

Chapter 1

Valerie Dunne— June Present Day

Young Valerie Dunne sat up with a start as she awoke. Something was different, but the room was too dark to offer any clues about what that might be. An impenetrable blackness surrounded her, and all was silent, so she had little to go on other than intuition. Staring hard into the darkness, straining to see, revealed nothing but more blackness. But she shuddered when a kaleidoscope of colors encroached on her peripheral vision, intruding at the edges of her consciousness like feathery clouds blown on a winter's night.

When what had been shimmering peripheral lights turned into throbbing pulsations of hot white energy, she cried out in fear and pain. So intense were they that she was forced to cover her eyes with her hands. Even so, she felt as if she was staring directly into the midday sun. Blinded by the intense explosions of color, her ears rang, and her mind swirled. Startled and confused by the painful experience, the girl fought to maintain her senses in what had abruptly become a trial of sensory stamina.

As quickly as the strange phenomena began, it dissipated, allowing her brain and senses to recover. But

when she opened her eyes, she found herself not lying in bed as expected but standing. However, staying upright proved to be a Herculean task. Wobbling knees refused to cooperate, while her feet seemed glued to the floor. More than that, her entire body felt as if gravity had suddenly doubled. *What's happening! Is gravity playing tricks on me?* Aside from gravity's cruel betrayal, her addled mind and impaired senses found no reliable explanation.

Struggling against the chaos, she fought to focus her mind and body. Finally, she was able to make out the dark silhouette of an enormous stick figure standing directly before her. She recognized the form as humanoid; however, she could not decide whether she was looking at a sculpture, a being, or something else. The possibility of it being something else had her worried.

"Corell? Are you there? Corell? What happened? Where am I?" She managed to mumble weakly, her frayed voice sounding so desperate she hated the sound of it.

"Corell Paris cannot hear you, Valerie Dunne," the unfamiliar but kind voice assured her. "You are not in any danger. You have no reason to fear."

Although the voice she heard was not what she expected, it was soothing enough that it eased her worst fears. Her vision was still too blurry to make out details, but it seemed the bronze figure remained stationary, which eased her nerves. Since the voice came from the general direction of the silhouette, she anticipated movement, but none came. Nevertheless, logic told her that whatever was directly in front of her must have spoken. She just couldn't be sure.

"What's happening? Where is Corell?"

"Corell is right where you left him — of course."

"Of course," she agreed, now feeling foolish for asking such an obvious question. *No doubt Corell is exactly where I left him. Where else would he be? Maybe if I could see something, I wouldn't have to ask such dumb questions,* she reasoned.

"I'm sorry, I can't see you. It's my eyes...." Valerie said impatiently.

"Do not worry. Your vision will clear momentarily," the smooth voice reassured once more. "Please seat yourself while your sight recovers. Right behind you," the speaker advised.

A quick glance over her shoulder revealed the shape of a bench, so Valerie backed up a step, guided by touch, then lowered herself carefully onto the edge of the bench. Half-blinded and afraid of stumbling, she felt better being seated. Then, drawing a deep breath of relief, she blurted out, "Who are you?"

"My name is Osomarío. I brought you here," proclaimed the pleasant voice, but she needed to know more.

"Wh-Where is... *here*?" she asked tentatively.

"The answer to that question might be difficult for you to understand. However, the precise answer is not so much where is here, as much as it is *when is here*."

"Well," exclaimed Valerie, "one thing is certain: 'when is here' sure is hot! It must be over a hundred degrees!" No one had to remind her that she was no longer in her air-conditioned room. Although dry, the heat was oppressive, as if she had stepped into a furnace.

"Osomarío, I am confused. I was in bed in Oregon a moment ago at Corell Paris' estate. Then I woke up and found myself here, fully dressed, half-blind, and in this— pressure

cooker. I feel like I have been kidnapped. If you brought me here, tell me why.”

“I saw that your time had come.”

