

From the Author of "The Dogman Cometh"

JONATHAN WOMACK



OLD SOULS

The Past

Sixty-five million years ago, intelligent life evolved on a larger, fifth world orbiting beyond Earth known as Thayuh, Mars was its moon. In a catastrophic moment of Entropy, the planet Thayuh exploded: the resulting blast destroying all surface life on Mars, leaving behind an asteroid belt of debris and dead remnants of an Egyptian-style civilization amidst the Martian craters.

The Present...

Sworn to protect mankind and the Earth from a repeat of ancient oblivion, a group of spiritually evolved, reincarnated superheroes known as "Old Souls" use their unique powers against an elite order bent on depopulating the planet with a cataclysmic attack.

*In the sixth age of man,
Humans will encounter a fork in the road:
One path leading to maturity and wisdom,
The other a repeat of ancient oblivion
-from The Book of Lost Souls*



OLD SOULS

JONATHAN
WOMACK

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Other books by Jonathan Womack:

A Cry for a Hero

The Dogman Cometh

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the old souls of the world,
past and present. Through our many lives yet to come:
May each of us attain spiritual perfection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A handshake to researcher and Harvard guardian, Chris Newcombe. A tip of my hat to Doctoral student John Roberts who served as the hero's likeness. A hug to my friend Yumi Maskay for her permission to use her name and image for the heroine. Blessings to my editor Karen Adams and her fine tuning. Kudos to Roger Hunt for his lustrous interior design.

Blown kisses to cover artists Molly Courtright and Miriam Grunhaus. This book is unique in that Mrs. Courtright drafted the cover early on when I was three chapters into the story. Set in the wilds of Glacier National Park, Montana, I was immediately struck by Molly's choice for background image, a photo of Lake St. Mary's, chosen from hundreds of Glacier Park stock images. I like to imbue a sense of realism into my fictional novels and upon closer inspection, I was tantalized by such notable features as the "T-Rex shadow" and the "Throne" formation that became pinnacle points of the narrative. I kept a close eye on the Lake St. Mary's image as I drafted the remainder of the manuscript around the scenery. Miriam Grunhaus added the finishing touches of spine, back, and flaps artwork to complete what has become my most relished cover design. As the Old Soul, Sage, would say, it was meant to be.

A salute to Richard Hoagland, the late Arthur C. Clarke, the Monroe Institute, the Farsight Institute, Psi-Tech Inc., Coast to Coast AM, and all who strive for disclosure.

PART ONE

Amnesia

*In light of past transgressions,
The knowledge of former lives
And from where our spirits hail,
Is knowledge best forgotten.*

—from The Book of Lost Souls

CHAPTER 1

MONTANA

THE SKIES ABOVE THE OXBOW WILDERNESS

Solar splendor lit the mid-morning sky, illuminating the snow-white glacial peaks of western Montana. A necklace of hovering clouds accentuated the majestic range of summits and valleys and cast an undulating shadow over the grandiose landscape.

High above the scene, northern trade winds escorted a lone, military cargo plane; the twin-engine craft holding steady at forty thousand feet as it hummed its course through the azure expanse.

Waiting within the plane's hold, Jonah Trek drew a practiced breath, attenuating his tension in preparation for his next jump. Braving the elements was nothing new to Jonah. As a former Army Ranger, he was well-trained for extreme missions. His mind flashed back to one year ago when patrolling a Kabul street, his platoon ambushed by Taliban insurgents. Facing a massacre, Jonah had stormed the extremist hold, and single-hand-

OLD SOULS

edly blown up, shot, stabbed, and pummeled a dozen well-armed enemies. A journalist embedded with the 101st had captured video footage of Jonah's charge, and the three-minute clip soon became a YouTube sensation that Jonah parlayed into post-tour-of-duty appearances on Leno, Conan, *GMA* and *Today*. Not long after, Jonah's fearless exploits landed him the starring role in *The Knowledge Channel's* "Primal Man" TV series, and in ninety seconds from now, he would leap from the plane's hold to embark on his first harrowing challenge.

The mission entailed a dangerous high-altitude, low opening skydive into the Oxbow wilderness: a 4,000-square-mile patch of rugged terrain, haven to a thousand dangers. Equipped with a minimalist array of survival tools and a helmet camera to record his journey, Jonah would spend seven days crossing the no-man's land; his goal to reach a prearranged pickup site alive and on schedule. Along the way, he would have to find food and shelter, and guard against attacks from a wide range of predators.

