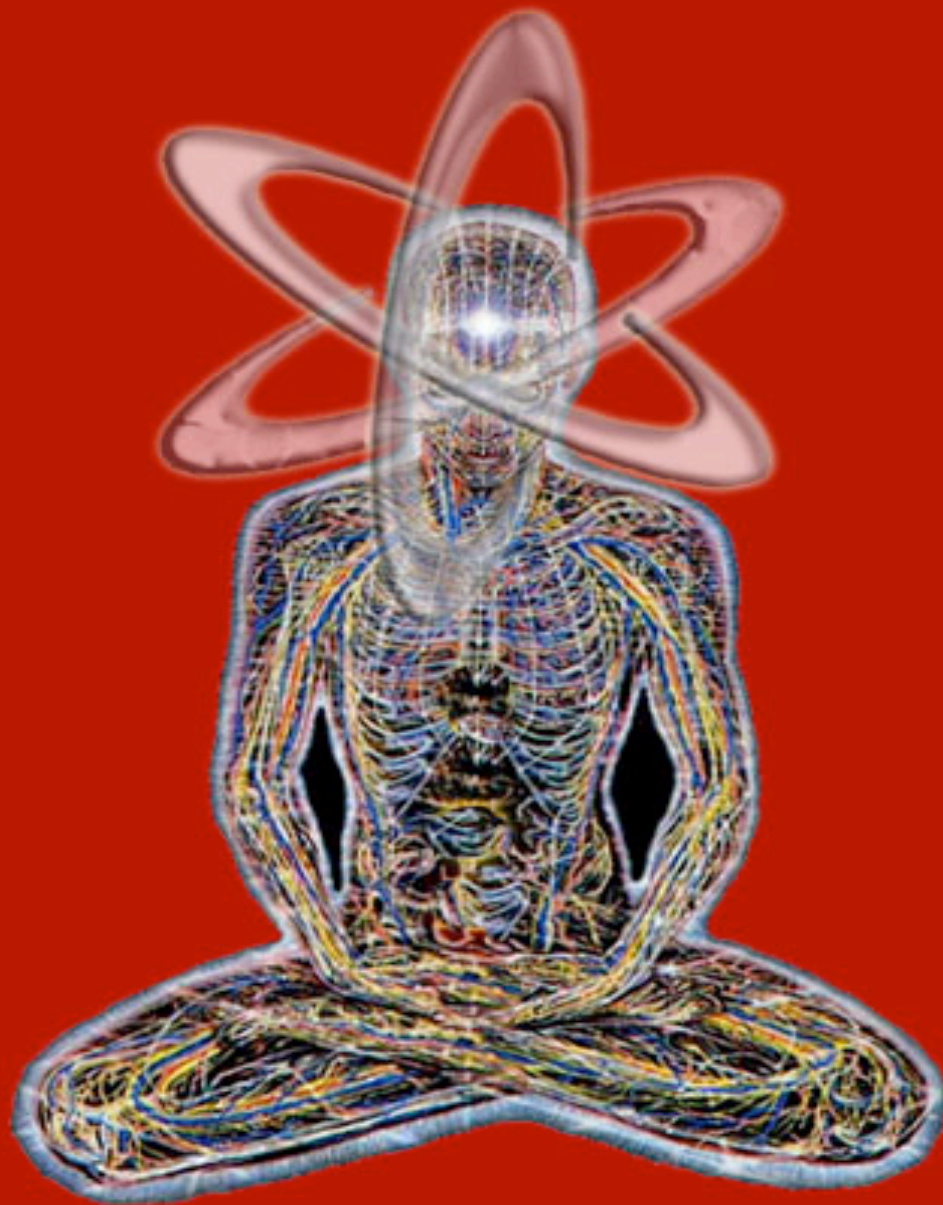


**jaebi**

# **The Alchemist**

## **EPISODE 2**



*Anything is Attainable*

*FROM EPISODE ONE*

"Jasir," Calli screams!

Jasir doesn't open his eyes but places her at the edge of the kitchen, behind Grasp and Taylon. He feels his captor pivot in her direction. Foolishly she followed clear sounds of danger and she will probably die because of it. Because of him.

Jasir race to the void has been too casual. His approach softened from its embrace, so easily attainable most times. The process is untrained and spoiled by leisure. Feet cannot carry him through the space of his mind quickly enough to help Calli. Jasir elevates. His consciousness rises from a black surface and at once he sees there has never been ground holding him in the first place. He soars as a missile toward the embrace of the void.

"Run," Jasir screams unconsciously. Somewhere he knows his words are too late. Somewhere he senses Grasp already bearing down on Calli, a murdering maniacal mass.

