

SNEAK PEEK

PROFUSION

DIFFUSION BOOK 3

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Profusion

Diffusion Book 3

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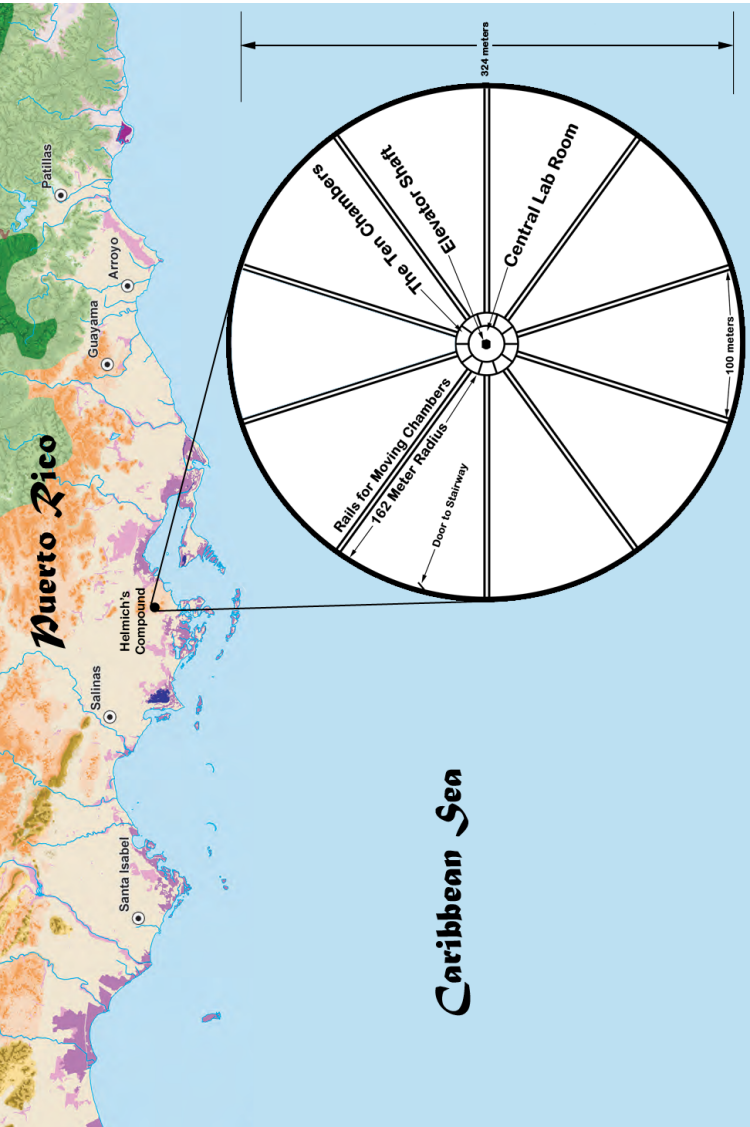
To those who look to the future not
with despair but with anticipation.

Infusion

Definition:

An abundance or large quantity of something.

A “pouring forth” of something in great quantity.



1948

Dutch New Guinea

Samuel Inwood trudged up a densely-forested hill, slipping in mud from a recent rain and bearing a heavy pack made from woven sago leaves that had been softened by chewing. He stopped at the hill's summit, hefted the pack to the ground, and sat beside it. His bare arms and legs were scratched and bleeding, but they would heal soon enough. He inspected his spider silk vest and fingered a ragged hole. That would have to be mended.

The sound of claws scuttling on tree bark made Samuel glance up quickly. A tree kangaroo, locally known as an *mbolop*, was clambering up a tree a few yards away. The creature had followed him from the village. Samuel frowned. He would have preferred to do this without being observed, even by the *mbolop*.

The surrounding trees upon the hill's crown were relatively sparse. Many years ago Samuel had been on a hill similar to this one. It had been his first hunting excursion with the Papuan savages who had long ago captured him and killed his companions—savages he now considered to be friends.

Today, though, Samuel had not come here to hunt.

"I estimate the village to be nearly three miles distant," he said, not necessarily to the *mbolop* nor to anyone in particular. During eighty years living with the tribe, he had developed a habit of speaking aloud when he was alone.

He opened the pack. Inside were twelve pouches, each of them made from the skin of a bandicoot, and each of them containing a lump of clay slightly smaller than his fist. He pulled forth one of the pouches. He held it upside down until the lump of clay fell out onto the ground before him. He then pulled forth a second pouch and dropped a nearly identical lump of clay next to the first. This was followed by a third lump, and then a fourth. Eight lumps still remained in the pack, contained within their own skin pouches.

Samuel had discreetly collected the lumps over a period of three months, carefully storing them in his hut. Each was contained within a pouch so the lumps would not touch, as his purpose would be ill-served were they to be mixed together before this particular day. He had pinched off the lumps, one at a time, from a much larger source, a mass of clay over two feet in diameter. The Papuan villagers called the clay *Lamotelokhai*, which meant *the end of the world*. Eighty years before, Samuel had briefly believed the clay might have been a portal to God. Since then, however, he had seen that it was something even more astounding.

Samuel studied the four lumps before him. A pinch from any one of them could be used to perform seemingly impossible tasks. If he wished to cause an object to dissolve into soil, he would need only to apply the clay to the object. If he or a companion were injured, applying the clay would heal the wounds—even if the wounds would otherwise have been fatal. If he wished to cook a meal or fire-harden a spear tip, he could apply the clay to the wood before burning it, resulting in a smokeless fire that would not reveal his location.

Unique tasks requiring more specific instructions, however, could only be performed by the larger source of the clay, the *Lamotelokhai*. Or so Samuel had previously believed. Recently, however, an idea had been circling about in his mind. What if it were possible to combine bits of the clay into a mass smaller than the *Lamotelokhai* but large enough to carry out complex tasks? If this were possible, the benefits would be numerous beyond imagining.

The question was this: how large would the mass need to be?

He looked again at the sparse hilltop trees. "Am I alone?" he shouted, and then again in the language of the villagers. "*Nu bai-khokhiim?*" There was no response, although he sensed the mbolop watching him from above. Returning his attention to the lumps of clay, he shifted his position on the ground and straightened his back, attempting to drive away his misgivings.

