

Fruit of the Valley – The Quest

Rowan woke again to Angela's screams. He moved quickly to hold down her arms as she thrashed back and forth. He marveled at her strength. He outweighed her by thirty pounds but it took every ounce of his strength to keep her from harming herself during what could best be described as nocturnal seizures. Finally she awoke, terror filling her wide open eyes.

“Angela it's over, you're awake now, with me. Here on this plain, this Earth. Leave the other worlds to those better equipped to fight the Fears. I'm here to help you,” Rowan said calmly.

“The visions get stronger all the time Rowan. We have to leave here. I know neither of us want that, but the visions demand it. Something is going to happen bigger than all of us. We have to leave our paradise,” Angela panted while still calming and centering her mind.

“Okay beloved heart. That is what we will do. Today we will begin preparing the Assembly.” With that, Rowan rose up from their bed and walked to the edge of the rooftop. They slept under the stars each night here on top of the Spaceship, resting with the other original followers of Continuity; those he called the Fruit of the Valley. Dark began to give way to the beginnings of morning and he could see the Assembly cooking fires below.

Food preparation would soon give way to the morning celebration of Sunrise, proof of resurrection and reincarnation. “If the Ra-Sun rekindles his flames each day, how then would man not do the same in each life?” Rowan taught. The celebration took the form of a play, Ra-Sun creating the Earth and all her creatures. Every line and action was memorized by even the youngest of children. Everyone wanted to have a part in the play, though Ra-Sun could only be played by one of the original Fruit of the Valley.

Balancing the joy of Sunrise, each Sundown another play had Ra-Sun strike down everyone and everything before putting himself to sleep. Sometimes the play would be repeated several times before bed, based on the focus of the Assembly and their reaction. The somber tone of Sundown was the perfect way to end the evening. Worshippers went to bed with the joy of knowing their holy beacon would resurrect himself everyone again the next morning.

Those beams were now beginning to fill the sky. He felt it...the warmth returning. Angela's dreams told him they would lose that warmth for a while, though he did not know how or why or even where. He no longer feared for his Profile not living on the Network. Rowan was confident Continuity was bigger than that now, that his consciousness would live on no matter if it was in physical form, electronic or simply spiritual. The freedom of that belief made him look forward to whatever lay ahead.

“Gatekeeper Saefong,” Rowan said gently over his shoulder.

“Yes Dear Leader,” a man replied from the dark.

“Angela has announced to me that now is the time to begin our journey. We will walk the physical manifestation of the Path, leading us on the next step of our spiritual growth. You and I have discussed this day and what it means for the Assembly. After Sunrise celebrations, our preparation must begin in earnest. The urgency is great,” Rowan instructed. He didn’t look back, instead feeling the increasing light arising from the east.

There was a pause and then a simple, “Yes Dear Leader.”

Rowan knew Saefong harbored reservations about the journey they faced. He was a true believer, no doubt about that. But together the Assembly had created a true paradise here since the Reset. Plenty to eat and freshwater to drink, both courtesy of the springs still flowing slowly even after decades of drought. According to his missionaries that spread Continuity out to surviving communities, few had anywhere close to either enough food or drink. Most within a few days journey from the Spaceship had already died off.

Rowan turned and looked at the man, still little more than an outline in the dim light. “We are meant for more than just survival, my friend. Ra-Sun calls us through Continuity to accomplish great things. We have brethren somewhere out there, they call to us now to come and join them.” Rowan thought he detected a smile on the man’s face. “Of course Dear Leader. I too look forward to what we discover on our journey. I shall go now and begin our preparations.”

Thousands of people sat cross legged on the ground surrounding the stage. The grass was kept green here all year around by gravity fed irrigation run off in the surrounding gardens. There was a theater inside the Spaceship building, seldom used when everyone preferred to celebrate the celebrations outdoors. Excitement bubbled through the crowd... Rowan would be playing Ra-Sun himself tonight! Plus all the Gatekeepers were playing a part, a true treat that only happened on high holidays. Anticipation overcame exhaustion, all day the Assembly prepared for the longest journey any of them had ever experienced since the Reset. Rumors flowed around the always chatty group about the nature of their trip. This evening Rowan and Angela would give them all the details.

