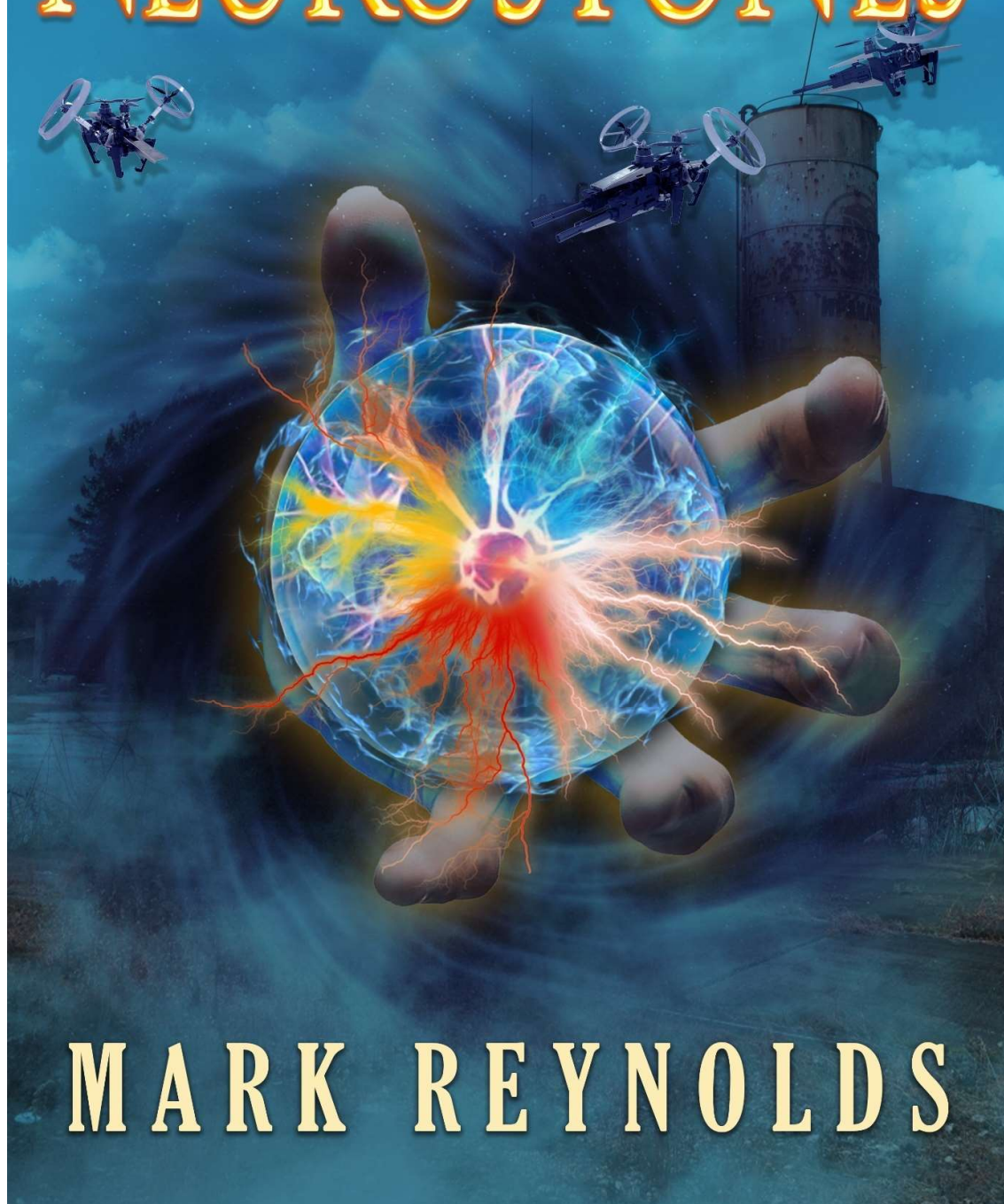


NEUROSTONES



MARK REYNOLDS

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Mark Reynolds

For Stacey

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NEUROSTONES

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1

Kai

Discovery

After emerging from the wormhole some four thousand feet above the city, I stretched my wings and glided a moment, then glanced back to make note of the portal's location. It hovered a few hundred feet below the lowest clouds, roughly equidistant from Big Ben, the Eye of London, and Tower Bridge. The air was crisp, and the full moon glistened off the Thames like a diamond-crusted snake in the shadows below.

It felt good to be the falcon again. From this height, the city looked tantalising, though I was surprised my keen eyes hadn't picked up a single sign of life. In a place like London, any time of night or day should have at least some activity. I soared towards Big Ben, noting the old clock showed ten past three as I landed on the top to look around. In every direction, the streets were deserted, and I shivered with fearful anticipation at what I'd find on the ground.