"Let no man deceive himself," he muttered. "Let him become a fool, that he may become wise." He then pushed the four lumps together and molded them into one.

He plucked a river stone from the pack and placed it next to the clay. Then, he placed his hands on the clay and closed his eyes to create a clear vision of his request. He stirred up a well-rehearsed series of thoughts, running them through his mind in a specific order: a vision of the river stone becoming smaller and taking on a golden color; a silent explanation that the rock had turned to gold, the heaviest of metals; a vision of a gold nugget tipping a scale, outweighing a stone on the opposite end.

Samuel opened his eyes, pinched off some of the clay, and smeared it upon the stone. He then sat back and waited.

Nothing happened.

He pulled four more skin pouches from the pack, removed lumps of clay from them, and pressed the lumps into the larger mass. He placed his hands on the clay, repeated the series of thoughts, and smeared another pinch of clay on the stone.

Again, nothing.

"God blind me! Have I embarked upon another fruitless path of inquiry?"

He pulled the last four skin pouches from the pack, extracted the clay lumps from each of them, and pressed them into the mass, resulting in a lump that was now as large as his head. If this didn't work, he would have to conclude the experiment was a failure, as it was impractical to gather more. He placed his hands on the clay and repeated the sequence of thoughts. After anointing the stone, he sat back and watched, softly singing an old song from his childhood to calm himself.

"A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go, we'll catch a giraffe and make him laugh, and then we'll let him go."

The stone shifted. Or did it? Perhaps it was just his imagination.

“A-hunting we will go, we’ll catch a bear and cut his hair, and then...”

The stone shifted again. This time it continued changing. It was becoming smaller. Its edges seemed to soften, and its surface turned to shimmering golden yellow. Samuel held his fingers above it to be sure it wasn’t hot, and then he picked it up. The bottom of it had conformed to the twigs and soil, as if it had melted and cooled, although no debris was stuck to its surface. Its weight indicated that indeed it was gold. He looked more closely. It was imperfect, with speckles of minerals showing on its surface. This was peculiar. He had made this same request of the Lamotelokhai many times, always resulting in perfect, pure gold specimens. Nonetheless, the results were encouraging.

He proceeded to the second experiment he had prepared. He placed his hands upon the lump of clay, closed his eyes, and conjured another sequence of thoughts. In his mind’s vision, the gold specimen transformed its shape. First it elongated and formed a head, thorax, and abdomen. Then two broad wings sprouted from each side of the thorax, gradually spreading wider until the entire object was an intricate gold sculpture of a butterfly. He opened his eyes and smeared a pinch of clay onto the impure gold.

He waited, softly humming the old song.

The gold began to change. It narrowed in two places, forming the three insect body regions. Then, however, the sculpting process went astray. Instead of delicate wings blossoming from each side, tendrils of speckled gold spewed forth into shapeless extensions. The insect body curled up and writhed, as if it were a malformed creature in great pain. Samuel watched, mesmerized, as the object’s shape continued shifting. For a moment the gold resembled a giraffe, and then a bear, and then it even resembled the face of his beloved Lindsey, whom he had left behind in London and who had no doubt grown old and passed away years before. When he saw this, he glanced away, unwilling to be tormented by the sight. When he returned his gaze to the gold, the transformations had stopped, leaving an amorphous mass that bore no resemblance to a butterfly. He touched it with his finger, half expecting it to change again, but it was cold and solid.

"Most... extraordinary," he said. He turned to the lump of clay. "You seem to understand my requests but are hardly capable of granting them. Of what use are you? I shall have to endeavor to discover what you can and cannot do."

He got up and began searching the area for a beetle or other large insect, which he would need for his next experiment. After sifting through leaf litter on the forest floor for some minutes, a slight movement in a low bush caught his attention. He approached the bush and soon was eye-to-eye with a slender arboreal lizard perhaps two feet in total length. Its yellow-spotted black body sharply contrasted with a brilliant blue tail.

Samuel sighed and shook his head. This was yet another new species of the genus *Monitor*. He would have a most impressive collection of specimens, had his life not taken such a calamitous turn of fate.

He slowly inched his way closer and then thrust his hand out in a blur and snatched the lizard. He inspected the struggling creature, holding it out so that its lashing tail could not whip his face.

"If you are indeed new to science," he said to the lizard, "then I have the honor of naming you." He used his free hand to subdue the tail. "*Monitor cerulean* seems to fit you well, as your tail is as blue as the evening sky. Let us see what we can do to make the name even more fitting, shall we?" He then carried the lizard back to the lump of clay and sat upon the ground.

He placed his free hand on the clay, closed his eyes, and formed a mental vision of the lizard. Then, he imagined the blue pigment of the creature's tail spreading forward, transforming the scaly skin on the rest of the body from black and yellow to the same brilliant cerulean hue. He opened his eyes and smeared a pinch of clay onto the lizard's back. By this time the creature had stopped struggling, so he released it, keeping his hand ready above it in case it tried to run. The lizard tilted its head but remained where it was.

Samuel waited.

Soon his mental vision began materializing. Beginning at the base of the lizard's tail, bead-like black scales faded to gray and then became blue. This alteration progressed until its entire body and head were blue with yellow spots.

As the yellow spots began changing to blue, the lizard abruptly wrenched its head to the side. Its mouth snapped open and emitted a menacing hiss. Samuel pulled his hand back, thinking the lizard was about to lunge at him. Instead of attacking, however, the creature spasmed and tumbled onto its side, its legs kicking desperately, as if gripped by seizure. Suddenly its body split in two, spewing forth blood and entrails.

Samuel rose to his feet. "What in God's—" He stopped short. The two halves of the lizard were now moving—transforming. Torn skin rolled up into itself and fell away from each portion of the carcass. The elongated rolls of skin then began crawling away, moving on their own like macabre grubs. Exposed organs detached themselves from the lizard's body. Some of them began oozing away, while others sprouted rudimentary legs and began crawling.

Horried, Samuel realized he was stumbling backwards.

The lizard's tail broke free from the body and thrashed about. Its haphazard movements became more coordinated and deliberate, until finally it slithered away like a snake. The head portion of the body was still floundering about, going through its own revolting transformation. As it rolled on the ground, its jaws snapped shut on some dry leaves and small plants, which then began changing, eventually assimilating into the creature's head. The unholy beast then began snapping up every living and once-living object within its reach, as if it had discovered a new life-sustaining food source. Each thing it clamped upon became part of its abhorrent and growing mass.