The crowd hushed as Rowan appeared from behind the black curtains. He was dressed in a long white robe made of linen with a golden sash. His head was freshly shaved, partially hidden by a headdress

with two large feathers protruding. Papyrus sandals covered his feet. In his hands rested a book bound with purple twine.

The stage itself was just a few feet tall, when combined with the slight rise in the lawn it was enough for everyone to see. A large yellow disc hung from the middle of the black curtain, with elaborate lines creeping like vines across the black back drop. Alone in the middle of the stage sat an obelisk, painted bright white and approximately ten feet high. Stage opposite of Rowan, Angela led ten of the Gatekeepers out from behind the curtain. She was dressed in the brightest of gold and silver, with a crown of stars atop her braided straw colored hair.

The Gatekeepers were each dressed in a robe, identical except for a rainbow of colors representing the many races of humans and their diverse beliefs. Identical masks, frightening in a determined scowl, covered their own freshly shaved heads.

Rowan opened his book and looked down as if reading from it: “Once, when dreams were not worth keeping, a life force flowed through the land. Invisible to the eye, yet seen everywhere. Unable to be heard, but creating a sound for every tribe of person on the Earth.”

His somber face hid an internal smile, he could see nearly every person mouthing the words together, recited thousands of times by now. He and Angela wrote this entire script in one night of passion and know it was dogma from their entire community.

“In this time, each person had plenty, fed by the invisible river of power delivering light, heat and nourishment. And the people multiplied and spread across the land, creating vast cities and exploiting the gifts.” Rowan paused, and the robed Gatekeepers spread out across the stage, forming a semi circle around the obelisk. Once they were settled Angela walked amongst them, seeming to float across the stage. She gently touched each robe with her right hand and then stopped next to Rowan.

Rowan continued: “But the people became greedy, unloving and lacking gratitude. They refused to acknowledge the power was a gift, instead believing it to be a result of their own work.” Rowan watched children’s heads shake back and forth vigorously. They knew that wasn’t right, they knew in their hearts the real source of that river of power. As he waited, each Gatekeeper turned their back from the obelisk, frowning and crossing their arms across their chest.

“The tribes of men fought against one another, trying to take all the power for themselves.” The blue clad Gatekeeper walked to the closest color beside him and acted as though he was hitting him over the head. The stricken Gatekeeper went to his knees, head bowed down. This process was repeated until only the blue robe still stood, again with his back to the obelisk.

“So Ra-Sun, the source of all living things, told Khonshu to take the river of power for himself, until the tribes of men found humility in the darkness.” Another Gatekeeper with a black colored robe and wearing the likeness of a falcon’s head came from behind the curtain and walked to the obelisk. He threw a dark colored cape over the obelisk and walked over to Angela. The Khonshu figure held out his arm and Angela slid her’s behind it. Together they walked past the blue robed figure, who at the last moment tried in vain to reach out for Angela. He too then fell to his knees with his masked chin at his chest.

“Ra-Sun was angry with the tribes of men. He set them against each other until all were nearly perished,” Rowan said as each color now went prostrate on the floor, face down. “When their power was gone, the tribes realized their mistake. They begged Ra-Sun for forgiveness and asked them to bring the power back.”

Each person in the Assembly knew the next part by heart. They waited for Angela to come back from behind the curtain, raise her arms and say, “Ask for my return beloved! Due what is right every day and soon I will return to you!”

Instead Rowan waited, watching each set of eyes focused on the curtain where they expected Angela to appear. After a few moments, eyes started to glance back to where Rowan stood staring down at his book.

Suddenly his voice thundered, shocking many from their trance, “I am Ra-Sun, and I will lead you on the Path! Follow me and I will take you to the source of the river of power! You must be purified on your journey, how else may you walk in my presence!” The Assembly was near bursting, several thousand repetitions of the story, never varying from night to night or morning to morning. Now this sudden break in routine set heads spinning.

“Who here will atone for the sins of the past? Who will make a sacrifice to quench my wrath and let the people take the next step on the Path?” he thundered. He drew a long knife that glimmered in the light of torches around the lawn. Gasps from the crowd now became audible as everyone realized what would happen next.

“Ra-Sun! Father of light and power, it was my tribe that caused you the most pain, let me atone for the rest of the people.” Murmurs and shouts erupted from the crowd as the blue robed Gatekeeper returned from backstage. Rowan noticed him stagger just a bit, but his steps continued as he reached the center of the stage, just below the covered obelisk.