I knew Zac would hold me to my promise of returning within five minutes, and I gave myself two minutes to complete my investigation before heading back to the wormhole. I dived towards the abandoned streets, shimmering into my human form when I arrived to peer into one of the shop fronts. Security lights burned inside, revealing clothes neatly stacked on racks and mannequins dressed in metallic jackets and colour-changing trousers. At a glance, the shop appeared to be closed for the night after a typical day of trading.

It was the middle of the night and I guessed the absence of people could be expected, though I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right. The stark lack of litter also struck me as odd, especially compared to the dirty streets of Lewisham, where I shared an apartment with Jess, Zac, and Amy. Thinking of Jess gave me a sudden sense of loneliness and I longed to speak to somebody. Maybe Zac was right when he said I'd been spending too much time on my own playing with the firestones.

A light breeze whistled through the street and a piece of paper blew past, flapping against the gutter for a moment before coming to rest on the pavement. I bent down to pick it up, watching as my hand passed through it, reminding me I was only there in spirit form. The paper blew further away, pinning itself to a brick planter box. I scrooched down for a closer look, discovering it was a receipt for a supermarket with discount coupons printed on the back. The prices on the coupons took me by surprise. Ninety-nine pounds to get three jackets dry cleaned seemed expensive. However, it had been a long time since I'd needed that service and I figured the price might be reasonable for London. The wind eased and the docket fell to the ground where I could read the other side. The receipt totalled over eight hundred pounds

for twenty-three items and I gasped to see a pint of ‘antibiotic’ milk cost thirty-seven pounds, and a loaf of ‘antibiotic’ bread was a staggering forty-six quid.

Although the prices struck me as exorbitant, even with inflation, and the addition of antibiotics in all the food seemed strange, the detail that took my breath away was the date; April 10, 2053. I staggered back, taking deep breaths to compose myself, then transformed into the falcon and hurried back to the safety of my wormhole. I circled below the clouds, triangulating my position with the three landmarks I’d noted earlier, but couldn’t see the portal anywhere. Panic rushed my senses, warping my thoughts as I scanned in increasing-sized circles. The clouds were only just above me, and I realised I was too high, so I glided down a little. Luckily, my falcon eyes honed in on an anomaly in the sky and I flew closer, shivering with relief to see the wormhole. Without hesitation, I zoomed through it, thankful to be leaving the strange Earth in my wake.

In an instant, I was home, transported to the rooftop garden of Jess’s apartment where I landed on the brick balustrade. The surroundings had changed in the short time I’d been gone. It was dark, which struck me as odd because it was a bright sunny day when I left, and now I was in the midst of a mild storm. The concrete patio had small puddles near the handrail and a slight drizzle blew in. Zac was gone. And so was my body. The stools where we’d been sitting five minutes ago were empty. A blue camping gazebo about three metres square had been set up on the terrace to shelter the wormhole. Ropes stretched from the corners of the gazebo, anchoring it on one side to the balcony and to stacks of bricks on the other.

The wormhole looked the same. The three firestones glowed at its perimeter and the pendant hovered six inches above it like magic. Streaks of coloured lights flickered across the portal, joining the firestones to the pendant. I shimmered into my human form and walked to the wormhole, reaching a hand out to retrieve the pendant and close the portal. When my hand passed right through the pendant, I laughed at my forgetfulness and concentrated on locating my physical body. I got the feeling it was close by, but for some reason, I couldn’t reconnect with it.

I made my way to the door to go downstairs, shaking my head when my hand passed right through the handle, then feeling peculiar as I walked through the timber door. Childlike excitement stormed my senses as I realised another realm of possibilities for my abilities. For some reason, I took my time, meandering down the two flights of stairs and through the door into the lounge, though looking back, I’m sure I could have passed straight through the floor and floated inside.

What I found in the lounge took my breath away for half a minute. Sure, I was glad to have found my body, but to see it like that was a real shock. I sat in a leather La-Z-Boy with the back reclined halfway, my feet resting on one of those circulation booster gadgets you see on

late-night shopping channels. A neck pillow supported my head and a blue blanket with white stars covered me from my shoulders down to my ankles. Next to the recliner stood a hospital issue drip stand, and two bags of clear fluid hung from its hooks. Clear tubes ran from the bags and disappeared down the top of my blanket.

Jess sat in an identical recliner next to me, watching Ninja Warrior on television. On the table between our chairs were a bottle of Coke and a plastic bowl of water with a blue flannel floating on the surface. Jess cheered when the ripped guy in Speedos made it through each obstacle and I called out to her, though I knew she couldn't hear me. I closed my eyes and forced myself back into my body. It took longer than I expected to make the connection. Most times, I'm back in the snap of a finger, but at least a minute passed before I could see out of my real eyes.

As I roused, my body felt stiff and numb, like when a foot goes to sleep but it went all the way from my butt to my ankles. The vibration from the circulation booster gave the bottom of my feet pins and needles and the back of my throat burned when I swallowed.