Samuel could hardly look away from this disturbing sight, but suddenly his attention was drawn again to the snake-like tail, which had slithered and spiraled its way up a sapling tree and was now at the height of his chest. The thing was tightening around the sapling like a snake constricting its prey. Carefully keeping his distance from the creature's voracious head, Samuel stepped closer to the sapling to observe. But then he stepped back again when the trunk softened where the tail was gripping it, the entire tree folding and collapsing toward him. The autonomous tail then somehow melded into the folded joint of the sapling's trunk and was gone.

And then the entire tree began to move.

"God save me," Samuel uttered.

The tree continued changing its shape as it slowly writhed about. Samuel backed away, but he tripped and fell over something. Sprawled on his back, his feet and knees rested atop a hulking mass that only moments before had been the head of a small lizard. The thing was now the size of Samuel's body, although its form was unrecognizable. No longer resembling the lizard it once was, it had grown body parts of many different creatures, all of them squirming and fighting as if they desired to escape from the horrifying conglomeration to which they were bound.

As Samuel tried to comprehend what he was seeing, a creature's head materialized from the mass and clamped its jaws onto his bare calf. The head was the size of a small dog's, but it appeared to be reptilian, with round yellow eyes and vertical pupils. Samuel kicked it with his free foot, tearing its teeth loose from his flesh. He rolled out of its reach and then sat up, pressing his hand against his bleeding leg.

The multifarious masses continued to squirm and grow before his eyes, including several smaller blobs that had originated from the lizard's entrails and hind legs. With every passing moment they grew larger as they engulfed leaf litter, soil, and living plants. The reptilian head that had bitten Samuel gaped and screeched as it fought to free itself from the jumbled body parts of a dozen or more different creatures, all of them squirming in the same frantic manner.

Several sharp cracks drew Samuel's attention upward. He rolled to the side just in time to avoid being killed by the trunk of a large falling tree. Smaller limbs on the now horizontal tree folded where they joined the main trunk and then broke off. The limbs began bending and cracking on their own accord, taking on new shapes. One of them emitted a dry, twittering shriek, unlike any sound Samuel had heard before.

He stared at the scene before him, too shocked to run or to try to stop the accelerating process. Suddenly he was aware of a curious sensation in his bitten leg. He looked down. The wound was changing. His skin was peeling back, exposing red muscle and pale fat. The underlying tissues were moving about, transmuting into something else. For a brief moment a three-toed claw emerged from the wound and grasped at the air before sinking back into his calf muscle. Another bulge formed,

and a pair of eyelids parted. A rust-colored eye stared back at him.

Samuel tried to cry out in despair and crawl away from the transforming flesh, but he could not escape his own body. He curled up on his side and pummeled his leg with his fist, desperately hoping to stop the monstrous transformation by beating it to a pulp.

In his panicked frenzy, his flailing arm struck something beside him. It was the mbolop, the tree kangaroo. Samuel's inadvertent blow sent it tumbling, but it quickly righted itself and sat up on its haunches. The creature scratched at its belly. It then ripped open its own skin, plunged one paw deep into its abdomen, and extracted a bloody lump of flesh, which it held out as an offering.

Samuel stared at the mbolop, then looked down at his leg. The wriggling, transfiguring wound was steadily growing larger. It had expanded down to his foot. One of his toes was now six inches long and was thrashing about, looking much like a lizard's tail. His entire body would soon be transmogrified.

He snatched the lump from the mbolop's paw and shoved it into his mouth.



In his panic and desire for haste, Samuel ran directly through a patch of *yalün*, or stinging nettles. The unnatural transformation of his leg had stopped, but the wound was still wide open, and the nettles pricked and lacerated his raw flesh, injecting their astringent sap. The pain nearly caused him to collapse, but dread and remorse pushed him onward.

He continued fighting his way through dense jungle for nearly two hours. At last, exhausted and bleeding, he arrived at the village. He made his way straight to where the Lamotelo-khai was concealed. Soon he stood at the base of an enormous, buttressed tree. Wasting no time, he extracted a thin rope with evenly spaced loops—a rope ladder—that had been tucked away in the crevices of the tree's bark. He began climbing toward the hut, which was over a hundred feet above the ground. His leg was now nearly healed, and soon he ascended directly

through a hole in the hut's floor and stepped away from the ladder.

To his surprise, three Papuan natives were there in the hut. One of them stepped away from the others and blocked Samuel's path. He was about Samuel's height, but he had dark skin and wore no clothing other than a sheath made from a gourd, fitted tightly over his sexual organs. A band of white paint, made from palm oil and the crushed shells of river clams, extended from one ear to the other like a mask. Green lorikeet feathers protruded in random directions from his frizzly hair. His name was Sinanie, and Samuel had lived with him and his fellow tribesmen since 1868.

Sinanie appraised the scratches and filth covering most of Samuel's body, a deep frown forming on his face. He said, "Samuel, *ge sumo abül lép-telo* (you have the smell of a man who is afraid)."

Samuel was still trying to catch his breath. "Sinanie, *nu khof-e-kha lamoda-Lamotelokhai tekhén-mo* (I must touch the Lamotelokhai)."

Sinanie furrowed his brow. He did not step aside.

There was no time to explain. Samuel walked around Sinanie and kneeled down before a low table. Upon the table was the Lamotelokhai, a shapeless lump of clay approximately the size and mass of a man's body. This was where Samuel had gotten the smaller lumps of clay he had secretly combined on the remote hill. And the Lamotelokhai was the reason Samuel had remained in this forest for eighty years. Without waiting to see if the natives intended to stop him, he placed his hands on the clay. He formed words in his mind without speaking them, although his lips moved slightly to facilitate the process.

"I must confess, I have again done something foolish and am in desperate need of your assistance."

One

Quentin Darnell stared at a brown water stain on the ceiling above the bed. He had been awakened at 4:30 by a loud call to prayer from the mosque across the street. The calling hadn't stopped, so there was no going back to sleep. He turned on his phone to check the clock—6:00 am. He had to do something—anything—to pass the time. Their flight to the inland village of Navera wasn't for another three hours. Lindsey was still sleeping, so he quietly got out of bed, slipped into his rumpled t-shirt and khaki trousers, and shoved on his hiking shoes. He plucked a thin, 4-inch bone from the nightstand and put it in his pocket. It was from a male raccoon, a bone called the baculum, also known as the penis bone. He liked to think it brought him good luck—his only superstitious habit. This one was a replacement, as he had lost the original eight months ago in a plane crash.