Frustrated, Valerie frowned and scratched her nose. Another cryptic answer was delivered matter-of-factly, which wasn't what she had hoped for. *I need to know where I am and what I am doing here! I need facts!* Her host's voice was reassuring enough, but it also carried an undeniable note of authority with it, which made her nervous. Instinct told her she was speaking to someone that commanded her destiny. Although she didn't feel an immediate threat, she remained on guard.

“Time for what?” she asked, swallowing hard. Yet, Valerie felt a compelling sense of serenity from this strange brown man and this scorchingly hot place. She felt dry, but licking her lips did nothing; they felt dry as paper. The air was desert air, carrying with it wonderful fragrances, those of a garden, she assumed. But if this was a garden, it was different than any she knew of because the scents were all wrong. While her focus cleared further, the colors became more vivid, revealing every hue of the sunrise and sunset. Now her sight was returning quickly, just as her strange host had promised, and she felt more at ease.

“The time has come for you to know the truth about yourself. I will teach you.” Osomario proclaimed.

Valerie furrowed her brows and squinted. With her vision clearing now, she realized that everything about this Osomario was indeed bronze in color. *No wonder I thought he was a bronze statue,* she thought. The creature was exceptionally tall, perhaps seven feet or more in height, and

startlingly lean. Valerie was taken aback as she noticed his broad shoulders supported, not two, but four long muscular arms of equal length. Each of those four arms ended in broad, powerful-looking hands with three fingers and a thumb. The lean muscle definition of this obviously alien life form was accentuated by hairless, leathery skin, making for an imposing presence.

But the feature that set it apart from anything she had ever seen or imagined was the high forehead punctuated by a pair of large, deep-set eyes. And those eyes shone of darkness, obscure as obsidian, reflective as mirrors, incomprehensibly empty. Although unknowable and more than a little unnerving, those glistening orbs seemed to see everything— and yet nothing. So utterly black and featureless were they that it was impossible to tell if they moved, looked past, or through her. Even as the creature turned its head, gestured, or spoke, those eyes did nothing other than mirror their surroundings. Seeing her own flawless image reflected in them caused a shudder.

Nevertheless, Osomarío's presence radiated serene intelligence and, in a strange way, undeniably beautiful. The creature's chiseled form and overall appearance confirmed her first impression: this Osomarío seemed to be more of an animated bronze sculpture than a living, breathing being. *What am I dealing with? A god? Perhaps.* The thought rattled her.

"So— you say I am here to learn the truth? About myself?"

How odd, Valerie observed. *The creature's clothing matches its skin color perfectly. Considering the heat, the loose-fitting, shapeless robes make sense, but the robes, even his sandals, are all*

the color of bronze. She reasoned that this character had embraced his favorite color like no one ever had. Although she knew better, for an instant, she imagined the creature to be a man of metal, entirely of bronze from head to foot. A walking, talking, four-armed metallic scarecrow.

“Yes. You are here to learn the truth about yourself, the Hesaurun rings, and how they should be used. I am Osomarío, your liaison to the five Hesaurun rings. I will teach you. I will be your guide.”

Valerie’s heart skipped a beat as she recalled the name *Osomarío* from Valerie Dunne’s journal and conversations with Corell Paris. According to Corell, he had gifted the five rings to humankind. Now she found herself face-to-face with the master of the five rings, and she assumed, the source of their power.

Valerie thought of pinching herself to be sure she wasn’t dreaming. For whatever reason, this Osomarío had chosen this time to bring her to him, which made her feel important. The warm glow of feeling needed, of being truly appreciated, coursed through her veins. Moreover, now she knew it was this alien she had seen so many times working in the shadows of her dreams. He had always been there to help her, and now he had called her home to him.

“Osomarío,” Valerie faltered, “I just realized I know you.”

“Yes, you do. We know each other quite well, do we not?” Osomarío said, with a trace of mischief in his voice. A wide smile had formed there, producing deep creases in his leathery features. It seemed he enjoyed the admission, as if it was something confidential, a special secret between them.

