

WHISPERED LIGHT

The technology was left far behind. Down there somewhere. At the end of the road. He carried what he required in his pockets and his day pack.

He tried to stay in the gracious coolness of the shadows as he worked his way up the steepening canyon. Hot. The August sun of southeastern Arizona was merciless. The canyon maintained a mutual ecology for its residents. Ancient evergreens and cactus had long ago agreed to the boundaries of community. Brilliant orange and yellow flowers gathered and gossiped in the sunlight.

The accentuated incline of the canyon walls forced him down beyond the flowers. Into the cactus. Into the sun. He sweated and struggled. The mountains were not new. They were resilient. The peaks were no longer spikes and spires. They were rounded and softening. Maturing. The robe of life concealed and enhanced the undulating contours. On and up he climbed. Through the cleavage of millennia.

Hot. Difficult. Enervating. The task made more demanding since he did not climb with his senses. He climbed with his mind. Although the mountain had little patience with small, heady men it was tolerant of mindful men. As he rounded the sharp bend of the dry, runoff stream he had followed, he grimaced and stopped. Before him was a sheer vertical face. Rock. Three hundred feet. Straight up. He swore. He turned without looking and tripped over a shin high, bristling cactus. He swore again. Thorns had stapled his pant leg to his flesh just above his left boot top. He clenched his teeth and grunted as he pulled out each barbed spike. It hurt. He hobbled thirty meters up the slope, returning to a field of pacific shadow. He removed his left boot and the sweat soaked sock. He rubbed the punctures and abrasions on his leg. A breeze, so slight that he did not feel it, brought the smell of the sock to his nostrils. At first he did not recognize the intrusion. As he massaged his leg the smell quietly entered his awareness. It was not particularly offensive. It simply had not existed as part of the mountain's orchestration of scents before he arrived. Curious, he thought. The pain had eased. He

replaced his sock and boot. No breeze. No skin evaporation. Just sweat. Hot. The mountain had blocked his ascent. His mind demanded high ground. He had questions.

The sun had moved discernibly toward the west. He needed to hurry to keep his appointment. Trees obscured his view upward to the ridge line on his side of the canyon. On the other side he could see a portion of the tight crescent, arcing from the rock face to a point where the canyon wandered around the corner and faced south. The slopes were steep but apparently negotiable. Evergreens inhabited the upper balcony into which he was entering. He turned into the trees and began the steep, switch-backing climb which he hoped would take him to the ridge line.

He used the trees to pull himself up the relentless incline. Tree sap clung to his hands. When he reached out for handholds, his fingers stuck together. Cobwebs clutched at his face. He wiped them away with pitch-soaked hands and swore. Branches slapped at his face and snagged his pack. His feet staggered on through the cushioned floor of pine needles. His shirt clung to his torso. The crotch of his trousers rubbed the insides of his thighs raw. He cursed. His mind demanded high ground. He hurt.

He stopped, squinting from the sting of sweat running into his eyes. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. He tried to find a dry spot on the cuffs with which to dab at his eyes. A spurting gust of wind raced by fanning his sweat-soaked body. He shivered. He must be near the ridge line. He shook his head vigorously, spraying the surrounding trees like a newly-bathed collie. He was going to make it. He was going to take his mind to the high ground. He climbed. The gusts became a breeze. The trees stopped abruptly as he entered the domain of the wind.

The ridge line was stark. Trees clustered together for protection. Rocks asserted themselves through compacted dirt, swept free on any natural litter. Before him stood the remains of a lightning-struck pine. The top two thirds of the tree had been obliterated by the blast. The remaining ten foot section was split vertically. Half lay broken at the base

of the trunk. The other half stood, wind-polished and austere, like a tombstone of the damned.

To his left, the crest continued barren for five hundred meters or so, then dropped into the wind shadow of a neighboring ridge. There trees began to clothe the mountain again. He walked out onto the scoured shoulder. There, like an ancient Phoenician, he stood. Facing north and west he viewed the approaching shadows cast on the valley that stretched out before him. A steady wind blew through his hair. His eyes watered. Commanding the western and northern quadrants of the radiant blue sky were the raw, aspiring colonnades of cumulus clouds. Thunderheads. He grunted. Soon he would know. He turned and walked back to the treeline. Shrugging his shoulders he removed his pack.

He shivered again as the wind surged by the dampened patch where the pack had adhered to his shirt throughout the day. He gathered small dead branches from the ground and snapped squaw-wood from the lower portions of the trees. In the quiet eddy of a boulder he scraped away the pine needles, gouged a small depression with his boot heel and built a hatful of fire. He glanced up the hill. Blue sky was all that was visible. But he knew it was coming. He made tea. He rested.

The sun moved onward toward the western horizon. The wind attenuated. He stood. It would be soon. He walked back up the slope. Immediately he saw them. Gray enfolded on gray. Cloud enwrapping cloud. Monstrous. Blackening. Moving. Approaching. Enveloping the mountain and ridges across the valley. An illuminating snap of light, followed seconds later by the grinding, gnashing report of thunder. Soon. He stood, facing the storm. Exposed on the high ground. The wind seemed to stop and invert, pulling at him. Closer they came. He moved forward to meet them. He moved past the lightning-shattered pine to open ground. The valley lay before him. A single tree stood fifty meters to his left. The stunted, diminutive clump of trees, holding firmly to the ridge, were to his right rear.

They came for him then. First, the eerie, tingling fingers that caressed his body and raised the hair on the back of his neck. He stood erect, lowered his head and waited. The wind swept in like a tidal surge. He took half a step back and regained his balance. Teeth clenched, face set, he lifted his head to meet them. He would know or he would die. The rain came first as widely spaced, intermittent globs splatting against him and the ridge. Then, with the ferocity of a storm surf, the rain cascaded over him. In defiance and terror he thrust his arms toward the clouds with the first static, searing, illuminating discharge. He clenched his fists and screamed in answer to the thunderous cacophony. Blue-gold arcs surrounded him. And they were one. The lightning. The thunder. The answering screams. The man. The lone tree to his left disintegrated in a blast of light. The acrid stench assaulted his nostrils. It continued. The man standing exposed. Screaming at the lighting. Demanding to see the face of God. Demanding confirmation. Demanding insight or death.

Behind him, among the small, resilient clump of trees, sheltered by protective branches, the woman sits holding a child. She glances through the foliage. She sees the man silhouetted against an incandescent sky. Her gaze returns to the child who nurses at her breast. She smiles at the child, caressing a cheek with her finger. Her whispered thoughts illuminate the universe. Of course there is a God.