas when we were kids? I swear this room has the same bedspread as our hotel back then.

Todd chuckled, “I don’t remember the room décor, but I do remember the sunburn we both got from spending all day trying to learn to body surf.”

Jack began to unpack the small duffel bag, pulling out the two T-shirts and one pair of jeans that were his wardrobe for the weekend. Tom’s dossier caught his eye, “So you’re going to be an elf?”

“An elf warrior,” Todd corrected.

“Oh yeah, Tom said this was a role playing weekend.” Jack opened his file and read the description of the barbarian he was to become. The details were astounding. He read a list of his weapons; an asterisk noted his character’s favorites. The description also included the number of different creatures he had killed and the weapons he used for each brutal battle.

“Do you know much about hypnosis Hopper?”

The young athlete was sitting at the head of his bed absorbed in his dossier. "No, but Sarah took psychology in college for her degree and says it's harmless," Todd answered. "Providing it's done correctly."

"How does this thing work anyway? Are we going to spend all weekend studying these files, then be hypnotized for 10 minutes and think we've been on a wild ride through fairyland?" Jack tossed the file on his bed as he sat down sinking into the old worn mattress.

"According to the itinerary, tomorrow morning after breakfast Dr. Strong will give us some last minute instructions before he hypnotizes us. We'll stay under until Sunday afternoon." Todd put down the papers and leaned forward before continuing. His face lit with enthusiasm and his speech quickened. "He's a professional; this is going to be awesome."

"What about eating? When and where do we sleep?"

"That's the beauty of it. We'll think we're eating wild boar while sitting next to a mountain stream or in a tavern somewhere in this enchanted realm when we'll actually be sitting at a card table eating chicken." Todd grinned, "I think it's awesome!"

"And..."

"We'll find a campsite and go to sleep. The doctor will have sleeping bags, cots, or something ready for us. The days will last around six hours, and then we'll think it's night, and Strong will send us into a deep sleep, for a couple hours. Then off we go on our adventure searching for hidden treasure, or liberating a village from a tyrant. It will seem like a week has passed. In reality, it will be only a few days."

It all sounded intriguing, but Jack couldn't shake the sense it was too good to be true. "Is it okay to be hypnotized for so long?"

"Don't be such a baby, Jack. Where is that crazy sense of adventure that is always getting us into so much trouble? Remember kayaking down the Zambezi?" Todd said with a grin.

"What if we don't like it? What if we want to stop?" Jack ignored Todd's remark. He did not like the idea of someone playing with his mind for an extended period.

"If it gets too hairy, or you feel uncomfortable with your character, just give the word, and Strong will bring you out."

"What kind of credentials does this guy have?"

"Come on, Jack you're starting to sound like Nicole. She questioned this every step of the way. It all checks out. He's legit. Hypnosis is just like vegging out on the couch totally involved in some movie at 3 a.m. If you get bored, you get up and go to bed. There's no mysterious control factor going on." Todd picked up his dossier, and then paused to stare at Jack and added, "Zambezi."

"I swear I didn't know about the crocodiles. It was my first year as a travel agent, give me a break," Jack sighed. The antics from their Spring Break jaunts were not something he wanted to rehash. "Hey, don't you have a game Monday?" Jack asked.

"It's an exhibition. Besides, I should be back in plenty of time. Coach will never know I was gone." Todd winked at Jack and went back to his file.

"You didn't tell him?" Jack grinned.

"It's one weekend out of my life. The only secret I'll ever keep. Do you remember the so-called friendly devil worshiping natives that lined the Amazon? I thought they were going to eat us for dinner." Todd's wicked grin brought back vivid memories of their careless adventures.

"Just what would you have done, if you hadn't eaten any meat in a year or so? Besides, that Priest talked them out of it, we were fine." Jack laughed despite himself, tossed his bag into the corner of the room, and fell back on the bed.

"You know Nicole's right. If this trip is as wild as Strong claims it to be, the good doctor could have a real money maker on his hands." Todd added with a grin, "And this time we are in no danger of being eaten by man or beast."

Jack had to admit it was hard to ignore the potential of this new adventure. Nicole was talking investment, and Hopper loved the idea before they even got started. Sarah researched the process from a medical standpoint and had given it her stamp of approval.

