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The Princess of Panchala - A TerraMythos Novel

By Tom D Wright

PART ONE – THE CHOOSING

Chapter Zero – Three Years Before

Demie knew she wasn't dead, at least she didn't think so. Not that she was any expert at the age of thirteen, but she figured being dead was like being crazy. If you can ask whether you are, then you probably aren't.

Well, ruling death out didn't help much, she still had no idea what was happening. As she floated weightless and confused, in stone-cold darkness, a writhing knot of dread grew in her core. And gnawing at the back of her mind like a pet gerbil in a cage, was the sense that her little sister Kori was in trouble.

Then she noticed them, suspended in the dark, staring at her. Glowing, fuzzy and nebulous. Creepy eyes. Cheshire Cat in Wonderland eyes. They didn't move closer, but Demie felt them look over her, within her, like groping hands. They read through her every secret thought and emotion, as if reading her diary.

She wanted to run from this thing, but when she tried to move her arms she felt no sensation of any sort. It was as if she didn't even have limbs. That triggered a wave of panic which nearly overwhelmed her, and then she remembered—whatever the hell these eyes were, it had taken Kori. Anger pushed aside her fear, and Demie screamed, “Why do you want my sister?”

She did not hear the response with her ears. Rather, the words formed in her mind, a ragged echoing voice so deep in pitch that she almost couldn't follow it. “She is meant for somewhere that isn't yet, but which will be.”

Then the eyes drew back; that or she was falling away. She couldn't tell which, because she had no sense of up or down, right or left, as the voice followed her. “Whenever you go to, I

will find the when you have chosen and come for you. Next time, you will not escape.”

Whenever? What the heck did it mean by whenever? Then, the eyes faded while Demie floated into a mental fog, along with a growing wave of dizziness as if she was on a playground merry-go-round. A distant, steady chirping sound beckoned to her, and she let herself drift toward it.

Demetra Anderson had no idea that she drifted within a dimension that lay between universes, nor that she had just chosen an alternate timeline. But she was about to find out.

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Tony McClure walked down the hallway toward his new office, restraining an urge to pump his fist. The one-on-one session with the TerraMythos CEO went better than he could've dreamed.

When the meeting invite came the previous afternoon, the subject was simply 'Panchala Project Shutdown' and throughout the rest of that afternoon he kept receiving vague condolences from his co-workers. Tony had been unable to eat that night, and finally around 12:30 he took half a sleeping pill. So in the morning, Tony picked out the sportcoat which best complemented his chocolate brown skin, listened to his favorite playlist on the drive to work and took a deep breath as he walked into the meeting. He knew the ax was falling on his dream project.

But something changed overnight. The executive not only supported Tony's proposal for a new gaming realm based on Hindu mythology, by the time Tony walked out of the office he had new workspace assigned for the project. Notifications were already on the way to the new senior members of his team. Apparently a brother could get a break, every now and then.

The biggest surprise, in more than one way, was the server applications manager assigned to his team. Over the previous year Tony had encountered Karen in the hallway a few times, and she was widely regarded within the company as one of the most talented devs within the organization. Karen had a reputation for being fiercely independent and unpredictable, and the few times they talked, she had been openly flirtatious.

For the past few months he had fantasized about asking her out, but as a rule Tony didn't believe in getting involved with people in the workplace. Still, Karen was known to blow right past the rules, and that aroused both hope and fear in him. She would be a handful indeed.

There was no time to waste, because the CEO set a firm project deadline of three years to get the new game world online. Tony hummed softly to himself as he walked down the hallway to the office space for the Panchala Project.

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The sharp hiss of drawn curtains snapped Demie awake. She was disoriented and woozy, and something covered her mouth and nose. When she reached toward her face, stabbing pain shot through her arm and she found an IV inserted into her hand. When she paused to stare at the tubing taped to her wrist, Demie realized a breathing mask was strapped over her face.

What? She must be in a hospital, which explained why she felt drugged. But where was Kori?

Movement to the right caught her attention and she turned her head, immediately groaning when it felt like someone buried an axe in her skull. A dull one at that. At the end of the bed stood an older, thin man in a white coat and a young woman wearing light blue scrubs. The man was focused on a chart which he thumbed through as the woman looked up, noticed Demie and came over smiling.