"What's all this, Jess?" I asked, surprised at how garbled my words came out because my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Jess's head jerked to the side and she sprang out of the chair, throwing her arms around me. "Kai! I can't believe you're back. Thank God you're okay." She let me go, stood up straight, then slapped me on the shoulder. "You scared the shit out of me, baby. I've been a nervous wreck. Don't ever do that again."

"What?" I managed to say before reaching for the Coke. I took a sip, swished it around in my mouth and swallowed. The fizziness expanded as it went down my throat and I coughed a little, then took another mouthful. "Do what again?"

"Go into that fucking wormhole! You've been motionless for five days, Kai. I thought I'd lost you."

"Five days? How? I only stayed for five minutes and came back."

She clasped my face between her hands and kissed me on the forehead, then wrapped her arms around me and held me tight for a bit. Her weight on the blanket trapped my arms, and I had to wriggle my hand out to rub her back. I breathed in her floral perfume and nuzzled my face against her cheek.

Jess moved her head back and rubbed her face. "Your whiskers are scratching me. I didn't feel confident to give you a shave."

"How did I get down here? The last thing I remember is showing Zac my discovery with the stones."

"Zac carried you down here the day you flew through that thing. He called me when you didn't wake up after a couple of hours and I came straight home. Lucky I wasn't away working on the yachts or I might not have found out about it."

“Sorry, baby. It was reckless, I know. Zac warned me not to go, and said I was crazy. But you know what I’m like. I get carried away when I’m excited.”

The gravity of the situation hit me as I started to comprehend Jess’s words. Somehow, while my mind spent minutes on the other side of the wormhole, my body endured almost a week here. If Zac hadn’t been watching over me, I probably would have died.

We stared at each other for a while, our faces getting slowly closer. I wanted to kiss her and was sure she wanted to kiss me. I leaned in and she lingered a moment before looking away, acting as though nothing happened. It’s not the first time either. Maybe she doesn’t want to kiss me after all. I pondered that awhile, then remembered that I’d spent the last few days on a recliner and I must stink. My breath must be hideous.

“Promise me you won’t go through that portal again,” she said, hand over her mouth, concealing her expression.

I looked her in the eyes, eager to reassure her that I’d never do it again, but at the same time, I didn’t want to lie to her. If there’s one thing I know about myself, it’s that curiosity is something I have no control over. I *would* go through that wormhole again. Not before I learned more about it or how to avoid putting myself in peril, but I knew I’d go through it again someday. I shrugged the promise off and answered with a question of my own.

“Where’d all this stuff come from?” I asked, pointing at the drips and the catheter tube I’d just noticed as my body lost its numbness.

“From Amy. She’s been taking good care of you. We all have. Zac’s hardly left your side. Only to go get stuff you need. He’s been so worried. I better call him and let him know you’re awake.”

“How did Amy know how to do all this?”

“She’s a nurse, silly. You knew that, didn’t you?”

“I thought she worked on the yachts with you. I just assumed her background was hospitality.”

“She just wanted a break after nursing for ten years. She could get work as a nurse on a cruise ship if she wanted, but decided to try something different. I’m not sure she’ll go back to it for a while. She likes the lifestyle on the yachts too much.”

2

Kai

Reunion

Zac arrived home later that evening wearing a t-shirt with a slogan on the front: *I'm Not Going Bald, I'm Just Getting More Head*. I chuckled, thinking how I'd never seen Zac wear anything like that before.

"Nice shirt, Zac. What does Amy think about that?"

"I guess she must like it. She gave it to me." He winked and threw a cellophane-wrapped package at me. I went to catch it but fumbled, dropping the packet at my feet. Bending down, I picked it up and read the label. It was a rectal catheter kit. Zac grinned, patting me on the shoulder. "Guess we both lucked out today."

I smiled. "Thanks for all this, Zac." I waved a hand at the cardiac machine, drips and tubes.

"Anytime, old boy. How you feeling?"

"Tired."

"How could you be tired? You've been asleep for days. What was it like on the other side? Why'd you take so long to come back?"

"I was only on the other side for five minutes. Enough time to fly down to the street and look around. It was weird. The place seemed deserted, but the shops looked stocked up for business. Maybe I didn't see anyone because it was the middle of the night, but I got the vibe that something was amiss."

Jess stood up and kissed me on the cheek. "I'm going to get changed," she said. "Then we'll go out for a bite. Are you up to that?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry. Something light, a salad perhaps. We don't have to go out. I'm happy to stay here."

"You might be okay to stay in, but I've been sitting at home for three days babysitting you. I need to get out for a bit," Jess said.

I nodded, reaching for her hand and staring into her eyes. She stared back, opening her eyes wide. I grinned and she left me there with Zac.

"She's a good girl, Kai. Don't mess it up."