After visiting the bathroom, he went back to the bed and gently shook Lindsey's shoulder.

She stirred. "You're going somewhere?"

Quentin sat on the edge of the bed. "I just need to walk or something. Maybe I can pick up a few things we'll need. I'll be back in plenty of time to make sure you're awake and to get ready."

She nodded slightly and rolled onto her side. In a barely-conscious whisper she said, "I'm sleeping. Makes time go faster."

Sleeping was not an option for Quentin. He left the room and walked down to the lobby of the Grand Bayliss Hotel. The

lobby was actually impressive compared to most other hotels in the Indonesian province of Papua. But upon closer inspection, it was easy to see evidence that this was a business struggling despite its best efforts amidst Papua province's impoverished economy and Indonesia's interminable bureaucracy.

"Mr. Grayson, delivery for you."

Quentin turned. Grayson was the name his family now used in public. The speaker was a hotel counter clerk, the same young Indonesian man who had checked them in the night before. His nametag said *Rama*. He waved Quentin over to the desk and then hefted two internal-frame backpacks onto the counter. The packs looked expensive, and they appeared to be full. Rama then handed Quentin a sealed manila envelope.

"Arrived late last night," he said, smiling pleasantly.

Quentin thanked him and took the envelope. All it said on the front was:

To: Warren and Olivia Grayson
Grand Bayliss Hotel
From: SouthPacificNet

He opened the envelope. Inside was a *surat jalan*, or travel permit, already filled out and approved for Warren and Olivia Grayson. He zipped open the top of one of the backpacks. It was filled with premium, lightweight wilderness gear. Hiking shoes, clothing, a cylindrical water filter with a pump lever, a handheld GPS device, and other things he couldn't identify without pulling them out.

Quentin shook his head. How Peter Wooley's staff had managed to get the travel permit approved without his and Lindsey's presence was a mystery, and perhaps a bit disturbing, but it would save them from taking a last-minute minibus ride to the police station to get one. And the hiking gear was a godsend. He and Lindsey had simply had no time to shop for the things they might need.

He paused, allowing a depraved memory to resurface—a memory of watching his son Addison pick himself up from the floor of a hanging hut, battered and bleeding, and then fleeing into the trees. Addison had just had his memory wiped out by a substance Quentin himself had forced upon him. They'd

searched for him with no luck, finally giving up and abandoning him to die alone in the wilderness. Now, what would it be like going back into the Papuan rainforest, and back to that same hut? It was all happening so fast. Fifty-five hours ago he and Lindsey had been awakened by a call from Samuel on their satellite phone. Samuel Inwood, who had been living in the wilderness of Papua for more than 150 years, was perhaps the most extraordinary man Quentin had ever met. He had called them with the news that their son, Addison, was still alive. Samuel had explained that Addison was no longer a normal boy, and that his appearance was rather shocking. But he was alive.

Quentin shook his head to rid his mind of these futile thoughts. He asked Rama to store the backpacks behind the counter until he came back, and then he walked through the glass and chrome doors onto the street. The street was officially named *Kemiri Raya*, but was often referred to as *Sentani Kimer*. It was the same road Quentin and four other survivors of a devastating plane crash had traveled months ago from the airport to a hospital in Jayapura. The hospital visit hadn't ended well: Quentin's group held captive, Bobby asking the Lamotelokhai to help, the Lamotelokhai responding by killing multiple Indonesians and transforming them into enraged, bird-like dinosaurs that then killed even more people. Again Quentin shook his head. He wished he could forget the entire incident. But of course he couldn't—he couldn't forget anything.

Outside the hotel, the air smelled of fried rice, curry, and a poorly-planned sewage system. The proportions of these smells would shift in the wrong direction as the day's heat set in. The traffic was still sparse, mostly minibuses for hire and motorcycles. Bicyclists and pedestrians bustled about on the roads and sidewalks. Although Quentin preferred tropical forests over tropical cities, this entire scene was invigorating and exotic, and he welcomed the chance to walk. Plus, he desperately needed the diversion.

The crowd on the street consisted of a diverse mix of various Indonesian ethnicities, such as Bugis and Javanese, as well as people of Papuan descent, indicated by darker skin and distinct facial features. Other than tourists at the airport, Quentin

had rarely seen Americans here. No more than a hundred or so expats resided in Jayapura, most of them missionaries or health workers. The city had once been a minor trading settlement, but it was now home to more than 300,000 people. Nearly all this growth had occurred since World War II, when a massive invasion of Humboldt Bay by Allied Forces had driven out the Japanese. The site had then become General MacArthur's headquarters, establishing it as a major base. A year after the invasion, the Dutch had designated the city as the capital of Netherlands New Guinea. To Quentin, Jayapura showcased a fascinating juxtaposition of cultures—a nexus for the diffusion of customs, languages, and beliefs.

As he walked east toward the airport and Jayapura proper, Quentin turned his thoughts to Bobby and Ashley. During recent months the two teens had become part of his family. In fact, they would almost certainly have been here in Papua with him and Lindsey if the teens hadn't left with Peter only hours before the shocking call from Samuel.

Quentin suddenly felt the need to make contact with them. He pulled out his phone, confirmed that he had a signal, and then tapped the country codes and selected Peter's cell number. He covered one ear to dampen the noise of passing motorcycles. The call went straight to voicemail.

That was unusual.

Quentin stopped walking. He called Bobby's phone. It went straight to voicemail. A moment later, a call to Ashley's phone gave him the same result. A sense of helplessness took hold of him. He and Lindsey would be flying to the interior in a few hours. They had to find Addison—they simply had to. This was no time for a second emergency. He turned and made his way back to the hotel, now oblivious to the bustling activity around him.

When he entered the room, Lindsey was sitting up in the bed with her phone to her ear.

"I understand," she said. "We'll be in the air in two hours. After that we'll be reachable only on Peter's satellite phone, but even that could be spotty. Please call back the minute you know something." She ended the call and dropped the phone onto the bed.