A flashing red light above the doorframe signaled the start of a sixty-second countdown. Jonah braced as a crewman slid open the cargo plane's port hatch, revealing a breathtaking view of the mountains below. Frost-coated winds rushed the hold, imparting an arctic chill into bone and metal.

Nearby, a videographer aimed a camera at Jonah,

JONATHAN WOMACK

chronicling the imminent spectacle in the name of reality TV.

The crewman raised his voice over the howling wind. "Thirty seconds, sir."

Jonah stared into the maw, the windy gulf calling to him, nausea pricking his gut. He'd overcome challenges in each corner of the world, abdominal butterflies were part of his job. This was different, a subliminal danger sense warning him of approaching doom. Though he could not discern the source of his unease, he trusted his instincts. He checked off a mental list of gear and procedure. Everything appeared to be in order, yet the sense of forewarning remained.

The red glow shifted to blinking green, revving Jonah's adrenaline: show time.

The crewman counted down with military precision, his proud-to-serve salute doing little to ease Jonah's trepidation.

"Five...four...three...two...one...go!"

Jonah contravened the go signal, a foreboding rush gluing his boots to the hull.

The crewman called to Jonah. "Sir, you have the green light. God speed."

Jonah held fast, green go-light blinking; his mind teetering with doubt. The videographer zoomed in on the action hero's unease. High drama equaled high ratings.

When a count of twenty failed to usher a jump, the

OLD SOULS

green light switched to red, signaling Jonah to hold position. The plane had passed over the target site.

The pilot's voice came over Jonah's helmet radio.

"Primal One, what is your status?"

"My apologies, captain, just a case of pre-launch jitters," Jonah responded. "I'm good for round two, whenever you're ready."

"Understood, Primal One. Stand by for secondary approach, ETA three minutes to drop zone." The pilot's tone echoed sympathy for Jonah. More than a few people had died attempting jumps this high without a pressurized oxygen suit. Furthermore, surviving the dive was but a warm up to a seven-day mission from hell. No matter how shrewd and tough mankind proved to be, Mother Nature always ranked tougher.

Jonah's relief was palpable. The turn-around would allow him a chance to compose himself, canceling the mission a last resort. He latched a hand to a support strap, leaning into the hold's tilt as the craft swooped through the sky. Sixty seconds elapsed before the captain's voice snicked in Jonah's helmet radio.

"Primal One, we are a go for secondary approach, speed eighty-five knots; altitude 40,000 feet. Sixty seconds to jump."

Jonah confirmed, "Acknowledged, Primal One standing by."

The pilot returned an unexpected response that

JONATHAN WOMACK

amped Jonah's warning sense. "Primal One, belay that message, we have two unauthorized craft approaching our eight o'clock vector; advise you to hold position and stand by for further instructions."

"Acknowledged, Primal One standing by." Jonah directed his gaze out of the hatch and aft at a pair of single-file, winged-shapes a few nautical miles southwest, gaining a steady approach.

The pilot's tone held the timbre of a seasoned veteran, showing no hint of the gut-twisting unease Jonah felt. "To unidentified aircraft, this is Captain Surguy of the Montana National Guard. You have entered a restricted zone. Please identify yourselves."

Jonah yearned for a benign reply to disprove his fears, straining his ears and his hope against the static wash filling his earpiece. He was infamous in the terrorist world, and the back alleys of his mind were shadowed with the fear of retribution, the approaching craft perhaps filled with a band of suicide assassins here to enact jihad. With no built-in armaments, the cargo plane was an easy target, defenseless against attack. Jonah's third eye warned him such an assault was imminent.

The pilot kept one eye on the radar display as the nearing craft loomed, now a mile away and coming in fast. Both appeared to be private jets, having greater speed and maneuverability than the bulky cargo plane.

The pilot repeated his appeal. "To unidentified craft,

OLD SOULS

this is Captain Surguy of the Montana National Guard. You have entered restricted airspace. Alter your course to zero mark four, altitude three-five-zero-zero.”

“Crewman, close the hatch.” Jonah’s tone disclosed his building alarm; the lead-jet streaming toward them, moments away.

“Yes, sir.” The crewman leaned his weight against the sliding metal door, grunting with effort, the oversized hatch resisting him.

Jonah shot a look at the civilian cameraman.

“Secure that camera and strap yourself in.”