Jack leaned back against his lumpy pillow and hoped his friends were not too disappointed if the entire weekend turned sour in the morning. In the two years, he'd known Nicole; she'd never considered anything remotely speculative. Perhaps there was something about the adventure Nicole failed to mention. He would just have to wait and see. The 'Ice Lady' was no fool. She wouldn't drag her friends, or herself for that matter, away for a weekend if there were the slightest chance Dr. Strong was not legitimate.

A soft knock at the door drew the conversation to an end. Jack opened the door to find the receptionist standing there smiling at him with her soft, sultry lips.

"Jack, Dr. Strong would like to meet with you before the session tomorrow. He wants to make sure Tom's dossier is right for you. We don't want any last minute complications," she cooed while reaching out her long red-tipped fingers to take his hand. "It won't take long."

Feeling drunk with the anticipation of being alone in an elevator with the blonde seductress, Jack turned back and flashed a wicked grin at Todd before disappearing down the hall.

"I'm Shala. I was also hoping we'd have a private moment together before your adventure begins." Her soft voice dripped like honey. She slipped her hand into the crook of Jack's arm.

"Shala, you read my mind," Jack replied guiding her into the elevator. His voice grew husky, "After Dr. Strong and I talk, how about you show me the sights of Landon?"

"The most exciting thing in Landon is in my suite," Shala whispered. She leaned hard against him, forcing his back to the wall. Her hands explored Jack's chest, sliding down his sides and around to his back sinking lower. Her fiery smile sent an unexpected chill through him. Jack squirmed uncomfortably, glancing up at the panel above the elevator doors. The second-floor indicator lit and held. He watched the doors silently slide aside to reveal a large banquet hall just as Shala's hands reached a sensitive spot.

Massive twin chandeliers twinkled dimly above them, giving off just enough light for the pair to avoid the series of athletic equipment scattered throughout the pale green-carpeted room.

“What is this place?” Jack asked. “It smells like an old gym.” He squinted at a ten-foot high pile of thick mats resembling a pyramid.

“This is where your adventure will take place.” She stopped in front of a large wooden door at the far end of the room. “Dr. Strong’s office is through that door. I’ll return for you in one hour.”

Shala spun around and headed toward the elevator. Jack’s eyes focused on her curvaceous, swaying hips as she glided across the room.

Shaking off her tantalizing effect, he knocked softly on the large ornate door. Receiving no reply, he pushed it open. A tall, white-haired man strode across the large room toward him.

Unlike the previous room, the light in the doctor’s office was bright. The room smelled musty from the clutter. Piles of books of every size and shape were stacked high along all four walls. Amidst the worn, dusty shelves were beakers filled with thick dark liquids, clay flasks stopped with large corks and small cloth bags stuffed full of unknown treasures. Intricately carved figures decorated the dark wood of the desk. All sorts of gargoyles and bat-like creatures ran along the side and front panels. A pile of dark-colored polished stones was all that sat on a large desk.

Dr. Strong held out his hand and addressed Jack, “Jack Tyler, this is an unexpected turn of events. Although I’m sure, we’ll have no trouble compensating.” The broad-shouldered doctor had an iron grip. He looked more than three times Jack’s age, but walked with the strength and agility of a much younger man.

“That’s good to hear, Doc. I’d hate to have to explain to the others our trip up here was a waste of time.” Jack sat down in an old high-backed chair that sank so deeply with his weight he could feel the wood base.

Walking around to sit behind a large oak desk situated in the center of all the clutter, “No more than I, Mr. Tyler.”

The doctor's cold smile set Jack's senses on alert. "So tell me Dr. Strong, exactly what kind of a doctor are you? I mean what type of degree is necessary to be considered an expert in hypnosis?" Jack leaned forward in the chair.

Dr. Strong smiled and said, "I have a Doctorate in Psychology from the University of Chicago. However, my expertise in hypnosis comes from years of personal study. My father was a Psychiatrist obsessed with the inner workings of the mind. His goal in life was to enter into the depths of the human thought process through hypnosis. He believed it to be the key to unlocking mental illness." Dr. Strong's dark gray eyes searched Jack with such scrutiny Jack felt as if he was a bug under a microscope. "But enough of me. I will explain everything you need to know about the procedure tomorrow morning before we begin. What I would like to do now is discuss your personal background."