Quentin swallowed hard. "What is it?"

She turned to him with a benumbed expression. "That was Ardell Gray from SouthPacificNet. He's one of the three people in Peter's company who know what Peter and the kids are doing. Quentin, they've lost contact with them. No one knows where they are."

Two

Bobby pushed a button, and a silent motor drew the accordion shade up into a compact strip across the top of the window. He had never been in a Mercedes-Benz before, let alone a luxury Mercedes passenger van. He found it to be both fascinating and disgustingly excessive. After two hours of messing with various electronic gadgets, he was still discovering new surprises. He gazed out the window. It was April, and things were greening up, but the Oklahoma landscape outside was a desert compared to the shore of the Sittee River in Belize, where he had lived for the last eight months. He turned around and glanced at the clock next to the television mounted behind his head. It was after 8:00 am. They would arrive soon.

“Should we wake her up?” Bobby asked.

Peter was sitting in one of the two deeply-cushioned seats on the other side of the table they had folded out from a cubby in the wall. He looked up from the brown leather folder of documents he was reading and smiled. He nodded at Ashley, sleeping in the seat beside Bobby. “Be my guest.”

Bobby hesitated.

Peter said, “Afraid to rouse her, aren’t you mate?”

“I have a healthy respect for her temper,” Bobby retorted. He shook her shoulder. Then he shook it again.

She rubbed her eyes. “Are we there?”

“Almost,” Bobby said. “Just thought you’d want to be awake so we could go over the plan again.”

She gave him a look. “We’ve talked about it twenty times.”

Peter closed his leather folder and stuffed it into the matching leather satchel that was in the seat beside him. He moved

the satchel onto the floor by his feet and then patted the empty seat meaningfully.

Bobby understood why. If everything went according to plan, there would soon be something that looked just like a human sitting there for the ride back to Oklahoma City.

Peter took a moment to tighten the elastic band that held his silver-speckled hair in a ponytail. He adjusted the collar of his white shirt, fastened the top button, and tucked the shirt into his blue jeans. Leaning forward, he grabbed the leather sandals he had kicked off two hours ago and put them back on. He took a deep breath and smiled at them.

"I am almost queasy, if you can believe it. I first encountered the Lamotelokhai four and a half decades ago. So much of my life has been spent thinking about it and preparing. I do hope I make a good impression."

Bobby laughed at this, partly because he was nervous too.

"It's just a machine," Ashley said.

Peter said, "And the prize goes to Ashley Stoddard, for the understatement of the year."

Ashley almost smiled. "I'm Hattie Grayson now, remember?" She pushed the button to raise the window shade on her side and turned to watch the passing countryside. Bobby wondered if she was thinking the same thing he was, that the grassy fields dotted with thick patches of trees brought back memories of outmaneuvering two fighter jets to avoid being captured or shot down, hiding in a patch of trees until the coast was clear, and then walking into the town of Pawhuska to find a motel room where they could rest until morning. It had been the most exciting time of Bobby's life and also the most traumatic.

"It's starting to look familiar," Bobby said to her.

Ashley continued staring out the window. "Yes it is," she said quietly.

Peter pressed a button on the arm of his chair. "Robert, progress report please."

A voice came back through the van's surround sound system. "Five minutes from our destination." The voice belonged to Robert Ramey. Not only was he their driver for the day, but he was also one of only three of Peter's employees who knew about this mission.

Perhaps Robert and the other two knew about it, Bobby thought, but he doubted if they really understood how important it was—or how dangerous.

Tall steel trusses suddenly punctuated the view on both sides as the van rolled over a bridge. Shortly after crossing the bridge, they slowed down and turned into a parking lot. Bobby looked past Ashley, and his eyes were drawn to the door to room 4 of the Economy Inn.

Peter said, “Does this look like the place?”

Bobby nodded. “I can’t believe we’re back here.”

“You and me both,” Ashley said. She was also staring at room 4.

Bobby saw that there were only three other cars in the parking lot. “He needs to park right there,” he said. “In front of room 4.”

Peter pressed the button and relayed Bobby’s suggestion to Robert. The van pulled in, and Robert killed the engine. Peter moved to the edge of his chair and grasped the handle of the sliding door. He looked at Bobby and Ashley.

“I know you would like to be with your folks in Papua. The timing of Samuel’s call was unfortunate. After we’ve completed this mission, perhaps we can fly there so we can greet them when they come out of the bush. If all goes well, they’ll have Addison with them.”

Ashley glanced at Bobby. She was smiling. She and Bobby had talked about requesting this but were afraid it would be asking too much. “That would be awesome!” she said.

“It’s the least I can do. For now, though, we have a most pressing matter to attend to. As you know, Quentin and Lindsey will kill me if you two get into any trouble. I want you with us when we go into the room, but wait until I come for you. Got it?”

“Got it,” they both said.

Peter slid the door open, and Robert was waiting for him just outside. Robert looked to be older than Peter, but Bobby knew he was much younger, due to the fact that Peter hadn’t aged in the forty-five years since he had first found the Lamotelokhai. Like Peter, Robert wore blue jeans, sandals, and a button-down shirt, although Robert’s shirt was plaid. He even wore his gray hair in the same ponytail. Bobby and Ashley had

spent the previous day with Robert deep inside the Kembalimo server facility. Peter had asked Robert to show them everything they wanted to see, including the top secret room that would be the Lamotelokhai's new home.

Robert was smiling as Peter got out of the van, which probably meant that Robert didn't realize how dangerous their cargo could be. Peter shut the door, and the two men walked to the motel's office.

Bobby and Ashley could see into the office through the large glass windows on its front. They sat in silence, watching Peter and Robert talk to the woman behind the counter. She looked like the same woman who had been here eight months ago—the woman who had called the police to report that six fugitives were hiding in room 4. She had almost caused Bobby and his group to miss the most important appointment of their lives.

"This doesn't seem right," Ashley said. "We should have brought bodyguards—like twenty of them."

Bobby said, "Why would someone scouting a location for a movie bring twenty bodyguards?"

"Peter could have come up with a different story. A group of actors coming here to actually film the scene. Or an FBI investigation."

"Or maybe a bodyguard convention?"

Ashley snorted a laugh. "At the Economy Inn of Pawhuska."