"I know. This whole thing with Kristy has made my life so complicated. They should be transporting her to London this week. Maybe she's already here."

Zac shook his head. "Didn't Jess tell you?"

"What?"

"Kristy died, man. The other day. The Hospital called and spoke to Jess. You must've

made her an emergency contact. Died peacefully in her sleep.”

I’d already mourned for Kristy twice, so it was getting easier. Once when she left me, and again when she went catatonic. I shouldn’t have even cared whether she lived or died after discovering she killed my mum, but she *was* my wife and it still hurt. I still didn’t understand why I couldn’t cure Kristy with the yellow healing stone Mum left for me. It seemed to heal everything else. Gunshots, knife wounds. Even bring back comatose patients.

“Dude. You alright?” Zac asked, snapping me out of my daydream.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. For the best anyway. That’s no way to spend your life, being locked inside your own mind forever. I’m surprised Jess didn’t mention it. She’s the one who found the nursing home in the first place.”

We sat in silence for a while. Zac kept staring at me and looking away when I met his eyes.

“What is it, Zac? Looks like you you’ve something on your mind.”

He shook his head, then blurted it all out. “Fuck man, I said not to go. And you just did it anyway.”

“Sorry, brother. It was selfish, I know.”

“How did you send the falcon in there anyway? I thought it was like meditation.”

“I can observe real life as the falcon now. Ever since I met Hiro, I keep discovering new tricks with the stones. I get the feeling I’m just scratching the surface, too. Like that latest development. Time travel, man! Can you imagine?”

“No, I can’t. And neither should you. You got lucky this time. I’m amazed you even made it back. It’d be different if you could be in the trance and still have control over your real body, but the way you do it now... So dangerous. What if I hadn’t been there? You would’ve been on the roof like a stunned rabbit for five days. And it gets cold at night. You could’ve died. Hypothermia or been eaten by an eagle.”

“I know. I’m lucky you were there. If I could trance and still function in my real body, then I’d be laughing. That way, Jess wouldn’t be so against me going back.”

“No, Kai. Don’t do it. We just got you back. What if you can’t get out next time? Or you get delayed inside and are gone for weeks here?”

“Let’s go pack the stones up. We can talk up there.”

“Talk about what?” Jess asked, stepping back into the lounge.

“I was just saying that we’d go pack up the stones and I’d tell Zac about what I saw on the other side.

“What, you don’t think I’d be interested in what you saw?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I’m kidding. Save the story for when we have dinner. There’s a new teppanyaki grill in Canary Wharf. It’s said to be great fun. What do you say? I can call and see if they have a table. What time does Amy finish, Zac?”

“She’ll be home soon. She was out looking for some supplements to put in Kai’s drip. I told her he woke up and she jumped on a train.”

“I’m famished,” I said. “I’d love to try the teppanyaki. Keen to see how it differs from the ones in Sydney. I went with Mum and Kristy a few years back.” Images of good times from a lost past crashed into me, clawing at my mood. I noticed Jess’s mouth twitch into a grimace when I mentioned Kristy, but she covered it well, taking a quick breath to calm herself. “Zac told me about Kristy. It’s alright.” I reassured her. She nodded and looked away. I had to let it go. My life is with Jess now. The past is the past. There’s no escaping it or trying to avoid unpleasant reminders. It just seems that everything reminds you of the people you lose. I always look at how far I’ve come, which helps me accept it, and I thank God for my friends. “How far is Canary Wharf?” I asked, steering the conversation away from Kristy.

“Fourteen minutes on the Dockland light rail,” Jess said, smiling at me. “Sometimes I forget you haven’t been here long. For some reason, it feels like you’ve been here years. You’ll love Canary Wharf. It’s got a really cool vibe. Right up your alley, babes.”

Jess moved beside me, ran her hand through my hair, then folded my ear in half in her fingers and giggled. She’d been doing that a lot lately, and I liked the affection, even though it was starting to hurt my ears. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her, not because it might hurt her feelings but in case she stopped.

“Sounds good to me,” Zac said. “I’ll call Amy and see if she wants to meet us there. It’s on her way home. Are you guys ready to go? We can pack up the stones later.”

“I haven’t even called to make a booking.”

“Don’t worry. If it’s full, we’ll go someplace else.”

“Give me twenty minutes for a bath,” I said. “Jess and I can meet you there if you want to intercept Amy.”

He grinned and agreed, then grabbed his stuff and left, and I headed off to the bathroom. Once I closed the bathroom door and ran the bath, I noticed how much I stank. Not surprising since I’d been in a recliner for the best part of a week, pissing into a bag. I squeezed a good helping of toothpaste onto my toothbrush and sat in the bath, brushing my teeth while it filled.