Grasp growls, "This one is pretty. I propose to you, return as my concubine or die on this pathetic carbon copy."

"Do not tempt fate with another unknown variable, Grasp, end her and let us go."

Grasp takes the time it takes to glance at Taylon to decide Calli's fate. "He has a point, pet--"

Grasp swings his arm, pulling Calli's body like a doll and aims for the wall.

Jasir finds the missile a lumbering mass of unrefined transport. His mind sheds its confines and heaps of steel fall away and shatter. Fragments become dust and dust becomes particles. The particles fuse into a string becoming a path of light. Instantly Jasir connects with the source and touches the void. He whispers, "I Am."

*AND NOW...*

## EPISODE TWO

The basic composition of nature surrounds them. Countless miniscule nuclei hover like planets, electrons and protons whirr like moons and comets. Jasir reaches for the principle matter of life and death like an alchemist for the philosopher's stone. The weight of the stone is trivial as it can and must be willed to be denser, lighter or simply different. Anything is attainable.

Jasir plucks the chord of existence like a master composer. The air surrounding the four bodies in the room surges like a shaken image. A rogue wave traverses the molecules in the room like a Tsunami. It causes the center of the room to implode like the surface of a lake struck by a pebble. The surge snaps outward, a sound-bending explosion of matter.

Nothing under the surges influence is spared except its nuclei, Jasir. Atoms of the air, the furniture, walls and bodies flap like flags in a breeze. Solids bend and warp back into their original configuration like rubber bands, inertia reclaims order.

Jasir drops a short distance, feeling the ground rumbling when he touches down. Grasp and Taylon are convulsing uncontrollably. Taylon's lasso handle lays harmless and

without the yellow bindings that protruded from it. The ball of light too, has vanished along with a spherical chunk of Jasir's house. Everything the ball of light touched is gone, all that matter simply scooped away. The sting in Jasir's shoulder reminds him to pull the knife out. He's thankful that its width thins toward the tip.

"Calli," Jasir calls, rushing to her side. Grasp is held in the comatose of a seizure nearby. Calli's face is caught in the torment of a silent scream. The unsteady floor makes it difficult to hoist her. Jasir puts his weight under her center of gravity and flips her onto his good arm, a hand to her back for support.

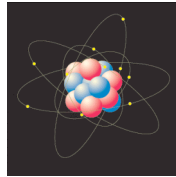
Jasir fumbles past Taylon toward the nearest exit, stopping to kick the cube device. Whatever it is, it is pure, comprised completely of one element. Just not one Jasir has ever seen. From the void, he sensed the spin of nuclei surrounded by 626 protons. Only 94 of the 119 elements on the periodic table occur naturally, the rest, manmade. But nothing known to man has 626 protons.

Jasir jumps from the living room floor, through a space where his wall used to be and lands in a small crater of soil. Shards of wood swing gingerly above, threatening to spill down on top of the first floor.

Jasir slides his hand against the side of the house for balance. The tremors become intermittent as he and Calli reach the Camaro. Its systems are lit but the engine is quiet.

Jasir carefully slides Calli through the driver side door and props her upright in the passenger seat, making sure to put her seatbelt on. The engine cranks and rubber screeches across gritty asphalt spinning the car 180 degrees before it rips down the road fishtailing.

The tremors ease into a murmur and fade away.



Jasir collapses against the bathroom door closing it behind him. Calli could come to at moment. He breathes his rest in the dark absorbing the lessons of his aching body. He learns tolerance. Next time, he will be stronger.

Jasir needs to mend his wounds before he can give Calli the proper focus. She will be his first attempt on another human beside himself but there's no matter he knows better

than his body. Without reaching, Jasir becomes one with the void. It has never been so easy.

The dark shatters into billions of spheres—atomic particles. The room is aghast with molecular filth. A whiff reveals billions of feces, salmonella and other molecular contaminants. Jasir pinpoints their locations and extends the void. Floating molecules are easiest to manipulate. The unwanted molecules shred into oblivion leaving those that remain sterile.

Jasir flips the light switch and photons bombard everything in sight. The racing photons slam into other particles causing those atoms to radiate wildly.

Jasir drags his aching muscles before his reflection in the bathroom mirror. An endless stream of particles smack against the plane of diamond-configured atoms layered over a chain mail arrangement of silver. The materials work together to return the decaying particles at precise angles relative to the original object. Billions of decayed particles reflect to form a virtual image of the original object.

Jasir's own body is the foundation of his studies; it presents him with a personal view into the forces at work in the universe. Jasir knows no object better than his personal smorgasbord of flesh and bone molecules. He

controls the forces at work in his physiology as an afterthought, forged by repetition. The moment Jasir becomes one with the void, his influence discards defective and warped molecules while promoting high functioning compounds.