The man did not question Jonah’s authority, his reality shoot put on hold.

With ominous grace, the lead jet, a sleek, white Lear, sidled alongside the cargo plane, matching its speed and altitude, wing tips dangerously close. Jonah watched as the jet’s starboard side-hatch swung open, revealing not an extremist, but a bald, Caucasian man wearing sunglasses, aiming a threatening look at Jonah.

Combat adrenaline electrified Jonah into action, convinced they were under attack. He scrambled to the hatch, adding pull to the crewman’s push, angry winds whipping them as they struggled to seal the breach.

From across the wind-torn span, the aggressor aimed an empty hand at Jonah. Ungodly powers birthed a maelstrom of furious turbulence, morphing into a giant fist. The force bludgeoned the cargo plane as violent

JONATHAN WOMACK

winds threatened to tear Jonah from the hold and out into the abyss.

Jonah's mind heated with alpha juice, survivor-blood scourging his veins. Grating sounds of strained metal reverberated through the fuselage, ill sounds foretelling a catastrophe.

With a Tolkien flourish, the attacker waved his hands at Jonah, unleashing a cursed wind streaming across the span and into the cargo plane hold, furling past Jonah in favor of the unsecured cameraman. Tangible fingers of air gripped the frightened passenger and hauled him from his feet, breaking the harness straps and tossing him toward the hatch. His tumble collided with Jonah, knocking Jonah through the opening and into the wide rift.

An angel kicked out of heaven, TV's primal star plunged toward an ill-fated end to a doomed mission.

CHAPTER 2

The wind snatched Jonah, slamming him against the rear fuselage, yards short of the tail wing, his demise stalled by a safety strap clipped to his harness, his body dangling horizontally from the open hatch. Around him, a deafening roar of pummeling wind, groaning metal, and thrumming engines. He strained for the safety release, freezing gusts stealing his breath, shearing G-forces hampering his efforts to free himself, each oxygen-starved second decreasing his chance for survival.

Jonah caught sight of the cameraman tumbling from the hold and careening off the Lear jet's wing with a bone-jarring thud, followed by a limp plunge at the ground, the videographer filming his own death. As in the Middle East, Jonah's insides ached with the loss of a comrade.

The crewman leaned from the hatch, fighting to free Jonah from the aeronautical death trap, the pilot's cries of mayday in their helmet radios. The crewman's efforts were futile, and like the cameraman, torrential currents sucked him from the hold, his body narrowly avoiding a mid-air collision with the Lear's wing as he tumbled at the earth. To his benefit, he wore a parachute, a small

JONATHAN WOMACK

chance at survival in the extreme conditions of upper atmosphere.

Speeding through the sky at two hundred miles per hour, battering gales banged Jonah against the fuselage. Cracks spread through the airship, the snap of popping rivets and metallic creaks. In moments, the condemned craft would either break apart, or explode.

Jonah sensed an approaching, final episode of his life's show, God the supreme network exec, Jonah's death pre-negotiated; the TV star's contract at an end. Denouncing fate, kismet, and destiny, Jonah braked his fear, his inner furnace burning with to-be compulsion. He strained a hand toward the knife at his hip; his only hope to cut away the strap and pray his release did not carry him into the tail wing's path. An aerial somersault out and away. A skydive and parachute drop to the ground to cheat death once more.

Unconsciousness rose from his mind's cellar, blood rushing to his head as he unsheathed his blade, all his might bent on reaching the strap, freedom a knife-cut away.

As he struggled, his gaze encompassed the Lear's far side, where the trailing third craft, a white Hugh's Shuttle jet, had caught up with the Lear, sliding into position twenty feet above and aside, the attacking Lear now sandwiched between Jonah's cargo plane and the Hugh's jet.

OLD SOULS

The Hugh's starboard side-hatch opened, exposing a staunch figure in a black flight-suit and matching helmet, face hidden behind a dark-tinted visor. As one pausing at the top of an escalator, the stranger looked down at the neighboring Lear, winds shearing through the airy gulf separating the two jets.

With the bluster of James Bond, the figure leapt from the open hatch, executing a swan dive through the streaming air to land atop the Lear's fuselage, straddling the craft as though saddled upon a flying dragon.