I washed and shaved and thought it would be funny to leave a Charlie Chaplin moustache. However, when I went downstairs, Jess disagreed and told me without humour that she wouldn’t be going anywhere with me with that on my lip. I chuckled and zipped it off in four strokes of the razor.

The light rail was great. I sat right up the front where the driver would be if the train was

manned. It brought me back to my childhood, and I had flashes of déjà vu from a public transport holiday I'd had with my grandma, where for the whole weekend, we rode around Sydney on trains, buses and ferries.

Canary Wharf was a trendy spot, packed with people. I couldn't get used to the crowds in London. Everywhere I looked, people were coming or going or standing still and talking.

Jess guided me through the streets with an arm linked through mine. Every so often, she'd tilt her head sideways and rest it on my shoulder. I'd breathe in her scent of coconut shampoo and floral perfume, my eyes closed in a mixture of appreciation and frustration. I wanted to pull her close to me and hold her, hug her as tight as I could without hurting her, and tell her I'd never let her go. I always refrained from the desire to embrace her, though I wasn't sure I could hold off for much longer. After all we'd been through, there's no reason we shouldn't be together. I'd held off because of Kristy, telling myself that as soon as Kristy settled into the nursing home, I could close that chapter and move on. I guess that time has come.

After wandering around Canary Wharf, we stopped and watched a street juggler outside the teppanyaki grill while we waited for Zac and Amy. The performance was entertaining, and he cracked jokes while juggling bowling pins and flaming sticks, then moved on to swallowing swords and eating light bulbs. When he'd finished, I patted my pockets in search of my wallet, realizing I hadn't brought it with me. Jess noticed and placed some coins in my hand like I was a child, so I could be the one to tip the busker. It made me laugh and I kissed her on the cheek to thank her.

Zac and Amy arrived after the crowd had dispersed, walking hand in hand and swinging their arms like a human pendulum. Amy waved, and I suddenly felt gratitude towards her for helping with my care. I forced myself to speak through the emotion clogging my throat.

"Hi, Amy. Wonderful to see you. Thanks so much for looking after me, setting the drip up and all." I smiled, feeling my cheeks heat up as I imagined my catheter.

"No worries, Kai. I'm glad you're okay. You know that Jess and Zac did most of the work, right? I just borrowed the stuff we needed and set it up. If I had my way, you would have been admitted to hospital in a flash. Zac wouldn't allow you to be too far from the stones."

"Yeah. I'm not sure what would have happened then. Honestly, I was surprised when I woke downstairs and away from the stones. I thought separating me from the pendant would cause me to snap out of the trance."

"My thoughts exactly," Zac said. "At first, I was reluctant to move you, but as the sun went down and the temperature dropped, I knew I had to do something. I hoped that as soon as I pulled your hand off the pendant—with a big stick, of course—you'd wake up."

"Cheers," I said, patting him on the shoulder and thinking how lucky I was to have such great friends. "Let's see if we can get a table at this joint. I went to a teppanyaki grill a while ago in Sydney and it was fantastic." I smiled, remembering Kristy picking egg out of her hair

after trying to catch omelette projectiles in her mouth, lobbed at her mercilessly by our chef. Jess rubbed my arm, and I pushed the image away, reminding me to focus on what I'd gained rather than what I'd lost.

Luckily, the restaurant had a last-minute cancellation and had four seats ready for us. Two other groups already sat around the grill, a man and woman celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and a couple with two young girls on their father's birthday. Our Japanese chef for the evening introduced himself as Aiko. The jokes started right off the bat when Aiko informed the young girls that he was their real father.

We had time to chat between laughs and physical challenges like catching stacks of rice bowls. Then after a beer or two to loosen our tongues, the others insisted I share what I'd seen on the other side of the portal. I explained how I'd seen the receipt with the future date and the weird antibiotic foods. And how I hadn't noticed any people on the streets.

"You must've seen more than that," Jess said. "You were gone for five days!"

"It wasn't that long for me," I said. "Not even ten minutes had passed."

"What, like some sort of time dilation or something?" Zac asked.

I chuckled at his scientific terminology. "You watch too many movies, Zac. But yeah, that sounds about right. It was thirty years in the future. A couple of small ultra-modern cars were parked on the street, constructed of moulded plastic. And there was a bin with products in it I didn't recognise. I couldn't examine them much because I couldn't touch anything, like I was a ghost, if you know what I mean. I read a few of the labels on the top. All the products were made by a company called ABC. AntiBiotic Consumables. Antibiotic water and snacks. Even antibiotic milk. Something must have happened in the future, causing people to need antibiotic-enriched food. I have to go back and investigate more."

Jess slapped me on the arm and I jerked my head around to stare at her. My mouth hung open for a second as I tried to figure out what to say. Jess jabbed a finger playfully in my chest. "Kai, you promised not to go back."

