

Detached Lives

Judgments

Sample Chapters 1-2

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Thank you.

To Joan, for keeping me attached!

Chapter 1

Clayton Troblan—his parents, when they were alive, just called him Clay—heard his front door swing open and then slam shut with great force. He immediately noticed a tense man racing towards him. He froze in his chair, uncertain of how to react.

Strangers didn't barge into his house often, but his home also served as his office. Clients were welcome, but by appointment only. Clay didn't recognize the intruder, and he wasn't expecting any visitors. People looking to discuss his accounting services usually knew how to knock or ring the bell.

The individual showed no such courtesy, did not even offer a greeting or an introduction as he stalked forward and began making rather absurd declarations of obvious facts.

"Let me make this very clear to you," the man stated with a fierce tone and even harsher demeanor, "because we can't afford any mistakes. You're not dreaming. I am very real. As strange as this will seem to you, you are awake and you remain in reality. And you're not dead. This will not be some absurd out-of-body experience for you or some glimpse of an afterlife. You're still very much alive. Do you understand so far?"

Clay understood very little of what was happening. He remained seated, hoped to appear calm, but he couldn't hide his alarm or his confusion at the sudden intrusion of a frantic stranger.

"Dead?" Clay questioned.

"Do not appear so surprised!" the uninvited guest demanded. "You're going to face far more critical issues. And don't stray off course. I'm not here to talk about death. Just the opposite. You have to accept that this is reality. Can you do that?!"

Clay was at a complete loss. He had dealt with difficult clients, especially regarding taxes and audits, but the visitors to his home office usually carried folders filled with paperwork, and they didn't make statements about dreams or death, unless it was an estate case.

"I guess so. What is it..."

The response was clearly inappropriate to the stranger who had just plowed through the stunned accountant's home. He immediately cut Clay off. The intruder couldn't allow the prospective candidate to continue with irrelevant questions, or even worse, careless displays of potentially catastrophic indecision.

"Guess? You must never admit to such a thing! You must always appear certain. If you lack information, request more... but always retain your focus. If you are undecided, remain silent. But never, *ever* state openly that you are making a guess! Now, do you understand what I have said or not?"

Clay wondered if a lunatic had jumped free from some asylum and happened to choose his front door for sanctuary. He decided to act casually, buy a few moments of time. He didn't want to provoke the stranger by refusing to answer, so he attempted to pacify the intruder with a mundane response.

"If you don't want me to guess, then I shouldn't be distracted either. Let me put this away so I can give you my full attention."

He collected the few papers on his desk and placed them in a folder as he composed his thoughts. He considered calling the police, but he didn't want to make any abrupt moves and his phone was just out of reach.

The stranger was thin but muscular, and he moved with a grace that Clay could not quite define, like a dancer gliding through a stage occupied by acrobats. Clay knew he was no match physically for the intruder, so he decided to comply and simply flow with the stranger's absurd demands. He believed it was better to appease a lunatic than to confront one.

With his desk clear, Clay placed his full attention on the tense man impatiently waiting for a response.

"I know I'm not asleep," Clay admitted as calmly as possible, "so I'm not dreaming. I also know I'm breathing, so I'm not dead."

"Excellent. That's exactly how you should answer, and it's what we need of you. Now, this is the difficult part."

Clay wondered what might be more difficult than dealing with a ranting stranger. As the intruder introduced a new element into the altercation, the situation turned from unsettling into utterly bizarre.

"Worlds can exist within each other," Clay's uninvited guest explained with a concise tone. "It's not so much a matter of occupying the same space or a divergence of different timelines. It is not even a concept of multiple dimensions of various stages of existence. It's a concept similar to reflection and shadow. An object can cast two separate shadows from the same light source if a mirror is introduced. The casting is not, however, a mirror image. It is a second and distinct shadow... two completely unique entities. Within the proper alignment, those two shadows can overlap. Even though they might appear to merge, they both remain in existence. Take one shadow away, and the other remains. Do you understand?"

"About the shadows? Yes."

"The same principle can exist under circumstances beyond shadow... convergence can occur with substance, even going as far as connecting two distinct worlds by what seems to be nothing more than a simple thread."

"Light sources can't cast objects of substance," Clay replied instinctively, and then wished he had not contradicted the stranger.

"I'm not talking about the differences between shadow and substance," the man replied without hostility, almost as if he appreciated Clay's response. "It's the concept which is important. I'm using the example of light and shadow as a way to help you understand where I come from. Reflection is a powerful force. It can be used to redirect as well as create. Once the basis of substantive reflection is understood and defined, a doorway can be created."

"A doorway?"

"A passage between two worlds. The universe is a grand puzzle. Time and space are potential restraints, but they can be lifted under the right circumstances. You must be able to accept this. You must never doubt the reality of your surroundings, even though they will be different from the world you know. If you dismiss what lies ahead as hallucinations or fanciful imaginings, you will cause more harm than good. It is extremely important you accept what is happening to you as a stark reality."

Clay grasped at an opening in the stranger's words. He didn't wish to continue the peculiar conversation, but he knew he had to be careful in responding. He wanted to avoid confronting the stranger, but he also hoped to redirect the encounter into a less hostile tone.