The habit began with those things young men find the most useful—strong muscles and bones. But when Jasir reached his early twenties, he began slowing the rotation and revolution of his particles, exponentially increasing their longevity. Life is built on cascading structures. Atoms make cells; cells make skin and flesh, which in turn make organs. What the atom experiences, all the rest does as well. All the rest.

"The body is thy temple," Jasir utters habitually as he braces in a horse stance before the mirror. He brushes dried blood free of his right shoulder and influences carbon based bonds. A whirlwind of water, carbon dioxide and iron spin and then scatter like pool balls before reconfiguring as strands of mended muscle.

Loose oxygen atoms feed the new muscle intravenously while spare carbon atoms stack into the meat making it firmer and rounder. The universe wastes nothing.

Jasir then mends his elbow and the disconnected line of hydrocarbons in his jawbone. His eyes flare like white



embers as the molecules snap in place like a jigsaw puzzle. Overcompensation leaves his jaw tight and awkward until he breaks a few hundred million bonds of the hydrocarbons. Jasir stretches his jaw—his chin feels good and normal.

A groan comes from the other side of the door, but something catches Jasir's eye. "You don't belong here," he says, pinpointing an army of influenza molecules bonding with those in his right lung. Outright obliterating the flu-protein molecules would be difficult and wasteful. Instead, he strips the virus of its power by reconfiguring it into the water and nitrogen his body craves. Carbon and spare oxygen readily become carbon dioxide that seeps from Jasir's lungs as he releases the void and opens the bathroom door.

Calli sits upright on the cheap burgundy motel blanket, her head in her hands. Jasir stands by his decision to avoid 'proper' medical attention. It isn't just that people would ask questions; they also wouldn't understand the answers.

Calli looks at Jasir and her face turns red. "Oh god, did we sleep together?"

"No!"

"I can't remember anything."

"Relax, you've been through a lot."

"What happened," Calli asks. Her head falls into her hands again as she reels from the attempt at thinking.

Jasir walks over to the wooden table next to the TV cabinet and digs into a white shopping bag. He fishes around warm steak burritos and pulls out a dark pair of sunglasses and a bottle of aspirin. Jasir rips the dangling price tag from the shades and turns to Calli. "Here you go," he says, handing her two tablets from the bottle. "I'll get you some water."

Jasir returns with a cloudy glass of tap. He pulls one of the rooms vinyl covered table chairs nearer the bed and sits while handing her the water. "Thank you," Calli says as Jasir puts the sunglasses on.

The room atomizes as the rim of the glasses cross Jasir's eyes, his milky gaze shrouded behind the shades. Calli throws the tablets in her mouth and tilts her head back. Jasir pushes the void outward, attacking rogue molecules inside the glass. Pure water along with an assortment of benign elements touches Calli's lips.

Jasir moves his star-gaze on to Calli's head, checking her cranium casing for faults and then on to her brain. Her tissue molecules are whirring fine so he delves deeper, focusing on the maelstrom of activity beneath. Countless photons stream through the transmission lines there,

soaring and spinning mechanically through a maze of tissue molecules. The brain impulses reflect like the photons from the bathroom mirror but with precision and destination. The particles bounce in a constant series of patterns, more than Jasir has ever been interested in counting or isolating.

Jasir concentrates on the functions he knows, focusing on the area of light that controls blood flow to her brain. The patterns require some slowing. He waits until the tablets slide down her throat and makes the adjustment.

"Oh...these really go to work fast," Calli says, grabbing her head in relief.

Jasir scans the rest of her molecular composition, tweaking abnormalities while he unconsciously rubs his thumb and index fingers together. He pauses just below her abdominal caught off guard by an assemblage of rapidly decaying tissue molecules in her cervix. Jasir quickly breaks the bonds of iron and carbon based molecules near shedding and streams the free atoms into her system. He hadn't felt invasive until just then but her body will rebound and it is a complication they can both do without today.

Calli shifts her weight, throwing one leg over the other. "What are you doing?"

Jasir shifts his focus from her crotch to her face, heat flustering up from his neck like a furnace. "Sorry...just—uh, zoning out," he says as convincingly as he can manage. "So, what do you remember?"

"Can't seem to remember much of anything after we met in the parking lot?" She stares into Jasir's eyes warily. "Is it that bright in here," Calli asks?

Jasir slides the shades downward. The room slams into solid matter as the top of the frames pass his eyes, now their normal green again. Calli's shoulders drop and her body sinks into the bed comfortably, both hands folded over her lower abdomen. "You remember leaving with me, don't you?"

Calli thinks a moment. "Yeah, I think so—"

"You followed me home. I went inside to change and you waited outside. Then—"

"What," Calli asks, picking up on Jasir's hesitation?