“You would take on this burden for all peoples?” Rowan asked in a harsh voice. The sound from his throat didn’t sound like his own. His own mind was foggy, like someone or something was controlling his speech and his actions.

“I would. I will. Let me help us all...” the Gatekeeper slurred and wobbled a little.

Rowan felt his body move towards the man, who’s masked head was tilted toward the floor. Rowan watched the knife rise up and then plunge into the Gatekeepers heart.

As the now limp body fell, Angela reappeared from behind the curtain and tore down the cover from the obelisk. “You have been atoned! This man has sacrificed for you, and is already preparing for his return in another body. Ra-Sun and I will now lead you on your Path. Once you have completed the journey, the river of power will return to you and you will be able to teach the whole world the truth of Continuity! This will be a long and treacherous trek, but together we will overcome the Fears themselves and achieve for the world what it cannot do itself.”

Then she bent down to the blood now pooling on the stage floor. She dabbed her finger into the warm fluid and then marked her forehead with a dot. She did the same thing to Rowan, who then dabbed his own finger into the blood. The Gatekeepers all came across the stage, repeating the same process. Then each member of the Assembly, many sobbing, rose up and formed a line up to the stage. Each man, woman and child received the mark that night, then all retired for the evening. Try as they might, sleep escaped most. Scenes from the night’s celebration swirled in their head. Fear of the unknown fought with faith leaving even the strongest with a sense of dread at the thought of leaving the peace and safety of the valley. Regardless of their feelings about it, they would leave the next morning, on the greatest journey of their lives.

Ocean breezes carried the smell of the sea onto Rowan’s face as he stood on the beach. Eyes closed, hands outstretched, he could feel the raw power of the tides so extreme here in Puget Sound. 800 treacherous miles seemed to blow away. An epic journey from the Spaceship building his Assembly loved so much, a glass and steel and stone cocoon protecting them in the chaos of the Great Reset.

The first casualties came just a week after they left. Violent earthquakes leveled everything in sight, killing many who had sought shelter in old buildings. Any vehicles not tossed over were now useless, no roads remained untouched by the heaving of the Earth, and underground tanks full of fuel ruptured and leeched out. Rowan considered turning back, but only briefly. The thought of what must have happened to his beloved Spaceship made him weep; its destruction confirmed when a small band of survivors from the few left behind caught up with them. All they had built in the Valley was gone, only piles of twisted steel and concrete remained.

All along their path north, more devastation awaited them. The earthquakes served the coup de grace to any small villages still holding on along the ocean. The double hit of fires forced everyone to live near the

ocean, and now the earthquakes leveled those shelters. Scattered survivors here and there joined in with the Assembly, subjecting themselves to initiation just for a remnant of hope and a packet of food. Not all gave in willingly of course, fire being needed to purify the small bands of resistance as the unstoppable human wave moved on.

Their strongest resistance came in the Willamette Valley south of the ruins of Portland. Scattered towns were surviving quite well there, enjoying a temperate climate and exceptionally rich soils. Even after the earthquakes ravaged the coasts, the interior villages had survived well enough to begin rebuilding. The Assembly scoured the area like locusts feasting on vegetables and game and livestock, instead of dried fish, for the first time in weeks. But Rowan made the decision not to assimilate the cultures there, fearing that his losses would be too great. Perhaps after they found what they were looking for in Seattle he would return to convert the unbelievers, but for now they were bypassed, left to face their fate after most of the area's resources had been devoured.

Getting closer to the ruins of Seattle, Angela's visions intensified, showing her a large mountain with a semi-circle entrance. Every night, a fiery bird climbed from the opening under the mountain and spread its blazing wings. Once fully outstretched, the bird – a phoenix Rowan believed based on the description – would fly into the air to swoop around the mountain and then land on one of the peaks, overlooking a field of satellite antennae. Each apparatus was pointed at the sky, then suddenly darkness became light as each shot its own beam of flame into the heavens.

Angela's dreams, and more recently nightmares, pushed them with haste to the place they stood now, just outside the shattered gatehouse of MSN Global's seaside campus. Several of Rowan's followers were already combing through the wreckage for any signs of life. The hope was to find a secret entrance to an underground shelter, much like the one where Angela and the rest hid immediately after GRAPEVINE turned the power off to the world.