"If it's that important, then any confusion should be avoided. Even basic information is important, so let's clear up some obvious questions. Why don't you start with your name? I don't even know who you are."

The stranger eyed Clay with a hint of dissatisfaction, but then, almost grudgingly, bent to Clay's request.

"You are right," the man acknowledged. "That is exactly how you should approach this matter... with a desire for clarity. Perhaps you are indeed the one we need. I am aware your name is Clay. My name is Sary."

Clay was slightly unsettled at discovering the stranger knew his name, but he decided to keep his questions focused on the man he knew he had never met before.

"Sary... is that your first name or last name?"

"Where I come from, we do not have first and last names. We have a single name and a title. The name is our identifier and our title defines our purpose."

"I assume Sary is your name."

"Never declare you are making an assumption! It is as bad as guessing. Assumptions are difficult to avoid, sometimes even necessary to make progress, but you must not use them in place of asking direct questions!"

Clay grew frustrated at being corrected with such aggression, but he still believed he was dealing with an unhinged trespasser. He had no idea how the stranger might react if he became argumentative. Clay remained convinced that pacifying the intruder was his safest path forward. Still, he could not avoid a hint of sarcasm.

"Fine. Is Sary your name? It doesn't sound like a title... and that's not an assumption, it's a statement of fact. I've never heard of any purpose defined by the word 'Sary,' unless it's some kind of obscure term referring to intrusions."

"You believe I'm intruding upon you?"

Clay took some satisfaction in correcting the man before him.

"It's not a belief. It's also a fact."

"You learn quickly. And since you will be required to ask questions, I will respond. Yes, Sary is my name."

"And what's your title?"

"Conveyor."

"Conveyor? That's a broad term. Do you transport items or do you communicate information?"

"Both. As for this moment—though I am aware I must communicate certain information—my main objective is transportation."

"And what is it you're transporting now?"

"You."

Clay wasn't sure how to react. It appeared as if he had become the object of some lunatic's obsession. Calling for help became a more plausible course of action, but he wasn't quite ready to panic.

He leaned back in his chair as he took a moment to gain a better perspective of the intruder. Sary's hands were empty. Clay noticed no weapons, but something small—a

handgun or a knife—could have been concealed under Sary's loose shirt or in the waistband of his trousers.

As he continued to inspect the uninvited guest, he realized Sary's attire was slightly odd. Everything was neat, but very simple. There were no visible brand names, no patterns, and no designs of any kind. Buttons adorned his shirt, but they were as plain as the rest of his appearance, and they were made of wood, not metal or plastic. They served their purpose and offered nothing more. Even Sary's sturdy leather boots appeared practical and without style.

Clay released a heavy breath as he decided to confront the intruder with a level of caution.

"Look, I don't want to upset you, but you have to admit this is confusing. Again, that's another statement of fact. You run into my house, and I don't know you. Now you're saying you want to transport me. You've told me you don't want me to guess or to assume, and I don't want to. Unfortunately, you're not leaving me with much leeway here."

"That's because there is no *leeway*. There is only a direction which must be taken, and it is one you must grasp without uncertainty."

"Then we're both in trouble, because I'm very uncertain about this."

"Uncertain about what?!"

In a wave of frustration, Clay revealed the full measure of his distress.

"Everything! I don't know who you are. I don't know what you want. I don't know why you're in my house! Where's the certainty in any of this?"

Sary shook his head in disgust as he wondered if some mistake had been made. He realized, however, that there had been no error. He had observed Clay for some time, and Clay himself had assisted in creating the passage, even if it was unknowingly. Of that, there was no doubt. If there was confusion, it was almost understandable, but it could not continue.

"You are permitting your discomfort with this situation to influence your thinking. You cannot allow that."

"You expect me to just accept a stranger appearing in my house like it was an ordinary event?"

"Yes."

"I'm open to suggestions on how to accomplish that."

"Analyze the dilemma before you without considering irrelevant factors. You see me as an intruder and your home as a safe haven, but that has little significance regarding what you must do. Look beyond your individual concerns and focus on the details of the challenge itself. Isn't that what you do?"

Clay thought of his work, his hobbies, and his overall interests. Sary was right. Clay could find solutions—whether they were to tax questions, jigsaw puzzles, or mystery novels—by pushing aside trivial concerns and seizing the key factors of most any problem. Clay was capable of focusing on significant details, and he decided to do just that. He took a long pause to consider everything Sary had said, and he was convinced he was dealing with a madman.

He made a bold, and possibly dangerous decision, but it was one he knew would confirm his concerns. He recalled the exact words of the intruder, and he came to one definitive conclusion.

"You think you're from another world, don't you?" Clay questioned almost harshly.

"I am."

"And you're here to take me to that world, aren't you?"

"That is my task."

"This other world, does it have a name?"

"Drenna."

Clay attempted to confirm his safety, even if he knew it was equally perilous to do so.

"You said I had to understand I wasn't dead. That means you need to take me there alive, correct?"

"You are useless to me otherwise."