“We're awake now, are we?” The nurse glanced at the wall behind Demie's head and pressed some buttons, making adjustments. She must be a parent, Demie thought; they have a

universal ability to ask questions without waiting for an answer. She pulled the mask away from her face.

“Whhhaaa...” Her voice emerged as a croak. She tried to speak, but the back of her throat felt as stiff as dried leather, and her tongue like a solid chunk of wood. Overpowering thirst shoved forward for her attention, pushing ahead of the splitting headache, and Demie gestured for the nurse to lean closer.

“Water,” Demie managed a husky whisper. “Please!”

The woman nodded and followed the doctor out of the room, returning with a small cup that she held to Demie’s lips. “Just take a few sips, sweetie, and swirl it around. If you can keep this down, I’ll bring you a cup of ice chips.”

Demie couldn’t taste the water but as she swished the refreshing liquid, her mouth started to soften and she treasured it as long as she could, until it trickled down her throat.

“Is that better?” the woman asked, and again without waiting for an answer she lightly pressed a digital thermometer to Demie’s forehead, then checked the IV tube. Demie managed a pathetic croak and a weak smile. The nurse patted Demie’s hand and continued, “I’m sure you’ll have a sore throat for a few days. Are you strong enough to write notes?”

When Demie carefully nodded her head, the woman left and came back with a pen and small pad of paper. Immediately, Demie snatched it up and ignored the wincing pain in her upper arms as she wrote down the question that haunted her from the moment she woke up.

“How is my sister?”

The nurse glanced at the pad, tilted her head and frowned. “I wouldn’t know that, dear. You’ll need to ask your mom. She said she’d be here this evening, sometime soon.”

“What happened to me?” Demie scrawled on the pad, and turned it to the nurse.

“I probably shouldn’t say anything, but...” The nurse glanced out into the hallway as if looking for guidance, but finding none continued, “All I know is that your chart says you were attacked by some kind of animal while you were camping.” Then she pointed to bandages on both of Demie’s upper arms. “It got your arms pretty good, but you’re going to be okay now.”

Those creepy eyes sure as heck weren’t like any animal she could think of.

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Chandar Partharajan weaved his way through stacks of moving boxes that filled the small living room, and stepped outside to check out the backyard of the new home his family moved into. Not that he had any choice. His friends were all back in Denver, and if he had been a year older and out of High School, family or not he seriously might’ve stayed there.

When the opportunity arose for his father to move up from just being a college professor to the head of a department, it didn’t matter that the college was in a small town which even Google hadn’t heard of. Okay, there were a few references, such as the fact that the Broncos football stadium held more people than the population of the whole county he now called home. Heck, the city they moved from had more population than the entire freakin’ state.

After looking around the large grassy yard and concluding he could add mowing the grass to the list of things he hated about this new home, he went back inside to get something to drink. Maa was in the kitchen, sitting at the table and talking to one of their new neighbors. That was his mother, always being the social butterfly.

“So I’ll bring over some dinner tonight for y’all, since I’m sure you’ll be unpacking for a good long time.” A frosty-haired woman with the puffiest hair Chandar had ever seen, sat across the table from his mom. The woman looked like a life size bobble-head doll.

“Everyone here is so kind,” Maa replied. “I did not expect such a warm welcome.”

Chandar poured a glass of iced tea from the fridge, and turned to make a hasty retreat.

“We take right good care of each other here,” the Bobble-head woman said, “Cause we have to. Fer instance, take your next door neighbor, Cassandra. You hain’t met her yet cause she took her daughter camping this week. Anyhow, Cassie’s divorced with one daughter, and tough as it is being a single parent, she’s also a volunteer paramedic.”

He paused in his tracks for a moment and frowned. That’s strange, he thought, then continued down the hall to his new room. He was certain the real estate agent told them the afternoon before, that a family with two girls lived next door. Chandar almost died of embarrassment when Maa joked about arranging a marriage with one of the girls, and the agent said Maa had better talk to their father first because the girls were nine and thirteen.

Chandar began to unpack the room that would be his for the next three years, until he finished High School and graduated from the two-year college. Then he would move back to Denver.

As he began to set up his computer, Chandar dismissed the contradiction about the neighbors from his mind; the agent must have been thinking of someone else.

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Demie rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. After demonstrating how the TV remote control also signaled for help, the woman left Demie alone with her fragmented thoughts. She recalled bits and pieces of what happened, of her and Kori with their parents, on a family camping trip for Kori’s ninth birthday.