Bobby smiled. He was as nervous about this as she was, but he tried not to let it show. The plan seemed too simple. Peter had insisted that they bring only one vehicle, to be inconspicuous. The Mercedes van wasn't really inconspicuous, but it was a good match for a movie director looking for a scene location. Peter had made the point that if anyone knew the Lamotelokhai had been hiding at the motel, then they would have taken it already. Besides, there were only three other people in Peter's corporation, including Robert, who knew why they had actually come here. 'Secrecy is the cracker of the day,' Peter was fond of saying. And he had insisted that Bobby and Ashley could come on this mission only if they agreed not to show their faces in public. They had taken private flights from Belize to Houston, and then to Oklahoma City. They had exited

the plane and immediately entered the van, which had then taken them to Peter's Kembalimo server headquarters. Peter hadn't allowed them to leave the headquarters until this morning. They hadn't even stopped to pee—Peter had told them to use the tiny bathroom in the back of the van. In spite of all this caution, Bobby was still nervous. What if someone—like Darron Mesner and the other feds, for example—suspected the Lamotelokhai was here, but they were just waiting for someone to show up and lead them right to it?

But Bobby understood it was crucial to move the Lamotelokhai to a safer place.

"Uh-oh, what now?" Ashley said.

Bobby looked. It appeared Peter was arguing with the lady in the office. Peter was typically calm and in control. Now his back was stiff, and he was talking with jerky hand movements. Bobby started to worry that the lady might call the police again.

Finally, Peter put something on the counter, the lady handed something to him, and then he and Robert came back out. Peter opened the sliding door and got in while Robert waited outside.

"What an extraordinarily disagreeable woman," he said. He held up a key attached to a red piece of plastic with a 4 stamped on it. "She seemed to believe the story of why we're here, but she insisted on personally giving us a tour of room 4." He forced a smile. "I had to pay for a night's stay in every room of the hotel to convince her to allow us to look about on our own. With any luck, we will conclude our business and be off the premises in a jiffy."

A lump rose in Bobby's throat. This was it. He would actually be face-to-face with the Lamotelokhai again. Horrifying memories began replaying with high-definition clarity in his mind. A monster that had once been his friend killing Miranda and at least a dozen Papuan villagers. Eight-foot dinosaurs ripping innocent people to shreds in a hospital. A huge passenger jet splattering against the ground, pulverizing everyone in it. The Lamotelokhai was an amazing thing, but carnage seemed to result every time someone tried to use it. If it fell into the wrong hands...

For the ten-thousandth time, Bobby shut this thought down before it could play out in his head. Instead, he put on one of

the cowboy hats Peter had brought to disguise them and handed the other to Ashley.

“One more time for good measure,” Peter said. “We’ll all go in together. Bobby, you’ll do your magic with the Lamotelokhai. Robert, Ashley, and I will come back out and get in the van. Then Ashley will go back in, and I will follow her ten seconds later. Bobby and the Lamotelokhai will come out to the van, and then Ashley and I will come out.”

Ashley started to shake her head, but Peter held up a finger and said, “Our researchers have proven that nine out of ten people observing that sequence will not notice there is an extra person.”

Ashley snorted. “Seriously, who does research like that?” But she put on her cowboy hat and nodded that she was ready.

Seconds later they were standing inside room 4. Bobby looked around. The room was just as he remembered it, except for two things. First, the pod for wired Internet connection was no longer on the nightstand between the two beds. In its place was an upright card with a Wi-Fi password. The Economy Inn had joined the 21st century. Second, there was another nightstand in the corner of the room. It was scratched and worn, obviously older than the one between the beds.

Peter cleared his throat. Bobby realized they were all looking at him, waiting. He walked between the beds and knelt before the nightstand. This had to be it. He placed his hands on the small table.

“Is it you?” he said.

The surface of the table heaved slightly, nearly causing the lamp on top of it to fall over. Bobby grabbed the lamp and the digital clock that was next to it and placed them on one of the beds. The table then began to change. First the corners became rounded. The gap around the drawer vanished, and the drawer’s metal knob melted into the wood. The entire nightstand then became a brown, clay-like lump with no particular shape. Bobby stood up and backed away to give it room.

“Holy crap,” Robert muttered.

Bobby turned to him. “Don’t be afraid.”

Robert’s eyes were round, and he had backed up to the closed door behind him. “I was told what to expect. But holy crap.”

Peter's eyes were round, too, but his face looked the way Bobby imagined his own face used to look on Christmas morning. The Lamotelokhai affected people in different ways.

The brown lump of clay had begun forming into something. Indentations had appeared on the surface and were now becoming folds. The folds deepened, shaping the clay into something with arms, legs, and a head. The featureless body awkwardly got to its knees and then to its feet. To Bobby it looked like a humanoid clay figure created by a five-year-old, coming to life. The creepiest thing about it was that it didn't even have a face. There was no mouth or nose for it to breath through. Bobby turned around to make sure Robert wasn't completely freaking out. The poor guy was still frozen in the same spot. When Bobby turned back, bits of clothing were starting to appear on the clay, and a mouth, a nose, and a pair of eyes were taking shape.

A few minutes later the transformation was finished. Standing in front of them was Addison. Bobby's friend. Son of Quentin and Lindsey. But of course it wasn't really Addison. The thing gazed at them. It had every one of Addison's freckles, and it had the same dark, curly hair. It was wearing flip-flops, blue shorts, and a yellow t-shirt that said Jose Cuervo across the front—the same clothes it had been wearing the last time Bobby had seen it.

"Hello, Bobby," it said with Addison's voice. "Hello, Ashley. Peter, it is nice to see you. How is Rose, Peter?"

Peter hesitated for a moment and then stepped forward. "Rose is not feeling very well, I'm afraid."

The thing's eyes turned from pale blue to fiery gold. This was its way of showing people it was thinking about something.

"I understand," it said. It dug into its left palm with the fingers of its other hand and then held out a small brown lump. "You should give this to Rose."

Peter stared at the lump. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, then he stopped. It looked like he was about to cry. Finally, he took it. "This is to help her?"

"Yes," the thing said.

He pulled a blue and white handkerchief from his jeans pocket and used it to wipe his eyes. He then folded it around the lump and put it into a pocket on the front of his shirt.

“Thank you. Will it be okay if I carry it this way until I am with her again?”