In that, Clay found a great deal of solace. Sary didn't intend on killing him, so all Clay needed to do was humor the lunatic. Still, rather than just agreeing to accompany the intruder, he realized Sary expected more of him. In order to determine just how dangerous the intruder might be, Clay decided to press for details which he could link to their discussion.

"It's obvious you're not here simply to take me to your world for a visit. You have something in mind for me. Since your world incorporates titles, I'll have to be given one as well. What will *my purpose* be on Drenna... my title? What's the point to all of this?"

"You will be Clay the Judge."

"A judge?"

"Yes, a judge. We do not need a champion or a king. We don't need a hero or some great magician. Nor do we need a thief or an assassin. We have more than enough warriors and would-be leaders. We have armies of proficient individuals to handle nearly every task we require. What we do not have is someone capable of resolving certain disputes."

"And what makes you think I'm qualified to be a judge? I don't have any real experience with the law, other than tax law."

"Your concept of written rules is not relevant to us. You will not be asked to review mountains of bounded material or to apply some set of unyielding regulations. We need someone to make rational decisions without bias. That is the key. We need an outsider, an individual with no stake in our concerns, an individual with absolutely no ties to anyone or anything in our world."

"Anyone from *this* world would fill that need. Why me?"

"No, not anyone. There are definite requirements. We need someone with your cognitive abilities; strong memory, attention to detail, and sound comprehension. The individual must be able to evaluate situations without requiring firsthand experience, and he must be capable of utilizing logic and reasoning. The individual we need also has to be a loner."

"Come again?"

"A loner. Someone isolated from the cares of everyone else in your world. Someone who would not be immediately missed and someone who would not miss anyone remaining behind. We need someone detached in such a way that the influence of your world will not spill into ours."

Clay disagreed with the assessment that he matched such a description.

"I may live alone, but I'm not detached."

"You are very detached. Your contacts are minimal. You have never had a group mentality. You never needed to belong, and I don't believe you ever will. You keep to yourself. You do not even have a pet."

It was a hard truth, but one Clay had to accept. It also meant Sary knew more about him than just his name. Sary had been watching him long enough to make that evaluation, a judgment that was almost painfully accurate.

Clay could not guess as to how long the lunatic had been keeping tabs on him or how he managed it, but it left him feeling very vulnerable. If Sary knew that much about him, he would also know his tendencies and weaknesses. Any attempt to deceive might be viewed as an act of aggression. Clay could make a fatal mistake without even knowing it. He didn't wish to remain in such a precarious situation, but he had to remain truthful. He wondered if he could possibly redirect the stranger's focus.

"Alright but still, there are probably thousands of people who would fall into that category, maybe even millions. If you're looking for a judge, there has to be someone else just as detached as I am who would be better suited for the job. If you needed Clay the Tax Accountant, I could understand it, but not Clay the Judge."

"Do not allow certain decisions within this world to affect your overall perception! You may consider yourself an accountant, but on Drenna, your occupation on this world is irrelevant. What matters is your character, your abilities, and your insight."

"But my occupation is a large part of my life. I can't just ignore what I've done over all these years. You have to realize I can't just erase those experiences."

"I don't expect you to, but you must focus on the true aspect of your personality and your traits. You chose your profession because it allowed you the greatest amount of isolation."

"Isolation? I deal with clients all the time."

"You deal with numbers... and you like it that way. The people are an unfortunate necessity, but you always look beyond them."

"Again, so what? There have to be more qualified people to decide your disputes. I don't even like confrontation. I'm not comfortable with talking to you right now. Why am I the loner you picked?"

"It wasn't simply a matter of us choosing you. In a way, you have chosen us."

"I didn't make any choice."

"The choice was an unconscious one. I know that creates more questions for you, but we are running out of time. I must now insist that you accompany me to my world."

Clay realized that they had reached a critical junction. He didn't want to go anywhere with the lunatic, but he didn't want the encounter to become violent. He decided to move carefully and look for a possible means to escape. He stood up slowly, but kept his desk between him and Sary.

"Will it be a long trip?" Clay pressed.

"Barely an instant."

"How are we going to get there?"

"Exactly as I arrived here. We will walk through the door."

Clay looked over Sary's shoulder, out beyond his office. He knew Sary came through his front door. He believed they would leave the same way. In that, he found hope.

If Clay could get outside, he had a far greater chance of obtaining assistance. At least he wouldn't be alone, trapped in his own home without any potential aid. If anyone was

outside, he could call for help or just make a dash for it. He knew he couldn't outrun Sary, but he might be able to surprise him just enough to make it to the street and get someone's attention.

"Alright," Clay allowed. "Let's leave the same way you came in, right through the front door."

Clay stepped around his desk and moved toward his office door. Before he could leave, he felt the stranger's firm grip on his arm. There was surprising strength in the thin fingers which held him.

"Before we leave, do you have any metal upon you?"

The question surprised the accountant, and he responded almost mechanically.

"Metal? Just some keys. I don't wear jewelry."

"Leave the keys behind."

Clay didn't like the idea, but he wasn't going to take the time to lock his door. He pulled his keys from his pocket and threw them on his desk.

"Any other metal?" Sary questioned. "Anything on your clothes?"

Clay looked down upon himself.

"Just a zipper and a button on my pants," he replied, clearly unnerved by the odd question.