I didn't, though. I'd side-stepped that promise a few hours ago, back at the apartment. I knew it'd catch up with me, just didn't expect it to be so soon. My fault for blurting out my intentions. That's an idea I'd really have to work on selling. "You're right, Jess. I wouldn't go back if it'd leave me comatose for days. But what if I could guarantee it was safe?"

"Kai, I can't do it. It almost killed me watching you like that. Don't be selfish. Think about what your actions do to the people who care about you. You're not twenty anymore. You can't just think about yourself."

"You know what you need, monkey man?"

"What do I need, Zac?"

"You need to be able to be here *and* there simultaneously. No more of this flying off and leaving your body all exposed and vulnerable."

I thought about what he said, scratching my chin as chef Aiko wheeled his trolley of food over and lit the grill. It was the same idea Zac had hinted at earlier in our apartment.

“You’re right,” I said. “Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure I’ve done it before. The night I killed Pietta, I had a moment where I could see from my apparition and out of my real eyes simultaneously.”

“What do mean, when you killed Pietta? I thought it was a drug overdose or something,” he said.

“Um... I meant the night she died.” I forgot that I hadn’t told anyone that I killed Pietta by ramming her mind with the combined power of all my stones. Sure, she had already shot me twice, and was levelling a revolver at my head at the time, so I guess it *was* self-defence.

Zac looked at me sideways a moment, then nodded. “Okay. So you think you can astro travel and be conscious here at the same time?”

“With practice, yeah. There’s still so much more to learn about the stones. Pietta could pin people to the floor, even take control of them like remote control robots.”

Jess shuddered when I mentioned Pietta. I’m clumsy sometimes and forget the ordeal she went through on the yacht when Pietta took her hostage. I thought about how I was able to split my awareness when Pietta shot me. I was so wrapped up in the moment and my own safety that I hadn’t really analysed what happened. Maybe it was just a survival mechanism, a one-off thing, or perhaps my recollection of what had happened was wrong because I was so disoriented.

Jess slapped my arm with the back of her hand again. “Snap out of it, Kai. You’re off with the fairies again. What are you smirking about?”

Covering my mouth with my hand, I felt the big grin and snorted, then put an arm around Jess and pulled her close. “Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I was just thinking about what Zac said, about being in the trance and reality at the same time. It’s brilliant. I can’t wait to try it. To be honest, I feel naked without my stones.”

“Can’t we just enjoy the night? Is it too much to ask to have you here without thinking about the bloody stones or talking about them for one night?”

“I know. I’m obsessed. I was about to say it’s not healthy, but that’s not true, is it? I mean, it’s healthier than anything because I can heal myself with the stone.”

“Kai, enough or I’ll just go home. I haven’t spent time with you for five days.”

Aiko tipped some thin egg noodles onto the grill and started spinning uncracked eggs on the hotplate like tops, then scooping the eggs up with his scraper and lobbing them in the air, ducking down and catching them in his chef’s hat. He sang softly the whole time, popular western songs with his Japanese accent, which made everyone laugh. Every now and then, he pulled out a miniature karaoke machine and belted out a chorus, encouraging the kids to join in by sticking the microphone in their faces.

3

Kai

Co-Exist

By the time we arrived back at Lewisham, it was eight-thirty and we started the fifteen-minute walk back to our apartment. Our local pub, the Hobgoblin, was at the end of our street and stayed open till at least eleven every night. As we got close, Amy hinted at stopping in for a pint. I think Zac really wanted to go and spend some time with Amy now that I was okay. I knew they'd all spent a lot of their time looking after me and I didn't want to be selfish, but I asked Zac if he'd mind helping me pack up the stones. I said I was a little worried about leaving the stones set up like that, which was the truth. Ever since the first one was stolen, I hated leaving them unattended. I hadn't quite come to terms with how vulnerable and powerless I felt without them. Really though, I had something important to discuss with Zac about the portal, stuff I didn't want Jess to hear because she'd be pissed off even to think about it.

Zac looked at me for a moment, then nodded, turning to Amy and hugging her, telling her that tomorrow night would be their night and he'd take her somewhere special. Amy's face brightened, her cheeks glowing and eyes sparkling as she gave Zac a playful smile. Amy convinced Jess to have a beer with her instead. Jess raised her eyebrows to me, querying how I felt about it. I told her it was a good idea to help her unwind, reassuring her it shouldn't take long for Zac and me to pack up the stones and we could come back to the pub after that. Jess cocked her head, maybe regarding me with suspicion, but it must have dissipated quickly because she kissed my cheek and followed Amy into the pub.

"What was all that about?" Zac asked.

"What?"

"*You* not having a pint."

"I'm just a little anxious about leaving the stones up there, that's all."

"Bullshit. Something else is going on. Otherwise, you wouldn't have left them up there while we went to the teriyaki Bar."

Zac knew me too well.