Rowan held little hope for finding anyone. In the chaotic moments right before his beloved GRAPEVINE betrayed him, he used the last chance he had at the interface to destroy MSN Global's software, and probably a lot of their hardware. With a few keystrokes, he activated a Trojan horse he inserted when GRAPEVINE first rolled out. Rowan regretted his decision now, feeling remorse for the destruction of his rival's survival plan, and ultimately the deaths of all those followers.

Nothing to be done about it now except search ruins for any clues to the meaning behind the visions. Likely what they sought would have been missed by scavengers, a piece too obscure to be valuable and certainly not edible. There was no rush, except that Angela's brain seemed to be even more tormented now. She tossed and turned at night, getting less sleep the closer they came to this place. Her normally quick

intellect was fogged by the pull of what she needed to find, and he could not prevent her from joining the search crews as they picked through the dangerous debris.

Other groups in the Assembly made camp, keeping everyone together as best they could. So those assigned to accommodations scrambled to get tents ready for the scores of followers that had finally made it here.

There was security to consider also. Everywhere they went, the Assembly faced those who wished them not to be there. Rowan gave his few firearms to guards remaining close to Angela's group. The rest used whatever hand held weapons they could muster, including a few bows and arrows captured or looted. The sheer numbers of the Assembly had thus far allowed them to overcome resistance, not yet facing any group with a fraction of their numbers. Most they would find here would be little more than savages, Rowan was sure of it.

"Dear Leader, Mother Angela wishes you to join her. She's found something of interest," a voice from over his shoulder said, disturbing Rowan's peace.

"Yes my child. I will follow. Lead me to her."

The messenger led Rowan past a man hanging upside down over a small fire, just recently dead from his ordeal. Long hair and beard were now scorched black against the scalp and skin. The poor creature had been caught in the ruins trying to hide from Assembly scouts. His interrogation led those scouts to every hiding spot throughout this area. Because of his helpfulness, he had been allowed purification so his soul might rise again with the coming of the Sun. Rowan made a small bow in respect to the transfiguration, and the two men picked their way through the chunks of shattered concrete. The earthquakes clearly left their mark here. Even those surviving the chaos of the Reset, wouldn't have survived here during the waves of tremors. Rowan pondered on where the purified man may have **ORIGINALLY** come from; outlying communities or underground? If there were people trapped below, there would be no way to get to him without the heavy equipment that no longer moved.

Rowan huffed and sweated, even in this relatively mild climate. The man he followed was young and athletic, a convert from the southern Oregon hill country. Sensing his older leader lagging a bit, he paused and wiped his face on his tattered cotton t-shirt. Rowan patted him on the back, smiling while acknowledging the gift of a brief rest. Finally they reached what had once been a vast corner office. The support beams were reinforced here and still held the next floor up above. A desk and filing cabinet were clearly visible under the ceiling of the office. The damp climate destroyed the finish of furniture but the pieces remained structurally sound. No scavengers thought to take either, having little use now for office supplies.

His beautiful Angela sat on top of the massive wooden desk, legs crossed and hands planted beside her where debris had been cleared off. In her lap sat a plastic envelope marked “Bennu Atum”. The look on her face told Rowan she possessed something that thrilled her.

“I can’t place the first word, but the second is another name for Ra, is it not?” Rowan asked as he approached her.

“It is, and the other word appears to be something similar to a Phoenix,” she replied with a smile.

“Your dreams! There’s always a fiery bird in your dreams right? I told you it was a Phoenix!” Rowan shouted gleefully.

Angela nodded, moving to open the envelope. “A fiery bird coming out of a mountain. I could never figure out what it all meant but now...Rowan, you should see it all. I just have to believe Continuity kept this file safe for us. It was just lying in the bottom of that filing cabinet, under some old business books.”

“Well, nobody read books even before GRAPEVINE died. It shouldn’t surprise us that no one wanted them now,” Rowan said.

“But even to burn these pages for a cooking fire? No Rowan, you must see that we were meant to find this. This has been sitting here for *years!* We’ve only been here less than a *day!* And we stumble, I mean I stumble across this? Impossible coincidence.”

“Well quit holding out on me! Show me what’s in the file!” Rowan said.

Rowan marveled at each page she handed him; pictures and drawings, lists of names and geographic coordinates. One picture in particular he stared at for a long while. A mountain, with an entrance guarded by fences all around held his attention, transfixed at the sight. Finally he gathered the stacks and carefully placed everything back in the envelope. He thought for a moment, as if unsure about being relieved or terrified.