"Then you will need a new pair, but we can get you one when we arrive in Drenna. It will work better that way. You will see something very important."

Sary released Clay's arm and moved toward the front door, expecting the confused accountant to follow without hesitation. Just as he placed his hand on the doorknob, Sary turned to Clay and asked a simple question.

"This door... where do you think it leads?"

"You should know. You just came through it."

"No! You are placing your expectations into my experiences, thus trying to give my actions a new definition. You must never do that in Drenna. What I came through was a passage, a passage which connects your world with mine. You can't conceive of such a passage, not just yet."

"So you think your passing through this door will be different than mine?" Clay wondered.

"Previously, yes, but not this time. When you walk with me out this door, we will both utilize the passage which brought me here... a passage which you helped create. There must be no doubt about that. If you do not prepare yourself for what will happen, you will lose yourself, and I can't afford another failure like that. Now, where do you think this door leads?"

Clay didn't want to contradict the fanatical intruder, but he couldn't ignore the obvious.

"This is my front door. It opens to my front porch, which leads to my front walk, which cuts through my front yard."

"And in your world, that is what you should expect, but we are about to enter my world. Remember, this is no dream, no illusion. This is reality."

Sary opened the door and Clay saw exactly what he expected to see. It was what he saw every day when he exited his house. Just past his front porch, he saw neat rows of bricks forming the walkway which created a path across his front yard.

"You see your world, correct?" Sary asked.

"Yes," Clay admitted, wondering if he would be sharply corrected once more, told that he was not looking in the right place, but he wasn't corrected at all.

"That's what I expected you to see. You did not even entertain the thought of seeing something else. You are curious about me, and certainly concerned, but you have not yet accepted what is about to occur."

"I'm not sure what's going to happen," Clay admitted.

"You think I'm mad... insane, don't you?" Sary questioned with a hint of a smile.

Clay didn't answer, didn't even look at the intruder.

"It's okay," Sary allowed. "Speak the truth. The truth will never hurt you."

With the door open, Clay decided to do just as the intruder requested. He spoke the absolute truth without hesitation.

"I think you're confused. I think you have the wrong house, and the wrong man. I think you need help."

"I do need *help*, but I do not have the wrong house... or the wrong man. To prove that, I want you to look past what you see. Ignore what's right before you. Look further out. Now what do you see?"

"My neighbor's house."

"Good. And beyond that?"

"More houses, more trees."

"Beyond that?"

"I can't see any farther than that."

"Not with your eyes you can't, but can you imagine what's out there? If you had to paint a larger picture, what would you create?"

"More land, more houses, more trees, more of everything."

"You can't see it, but you know it's there."

"Of course."

"But you're not really a part of it, are you?"

"Of course I'm a part of it."

"Yes, I know. You have people come in your home. You do work for them. You go out beyond your house. You shop for your needs. You see people all over, but there's no connection. You know that."

Clay frowned. He looked through the open door and wondered if he should just take off, bolt for a neighbor's home or run into the street and start screaming about a fire just to get attention, but he realized he didn't want to. The conversation had suddenly turned very personal, and he needed to finally confront the insane stranger.

"We're back to that? Back to me being a loner?"

"We've never left it. It's why I'm here."

"I thought you were here because you needed to bring me back to your world... because you needed someone to settle your disputes."

"I'm also here because you called me here. You've contemplated this all before. You've stared at the people passing by. To you, they were much the same as insects, nothing more. More people than you could count moving in every direction... you wondered what separated them from ants."

"How do you know this?" Clay demanded.

"I've watched you. I've listened to you. You talk to yourself. Not often, but enough for me to know some of your thoughts. That's what I meant when I said you called me here. I know enough of what you want to believe you really can help my world."

"What is it you think I want?"

"You want fulfillment while remaining in solitude. You want achievement without competition. You want purpose without belonging. I believe I can give you that, but you have to believe it as well. This is the important step we're about to take. It's why I told you that you weren't dreaming, that you weren't entering some afterlife. This will be very real and you have a chance of obtaining what you desire."

"All I see is my neighborhood."

"That's this moment. When you step through this door, you will see something else entirely."

"And this will all happen because I'm somehow disconnected with my world?"

"Yes."

Clay finally grew tired of arguing with the intruder. Reality was right before them and the lunatic could not admit it. It was time for Clay to get help. Maybe they would take Sary to some hospital and Clay could get back to his work. It was the best way to solve the problem. He stepped through the threshold of his front door and his world was gone.

Chapter 2

Clay's surroundings changed the very moment he left his home, and not as he expected. He did not step out onto his front porch, did not move toward the walkway leading to the street. Everything which he normally encountered beyond his front door was nowhere to be found. His entire neighborhood disappeared before him.

There was no momentary void, nor did he fall into a dark abyss. He did not walk through a tunnel of light or leap through a vortex of swirling colors. He took one step and everything changed.

His foot came down upon a wide road made entirely of perfectly symmetrical bricks. The smoothness of the surface surprised him, but the road itself did not hold his interest for long. Directly in front of him, not but a few paces from where he stood, was another construction of stone which immediately called for his attention.