In an astonishing display of strength, the newcomer stabbed a hand through the Lear's fiberglass hull, tearing open a yard-wide gap. Quick and dexterous, the mystery aeronaut slipped through the hole, disappearing inside the Lear's inner sanctum. Next came the bald sorcerer's violent expulsion from the Lear's hatch, his fall disappearing into the blue yonder.

In an instant, the turbulence eased. By expelling the attacker, the faceless Samaritan had allowed Jonah a fighting chance. No time for questions or gratitude: there was only surviving, his mind a zero point of focus, escape his sole ambition.

Jonah's faceless benefactor appeared at the Lear's open hatch, aiming a visor-clad look at Jonah. Jonah deferred to his third-eye assessment, recognizing the stranger not as an enemy but as a comrade, someone so in tune with Jonah's nature as to be a mirror version of

JONATHAN WOMACK

his warrior self. Even under death-defying duress, Jonah perceived a brother-in-arms, a fellow soldier committed to rescuing Jonah, willing to sacrifice his own life in the pursuit of their mission.

Halfway into his cut, a gust hammered Jonah against the fuselage, jarring the knife from his grip. The weapon glinted as it tumbled away, demolishing his faith. His valiance was further impaled when something jerked his would-be rescuer from the hatchway, yanking the stranger inside the Lear's hold. An ill sight followed, Jonah's mystery comrade bursting upward through the Lear's fuselage as though whaled upon by King Kong's fist. The stranger rocketed upward toward the Hugh's fiberglass wing, spearing a wide hole in it before arcing away and out of sight, another brave soul snuffed out by evil.

The wounded jet teetered starboard, chaotic forces tilting the disabled airliner into a collision course with the Lear. The two airships collided, setting off a fiery, mid-air explosion, echoes of war sounding across the battlefields of Jonah's makeup.

Titan defiance spiked Jonah's pull at the torn strap, his last ditch effort snapping the remaining strands, freeing himself as furnace heat reached for him. He jetted away from the maelstrom, flaming wreckage whizzing past his free-falling form, the earth's irrefutable surface waiting to arrest his descent eight

OLD SOULS

miles below. Close behind, an inferno engulfed the cargo plane, inducing another explosion, metallic debris raining down through the Montana sky. As to the fate of the pilot, the airman, and the visor-clad Samaritan, their survival seemed an empty hope. Jonah's crumpling heart stood fast against despair. By his life or by his death, he would survive this attack to one day hunt down and exact justice on those responsible.

Dropping fast, he pinned his arms to his side; toes pointed, his flight suit's built-in stabilizers righting his tumble. A count of fifteen passed as he surfed freezing winds, consciousness a slippery eel swimming amongst an emotional flotsam, passing out a prelude to certain death. He willed his oxygen-starved brain to remain focused until he could reach a lower altitude, where his next breath waited. Tight bands of suffocation wrapped his chest, and to his agony, gray tentacles of nothingness drizzled over his vision, his brain shutting down; too high, too thin, too lax: too late.

Oblivion swallowed his awareness, and in that moment, by all means and measure, Jonah Trek was no longer amongst the living.

CHAPTER 3

Riding languid trails of ether, Jonah's mind settled into a lucid, near-death space pleated between dream and coma. One measureless moment followed another while fast-moving images played over the curve of his inner vision. There was a click of adjustment as his consciousness reseated itself within his brain, aligning his mind to a higher state. As time and space resumed, he awoke to find himself gliding through the cobalt blue Montana firmament, moving at a comfortable speed toward the ground miles below. Beside him—a wing-span away, matching his speed and descent—his material body, limp with unconsciousness, falling toward the earth. More curious than concerned, he watched as though a spectator, a spreading sense of detachment from his most recent corporeal vessel. His jubilant life force was set free from its physical body, the temporary ride for his hitchhiking soul no longer needed.

In time, he would choose another body to incarnate with, for this was not to be his final, physical life on this planet. Although an advanced soul with thousands of lives lived, there were still lessons to be learned and trials to overcome before graduating Earth School.

OLD SOULS

Waning attention to his physical vessel's plight grew to indifference, his disassociated consciousness absorbed by the magnificent beauty of the mountainous landscape from on high. Creator energy was everywhere, in every rock and tree, air and earth, an even wash of life-generating force penetrating the universe. Awe and wonder urged him to accept his departure, and abandon his damaged matter-shell in favor of exploring the greater beyond, existing as a learning, sentient being.