Zac started to unpack the gazebo, removing one of the side walls and folding it up. I stared at

the stones and couldn't help smirking at the way the vortex of energy swirled around the portal. I grabbed the clear teardrop pendant from the top of the portal, surprised the image inside the portal stayed the same. In the past, moving the pendant moved the image, zooming in and out of the world on the other side.

"Zac. Before you pack up anything else, I want to ask you something. And don't tell Jess about this either."

"What is it?" He looked at me, eyes narrow.

"I want to go back through the wormhole. Just for a minute this time, but I'll go through from the back. My theory is that the time dilation will be reversed. Instead of spending five minutes there and five days here, I'll spend a day there and only a minute here.

"Oh, man. Don't put me in this position. When Jess finds out, she's gonna kill me."

"Jess won't find out. Fifteen seconds, then. That should give me around six hours there. What do you say?"

"What do you need me for? If it's only fifteen seconds, you could just do it and no one would ever know."

"Just in case. I'd feel better if you were watching over me."

"Listen, Kai. I'd always support you, and if you flew into the thing again, I'd make sure you were okay. But why don't we be smart about this? Since you're gonna go through anyway?"

"Smart, how?"

"Like send the bird in for a look but remain conscious here at the same time. That way, you're not leaving your body vulnerable to attack or danger while you're off... *Exploring.*" Zac held up both hands, his fingers twitching in a quote gesture.

I sucked my teeth a moment, nodding slowly as the idea sunk in. "Zac, you're a genius. I think I've done exactly that before, though I'd forgotten about it. Back on Pietta's yacht, when she attacked me just before she died, I could see out of my own eyes and the falcon's eyes simultaneously. It only lasted a second but I'm sure I could do it again."

Zac grinned. I'm not sure if he was happy because he'd come up with a cool idea or because I'd decided to wait before flying into the portal. Either way, he darted off down the stairs. "Back in a minute, buddy. Just wait there." His footfalls echoed in the stairwell like he'd taken the stairs two or three steps at a time. A moment later, I heard him bounding back up again. Panting, he held up a deck of cards and smirked. "Up for a little poker, old boy?"

I crinkled my nose, focusing on the plastic case of poker chips in his other hand. Zac put the poker chips on the table and set the stools out, slipping the cards out of the case and shuffling them.

"What's all this?" I asked, not attempting to conceal my confusion.

"Motivation for you. Proof for me. If you can be the falcon and sit there playing poker at

the same time, there's no way you could lose."

"Gotcha."

Zac made piles of different coloured chips in front of our seats. When he was finished, he explained. "Red chips are worth one. Green ten, blue twenty and black fifty. That's two hundred fifty quid a piece. First to five hundred. You win and I watch over you while you go into that fucking portal again. I win, you never mention it to me again. I'm dealing. Do we have an accord?" Zac held his hand out to me.

Nodding, I took a seat while Zac dealt five cards to each of us. "Ten in the kitty to start," Zac said, sliding a green chip into the centre. I copied him, then checked my cards. Two jacks and not much else. I tossed another green chip onto the pile to stay in the game. Zac did the same. "You want any new cards?" Zac asked.

"Three," I kept the jacks, discarded the rest. Zac dealt me three cards, which I picked up and sorted with my jacks. This time a pair of kings and a five of hearts. Two pair is okay, I thought.

"Dealer takes one," Zac said, discarding a card and dealing himself another. He picked up the card, slotting it carefully into the middle of his hand before shooting me a tight grin and a nod. "You're up, dork boy."

I stared at Zac, trying to read his face and guessing his cards. To keep four cards, he could have two pair and go for a full house, maybe aiming for a flush or straight. The way he grinned at me felt like he was bluffing, though. I think if he got a good hand, like a straight or a flush, he would have tried to hide the smile afterwards. Surely a winning hand would have triggered a noticeable surprise, not to mention how lucky it'd be on the first hand. I decided he had two pair, and unless he had aces, I was in for a shot.

I flicked a black chip into the pot. "I'll raise fifty."

Zac looked at his cards, stroking his chin a moment, then frowned, staring at me with intense narrow eyes. I grinned. Zac reached for his pile of chips. "I'll see your fifty," he said, tossing in a black chip, "and raise you another fifty."

Zac didn't take his eyes off me as he leaned back with his tongue in his cheek and a semi-concealed smirk. I was sure he was bluffing, the twat. I quickly counted the bet so far. Seventy pounds, plus another fifty to see Zac. The betting was getting a bit high for two pair. Zac could easily have something better, so I threw my cards in. "Fold," I said.

Zac smiled, scooping the chips up and dragging them over in front of him. He kept staring at me, then shook his head. "What the fuck are you doing, dude?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you want to go through the wormhole again?"

"I thought that's why we're playing. If I win, I go."