“What month is it?” he finally asked Angela.

“November.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to pull out the maps, but I think we need to set up a more secure settlement,” he said as stroked his wispy beard. “We’ll have to over winter here in the ruins, or at least on this side of the mountains.”

Angela jumped off the desk, nearly pushing Rowan back against jagged rebar sticking out from the broken concrete. “Aren’t you anxious to get started?” she shouted. “Rowan this is it! This is what Continuity has been leading us to!”

“Oh I am anxious, my dearest heart,” he replied, holding up both hands in defense. “But winter is coming where we’re headed. Not like here, I mean the real thing. Constant freezing winds and snow, little to eat and it’s going to take us a long time to get there. Our people are used to sleeping outside under the stars, or in tents. We could lose everyone out in that weather. That’s not taking into a count that we’ll likely face organized survivors in Idaho and Utah.”

“Even more reason to get started now! We’ll just take over a town if the weather gets too bad.”

“Think this through clearly, my heart. I may be off by a bit, but I’m positive the journey will be at least a thousand miles. Remember our troubles reaching here? That’s nothing compared to the struggle to make our way to Colorado.”

Sunshine warmed the broken asphalt Rowan Shayam sat upon. Years of neglect let nature take their toll on the works of man. He stared at a metal gate ahead, clearly maintained by expert hands, human activity apparent in the craftsmanship of the reinforced hinges and fresh paint. Seven years since GRAPEVINE went to sleep, it was always apparent where organized people still dwelled. Just beyond the gate sat the entrance to what was known as Cheyenne Mountain, once headquarters of the North American air and space command.

Rowan and his group had trekked thousands of miles to get here. The journey from the ruins of Seattle, Washington to the place where he sat held treacherous passes, violent winters and hostile natives. Still, he was thankful to be here. Without the visions, or the memory, or his partner Angela, great earthquakes would have found them in their Silicon Valley headquarters, now leveled along with the entire western coast. Warm weather spurred the beginning of their fourteen-hundred-mile trek began.

Three thousand Fruit of the Valley marched like locusts, consuming and overwhelming anything in their path. Pockets of resistance were burnt out and survivors converted into members of the Assembly. Even fort-like villages in the Snake River basin couldn’t stop the swarm, being too spread out and independent to help one another until it was too late. Ammunition consumed in the years since the Reset hadn’t been easily replaced, meaning numbers meant more than firepower now. As he had in the Wilamette Valley, Rowan simply bypassed any community not easily conquered, leaving those to subside on their supply storage.

They sheltered best they could during the winter storms, which claimed more casualties to the group than weapons. But with new converts added to those who survived the walk, Rowan now had roughly the same number camped in the surrounding woods that he started the trek with two years ago almost to the day. A week-long stop at the sprawling airport outside of Denver Colorado yielded more followers of Continuity, living comfortably in the labyrinthine tunnels below. They impatiently awaited a sign of the Awakening, which the arrival of Rowan's Assembly provided.

“Our future is inside this mountain. Whether friend or foe reside there, we do not yet know,” Rowan stood and said, voice rising so all of his Gatekeepers could hear. He walked down the roadway, speaking to each person he could see. “Angela gave us the vision, I have shown you the path, now we will create a new future. We are the seed, the Fruit of the Valley will multiply throughout the Earth. Inside this mountain is the key to the Awakening! Brothers and sisters, join me in singing a song of gratitude to Ra-Sun and Continuity for leading us here safely!”

Rowan began a hum, then a steady *la* and then *ra, co, dem* - each syllable drawn out and louder than the previous. The chorus swelled as each person joined in, arms raised and heads tilted back to the sun. Followers walked in from the surrounding forest, leaving their campfires to join in song. Sometimes these sessions lasted hours, until Rowan or Angela would finally bring their hands down.

Not today. After only a few minutes of chanting and song a short scream came from somewhere in the crowd, interrupting the trance holding the group. Rowan looked to chastise the person lacking proper focus, instead seeing the terrified face of a young man holding his head with one hand and pointing with the other.

Rowan spun around...someone, or something, was standing at the gate in front of him. Something Rowan had never seen before. Something he was at a loss for words to describe, finally muttering, “Phoenix”.



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