"There were two men there—waiting. I think you heard the commotion and came in. That's when they came for you."

"What!" Calli sits up again.

"If there hadn't been the earthquake, I don't know what might have—"

"Earthquake—when?"

"Not long ago. You fell and hit your head pretty hard."

"Oh my God."

Jasir follows Calli's deadpan stare toward the television displaying images of the earthquakes damage across town. Calli asks him to turn up the volume.

*Several residents in La Jolla today experienced the first earthquake above 4.0 on the Richter scale in over a decade. As you can see from the footage here this Quake was powerful enough to bring down landlines and trees. Early estimates total over five million dollars in damage. So far reports have injuries in the hundreds, mostly bumps and bruises. Miraculously, no fatalities.*

Jasir closes his eyes, thankful for that last piece of information. The TV falls silent before Jasir turns back to Calli, her eyes dead set on him. An intense sensuality radiates from her eyes as she eases from the middle of the bed. The smell of her washes over Jasir as she plants herself in front of his chair, leaning in so her eyes are level with his.

"Jasir, I trust you and you're one of the smartest people I have ever known. So I have to believe that there is a really good reason why you didn't take me to a hospital and why you haven't gone to the police."

Jasir braces himself. What does she remember? He can't move from the seat without touching her and that would be more intimacy than he can bare right now.

"What's the product," Calli asks, plainly? Jasir's face wrinkles with confusion. "Trust is a two-way street, Jasir. I may be able to help. Some of my acquaintances may be able to cosign whatever you need to get on your feet."

"Are you suggesting that I'm some kind of dealer?" Jasir realizes his bark only as Calli steps back.

"Wait—it's not gambling—you don't have a compulsive personality and your too square for random warrants—"

Jasir answers with an exaggerated shrug of his hands and shoulders.

"You spend all that time in your basement lab, 'running experiments'—"

"And somehow that means drugs!" Jasir finally escapes from his seat, waving his arms out in bewilderment.

"Then what's really going on—who is after you and why are we in this crappy motel instead of a police station."

"I don't know who they were but I think they were mutants."

"Mutants? Does this have anything to do with—"

"Them? No, they're the good guys."

"It doesn't make sense. If you're telling me you're clean-okay. But why would anyone be after you?"

"I've had twice as much time as you to ask myself that very question and I still don't have an answer that makes any sense. All I can tell you is that they wanted to take me-somewhere."

"Like a kidnapping?"

"Maybe-they definitely knew who I was." *They know what I am.* "It could be connected to my work somehow." Jasir grabs his car keys and says, "But you're right-this is a crappy motel. Grab your boots and your burrito, your body needs to replenish its matter." Jasir immediately resents sounding like an egghead.

"Where are we going," Calli asks, hurrying to follow Jasir's instructions?

"You," Jasir emphasizes, "are going home. Now that you're okay, I don't think it's smart you hang around waiting for my troubles to show up again?"

"And you?"

"I have some friends out east, I'm due for a sabbatical."

"New York?"

"Further east," Jasir says, waiting for a visual cue that she is ready before heading to the door.

"Wait," Calli says, hopping two big steps to intercept the door from opening. She slides her perfect frame neatly into the space between the doorknob and Jasir's outstretched arm. "I'm sorry for assuming—I don't have the best track record when it comes to guys and when I woke up here—my head was spinning. I know you were looking out for me. Thanks. I do appreciate it."

This is that moment with Calli that Jasir has always been waiting for. The moment when everything else means little, the persons and events of yesterdays vanish. And all that remains is the vibration of life made meaningful by this connection. Even in the void, there would be nothing to see, nothing to taste and yet everything would scream, 'touch me'. Jasir summons the void but does not become one with it. Instead he carefully tucks this moment inside of the void. It puts him into a trance, focusing his mind on getting Calli to safety.

"We need to go," Jasir whispers. Calli inhales as if to catch her breath, though she barely moves at all.

Jasir puts his shades on as Calli spins toward the exit silently. A chilly twilight blankets the air outside. The second floor deck of their motel room is still, but something moves on the ground level.



Through the steel banister, Jasir catches a glimpse of a canvas colored trench coat floating beneath a fedora stalking about on the lower level. Jasir pulls Calli against his body and puts one hand over her mouth. They freeze in place as the shadowy figure stops somewhere beneath the upper walkway.

Taylon stands with his palm outstretched, hovering between a motel room door and window.

Jasir spins his eyes in every direction searching for the larger one—he isn't likely far. Slowly, he pulls Calli back into the room and gently closes the door. The tiny click of the lock is barely audible but he wouldn't be surprised if either of his hunters had enhanced hearing. You never know what mutants may be capable of.