"This is not a random game of poker, buddy. It's for you to practice becoming the falcon

and remaining awake in real life.” He laid his cards down on the table. A pair of fives was all he had. “There’s no way I should be able to beat you with two fives. Your deal, and this time, concentrate.”

As I shuffled the cards, I pondered his words and understood. That’s why Zac was acting like a smug twat, trying to get me to engage the falcon. I shook my head, embarrassed for not understanding. It took all my concentration to focus on opening my chakras while I shuffled and dealt, but soon I felt the falcon forming in my mind and forced my body into autopilot to deal the cards. It felt like I moved in super-slow motion as I placed the cards in front of us and set the deck down, as though it had taken fifteen minutes to deal ten cards.

As I flicked a green chip into the kitty, something about the room looked odd. It took a moment to realise that I was looking through the falcon’s eyes as I perched on my own shoulder. I looked at myself, my head turning slowly, then my human eyes and falcon eyes locked. I shuddered and looked away, momentarily disorientated like I’d looked into two adjacent mirrors, watching infinite copies of myself getting smaller and smaller in the reflections.

I felt myself start to sway and grabbed hold of the table to steady myself, closing my eyes until my vision stilled. I looked over at the bird on my shoulder, avoiding its eyes so I didn’t get vertigo again. At the same time, I looked down at my human form from the falcon’s perspective, watching a smirk spread over my face. The two images waved into each other like when I’d made myself cross-eyed as a child, and I felt the familiar eye strain beginning. I snapped my eyes closed again, letting the single perspective of the falcon’s view settle in my mind before opening my eyes again. It took a few cycles of opening and closing my eyes before I could differentiate the two images, switching between them at will like the picture-in-picture feature on a TV. Before long, I could focus on both images at the same time, viewing the room in a strange, augmented reality or fourth dimension.

The falcon became an extension of myself, expanding my perception and view. I spurred the falcon into flight, soaring up into the sky and looking out at the city of London. The view through my human eyes at the five cards fanned out in my hand became like a heads-up-display, or HUD, at the top of my vision and when I focused on my hand, the cards seamlessly enlarged into the full-screen version and the falcon’s vision morphed into the HUD.

I snorted, rearranging the cards into order; five, six, eight, nine, and an ace; two diamonds, two spades and a club. Had a chance at a straight if I discarded the ace. If I drew a seven, I’d have an okay hand. If not, I’d have to fold. I placed them face-down on the table, then sent the falcon over to land on Zac’s shoulder, watching as he organised his three queens together. Three of a kind is a sweet hand. I watched Zac’s face a moment, fixed in a permanent frown as he folded his cards together and held them against his chest.

Zac looked at me, the tiniest of smiles twitching his lips. "Ready?"

"Sure."

Zac slid two blue chips into the pile. "I'll kick off with forty."

I flicked two chips in the centre. "I'll see your forty. How many cards do you need?"

Zac fanned his cards out and I watched from the falcon's vantage upon his shoulder as he kept the queens and tossed the rest. "Two, please."

Nodding, I dealt two cards in front of him, then picked up my own cards and fanned them out, removing the ace and discarding it.

"Dealer takes one," I said, grabbing a fresh card and slotting it into my hand, refraining from looking at it until after I'd seen what Zac got and how he reacted. I didn't trust my poker face if I got a seven.

Zac picked up his cards and spent a minute rearranging his hand. His face remained unfazed, free of any emotion until right at the end, when he placed the cards in front of him and looked at me, his lip turning up a little in a concealed grin. Good bluff Zac, you sneaky bastard. If I hadn't been watching him reorganise the ace and ten around from the falcon's view on his shoulder, I'd swear he had a full house or better. I closed my eyes a moment, trying to settle my nerves before I looked at my card. It didn't have the calming effect I expected because I could still see through the falcon's eyes, but I still had the advantage of a poker face because I could watch what I was doing from the falcon's point of view. I arranged the card in my hand with no idea what it was, and that made me smirk more than knowing whether I had a straight.

I opened my eyes, examined the new card. Seven of spades. Gave me a decent betting hand. It would beat two pair or three of a kind, but not much else. I smiled at Zac and lay the cards down in a neat pile in front of me.

"I'll raise fifty," Zac said, sliding a black chip into the centre.

"I'm all in," I said, counting my chips as I pushed them into the centre. "That's a hundred and thirty."

"Fold."

We played another five hands before I'd stolen all Zac's chips. Beating his straight with a lucky flush and folding on him when he had a full house. At the end of the games, he lay back and rolled a cigarette. "You seem to have the hang of it. I'd like to see you perform in a more stressful environment, though. I heard of an illegal gambling joint in Brixton. How about we go there, play a few hands? If you can turn a hundred quid into five hundred, I'll babysit while you go through the portal. Lose the hundred and we never speak of this again. What do you say?"

"You said you'd do it if I won all your chips."

"Changed my mind. This is the new deal. Take it or leave it."

