

Dark Energy

California, 2005

Aaron Wainwright startled awake, disoriented, breathing hard. He frantically scanned the space around him, quaffing deep drafts of air as though winded. He forced himself to unclench his fist from the drape of sheet at his throat, tossing it aside.

“*Jesus,*” he muttered under his breath as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. He inhaled deeply, straightening, letting his breath out slowly.

Molly, his mixed-breed Lab, stared up at him, her chin stolidly resting on her forepaws, her eyes attentively fixed on him, gazing up from beneath rumpled brow. Molly had grown accustomed of late to sudden disturbances in the night. Perhaps she even gleaned some telling truth in the disconsolate images parading on the stage of Aaron’s sleep and was puzzled why it was so difficult for him to grasp their meaning. Who could say?

He’d dreamed again about the red-haired woman in flowing cloak, fleeing in the night over open ground. The dreams had been appearing with greater frequency. They were deeply disturbing. Distressing. She was obviously fleeing, but from what? He had no clue. Bizarrely, he felt that he knew her – while also knowing it was someone he’d never met before.

Aaron ran a hand roughly over his face as if to erase the echo of the dream. He pushed himself to standing and padded unsteadily, fumbling his way in the dimness toward the bathroom. He relieved himself, then found his way into the main room of the apartment.

He stood at the third-floor bank of windows peering out. The house sat perched on a quiet sycamore-lined street in the fashionable, old Elmwood neighborhood south of the Berkeley campus, just where the last roll of land from the high hills behind began to give way to the flats extending to the Bay. The blackness of night was just beginning to leech away. In little more than an hour the sun would crest the summit of the Berkeley Hills, showering the Bay with radiance, its golden light thrown back from the Transamerica office tower rising like a pale, slender pyramid in downtown San Francisco.

Aaron turned to the sink, filled a glass, and drank it down. He filled it again and paced slowly through the dim space of his apartment, consumed by memory of the haunting dream. It was echo of one he’d had intermittently since childhood, a dream of the one he knew as the *Seer*, the always-fleeing-one in the dark cape. There were other

dreams that periodically plagued him, especially that of the *Knower* – but mostly it was the *Seer*. Why had he always thought of her as the *Seer*?

He stopped at a bookcase and picked up an elaborate piece of old, silver jewelry that he'd scavenged from god-knows-where many years before. It was gothic and gaudy and fascinating at once: a snake circling, clasping its own tail with its mouth. The bracelet was part of a small collection of serpentine objects similarly composed. He absently turned the bracelet in his hands. The snake's image and the dream were both twisted elusively in his mind. He had no idea of the meaning of the snakes, nor why they appealed to him – almost in an obsessive way. The strange, peculiar dreams, for their part, had made extended visitations three times in his life, coming first like heralds of his parents' death in Egypt when he was seven. Then again when he was fifteen. And again now. They weren't particularly menacing, despite a certain dark aura about them. They were, however, riveting in their insistence that they be acknowledged.

Aaron set the bracelet down and turned his gaze out the window to stare into some middle distance.

This, I don't need, he thought.

Not now. He had enough to deal with. A very important symposium paper to present in two weeks – one he had a complete mental block in developing. He was half way through his fellowship at the Bettwell Institute of Theoretical Physics at Cal Berkeley and viewed the presentation as essential to being invited to remain for another year, hopefully converting that into a full-time faculty appointment.

Not only was the presentation not going well, but also his personal life was fairing hardly better. Annie Brown, his fiancée of five years, had finally lost patience and broken off their engagement, accepting a job out of state. Aaron hadn't heard from her in months.

His dreams, for their part, were disturbing and mystifying on many levels, not the least of which their persistence and their savage vagueness. Aaron liked hard edges. It was why he'd originally been drawn to science. Not that his current interest, the focus of his presentation, offered many. He'd become absorbed by the riddle of 'dark energy,' theorized to be an omnipresent field of energy that filled all space, a force field not unlike gravity, only infinitely more subtle. It was deemed *dark* not because it was sinister, but because it couldn't be seen, hadn't actually been scientifically verified. Though undetectable, it had become a major, essential construct for explaining how the universe worked. Dark energy was one of the most challenging theoretical riddles in cosmology – akin to asking for hard evidence for the existence of God.

Aaron was attempting to illuminate the mysteries of dark energy via the principles of *absorption* and *strange attractors*. Their stark polarity had a mesmerizing effect on his mind: *Absorption* – the force that merged separately pulsing energies – down to the smallest atomic particle. And *strange attractors* – the mysterious forces that drive relentless change in chaos. A kind of yin and yang – harmony and disorder. The two seemed locked in pitched battle for dominance.

Here's a strange attractor for you, Aaron thought: *craziness*.