Calli spins in place, quietly looking for some explanation from Jasir's face. She finds it and begins to erupt with fear until Jasir puts his hands on her shoulders.

"That was one of them," Jasir confirms as a courtesy. "The cops," Jasir remembers. Calli nods and pulls her mobile from her bag.

Jasir knows the chain reaction that helped them escape earlier could have ended much worse. Most frightening of all is that he doesn't know what 'worse' means. Even if

Jasir could warp matter again, he has no idea how to control it. For all his accomplishments, he's like a toddler that hasn't learned to run when it comes to atomic influence.

"Okay, we'll wait here, please hurry," Calli says. She nods and ends the call.

Jasir walks toward the opposite end of the room, peering through blinds. He moves his hand across the top of the window and opens the latch, gently applying pressure.

"What are you doing," Calli says in a shrieking whisper.

"Trying to get the hell out of here."

"I am not going out the window--"

"That wasn't my idea, Calli, I don't want you near this anymore--"

"Are you crazy, you're going to break your neck--the police are on their way--and I don't want to be left alone!"

The wooden floor panels outside the door moan under stress. It snatches Jasir and Calli's attention. Their lungs barely breathe, as they stare toward the door. Calli's fingers dig into Jasir's arm as a brutish bull's snort vibrates the windowpane.

A moment seems as vast as ocean when swirls of blue and red lights color the night air. Suddenly heavy footsteps move away from the door down the corridor deck. Jasir

remembers to breathe again as he grabs Calli's hand and heads toward the door. He uses the bath of squad car lights to check for silhouettes through the window. All clear.

Jasir looks at Calli, her eyes understanding his inaudible question; ready? Her nod is imperceptibly understood. Jasir moves toward the door, her hand in his. He grabs the knob and turns to her, "Ready?"

Jasir steps outside and scans the walkway. He pulls Calli through and ushers her directly in front of him. "Don't stop walking." She tosses her black hair backward as if to shrug off worry and struts bravely.

Two officers exit the motel office as Calli hits the bottom of the stairs. She waves toward the officers and hastens to a trot across the motel driveway.

Jasir follows her past the edge of the hotel, the hum of a vending machine apparent as he clears the corner. A blur approaches from the far side of his peripheral, fading into clarity. A stiff forearm slides across Jasir's trachea, bracing his neck against a pulsing bicep. A cold and hard object clunks against his temple.

Calli stops abruptly as the police officers draw their weapons. She raises her hands instinctively and looks in Jasir's direction as the officers holler her aside.

"Drop the weapon," an officer orders.

"I have you now Seer," Taylon sneers. He jerks Jasir's neck and says, "I will not leave without you. Not now that I know what you are truly capable of. How does it feel-- such power in a Sapien?"

"Put the weapon down and let that man go!"

"His life lies in your hands," Taylon taunts.

The second officer tries a different approach. "You have no where to go, friend. We don't want to see anyone hurt, but you're going to have to want it too--lower your weapon."

"We have what we want," Grasp barks, flanking the officers from the opposite left. He menaces forward with a huge black cannon. A softball can easily fit in the weapons nozzle.

Jasir is intrigued by what could come out of it, already feeling the energy boiling in the weapons' casing. The squeal of an old camera flash seems to pull towards the device. Appropriately, a sudden look of concern overcomes the officer's faces.

Several car sirens wail into the parking area, four squad cars joining the party. Pairs of officers barricade themselves near their cars. Rifles and pistols load, snap and lock promising a display of terror.

Taylon moves with Grasp, dragging Jasir in the opposite direction as they step away from the police barricade. Grasp turns in Taylon's direction, a flash of recognition gleams from his yellow eyes.

The hum from the vending machine dampens the officers' shouts, and the growing squeal of Grasp's canon. The void trembles inside Jasir as a ball of white light creates a halo at the tip of the weapon. The ball of light narrows into a tight beam aimed at the first officer who spoke. His body jerks forward an inch, then topples vertically as if his legs suddenly stopped working.

Grasp draws a torrent of gunfire as he pulls the trigger of his weapon a second time. Another officer falls as if the light inside of him just vanished. Shells bounce off Grasps oversized mitt like off of concrete.

Taylon pivots, finally taking his weapon from Jasir's head and points it toward a police car. Jasir clenches Taylon's arm as heat blows from a roaring explosion. Taylon's torso riddles as he chuckles and fires his weapon again. His projectile spitting gun cracks against metal and explodes. Death fills the air and Jasir's moment with Calli at the motel door seems a distant memory. Taylon screams in objection the moment before Jasir pairs with the void.