At that moment, the tension Valerie felt evaporated, and she felt a definite kinship with the strange alien.

“Almost every night for the past fourteen years,” she confessed. But realizing what she had just said could easily be misconstrued, she laughed, embarrassed at the unintended double entendre.

“Quite true,” her host responded, avoiding her verbal misstep. “We have a lot to talk about, do we not? But before that, allow me to show you my home,” he welcomed, gesturing gracefully with a pair of open hands.

With her vision finally restored, Valerie looked beyond Osomario for the first time and made a discovery that took her breath away. The scope and splendor that was Osomario’s home were almost indescribable. As she took in her surroundings, she was instantly reminded that she was no longer home—heaven perhaps, but definitely not home.

As she saw it, nothing compared to this place. No fantasy or fairytale could compare. She was reminded of OZ, or perhaps Asgard. The hanging gardens of Babylon crossed her mind, but she found no comparative metaphor.

What Valerie saw seemed not to be a home at all but rather more of a domed indoor open-air botanical sanctuary. The place was a galleria of pillars and arches, with sculptures, fountains, and more exotic foliage than her eyes could assimilate. Light, colors, and textures converged within the immense airy space, producing a scene anyone could savor.

Referring to this palace merely as a *home* would be a gross understatement. The entire structure appeared to be hewn from stone. A series of intricately engraved arched braces rose until they merged, producing an eloquent dome. Valerie didn’t know much about rock or building materials,

but she guessed she saw marble with meandering green, blue, and black veins.

Osomarío took the lead, and Valerie followed past what she assumed was the main entrance, where she had her first glimpse of the landscape outside the dome. One look told her she wasn't on Earth, or likely anywhere near it. A pair of suns, one yellow and the other red, hung in the cloudless gray sky as indisputable proof of that. The terrain was disturbingly jagged and torn with massive rocks thrown about. A valley visible in the distance helped her place the location high on a ridge or mountain. Deep gouges marked the valley floor without evidence of life or of habitation. Although she couldn't imagine how anyone would want to live in such a lifeless inferno, she resisted judging Osomarío adversely for choosing a desolate inferno as his home.

Valerie followed the creature past a courtyard adjacent to an aquatic garden. As they passed, something struck her hard from behind, on her hip. Valerie shrieked and spun around in time to see the head of a large red flower retreating with a power bar in its maw, munching voraciously on it, wrapper and all. Instinctively, she reached for her hip pocket where she had put it before yesterday's hike with Correll but felt nothing; it was gone. The big flower swallowed the bar whole then loosed a resonant call similar to a baying goat. She watched, bemused, as the vine-like creature slunk back into its watery plot with a splash.

"What the—" Valerie exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at the offender, who by the time Osomarío had caught up with her, appeared to be as innocent as any house plant. Just then, a bubble escaped the surface, sounding suspiciously like a burp.

“You have to watch that one,” Osomarío warned with a smile. “The Telygren is always looking for something to eat.”

“Tel-ey-gren,” Valerie repeated. “I’ll remember that for sure.”

Although the atmosphere was sweet with a luxuriant scent, it had an otherworldly tang she tasted and felt on her skin, similar to cooking Brussels sprouts in a sweltering kitchen. Everywhere she looked, she saw gardens, rockeries, and water plots with too many varieties to count. Each plant seemed unique, so different in appearance she guessed correctly that they were from disparate worlds, none of them familiar.

Osomarío led her past a stone staircase that spiraled to the highest levels before being swallowed by the incoming light streaming in through the arched openings. Sunlight played on the steps in a mosaic of glowing illumination and shadow. Osomarío waited patiently for the girl while she stood, staring wordlessly at the majestic scene.

“The staircase leads to an observatory,” he explained.

“It’s beautiful, your home is amazing, and I love all these plants!” Valerie gushed, then dutifully fell in behind her lanky, four-armed tour guide.