They were asleep inside a tent, when the small, stocky blond girl whimpered and scrambled out of her sleeping bag to worm in with Demie. “I had a nightmare,” Kori had whispered. “I saw a big man standing over me, all dark and wearing some kind of shadow. A Shadowman.” The younger girl shivered as she snuggled up to her sister. “He said he was sorry, but I had to leave this world.”

Then, something happened to Kori, something so terrible she couldn’t face it. The memories were locked away, as inaccessible as a bank vault in her mind. That thing with the Cheshire Cat eyes was the Shadowman that Kori had seen. Her sister’s words, along with the Shadowman’s dire promise to come back for Demie, brought a cold shiver that penetrated into her bones.

She didn’t want to be alone, so Demie groped around desperately on the bed for the remote, before remembering that the nurse hung it on a bar at the head of the bed. Reaching up, Demie pressed the call button and asked for an extra blanket, which the woman brought in along with a cup of vanilla pudding. The smooth snack wasn’t half bad, and felt soothing to her throat as it went down.

Still, the image kept replaying in her mind: Kori, fading into darkness, silently mouthing the same question over and over again. ‘Why?’

Demie was just finishing off the pudding when her mom walked in. She wanted to jump out of bed and run to her mother. But the best she could manage was to raise her hand in greeting, and then stare.

This was a different Mom who walked across the room. Instead of the long ponytail that always hung between her shoulder blades, Mom’s hair was cropped short. Her eyes had slight bags and lines that weren’t there before. She even walked like she was tired. It was as if Mom had aged ten years since Demie last saw her. And when her mother walked up, Demie smelt a trace of cigarette smoke. Since when had Mom smoked?

A shiver coursed through Demie as this stranger-who-was-Mom-but-not-Mom took

Demie's hand and gave a weak smile.

"How are you doing, honeybear?" Mom asked. As a preschooler, Winnie-The-Pooh had been Demie's favorite book, so Mom started calling her "honeybear." Demie hated it, but she still gave a thumbs up. At least it was one thing that hadn't changed.

Since Mom was here, Demie could ask the question. Making a hoarse croak and pointing at her throat, Demie grabbed the paper and pen, and wrote, "How is Kori?" Her hand shook, so afraid of the answer that she could hardly write.

Mom read the message a couple times, frowned, and then looked at Demie, puzzled.

"Who's Kori?"

Cold trembles pierced Demie's body. She had imagined all kinds of answers over the past few hours, few of them good. But none came close to this. Anger surged within as Demie glared at her mother and scribbled, "My sister, Kori. How is she?"

Mom stared at the pad, then slowly shook her head as she replied, "Honey, you don't have a sister. You're an only child."

What the heck was wrong with Mom? This couldn't be happening. A pounding ache erupted in Demie's head as she wrote back, "Not funny! Where's Dad?"

Mom snorted, "Where do you think? My ex-husband is too busy with his girlfriend to be here."

Mom's EX-husband? Since when, and why would she even say something like that? For some reason, Mom was playing some real sick joke on her. Her hands shook as Demie snatched the pad back, "You're NOT divorced. Why are you DOING THIS?"

Mom read the message as the doctor walked in and then, dropping the pad on the bed, she pulled him aside for a whispered conversation. Over the beeping of the machines and the hiss from the ceiling vents, Demie overheard snatches of the conversation as the doctor calmed Mom down.

"...very traumatized...classic symptoms of PTSD...just an imaginary friend."

Demie scribbled, "Kori is REAL!" and threw the pad at her mom. The lies about Kori and being divorced had to be covering something up, and apparently the doctor was in on it.

Whatever they were hiding, she needed to find out what was really going on and why they were doing this to her. Maybe they were punishing her for not saving her sister from the Shadowman. She couldn't remember, didn't want to remember exactly what happened, but Demie knew with a sickening certainty that she had somehow thrown Kori under the bus to save her own self.

Demie thrashed in the bed as she pushed the side rail down, slipped over the edge and dropped to the floor. She tried to crawl away while Mom and the doctor held her down and the nurse scrambled to get a sedative injected into the drip line. Demie kept picturing Kori's eyes, asking the question Demie couldn't answer.

The sedative slammed her into unconsciousness, as she directed her last, fading thought toward her sister.

'I promise, Kori, I'll never forget you. Ever.'