The average 12 ounce can of soda contains over two billion billions of CO<sup>2</sup> molecules. Gas just begging for freedom from the stifling confines of liquid and metal. Jasir becomes their savior. He pushes the void outward and taps into the carbon dioxide's potential. It ignites with the inertia of gas and the contents of dozens of soda cans rage outward. The vending machine erupts, exploding cola, plastic and metal everywhere. The machines power feed surges and electric sparks rain into twilight.

Taylon's footing tilts making his forearm less rigid. Jasir spins and cranks his waist, piling his elbow into Taylon's midsection. It feels like a wooden mattress but does lose some air. More wiggle room for Jasir to spin his torso in the other direction. His elbow slams up under Taylon's jaw.

A raging policewoman aims toward Taylon and fires a shotgun. Jasir barely avoids the blast, falling to the floor as Taylon crashes into the staircase behind them.

Grasp charges the officer; his giant fist shattering her body and her weapon to the floor. He lifts a monstrous black boot and crashes it down on her shoulders for good measure. Grasp turns on Jasir immediately, a ram charging with his mighty fist raised. Jasir braces his jaw to be ripped in half for the second time today.

A police squad car clips Grasp below his knees and plows him into a corner of the motel office. Grasp disappears in a cloud of disintegrated pieces of sheet rock and wood. The squad car pulls in reverse, lobbing its tires over solid debris and dead officers.

"Let's go," Calli screams from behind the wheel. Jasir scrambles to his feet and jumps through the open car window feet first. Grasp punches through what remains of the ruined wall and charges after the vehicle.

Jasir's neck snaps as Calli speeds the car in reverse, slamming into the wreckage left by Taylon's weapon. She shifts into drive and floors the gas pedal. Their path to escape begins to open until Grasp soars an impossible height and lands on the passenger side of the squad car. The vehicle's underbelly scrapes the concrete as metal and rock shatter. Grasp wraps his mitt around the edges of the windshield and door, giant fingers poke straight through the edge of the windshield. Hairline fractures splinter across Calli's view of the road as the car swerves into evening traffic.

Grasp reaches back and puts his second fist through Jasir's window. Calli swerves the vehicle absurdly as Grasp's meaty fingers scrape at Jasir. The car frame

squeals under the pressure of his mitt and he reaches into the door getting a firm grip on Jasir's neck.

Jasir struggles with his left hand futilely trying to pry the fingers free, his right hand busy in the door's lower side panel.

"Stop or I'll snap his neck--"

"No Calli!"

The car careens onto a sidewalk, rubbing Grasp against a row of shop windows. The force pulls his body further away from the vehicle, along with Jasir's neck. Jasir barely manages to catch himself at the edge of the window.

"Jasir," Calli screams, grabbing Jasir's jeans as she steers. Glass and debris cut into Jasir's face as he fights his way back toward the passenger seat. His hands wrapped around Grasp's immovable hold unwillingly makes it easier for the monster to squeeze the life out of him.

"Watch out," Jasir shouts! Calli narrowly misses a young couple as she banks left back on to the street. The maneuver throws Jasir against the door, reminding him of the worthy cause below. He drops his hands into place on a shotgun stowed in the lower side panel.

"Stop the car, Sapien wench!"

"Calli, hit the brakes--now!" She listens. Jasir and Grasp hurtle forward. Jasir takes the brunt of the blow



against the windshield with the side of his head and shoulder. Strips of flesh tear from Jasir's neck as Grasp swivels around the edge of the windshield extended from his giant fist. He slams into the hood of the car like a wrecking ball.

"Go!" Calli floors it again, gritting her teeth in a fit of determination.

"What are you doing," Grasp roars, pinned to the hood. He seems to have some inkling when he hears the cock of the shotgun.

Jasir leans out the passenger window, rushing air stinging his wounds as he fires directly into the elbow joint of Grasp's arm. The vulnerable area at the edge of Grasp's indestructible hand tears away exposing bone and muscle.

"I'll kill you Seer, I will grind your bones into dust!" Jasir pulls the trigger a second time, disintegrating what's left of Grasp's arm. Grasp flails like a flipped turtle and the elbow of his good arm shatters the windshield to uselessness. He strikes again and the glass folds into the cockpit. Calli screams, blindly pulling the car left.

The nose of the police vehicle slams into the guardrail of La Jolla expressway's overpass. Momentum plucks Grasp from the car hood, sending him hurtling fifty feet below.

The street traffic quickly comes to a crawl, an assortment of concerned people drawing a crowd around the beat up police cruiser.

Jasir slides from his fetal position against the shattered windshield and falls into his seat. He kicks the sheet of windshield onto the hood and then puts his seatbelt on. "You okay?" Calli nods blankly, her shiny black hair tousled in every direction. "Let's get out of here."