Smidgens of soul memory pinged his consciousness, vague recollections of his time in the spirit world prior to arriving here; his careful choice of gender, body-type, and life situation; a strong, athletic male, the brain well developed, the time-space humanoid interface serving him well for its thirty-year span. His decision to live a life as a wartime soldier was based on his notion that such an intense environment would yield the maximum experiential growth, evolving him at a faster rate. Fleeting imagery from past lives—men, women, black, white, old, young, rich and poor—each a past version of him, did not engender a sense of familiarity but rather the impassiveness of an amnesiac shown pictures of long-forgotten relatives. His curious mind yearned for answers, driven by a need to reconnect, to relive the events and emotions of his former selves, to *remember*. But strain as he might, a force greater than him con-

JONATHAN WOMACK

founded his focus, his mind unable to penetrate the astral fog veiling his past lives.

His reminiscence was vexed as well by a nagging tug of karma compelling him to return to his body. An ominous concern that he had jettisoned his life prematurely plugged his heart with remorse. Cresting insight revealed he still had more to accomplish on the physical plane, his greater purpose unrealized, his spiritual goals unachieved. The lines waiting to be human were long, each incarnation a difficult, yet invaluable learning opportunity. From a spirit-world perspective, to relinquish a human life ahead of time without giving one's all was a colossal waste. Though he sensed an unpleasant future and a dire fate if he returned to the here-and-now, further meditation solidified his decision. For good or ill, he would reincarnate and live out his chosen destiny. It was the right thing to do.

Gliding 10,000 feet above the earth, he closed in on the falling body. Re-immersion would be traumatic and involve physical agonies he would rather avoid. A part of him was aware that Earth's spiritual battlefields would go on without him, his heart of hearts wanting to return to that most glorious of places; the home of souls, where, together with his spirit guide, he would debrief the life just lived before contemplating the next.

Jonah reached an internal compromise. Utilizing innate abilities natural to his non-corporeal self, he

OLD SOULS

would guide the body safely to the ground, and leave it in the park among the trees in order to re-associate with it later. A real-time minute was all he needed to enjoy an interlude of unencumbered freedom in the spirit world before returning to the harsh existence of man.

Focusing his essence, the formless being once known as Jonah Trek extended a tendril of energy toward the body to finger the parachute's ripcord. In moments, the breakneck descent would reach terminal velocity, a point of no return leading to permanent physical death. But the mechanism resisted his pull, the raw density of time/space making it difficult for his consciousness to affect matter. Sustained attention tightened his psyche, and with forceful concentration, Jonah activated the release.

White nylon folds shot upward, unfurling into a bilowed symmetry, slowing the body's rapid plunge to an even glide. Jonah nudged the slack body through cross-cutting currents and filmed clouds, navigating the parachute toward an alpine slope 7,000 feet below, and the visible, green, bulls-eye of a lakeside clearing surrounded by peaks. After a softened landing, a minutia of life force would be left inside the brain to keep the heart beating twice per minute, insuring the body's survival until his return.

From above came the approach of a noxious energy

JONATHAN WOMACK

grabbing his attention, an onrushing wake so vile it drove Jonah to back away to a wider perspective, viewing the scene from a distance, his caution piqued.

Barreling down on a headlong trajectory, sans parachute, was the mad sorcerer, his sunglasses still in place, his aerial maneuverings drawing him in on the white blanch of the furlled parachute below. His intent was clear. The bald man meant to exterminate Jonah's body with extreme prejudice.

Jonah's emotional detachment quick-changed to burning alarm, flailed by an imminent notion that the fate of the world somehow depended on him returning to his body. He was meant to vanquish this adversary, and if he failed, billions would die who did not die before.

The sorcerer swooped closer, arms pointed, his hands discharging metaphysical power. A swath of whipped wind caught the parachute, careening the tethered body into an uncontrolled spiral. A second gale collapsed the sail in on itself, the drifting body now a flung stone tied to a string, the ever-closer ground 5,000 feet below. Nylon lines tangled the body as it plummeted, eliminating any chance to deploy the backup chute.

The sorcerer arced an adjacent path to the hog-tied prey, his sanctimonious mission to behead the enemy's second in command. Impact with the ground would damage the hard-won trophy beyond recognition. To

OLD SOULS

insure full credit for his achievement, he would take the head of Jonah Trek while airborne.