He stood before a structure overwhelming in design. It reminded him of a medieval castle, but only in its basic composition. The walls before him were built from large blocks of gray stone. Clay imagined the building could easily withstand the most brutal storms of nature and hold off just about any conventional attack.

It was not, however, an elaborate fortress with elegant spires and impressive ramparts. It was a flat design, massive in scope but only one story tall. It was one of the widest buildings he had ever encountered.

Clay fought off the shock of the moment, pulled his gaze from the massive collection of heavy gray stones set in a well-defined pattern. He looked back over his shoulder hoping to find a familiar sight. He found no such comfort. His home was gone.

He stood at what appeared to be the center of a strange town. There was an odd assortment of buildings which created an almost surreal village. Some structures looked to be homes, others were shops. The basic dwellings were constructed of wood and brick and were almost graceful in their simple design. From the seemingly dated appearance of his surroundings, Clay felt as if he had stumbled upon some tourist attraction, a settlement meant to resemble some community out of the past.

There were people about, but he did not recognize any of them. They were dressed in the same plain fashion as Sary. Many of them paused to stare back at him, obviously surprised at his sudden arrival.

As the apparent source of their attention, Clay grew very uncomfortable. He noticed more than just surprise upon their faces. He sensed suspicion and mistrust. He also felt a wave of insecurity as the glances of the strangers held a hint of disapproval. It was a familiar feeling. He never liked it. It seemed as if those around him were judging him based on his appearance.

His discomfort was amplified by his confusion. He didn't know where he was or how he got there. He searched desperately for a familiar sight, but he could not find a single anchor, not the smallest hint of anything recognizable.

He felt panic surge in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to find his front door and race back inside, cut himself off from the distrustful stares of disapproving strangers.

Clay realized Sary remained at his side, and he turned a blunt accusation upon the individual he believed was responsible for his inexplicable circumstances.

"What is this?! What did you do?"

Sary was pleased to respond, for he was not certain where they would arrive in his world. He hoped it would be close to his ultimate destination, but he never dared believe Clay's unrecognized aspirations would bring them to that exact location.

"This is Ticen, the official seat of Border Administration. And it is not what I have done, but what *you* have accomplished. This is where you will judge the disputes."

"Where's my house?" Clay demanded.

"Back on your world. You have stepped through the passage and appeared right at the doorstep of the Tribunal. You are exactly where you should be."

"What do you mean, 'where I should be?' What's going on? This can't be real! Did you drug me?"

Sary's expression soured and his eyes filled with rage.

"What did I tell you?! This is not some hallucination! This is..."

Sary held his tongue. He looked about at the curious spectators. He could not allow the discussion to continue in their presence.

"Come with me. Now!"

Sary did not grab Clay, but he nudged him forward with a stiff push. He directed the stunned visitor toward the large wooden doors of the massive structure before them. Sary pulled upon the stone handle and opened one of the doors.

Confused to a high level of both frustration and apprehension, Clay nearly stumbled into a massively wide hall. The floor was of polished marble, the walls were composed of elaborate bricks of several colors. The hall was slightly oval in shape, and there were more doors than Clay had time to count, forming a ring around the outer wall.

His heels clicked loudly against the hard floor as he followed Sary's lead. Empty of both furnishings and people, the large vacuous space served as an extensive cavern of unnerving choices. It was like a maze without inner walls, just a multitude of doors along the rim with no indication of what might be lurking behind them. Sary guided him to a single wooden door to his right.

Clay entered an empty room. There were several wooden chairs distributed about in no particular order. It appeared as if they were moved about regularly. There were no windows, just solid walls made from the same bricks which adorned the outer hall.

For a brief moment, Clay ignored Sary. He looked down at his hands, felt his fingers, and even squeezed them. He knew what he was doing. He was testing to see if he could feel the sensation. He wanted some sense of reality. He squeezed hard enough to cause slight pain, and the minor discomfort forced him to recall Sary's initial warning.

Surprisingly, he turned to Sary and offered a simple but extremely important acknowledgment.

"Okay. It's like you told me. I'm not dreaming, and I'm not dead. But this... this is too much for anyone to simply accept without questioning his or her own sanity. What happened to my house?"

"It is exactly as you left it."

"We took one step out my door. We shouldn't be here!"

"It's understandable you feel that way, but I did warn you."

"I thought you were crazy. Now I think I am."

Yet again, Sary admonished his guest.

"You are not crazy! You must not think like that!"

"Then explain how this is possible!"

"You did not simply walk out your front door. And you did not step into some delusion. Do you remember what I told you about two distinct shadows appearing to merge?"

"Yes."

"It's like that. Our two worlds exist within each other, not in the same space, but within borders which overlap yet remain distinct. You stepped out of the borders of one world and into the borders of another. An opening was created at your door."

"How?"

"Necessity."

"What necessity?"

"We need you, and you need us."

"That's absurd."

"Is it?" Sary challenged. "You know nothing of my home and nothing about the patterns which connect our two worlds."

"How can a 'need' connect worlds? And even if it could, I don't even accept the premise. I don't *need* anybody."

"That is what you have always believed. I think it's also what you have always wanted, but in your world, that could never be achieved. That is why the door led you here."