"I'm afraid I'm not very interesting."

The doctor leaned forward clasping his hands together on the desk. "It is essential that I have a concept of the type of person you are. I want to know where you grew up. Who were your family life and the extent of your education?"

"Well, I'm a corporate travel consultant with a large firm in St. Louis. I handle international flights and tours for several of our larger corporate clients. My mother died of cancer when I was five; my father passed a few years after her. I was a pretty disruptive child.

I grew up in Maine, in a series of foster homes. Most were great; they took decent care of me, a few were not. Right, before I turned eleven, I landed at the Tyler's home, and they decided to adopt me. They were old enough to be my grandparents, but I had a good home and lots of love. I graduated from high school, went to a trade school and here I am." Jack squirmed in his seat and cracked his knuckles. He was uncomfortable, telling his life story to a stranger and wanted to get the meeting over with quickly.

"I see. You may well be the only person I've ever met that's capable of describing their entire life in less than sixty seconds," Dr. Strong said. He leaned back in his chair and picked up one of the polished stones from the desk and began to examine it. "Are you satisfied with your life, Mr. Tyler?"

“Satisfied?” Jack stared back, hesitating, trying to figure out where the doctor was going with his questions. “I enjoy what I’m doing. I get to travel all over the world for practically nothing. I have experienced more adventures than my hard working, high paid corporate friends. Travel isn’t a high paying profession, but it’s not a bad job.”

“How old were you when you arrived at the Tyler’s home?”

Jack shifted in his chair and began tapping his toe. “Twelve. Are you making a point?”

“What did twelve-year-old Jack want to be when he grew up?” Dr. Strong continued. If he was affected by Jack’s growing annoyance, he didn’t show it.

“Most of my friends wanted to be a space warrior. I wanted to be a firefighter. That was my new dad’s job. He was the only real hero I’d ever known,” Jack answered. “But I daydreamed a lot about fighting my way through the galaxy.”

“Dreams of adventure with a practical attitude,” Dr. Strong said. He sat back in his chair staring at Jack.

“You’ve condensed my life into one simple sentence,” Jack stated. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“I meant no offense. You seem to have your priorities in order. The realization that life is an upward climb does not appear to cause you any distress. It is enough for me to discern that you will do fine with the barbarian identity.” Dr. Strong rose from his chair and walked around towards Jack. “Tell me, how you met your friends? “

“Todd Hopper lived next door. We were inseparable from the time I arrived at the Tyler’s. His family didn’t hesitate to reach out to me despite my past. Todd has a large family, mostly brothers, and his parents understood my foster parents were older and not very active. They let me hang out with them, and included me in all of their family outings. I was part of their family. The Tylers loved me and cared for me; the Hoppers taught me what a real family was.” Jack paused for a moment then continued. “As for Sarah, she met Hopper in college several years ago. They were best of friends forever then recently started dating. She is a brilliant, sweet kid. She appears shy at first, but once you get to know her, she is quite a charmer. Sarah is perfect for Hopper. As for Nicole, she is my best friend Tom’s girl. Tom grew up on the other side of

town, where the kids all had a brand new car at age 16 and went to Europe or Hawaii on spring break. He's a corporate attorney headed for politics. Nicole is as full of ambition as Tom. He thinks they make the perfect political couple. I am not sure Nicole will do well in politics. Although it's very likely that one day Tom will run for President, so if she sticks with him she could be the first lady one day."

"Thank you, I will leave you to your studies, Mr. Tyler. If you want to enjoy your adventure, it is essential you comprehend the material Shala has given you. Good night Mr. Tyler."

Jack rose and shook the doctor's hand. He was pleased the interview was ending. "I've got to admit, you've peaked my interest. This place is full of character. That Olympic stadium you've got in the next room shows a lot of promise."

"It's all part of the adventure. I am merely setting the mood. It will make the transition much easier for all of you." Dr. Strong's eyes grew dark as he glanced past Jack toward the office door. The stocky little man stood silently waiting as Dr. Strong concluded the session. "Homun will show you to your room. I'm afraid Shala has a few tasks she must complete before tomorrow."

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