The villain closed in, latched a hold to Jonah from behind, legs locking around Jonah's thighs, one arm wrapped around Jonah's neck, nylon folds whipping in the wind. With a grab and a pull, the madman yanked off Jonah's helmet to expose the throat. The bald assassin made real an additional impossibility by drawing Jonah's sky-dropped knife, seconds away from slaying Jonah with his own weapon.

Desperation jolted Jonah into action, and he snapped back into his body with a hard shock. Physical senses avalanched his consciousness, his wits stalled by one unwilling tendril still stuck in the ether. Heart pounding, lungs screaming, he dragged a ragged breath, nylon tangle binding his limbs. The menacing brute grabbed a handful of Jonah's hair, knife sharp and lethal bearing down. Below, the elevating landscape grew in detail, an uncompromising beauty waiting to catch them in its fatal bosom.

The whoosh of a barreling jet preceded a thudding, midair collision with a third, unidentified object; the crash knocking the aggressor off Jonah's back. Hero and villain arced away in separating trajectories. Though free of the sorcerer's clutch, reality tempered Jonah's hope, the ground rushing up at him, impact sixty seconds away; death a relentless pursuer. A nylon flap

JONATHAN WOMACK

blowing in his face was a recurring slap of fate's power over him. He had always felt he would die in combat on foreign soil with a noble cause in his heart. Regrettably, the God War had reached far into Jonah's homeland, and his empty death would mark a bittersweet end to a valorous life.

He did not see nor hear the approach, rather felt the abrupt presence of a pair of legs wrapping around his waist from behind, concluding it was the sorcerer, returned to crush the last remnants of Jonah's soul. Wrapped in a cocoon of cord and nylon, Jonah was defenseless. Not that it mattered. The threat approaching from below was greater than that at his back. A surly thought crossed his final moments, fear of the unknown tainting his heroic makeup with a grinding-stone of revenge, his last wish to take the murderous sorcerer with him.

Amongst the crumbling pillars of Jonah's faith swam not the slither of evil, rather a profound ambience of warmth and assurance, as light as the space between a tick and a tock, yet as powerful and bright as the sun. It washed through him in a blinding instant, its wake supplanting his weakened core with courage. In a moment of illusory absorption, comprehension sustained him. All was not lost, for his flight-suited guardian had survived the plane crash and had returned to Jonah's aid in his darkest hour.

OLD SOULS

The guardian spooned Jonah's back, steely arms in a firm hold around his chest, one hand cradling Jonah's throat. Their twirling smoothed into a straight drop; backs to the earth, his guardian on the bottom, positioned to absorb the brunt; their furious descent accelerating.

The clearing loomed below: Alpine slopes reaching for them, sadness rising from the propinquity of death. No human could survive a fall from 40,000 feet, and Jonah would never know the identity of this fearless comrade, nor the reason behind his brave, but futile actions.

Five, four, three, two...

They impacted the ground with the force of a crashing asteroid, interrupting the clearing's solace with a thunderous explosion. An earth-jarring boom resounded across mountain slopes while a mile away, the lake's still surface splashed with falling debris.

Harsh echoes crackled into the distance as Mother Nature regained her footing. Unsettled winds funneled amongst the trunks of Douglas firs flanking the meadow, a leftover breeze dissipating a residual cloud of pulverized earth to reveal a crater ten feet deep and fifteen feet wide.

Prone on his back inside the crater, eyes closed, head pounding, hot, dusty air ravaged Jonah's lungs. Pain receptors scraped his overloaded nervous system, and

JONATHAN WOMACK

he was unsure whether the ringing in his ears was the result of heavenly angels or hard-core concussion.

He felt the tug of nylon lines being snapped, a powerful grip tearing apart his woven tomb. He opened battered eyes to a figure bending over him, the guardian's identity hidden behind the dark-tinted visor, concerned voice muffled.

"Are you okay?"

He wheezed against bruising pain racking his insides: shock and awe dizzying his mind. If not for wits sharpened by battles fought and comrades lost, he would have succumbed to unconsciousness. Instead, he shook away the numbness clouding his brain, and measured up his benefactor with a gritty look.

Though the guardian was slight of frame—five feet five inches tall, 115 pounds by estimate—Jonah sensed the presence of a consummate warrior, a fighter with superior strength and capabilities. Furthermore, their meeting was not by chance, but an inevitable moment in the chronology of his existence, the whisperings of an ageless connection oscillating his interior. Unable to sort the wild mix of emotions swirling his mind, Jonah grasped at nodes of enlightenment just beyond his reach, his blurred gaze posing a thousand questions, his throat cracking with strain.