Clay wanted to argue the point. He never wanted to end up in some unfamiliar village, surrounded by strangers, and brought to some empty stronghold. He wanted to be left alone.

Unfortunately, he could not dismiss his surroundings, nor could he explain them. Sary might have warned him to keep a hold on reality, but it would not be an easy task. In order to retain more than just a shred of his sanity, he needed to reach for a more substantial explanation for his circumstances.

"Are you saying I had a hand in creating the passage which brought me here?"

"You are asking me to repeat myself. You must be careful not to continue with that habit."

"It's not a habit! I'm looking for an answer here. If that means I have to ask you to repeat yourself, then maybe you need to explain things better."

"What is it you wish clarified?"

"Everything!"

"Should I start with the moment of your creation?" Sary asked with obvious sarcasm.

"No," Clay growled. "I need you to start with..."

Before Clay could say more, he felt his pants come loose. He grabbed them at the waist and discovered his zipper and button were gone.

"What's going on now?" Clay questioned. "What happened to my pants? My button is gone, my zipper..."

"You are discovering one of the most significant differences between our worlds. On Drenna, metals cannot exist in a free state. They are part of this world as compounds, but they must remain as composite minerals. Whenever we try to separate the metal into a usable form, it begins a very quick process of collapse. You might think of it as an extremely expedited form of corrosion, but even metals which do not rust in your world will breakdown in ours and deteriorate into unusable debris almost immediately."

"You don't have any metals?"

"We have them, but we are unable to utilize them as you have done in your world. They must remain in their natural state of existence."

"So you don't have items made of iron or copper?"

"Metals remain part of the stones we often use in construction, but as I have said, we cannot extract them into a purer form."

"How was this building constructed?"

"Wood and stone?"

"What about nails?"

"We have learned to construct without such metal devices. We use pins made of stone, incorporate pegs made of wood, or create joints made to fit together. Our engineers constantly amaze us, but those are details unimportant to your task. Let us focus on your immediate needs. You must have suitable attire. Give me a moment."

Sary left the room only to quickly return with a new pair of trousers.

"Use these," he stated as he offered the garments to his guest.

Clay changed his pants. The new ones fit comfortably and were held at his waist by a rope belt.

He sat down in a chair as he looked down upon his new trousers and then across the room. He wanted to discount everything around him, everything which had happened, but he couldn't. He recalled Sary's words when the intruder initially entered his home.

"You said exactly what you had to say, didn't you?" he questioned Sary.

"Regarding?"

"When you first came into my home, you told me I wasn't dreaming, that I wasn't dead... that this was all very real. Even while I'm sitting here trying to explain this away as some hallucination, I keep recalling what you said. It's like I can hear it all again in my mind. You said it before you even told me your name. It's keeping me from just shutting down."

"It was what you needed to hear."

"How did you know?"

"Experience."

"You've brought others here?"

"It's best if we do not discuss such things."

"Why?"

"Because you must accept that you have no connection to this world."

"Why is that so important?"

"Because if you believe you have any stake here, even the slightest, it will alter your conceptions. That cannot be allowed. It would be... dangerous."

"Seems as if there are quite a few things which can't be allowed."

"Such conditions are necessary for you to perform the duty for which I brought you here."

"To be a judge," Clay offered, followed by a heavy sigh. He looked about the room and more questions popped into his mind.

"Where does the light come from?" he asked. "There are no lamps, not even candles. The ceiling appears to glow."

"In a way, it does. It reflects light. We use many different means to direct light from outside into our structures."

"What happens at night?"

"It gets dark."

"Very funny," Clay acknowledged, and he almost laughed. "That's the first hint of humor I've seen in you."

"It was not meant to be humorous."

"Shame. So you just walk around in the dark?"

"We have fireplaces, torches, candles, and oil lamps."

"No electricity?"

"No. I've seen such power as I examined your world. It has amazing potential, but without working metals, it is probably beyond our grasp."

"Let's talk about that for a moment... you looking into my world. You've been watching me. How did you manage that?"

"We understand reflection. It is one of the most important discoveries and concepts of *our* world. We've managed to discover the existence of your world by following certain reflections, but they are more than just images. They are patterns that interact with our world. And just as metals react differently on Drenna, so do these patterns"

"It's not like light?"

"It is different, just as our worlds are different. It would be difficult to explain to you without common reference points. It would be like you trying to describe to me how you can communicate instantly with people all over your world."

"You can't do that?"

"How could we develop such technology without metal?"

Clay could not answer. He grew silent as he reflected upon the absurdities of the conversation. He considered his situation as a whole. He shook his head with frustration. He wanted to reject everything he was hearing as the ludicrous ravings of a madman, but he could not ignore his surroundings. When he wanted to dismiss it all as some hallucination, he heard Sary's voice in his head, demanding he recognize reality. He also recalled what Sary told him about the truth, and he decided to test the conveyor's words.

"You told me the truth can't hurt me. Well, here's a very simple truth; I don't understand what's happening to me. I don't understand your world. I don't understand how this place could be hidden from my world, but you can see into ours. I don't even understand how I got here. If I can't understand how your world works, how can I judge any disputes within it?"