Calli nods blankly again and tries turning the engine over. The ignition cranks repeatedly without start. A booming crash grabs her attention. "Jasir—"

Jasir looks past Calli. A trailer bearing truck burrows through slower moving cars. Jasir knows who is behind the wheel. "Calli, start the car—"

"I'm trying—"

"Start the car!"

Calli turns the ignition and the engine bursts to life with Taylon's truck just a few meters away. Calli steers into the road just before the rig slams into the rear of the police cruiser. The engine whines as its forced up to speed but Taylon manages to smash into them once again.

Taylon pulls beside them, his gray blotted face mad with determination. He raises an arm and Jasir stares down the

barrel of a weapon. Pure energy screams from inside the barrel—different from the thing that spit projectiles at the motel.

"No," Jasir screams, pushing the void from tip of his hands. A stream of electrons shoot from Taylon's weapon, their wavelengths more tightly packed than gamma radiation. The beam is already on top of him before Jasir can reason his influence into a defense. Jasir musters some influence over the electrons, stretching their undulation toward something less lethal.

Calli screams as energy from the blast sears her hair and skin. Jasir anticipates the second blast and stretches the electron wavelength to match an FM transmission. Strands of Calli's hair stand on end as electrons bounce inside the cabin.

Taylon screams and swings his wheel sharply toward the police cruiser. Calli loses control and barely rebounds before the truck comes in again and clips the rear edge of the cruiser on Jasir's side.

The car's suspension collapses and metal digs into concrete. The weight of the car shifts and tosses its momentum around the width of the cabin. Jasir moves to help Calli compensate in steering but it's too late. The vehicle tilts off the ground, Calli's side first and barrels

viciously toward the guardrail. The cruiser skips repeatedly into the air before breaking through the barrier plummeting to the road fifty feet below.

Jasir's coveted moment with Calli is not secure. He reacts to expand the void, padding the distance between his influence of matter and his promise to protect her. He finds solace in the fact that most of the objects he interacts with are the same few elements remixing molecular structures. Californian asphalt for instance, shares the same key elements as the car's tires: Carbon, Hydrogen and Sulfur.

The car plummets roof first, as Jasir stands upright his all-white eyes hand picking extraneous elements he needs to free from the asphalt. Nickel and vanadium vibrate like the chords of a violin under Jasir's influence. They form chemical bonds as carbon and hydrogen work into a randomized assortment of polymers.

It is not enough. The resulting bonds of polyisoprene are not fluid and they will need liquid rubber to survive the fall. They need more viscous asphalt.

*More rubber!* Jasir hears his voice echo through the void, unintelligible there, where words are meaningless. In the void only the will of the Composer and his knowledge of the universe matter. In Jasir's void, only Calli

matters. That knowledge fills him with purpose and he understands what he has always known.

The car splashes down into a pit of rubber tar, a sudden stop that brings Jasir to his knees and crushes the car's remaining windows. Calli's screams end in an abrupt choke.

Oily black sulphites ooze through the windows even as the car buoys toward the surface of the liquid road. Jasir and Calli's rib cages jostle as the vehicle snaps to the surface. Finally the movement becomes negligible, though the vehicles chassis moans like a ship at sea.

"You okay?"

"I think so," Calli says. "How—"

"Let's get out of here," Jasir says, unbuckling Calli's straps. "Hold on," he says, climbing from the wreck before reaching in to hoist Calli out. Jasir checks his sunglasses, which are amazingly in tact.

Cars swerve around their gooey island, honking, passengers gawking. Jasir's eyes meet his hunter, Taylon, who peers down from the rail edge. The fedora turns away and disappears over the ledge.

"A miracle," Calli says, her resolve shedding away under the weight of mortality. She stands unsteadily over the floating car. "How--what is this?"

"It's just rubber-follow me." Jasir transforms a path across the tar pit. He leads Calli over the vulcanizing rubber walkway.

"Jasir," Calli shouts, pulling her hand away after they clear the molten island. She stares at her reflection in the dark sunglasses and that of the inexplicable patch of rubbery road that saved their lives, behind her reflection. "What's with the glasses, Jasir?"

Jasir means to change the subject, but his mind freezes as she slowly reaches for his glasses. It was only a matter of time before she put it all together: his guests at dinner, his abnormal green eyes and apparent genius, an apparent miracle—and the stupid shades.

"Calli," Jasir pleads, stopping her hand on the side of his glasses. Jasir's heart shivers. He starts to explain his ability, what he sees when he looks at her from the void, how transforming lead into gold is as straightforward a process as baking brownies. How can he make her understand that more than a chemist, more than a physicist or biologist, that he is an alchemist? Anything is attainable. Except lost time.