"Who are you?"

OLD SOULS

Time diverted from its forward pace, fate's dramatic showing of its hand, the stranger removing the helmet.

Jonah gasped. His rescuer was not a man, but a dark-haired Asian woman, meeting his gaze with infinity in her eyes, stirrings of love sealed away long ago now leaking to the surface of Jonah's heart.

In the span of a long beat, a hundred possible replies wavered in her eyes, as if she had prepared all her life for this moment, and now that it had arrived, the power of its reality had stolen her voice. Her demeanor that of a quarry keeping the hounds at bay, she leaned in close: perhaps her only chance, her lips closing in on his. Her kiss was as innocent as a first hello between fated lovers, as undeniable as the tides, replete with an emotional purity known only in children's fairytales.

Too brief, she pulled away, breaking the kiss while leaving the spell intact, her earth-brown eyes moistened with longing as she sought the depths of his soul through the twin panes of his eyes.

"I am Yumi. And I am...your Density."

CHAPTER 4

Yumi's image wavered before Jonah. Though his subconscious was aware that rising heat generated by their impact caused the ripple effect, it reinforced his awestruck impression she was an angel fallen from heaven. Whether her unannounced entrance into his life was happenstance or planned was yet to be discovered.

He did not flinch when she reached to check his pulse with the compassion of a nurse, the concern of a lover. "Are you all right?" Her American English was accented with Asian inflections, her brown, radiant complexion highlighting her Nepalese features.

"What happened?" Jonah said, incredulous. The last fifteen minutes of non-computing input had crashed his brain. After a cold reboot, a cache of impracticalities petitioned his left hemisphere for a much-needed dose of logic.

Her response was understatement peppered with perseverance. "We had a bad fall, but we survived."

Stunned silence gripped Jonah's voice. Having endured a terrorist attack, a harrowing sky-plunge, and a near death experience, it seemed to him God had

OLD SOULS

plucked a harp string of creation, sending out an orchestral pulse across the sheet music of continuity that now allowed for heretofore impossible arpeggios.

“No one survives a HALO without a chute. We should both be pulp.” He turned his eyes around the pit, the blast radius of a ballistic missile, blackened chunks of fused granite, steam rising from the crater wall. His mind rattled from the foregone but implausible conclusion the rift was caused by a woman weighing in at a hundred-nothin’ pounds. Addled and off-guard, a cluster of post-war paranoia struck his defenses, his tone more suspicious than appreciative.

“I don’t know who you are, or who you work for. All I know is we were attacked and one of my crew is dead. The rest are missing.” His loath sigh indicated psychological anguish. “I need some answers ASAP ‘cause none of this makes sense.”

She allayed his shell-shocked reproach with an appeal, her hand moving from his throat to his forehead. “Please, listen to me. I know you have many questions, but we are in danger and cannot remain here. I ask that you trust me and do as I say.” Her appeasement could have persuaded a cornered hunchback from a bell tower. “When we are safely away, I swear to you all will be answered.”

Jonah scanned her expression as though her soft, angular features contained a map leading to her heart’s

JONATHAN WOMACK

treasure. Misdeed, malice, or mayhem could find no quarter in her entrusting gaze, her sincerity honed by selfless acts, her sense of loyalty untainted by cynicism. Whatever the identity of this remarkable warrior, one thing was clear: she was one of the good guys.

He nodded his compliance, sealing the pact, their foxhole-bond established.

“Are you injured?” Yumi said.

“My left arm,” Jonah said, submissive, “Feels broken.”

Yumi followed his gaze to his forearm, and rolled up the sleeve of his flight suit, baring his skin. If this was the worst of his injuries, then they had been fortunate indeed.

“Lie still, I’m going to help you.”

Her palm hovered an inch above his swollen forearm, the small size of her hand in sharp contrast to the heavy pressure emanating from her light touch. The thick pressure increased and spread through Jonah’s flesh to his bone, a strange, altering sensation coursing through vein and marrow, confounding his mind’s attempt at interpretation. In moments, the pain subsided in cycle with the swelling, the fractured limb healing before his eyes.

She arched an eyebrow. “Better?”

Jonah rubbed an appreciative hand over the injury. “How did you...?”

Her upraised forefinger was a reminder to postpone the Q & A until later.

OLD SOULS

“Can you stand?”