"We're not sure you can, but we have to try."

"Why are you so determined to make me a judge?"

"Because if certain disputes are not settled, the consequences will be disastrous."

"Disastrous? That doesn't sound encouraging."

"It should encourage you to accept the seriousness of what we face."

"I'm not doubting the seriousness of any of this. I'm questioning why you want me to settle any kind of dispute, let alone one that might have disastrous consequences."

"Because we are unable to settle it ourselves."

"And you want to place that kind of burden in the hands of someone who's as confused as I am right now?"

"You may be confused, but whether you are willing to admit it or not, you have already accepted the reality of your situation."

"That's because you planted that seed in my head."

"You can't possibly believe that. I did not plant anything. I simply sparked what was already there. It was there all along, before I entered your home, before I even found you on your world. That's why I know you called to us as much as I came to you."

"And you think that's why a passage opened up at my front door?"

"It was a passage that led to this place; the city of Ticen and the very doors of the Tribunal. As I said before, Ticen is the seat of Border Authority. The Tribunal was constructed by an agreement between two dyans, what you would call tribes or clans."

"Or nations?"

"Perhaps, but I am uncomfortable with that term. From what I have learned of your world, nations have developed into rather complex entities. The separate congregations of our people is much simpler. There are only roughly a dozen dyans."

"Just a dozen? Is your world much smaller than mine?"

"Difficult to answer. I would say not, but then degrees of measurement in that regard are hard to compare. Whatever the case may be, it is irrelevant. It's more important that you focus on the point of my claim. You helped finalize the passage from your home to Drenna. You brought us to the Tribunal, and it is at the Tribunal where disputes need to be resolved."

"Why here?"

"Because it was constructed by two of the dyans... in an unprecedented display of cooperation."

"Unprecedented? The dyans don't get along?"

"That would be an understatement."

"Why did they build this place?"

"The two dyans involved—the Poyt and the Cabbo—were neither the smallest nor the largest of the tribal powers. The two largest dyans are constantly struggling against each other for domination. The smallest are fractured and facing complete annihilation. I believe one or two might already be extinct. That's why I am unsure of the exact number of existing dyans."

"So the Poyt and Cabbo built this structure?"

"It was their deliberations which led to its construction."

"And where do they fit in the scheme of things?"

"The Poyt and Cabbo are both strong enough to offer resistance against the larger dyans, but not extensive enough to make any claim toward dominance. They're also relatively equal in size, and they occupy lands in close proximity of each other. Neither are nomadic, but they are also not totally sedentary. They realized they would have several disagreements. If they attempted to settle every dispute through armed conflict, they would leave themselves vulnerable to the larger dyans. The Tribunal was created to settle disputes without weakening either side."

"Which group controls this town?"

"Neither. It is the one village in all of Drenna which is equally settled by two dyans."

"So it's served its purpose."

"It has."

"Then why do you need me?"

"The disputes have grown in scope. In the past, the two dyans have found mutually acceptable solutions to solve several of their problems. In most cases, they have utilized a

simple doctrine of separation. You take yours and we'll take ours. You go your way, we'll go ours. You hold to your beliefs, and we'll keep to ours."

"Disputes don't normally arise when there are such easy solutions," Clay noted.

"You do not understand. Those were not *easy* solutions. They were hard to accept... by both sides. It's difficult in our world to say we can agree to disagree. Each dyan wishes to be deemed correct in their ways, and they feel compelled to correct those who disagree. And this would occur for even the most minor of disagreements."

"What happened when you faced more complicated disputes?"

"The two dyans held firm to the belief that armed conflict was the worst possible outcome. It's not that they abhorred battle. Quite the contrary. Both sides are almost eager to fight each other. But they realize the larger dyans want a war to occur. When it does, the current balance will be broken."

Clay immediately saw the implications of such a conflict.

"The balance creates a relative level of safety, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Obviously," Sary replied. "If the balance is destroyed, the consequences would be disastrous. If the Poyt and Cabbo ever go to war, it won't matter which tribe is the ultimate victor. Both will be weakened. One of the larger dyans would swoop down after any battle and decimate them all. The citizens of both tribes are not so shortsighted that they fail to see what would happen under those circumstances; oppression, slave labor, the inevitable eradication of both dyans."

"So how did they manage to settle the more complex disputes? There had to be some circumstances where they couldn't just ignore each other. They occupy the same town. There had to be situations where it wasn't so simple to just say this is yours and that's mine."

"The doctrine of separation includes a clause of mutual abandonment. If there is a complex dispute over land or property which cannot be settled within the Tribunal, then neither side can make a claim of ownership."

"Both sides would just give up?"

Sary found Clay's tone insulting.

"If you believe that is akin to surrender, you are gravely mistaken. It often came down to a matter of putting the dyans' need to survive over personal desires."

Clay reflected on what he was told. An obvious question arose.

"Who served as the judge or arbitrator for these disputes before me?"

"There is no judge or arbitrator. Each dyan places a council of twelve members in the Tribunal. The twenty-four individuals argue over the dispute. If the two councils can come to a mutually agreeable solution which fits the doctrine of separation, the verdict is rendered. If not, the issue is either dismissed as irresolvable or postponed until a new set of council members are seated. The number of postponed cases has been growing substantially."