“Yes, it will be okay,” the Lamotelokhai said. It then turned to Robert, still with his back to the door. “You are Robert Ramey.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Robert said.

“Why?”

Robert’s eyes flicked toward Bobby briefly. “Well, um, because you’re important. You’ve already helped us all so much. You may even be the one thing that prevents our extinction.”

“The probability that I will cause your extinction is approximately equal to the probability that I will prevent it.”

This was followed by silence.

Finally, Peter spoke. “If we have anything to say about it, there will be no extinctions taking place.” He put a hand on Robert’s shoulder. “As you probably know, Robert is with us today to help transport you to a new location.” He held his hands out and looked around at the room. “This place does not suit your capabilities.”

“I understand,” the thing said. “Bobby has explained this to me. I will go with you.”

Ashley spoke up for the first time. “You’ve been in this room for months. I bet you’re sick and tired of it.”

The copy of Addison looked at Ashley with a blank face. “I cannot be sick. And I am not tired.”

Ashley sighed. “Dude, seriously?”

Bobby saw that the thing was now smiling slightly. Was it actually messing with Ashley—making a joke?

A vehicle could be heard on the road outside, and Robert pulled the curtain back to watch it pass by. “We should go. No reason to linger.”

Bobby wasn’t quite ready to go. He turned to the Lamotelokhai and spoke softly. “I’m kind of afraid.”

“Yes, I see that you are,” it said. “Why?”

“I know you didn’t come here to hurt people. You proved that during the time you were hiding here. But before that, when you were with us, bad things kept happening, and people did get hurt. They have an awesome place for you in Oklahoma City.” Bobby tilted his head back toward Peter and Robert.

"They showed it to me yesterday. It's nice, but still I'm afraid of what could happen before we get there. Promise me you won't do anything that will hurt people, okay?"

Just briefly, the thing's eyes—Addison's eyes—again changed from blue to fiery gold. "I can promise you that I won't do anything that will hurt people. However, it is not possible to predict what might happen when I am with you and with others of your kind, as you are unpredictable. Therefore it is possible I would break my promise to you."

Bobby stared at the thing's eyes. "Then it's not really a promise, is it?"

It gazed back at him without answering.

Bobby wasn't ready to give up. "It will take two hours to get to Peter's building in Oklahoma City. Then maybe another hour to get you situated in the room they have ready for you. And then we'll leave you alone to do what you feel you should do. Just like you've been doing while you've been hiding here. Please promise me that in the next three hours you won't hurt anyone—even if someone asks you to."

The thing smiled slightly. "I understand."

It looked like that was the best Bobby was going to get. He was about to agree with Robert that they should go, but he thought of one more thing. "The van is right outside, but Addison's face is even more famous than any of ours. Can you look like someone else, at least until we get into the van?"

"Yes," it replied. It stood still with its arms at its sides. Seconds later its features softened and began to shift. Light skin became darker, bones shifted, and clothing dissolved. After several minutes, the transformation was complete.

The room remained quiet. Before them stood a nearly naked Papuan tribesman, wearing nothing more than a penis gourd and several cords around his neck, strung with stone beads, black beetle carapaces, and small bones.

"This is the body of Miok," it said. Its voice had the lyrical sound that Bobby remembered from the men of Sinanie's tribe, almost like singing.

Ashley said, "I remember Miok, but that's not going to work."

"I agree," Peter said.

Again Bobby thought the thing was smiling just slightly. Another joke? If so, its sense of humor might need some work in terms of delivery.

Miok said, "I can make myself appear to be objects and living things I have encountered. I have encountered Miok and the others of his tribe. I have encountered you, Peter. And you, Bobby. And I have encountered you, Ashley, as I am sure you remember. I have also encountered Miranda, Carlos, Quentin, and Lindsey." He turned to Robert. "I have not yet encountered you, Robert."

"No, I suppose not," Robert said.

Ashley said, "You've definitely encountered Miranda. You helped kill her. Why don't you change yourself to her?"

Bobby turned to look at Ashley, but she didn't take her eyes off Miok. He knew her well enough to sense that her anger was about to get out of hand if he didn't step in. "That's probably a good idea," he said. "Miranda wasn't on TV with the rest of us."

The Lamotelokhai nodded. Again it stood with its hands at its sides, and its features began shifting into something else. Several minutes later, Miranda stood before them. Her hair was a mess. Her skin was dark from mud and dried blood. Filthy scraps of jeans and t-shirts were crudely knotted together and arranged so they barely covered her chest and groin. It was Miranda in the same condition as when Addison had used the power of the Lamotelokhai to kill her.

"Jesus Christ!" Ashley blurted out, her voice choking. She turned away and faced the wall. "Bobby, please make it get this one goddamn thing right."

Ashley's pain cut into Bobby like a spear to his chest. He looked at the Lamotelokhai, but the sight was so disturbing that he had to swallow a few times before speaking. "Miranda was her best friend. I don't think she expected her to look this way. Maybe you could—"

"Perhaps we are overthinking this," Peter interrupted. "The van is ten meters from the door." He pointed to Robert. "You're wearing an undershirt. Can we please borrow your shirt?"

Robert quickly unbuttoned his green and white plaid shirt and handed it over.

Peter gave it to the Lamotelokhai. "Do you know how to put this on?"

Without answering, Miranda put on the shirt. Peter then gently asked Ashley for her hat. She plucked it from her head and threw it at him. He placed it on Miranda's head and stood back. "Good enough, I should think."

Ashley, Peter, and Robert went out to the van. Ashley came back in, followed by Peter.

Bobby looked at the Miranda copy and motioned to the door. "Remember, please be careful."

Miranda smiled at him and led the way out the door. Bobby followed and squinted in the morning sunlight. The same three cars were still in the parking lot. He could see the woman's head behind the counter in the office. It looked like she was watching them, but he couldn't tell for sure. They got in the van, and Miranda sat in the seat facing Bobby. Seconds later, Peter and Ashley came out. Ashley got in, and Peter went to the office to return the key.

They watched Peter through the window for a moment, and then the Lamotelokhai said, "Ashley and Bobby, I am interested to hear about the status of your relationship."

Bobby stared at the copy of Miranda. He didn't look at Ashley, but he could tell she was doing the same thing.

"What are you talking about?" Ashley demanded.