Jonah delayed his reply, assessing internal pains. Other than his arm, his insides seemed to have taken little damage. “I will try, general, might need a hand up.”

Yumi noted Jonah’s Freudian slip. Addressing a civilian as a superior officer was a subliminal compliment, and in his shocked state, had rolled off his tongue unconsciously. She clasped his hand, cupped her arm under his. “Okay, here we go, soldier, nice and easy; one, two, three...”

She lifted him to his feet with ease, and steadied him against a dizzying spell. She found his eyes and waited for his gaze to focus. “You with me?”

Jonah nodded, groggy. “Yeah, I’m here. We’re in danger, need to evacuate the area. What’s the plan?”

Her tone was pointed in the face of his disorientation: his full attention vital to their survival. “We must get clear of this pit. I am going to carry you out.” She did not wait for his acknowledgment, and picked him up in her arms, cradling his six-foot two, 230-pound bulk with no more effort than if he’d been grandma’s blanket.

“Stick close. Relax your body, and you will be okay. Ready?”

Jonah nodded, surrendering his fate to her forklift hold. Yumi bent at the knee, and in a single bound, leapt from the pit to land on the crater’s rim, the sun-

JONATHAN WOMACK

drenched meadow beyond belying the violence of their crash-landing. Yumi stepped away from the ledge to a grassy knoll and set Jonah on his feet, her hand on his shoulder, strong and steady.

“How do you feel?”

Jonah bent at the waist, hands to his knees, savoring a full breath of fresh, mountain air. Oxygen, though thin at this elevation, never tasted so good. “Like I stepped on a live mortar.”

“You may have a concussion,” Yumi said. “We need to find a haven where you can rest.” She indicated the direction with her pointing finger while he collected his bearings. “Once you catch your breath we will head north, through the trees to the lake. If you are too damaged, I can carry you.”

Jonah took her claim as word. From what he had witnessed so far, he would not have jeered if Yumi purported to be a genetically-enhanced spy belonging to a top-secret race of superwomen who could bear Jonah’s weight for leagues without breaking a sweat.

“No, I’ll be all right, just need a minute.” He drank in the unspoiled air while Yumi turned her inscrutable gaze at the pine-needled woodland, searching for hidden threats among the sunlit landscape.

“They know we are here,” Yumi said, her expression flexed with the look of the hunted. “They will come

OLD SOULS

looking for us. We must hurry if we are to gain a head start.” She aimed a wordless warning at him to brace for the fight of his life.

Jonah considered the implications of an enemy that instilled such apprehension in someone as extraordinary as Yumi. Having experienced first-hand the metaphysical mastery of the mad sorcerer, the gathering forces hunting them must be insidious beyond measure.

She faced him full on, her expression as grim as the war-torn streets of Kabul. “Are you ready?”

Jonah stared into the depths of her eyes, watching as the doorway to her most intimate place nudged open. Longing to share in the secrets of her universe, he trained eyes wide open upon her inner beauty. What he glimpsed was remarkable. What he felt was shameful. Questioning her motives in a moment of paranoia had overshadowed the fact that if not for her, he, a total stranger, would be but a smattering of flesh and bone. He tucked his self-admonishment under a blanket of self-analysis to be sorted out later. Approaching danger notwithstanding, he did not want another moment to pass before acknowledging her death-defying heroics on his behalf.

“Thank you,” he said.

She regarded him in silence, sensing his internal wrestling.

JONATHAN WOMACK

"You risked your life for me," Jonah continued. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Yumi downplayed his *Semper-Fi* faux pas. "No thanks necessary. You would have done the same for me."

"For someone who doesn't know me, you sound pretty sure of that."

Yumi skipped over his comment. "As for your initial mistrust, under the circumstances, I would expect it."

"Yeah, well, I don't take such actions lightly. I owe you my life."

Jonah could not tell where the wistful wash cresting her eyes came from, only that for a moment, her vulnerability showed in her face, her posture, and her eyes. In that span, he saw her unfettered by war or responsibility, as a beautiful, intelligent, and alluring woman, and he found himself hoping she was not yet bound to anyone.

Whatever the cause, Yumi blinked the emotion away, and turned toward the woods. "Let's move out."

"Right behind you," acknowledged Jonah, trailing her lithe form.

Using stealth, they entered the tree line to disappear amidst the evergreen boughs: hero and heroine together aboard a roiling ship of destiny.