"And that's why you need a judge?"

"No, we need a judge because the doctrine of separation is in danger of failing. Certain circumstances have arisen to cause both dyans to actually consider armed conflict if this particular situation is not settled properly."

"What situation?"

"The issue you must decide involves a discovery of diamonds."

"Diamonds?"

Once more, Sary noted Clay's tone of disapproval and found it unacceptable.

"You think we argue over wealth?"

"Aren't you?"

"No, we are not! Consider what your world would be like if all metal dissolved as did the button on your pants. Imagine how your world would have advanced. Think about how important... how strategically significant... certain materials would become. Rock and wood are prized, but we have them in abundance. Precious gems are another matter entirely. They serve innumerable purposes. This is not about wealth. This is about the very basis of our civilization."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The location of the discovery. A large deposit has been found on land currently in dispute between the two dyans. Under the doctrine of separation, both the Cabbo and the Poyt agreed to abandon the region, but with a deposit of diamonds now known to exist within its borders, it can no longer be ignored."

"If it was abandoned, how did they discover the diamonds?"

"A prospector of the Poyt dyan secretly ventured into the region at night. He found the deposit and began selling substantial amounts of diamonds. Suspicions arose and he was followed. The discovery was uncovered. Word spread. The prospector has been eliminated from the dispute, but we are left with a larger problem."

"Eliminated?"

"Put to death in a way I would rather not discuss. He put his personal gain and desire for wealth above all else, and you may deem him deserving of as much disgrace as you wish, but the dyans are now faced with a dilemma which threatens our entire world. Diamonds are too precious to simply ignore, and the size of the deposit is significant. Neither dyan is willing to abandon the discovery."

"So they're going to go to war?"

"Without a reasonable solution, war is inevitable. If the diamonds are not mined, they will become a prize too enticing to resist. We have managed to keep the discovery a secret for a substantial period of time as we have searched for a solution, but leaks are now occurring, from both dyans. Word will eventually spread of the find to the other tribes. One of the larger clans might deem an invasion of the territory worth the risk, especially if the deposit is not being exploited. It might weaken an aggressor temporarily as the invading force fights both the Cabbo and the Poyt, but the deposit of diamonds could turn the tide against other adversaries in the longer term."

"And you want me to solve this?"

"You are here to make the attempt."

"I can't solve this. I don't know anything about your world."

"That is exactly what is required."

"Ignorance? Is that what's required?"

"No. Detachment. Your ignorance of the situation will be resolved during the proceedings. Each side will present their case. You will review the arguments without prejudice. That is what has been agreed to by both sides."

Clay could not imagine a more dreadful and suffocating situation. He looked about the room in total exasperation, but there was no one else there, no one who might appreciate his dilemma. He was alone. But in that, he actually found strength.

Beyond a complete stranger, there was no one there to judge him. He could say whatever came to his mind. He didn't need to worry about guilt.

"What if I say 'no' to your offer?"

"By all means, say 'no' and go about your own business."

"You'll return me to my home?"

"You make it sound like it's up to me."

"Who then?" Clay demanded.

"As I've said many times, you're as much responsible for being here as anyone else. You created the passage. You brought us directly to the Tribunal."

Clay refused to accept the notion, but he attempted to exploit it for his own possible salvation.

"Then I should be able to return on my own."

Sary was not even slightly alarmed by the suggestion.

"Perhaps," the conveyor allowed. "If you wish to try it, then leave now. Walk out the door of the Tribunal just as you walked out the door of your home. If you really wish to return, the passage should open for you."

"And if it doesn't?"

"I'm afraid you'll be on your own, and good luck with that."

It sounded like a threat, and Clay challenged his host.

"What are you saying?"

"Both councils will know you attempted to leave before the proceedings. They will view it as both a refusal to hear their case and as a sign of weakness. They will deem your action as that of a coward, and they will not allow you to judge them in the future."

"And what will happen to me?"

"You'd be on your own. I don't think that would go well for you. Ticen is not a trusting village. It cannot afford to be. The citizens are suspicious of strangers. They will not offer you any aid. And what do you have to offer in the way of currency? My guess is you will not survive for long."

"So you're blackmailing me?"

Sary grew angry once more.

"Do not blame me for your situation! I am explaining what you face. You opened the passage."

"You keep saying that, but I didn't open anything!"

"Then explain how you came here!"

"I can't."

"Then you also face a dilemma, just as the Poyt and the Cabbo."

"It's a dilemma without a solution! There's no way for me to survive."

"Wrong! Hear the case. Become the judge."

A Final Note from the Author

Detached Lives: Judgments does not end here. The entire book is available for sale at many on-line ebook stores. For more information on obtaining the rest of the story, please visit www.sitelane.com.

If you have a comment or question about this sample or any of my books, please feel free to send me a note. Also, please let me know if you encounter any difficulty with the formatting. Contact information can be found on my web site at www.sitelane.com. Please consider my other novels, including *Soul View*, *Soul Chase*, *Counterproductive Man*, *Slow Fall*, *Alien Cradle*, *When Do I See God?* and the *Delver Magic Series*.

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