"Calli," Jasir screams, reaching for her shoulders as Taylon crashes one knee down into the car's underbelly.

"Move," Jasir commands, yanking Calli into movement, relieved that she continues to follow him.

They bolt down the middle lane of the expressway, headlights and horns streaming past them. Jasir yanks Calli to the left as the scream of malicious electrons enter the voids' consciousness. A deadly beam misses them narrowly. The car it hits remains intact but its driver evaporates into threads and dust.

"Jasir!" The source of Calli's fear lies ahead of them, a hulking mass of life-carbon molecules approaches. Fresh molecules spin and replicate, forming a new oversized hand to replace the one Jasir removed.

Jasir spins his forearm forward, mastering a yoga pose that the void uses to train a barrier of random molecules that counteract another beam blast from Taylon's direction. The malicious electrons eat away at the invisible barrier. Calli gasps as the air surrounding them bakes instantly and Jasir can feel her eyes on him—her mind all but assured of the obvious.

"This way," Jasir pulls, leading Calli off the expressway. They slide and shimmy under the weight of gravity down a manageable hill of grass and rock.

Plumes of smoke rise from several candy-striped stacks towering over a factory in the distance. A razor wired fence protects the property, surrounding its perimeter.

Police sirens scream from the top of the hill. Almost immediately the sirens are drowned by the all too familiar sounds of fire and metal rapidly expanding. A fireball rises over the top of the hill.

"This way," Jasir says, leading Calli in a b-line toward the fence.

"Jasir—wait--," Calli says, her voice weary.

Jasir focuses on the taste of the steel fence, already under the voids influence. He reaches out to it, his palm pushing against the air. Calli grabs his hand, placing herself between the fence and his body. She reaches for the dark sunglasses and Jasir pulls his head away.

Calli stalls her advance, her eyes pleading allowance. The taste of her molecules tingle the void and beg for a place in its enclosure. She reaches for the glasses again, seeing the barriers melt from Jasir's shoulders.

*Not now, Calli.* Alchemist's know that time is distilled from the stars—from all matter and as such answers to none. But Calli is a woman and in this moment it seems time answers only to her.



Calli tosses the glasses to the gravel at their feet. Jasir feels his cowardice creeping up his spine as Calli's fingers caress the area around his eyes.

"It was you all along."

"Calli," Jasir says, hiding his eyes behind their lids. "This is crazy, we need to move--"

"You fight so hard, yet can't trust me enough to look me in the eyes. What is it that you even fight for?"

Jasir opens the door and lets Calli in. She inhales deeply just short of a gasp, her full tender lips parted as if to speak, though she says nothing.

"No one knows, Calli," Jasir says, as he walks toward the fence. "Not my parents, not my friends, my colleagues. No one." Jasir extends his influence and the section of the fence before him bends forward like clay. The squealing steel is somehow diminished by the sounds Calli makes behind Jasir.

Jasir turns to face Calli again and she swallows hard doing her best to suppress the fear she must feel. "No one except them—and you," Jasir continues, offering his hand to Calli. She reaches for his hand carefully but without hesitation.

The sea of molecules in her hand splash into his and the atoms of their skin form trivial bonds. But there is a

transfer of energy that even Jasir cannot see, something his atomic senses do not allow him to touch or taste. Jasir feels it, nonetheless.

Jasir bolts across the fence with Calli in tow.

"What is this place--and that smell," Calli whispers, partially covering her nose and mouth.

"Loose carbon and boron based molecules in the air," Jasir answers.

They scurry across a vacant parking lot framed by shipping containers on the far end of the enclosed area. Their forms slip between the swaths of shadow cast by the large metal boxes until they reach the outer wall of the building. Cones of light shine over their heads every few feet as they comb the perimeter, the acrid smell of pharmaceuticals growing stronger.

Jasir stops in front of a recessed door with no handles. A hastily slapped on sticker reads the company's name in a blue italicized font: *STRATEGENE*. "I know this place."

Within the void, it is easy to become lost in the granular details of matter but every so often, a pattern hints at a framework as rigid and predictable as a peptide bond.

The fence rattles in the distance and section of fence directly behind Jasir and Calli wavers. Jasir extends his

influence from the void and the locks on the other side of the door rip free. He envisions a fishing net in his hands and pulls a catch of air molecules toward him and Calli. Jasir pushes Calli inside when the door opens.

"Hold on," Jasir says, turning to the door. The door and its frame are crafted from the same copper alloy. Both beg to be one making Jasir's influence trivial. The edges of the door take on the consistency of mercury, melding into the surround wall. In seconds the wall bleeds into smooth continuous surface as if an exit never existed. Jasir turns into a run, grabbing Calli's hand again. He wishes the void could show him where he needs to go next or how long he will have to run.

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