Perhaps not a proper psychiatric term, but deeply evocative for anyone fearing its absorbing, gravitational pull. *Crazy*: that was what his grandparents – his father’s parents – had said of his mother. Clearly his mother had been different, talking of *knowing* and *seeing* things others didn’t – things that defied logic and science. Beyond that, hadn’t she also become a bit crazed, certainly unbalanced after the death of her baby daughter, Aaron’s sister, when Aaron was seven? She subsequently had sunk into a deep, what seemed intractable, depression, a dark hole from which no light or love escaped. One so deeply worrisome his father took an unscheduled leave from Stanford to return with her to Egypt where they’d first met on an archeological dig and had fallen in love. He hoped to draw her out, bring her back into the light. The dreams first appeared to Aaron while his parents were away, while he was in the care of his mother’s parents in San Francisco. Looking back, he associated the nighttime phantoms as harbingers of his parents’ pending death just days before they were to return home. And now the dreams had returned again, accompanied this time with more disturbing, inexplicable occurrences. It all had started to feel to him too much like tuning to spectral frequencies nobody else could sense.

Odd, powerful ‘coincidences,’ seemingly random occurrences randomly happened in his daily life, carrying potent meaning, forging links between seemingly incongruous events. Like thinking of someone – and having them call just at that instant. Or searching for something he’d mislaid and hadn’t been able to find for weeks, then finding it in the middle of his bed, or on the kitchen counter, or on the passenger seat of his car. Perhaps most distressing of all lately were the episodic blackouts that were accompanied by pulsing, searing light. These were most disturbing, cycling up in frequency and intensity over the last several weeks. They had prompted him to see a doctor. The tests revealed nothing. Which was paradoxically discomfiting for he’d hoped to gain at least a logical explanation, however dire – even a brain tumor might have been comforting.

Aaron stood leaning against the counter, staring out the big window. The night sky continued to lighten. Features in the landscape began to emerge from the blackness. He could make out the outline of neighboring houses beneath the canopy of trees. He spied shadowy movement, a cat, disappearing into shrubbery. He lifted the glass and took a small sip, then set it down.

There was little point in going back to bed. Maybe he’d go in early, get a jump on his presentation in the yet quiet hours on campus. He turned toward the counter to make coffee, noticed movement across the room. It was Molly, standing near the door to the stairs. Her tail began to wag expectantly in her catching Aaron’s eye.

“Okay Girl. Give me a minute,” he said. Molly pranced eagerly after him as he walked back to the bedroom to change into running gear. Molly’s tail thumped vigorously against the doorjamb of the room.

“*Okay, okay,*” Aaron protested, slipping into his shorts, pulling on a hooded sweatshirt.

Molly bounded toward the door to the stairs as soon as Aaron rose from lacing his shoes. He opened the door to the stairs and followed after the big dog as she descended toward the street.

“Let’s go chase some rabbits.”

The run in the hills behind the Lawrence Berkeley Lab got his blood flowing but hadn’t cleared his head. He returned to his apartment consumed, in fact, by a thick flooding of dread. He didn’t feel well at all. He climbed the stairs debating whether to go to campus at all today. As he unlocked the door, the phone rang, spiking his foreboding. He looked at the stove clock as he entered the apartment: not yet 7:30.

It rang again. An ominous premonition welled: *This is the storm that’s been gathering*. The thought, almost an eerily auditory voice in his head, was completely unprompted. Unwelcome. He had no idea what it meant, but it churned a riotous sick feeling in his stomach. He felt like he might vomit. The phone rang a third time. With the fourth ring Aaron picked up before the call rolled over to the answering machine.

“Aaron. *Good god* I’m glad I caught you.” It was Gary Westham, his best friend since undergraduate days when they roomed together. Westham was a lecturer in mathematics at Cal. “You need to get up here – to campus. *Right now*.”

This is the storm that’s been coming. The pronouncement was like having a radio receiver in his skull. Aaron drew a deep breath.

“What’s up?” he asked hesitantly.

“It’s John Newman.” There was a long pause.

Aaron’s heart pulsed in his ears.

“What about John?” Aaron forced himself to ask.

“I just got here a bit ago. There was a big commotion outside Le Conte Hall. Cops, EMTs. They have the patio between Le Conte and Birge Halls taped off.”

There was a pause. Aaron closed his eyes – then immediately opened them again to halt the spreading out-of-body experience that seized him. “It’s Newman. Somebody said he jumped. From the fourth floor walkway between buildings.” Another pause. “He’s dead.”

Jagged. Raw. The pieces of information didn’t fit into any mosaic that made sense.

“What do you mean? *Jumped?*” It was the only detail that offered something to grab onto.

“Jumped. *Suicide*.”

Aaron felt dizzy. He sucked for air. *It’s not suicide*. Again, the pronouncement inside his head.

“John? You’re *sure* it’s John?” Despite hoping there was some mistake, Aaron was certain there wasn’t.

“I’m positive. They haven’t taken him away yet. You should get up here.”

Aaron laid the phone down in its cradle. He stood staring at it, his hand extended, resting on the receiver as though rendered in still life. He raised his hand to his mouth, rubbed the contours of his flesh as if kneading a knot.

Oddly, the growing weight of pervasive dread that had plagued him since he'd awoken abruptly from the dream had dissolved. It was replaced by deep-bone exhaustion. Aaron worked to segment and categorize his tangled thoughts. There was no way John Newman – professor emeritus in physics; gifted scientist and teacher; mentor and most significantly as close a father figure Aaron had had since his own father died – there was no way he would have taken his own life. *No way.*

But if it wasn't suicide, what was it? An accident? *Murder?* That was more implausible than suicide. Who'd want to kill John Newman?