Osomarío led the way to a fountain featuring a graceful four-armed figure cradling an earthen vessel pouring water into a pool filled with floating vegetation. The creature motioned toward a bench across from the fountain and seated himself. Valerie joined him feeling refreshed, the tour through Osomarío’s gardens having calmed her previously frayed nerves.

Comfortable now in this strange place, she felt content focusing on the serene fountain, watching the water flow.

Osomarío rested next to her in silence, with sixteen long fingers folded on his lap. Then the reality of having been involuntarily removed from the safety of her bed without consent crept into her consciousness. Tension built the more she thought about it. As she was about to ask again why she was brought here, Osomarío interrupted.

“Patience. Please. Valerie,” the creature told her in clipped words, exasperation evident in his voice. “I am very aware of your feelings. You want to know why I brought you here.”

That this alien knew precisely her thoughts and feelings took her by surprise. But then it began to make sense. After all, Osomarío had been in her head since she was a child, which meant he knew her intimately through dreams. And what of the first go around, the original Valerie Dunne? How well had he known her in that iteration of herself? She couldn’t say for sure, but guessed they must have had an intimate bond. Didn’t that make a difference? She thought it did. Humbled by this realization, she made a mental note to avoid playing poker with Osomarío.

“I am,” she admitted. “I am eager to know more about why you brought me here,” she said anxiously, seeing no reason to hide her feelings at this point. “Tell me.” What she actually wanted to say was, *“Just say it, will you!?”*

“Alright,” Osomarío conceded. “Remember, I said, ‘It is your time to learn the truth about yourself? You are here for that reason. I fear there may not be enough time for you to learn by trial and error. Time is limited. You have much to learn. I must teach you.’”

Teach me? Teach me what? Valerie wondered. Yet without saying the words aloud, Osomarío answered.

“Trouble is on the horizon. When the Boeck claim star systems, they take everything of value, such as what happened here on Hesaurun. The population is enslaved, and everything of value is stripped away, including soil, minerals, water, plants, and animal life. Nothing of value is left behind. It is what they do; it is what they have always done. That is their way. Currently, they are in the Epsilon system. Once the Boeck have completed their harvest, Sol will be next. That is why I brought you here. You will stop them. I will teach you how.”

The creature raised a pair of bronze hands, sweeping them across the room. “This sanctuary...” he said, with a note of melancholy. “These life forms are all the last of their kind, brought from worlds harvested by the Boeck,” now long dead. Then an emotional admission— “I do not want to see the remnants of Earth preserved here.”

Valerie’s heart sank. She wasn’t sure which part of what she had just heard hit the hardest. Was it the fact that aliens were headed to Earth to destroy it? That she had just learned the beautiful indoor gardens were all that was left of untold worlds consumed by this ‘Boeck Dominion’? Or that she was expected to do something about it? It was all so awful she lashed out defensively.

“Osomario!” she cried, turning to face her host. “I don’t understand why you need me; you said you are the master of the five rings! Why don’t you do it yourself? Why on Earth....”

Realizing her poor choice of words, she stopped, searching for another way to express her feelings. After a cleansing breath, she rephrased. “What do you need *me* for?” she said, exasperated. Then added, “I’m just a girl from

Arlington, Washington. Why does everyone want to hang this on me?"

A silent moment passed as the emotion of the moment receded.

"They know who we are, my companions and I," Osomarío admitted. "We cannot interfere with the Imperium directly. If we are going to sabotage their efforts, we must do so indirectly."

"I'm sorry, I still don't understand. What makes you think I could ever do anything to stop them?"

"You are more powerful than you realize, Valerie Dunne. And you are not Boeck!" Osomarío spat those words as if they were distasteful. "The Imperium does not expect effective resistance."

The untold truth hit her like a hammer blow to the chest. What was not said was stunning, so shocking she wanted to erase it from her mind. But this revelation was not something she could brush aside or easily forget. Willing herself to breathe, she struggled against the horror in an attempt to remain objective. But the truth was too horrible to suppress.

"Osomarío..." she erupted, seething, glaring at the creature, "you— you are one of them, aren't you. You are Boeckian!"