"I have learned much about your kind during the time I was in that room. Some of what I have learned allows me to consider from a new perspective your behaviors I observed when we were together before. When I consider your previous behaviors, I am able to surmise that you, Bobby, had romantic inclinations toward Ashley. And you, Ashley, had romantic inclinations toward Bobby. And now, as I observe you again, I surmise the same inclinations. It is clear from many of the artistic creations of your kind, such as novels, songs, and movies, that many of you are interested in the status of the romantic relationships of others. And so I am interested to hear about the status of your relationship."

"I don't want you to be Miranda," Ashley suddenly said. She was glaring at the Lamotelokhai. "I wasn't even serious when I suggested it before. Please turn into someone else."

Without saying a word, the thing handed Ashley her hat, removed Robert's shirt, and began transforming right there in the seat. It was happening so close that Bobby instinctively tried backing away, but all he could do was push himself deeper into the leather seat.

Suddenly the van's door slid open.

"Bloody hell," Peter said when he saw the transforming mass. He seemed to gather his wits quickly, though. He got in and sat in the only open seat, beside the Lamotelokhai. As Peter pulled the door shut, Bobby saw that the lady in the office was standing closer to the front window now. She was definitely watching them.

When the transformation was complete, the thing was Addison again, complete with t-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. It gazed at Ashley for a moment, and then at Bobby, but it remained silent.

Peter pressed the intercom button. "Robert, let's take our passenger to its new home, shall we?"

The van backed up and pulled out onto the road, headed north toward the bridge and Oklahoma City.

Seconds later, Bobby saw the blurred shape of a white car careening around them from behind.

"What the hell?"

Bobby had heard Robert's yell without the help of the intercom. The van screeched to a stop, nearly throwing Bobby and Ashley into the laps of Peter and Addison.

"Mr. Wooley!" Robert's voice came through the intercom this time. "Some woman just blew past us and then crashed into the truss of the bridge ahead. She's out of her car and walking this way. She appears to be hurt."

Bobby's heart felt like it was in his throat. He looked at the Lamotelokhai. The thing just looked back at him with no expression. Next to it, Peter rubbed his chin like he was thinking. Then he let out a nervous, frustrated growl.

"Please remain exactly where you are," he said to all of them. He then got out and slid the door most of the way shut behind him.

"Please help me!" It was a woman's voice.

"Good lord, ma'am, you're injured," Peter said. "We'll call an ambulance."

“No! My husband—he’ll kill me!”

“I’m sure he’ll understand,” Peter said. “I’ll call—”

“No! You don’t understand—he’s going to kill me. He’s coming after me now! I can’t wait here for an ambulance. Please, I need a ride. Anywhere. Anywhere but here! Please!”

There was a pause. Bobby couldn’t see them, but he imagined Peter was rubbing his chin again.

“Alright, come with me,” Peter said.

The door slid open. Peter held out his hand, and the woman stepped into view. Her face was covered in blood. She wore a pretty blue dress with little yellow stars all over it and blood running down the front.

“You can have my seat,” Bobby said, and he quickly moved and sat in Peter’s seat next to the Lamotelkhai.

She climbed in. “Thank you. I’m so sorry.” After sitting down she wiped her face and stared at the blood on her hand.

Peter got in, closed the door, and knelt on the floor next to Bobby’s seat. He said, “Bobby, press the com button.” After Bobby pressed it, he said, “Drive north, Robert. I’ll locate a hospital.” He looked at the woman as he dug out his smartphone. “Try to relax. We’ll get you somewhere safe.”

Bobby couldn’t help staring at the poor woman. She moved her right hand from her side into her lap. There was something in her hand. It was silver, the size and shape of a water bottle. But it wasn’t a water bottle.

The van started picking up speed, but then it abruptly stopped. Bobby heard Robert’s muffled voice. He was talking to someone.

Suddenly there was an explosion right next to the van, like a firecracker or a gunshot.

“Robert?” Peter shouted.

Bobby reached for the intercom button, but then he saw the woman’s hand move again. She had pulled the silver cylinder closer to her belly. Then her finger moved against the object. There was a harsh hissing sound, like air leaking from a punctured tire.

Bobby looked up at the woman’s bloody face. She was staring right at him. But then her eyes closed and her head dropped, as if she had abruptly fallen asleep.

Suddenly, Bobby realized what was happening, sensing that he too was falling asleep, but he was out before he could warn anyone.



Bobby heard voices, as well as the clicking and whirring of electronics. The voices washed over him and then receded, and then washed over him again. Finally, they became louder and did not fade away.

He opened his eyes, and the voices stopped. He felt like he had been asleep for a long time. He stared at a ceiling that looked to be concrete painted white. A man's face appeared above him.

"Bobby Truex, it is a pleasure to have you with us. I imagine you would prefer to sit up." The man did something with his foot, and a motor slowly cranked the bed into a sitting position.

Bobby then saw that the walls were just like the ceiling—white concrete. Medical equipment was arranged around the bed, and there were more people there—two men and a woman—sitting in chairs and monitoring computer screens. The man standing next to Bobby was older than the others. He had short black hair and a mostly-gray beard. He wore glasses with red plastic frames—the kind younger people usually wore. All four of them wore pale green doctor-type shirts and pants.

"Where am I?" Bobby said.

The man beside him held up a finger. "Hold on a moment." He turned to one of the men. "Ready to test it?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied.

He turned back to Bobby. "Bobby, could you please repeat your question?"

"Where am—"

Everything went black.

Bobby opened his eyes. He sensed he had been asleep again, but only briefly this time.

The man with red glasses was still beside him. He was frowning. He held up a finger just as he had done before. Again he turned to the younger man. "Drop the delay by point five

seconds, and drop sensitivity to 200 millijoules.”

The man at the computer typed for a moment and then nodded.

“Okay then,” said the man beside Bobby. “Could you please ask your question again?”

Bobby stared at him for a moment. He then opened his mouth to speak. “Whe—”

Everything went black.

He opened his eyes, again feeling he had been asleep only a short time.

The man beside him was gazing at Bobby’s face as if observing a fish in an aquarium. “Seems to be working. Don’t become distressed, Bobby. We have tried to make it as painless as possible. But we can’t have you just saying whatever you wish when we reunite you with your extraordinary friend, can we?”

This was the first 10% of *Profusion*.

Find out more at the author’s
website:

<http://www.stancsmith.com>