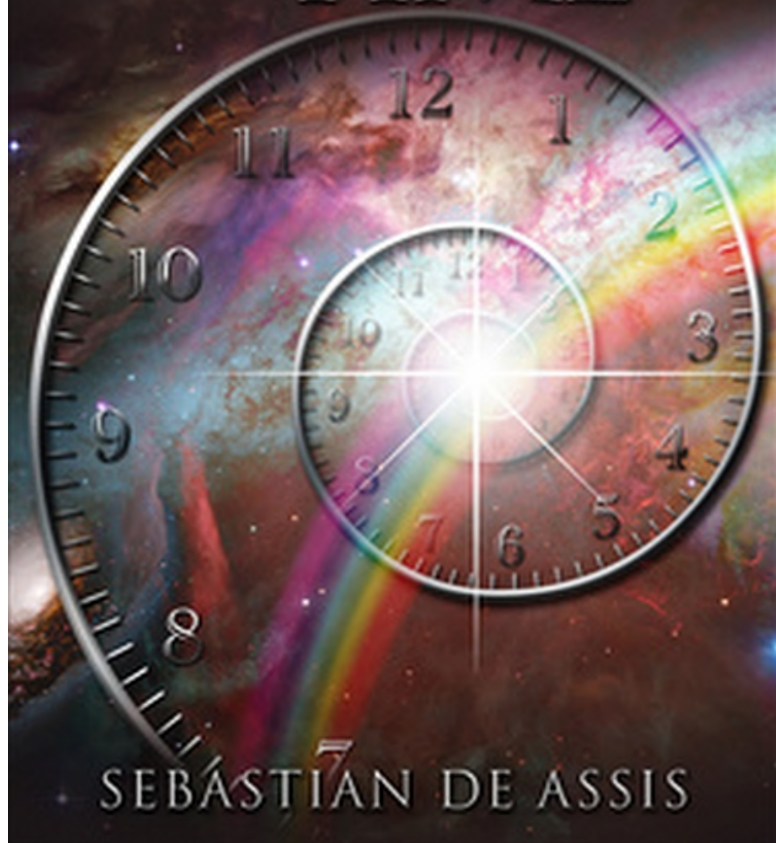


THE
ALCHEMY
OF TIME



Prologue

Julie Marie was tired of hearing the litany of pseudo-optimistic commercialized concepts of growing old: successful aging, aging gracefully, anti-aging secrets, aging backwards, among numerous other contrived inspirational approaches that did not assuage her anxiety about facing the inevitable. It was exhausting to worry all the time about what is arguably the most challenging stage in human life.

“How is it possible to prevail against such a juggernaut that cannot be defeated? How can you surmount the relentless assaults of the passing of time when your only certitude is that old age and death await patiently at the end of the journey?” She asked the wise old man she met in her dreams.

“The answer is very simple,” he replied. “You can’t.”

“This is very depressing! I wish I had not bothered asking you,” she said vexed with his response.

“The only alternative to the perennial human dilemma of aging and death is to transmute your fears and anxieties into a courageous attitude that defeats, not the unconquerable adversary, but your own resistance to it,” he said attempting to offer her some hope.

“And how in the world can I replace my suffocating apprehension about aging and dying with an empowered attitude that makes me fearless?” She insisted on receiving a practical answer to her original question.

“The answer is equally simple,” he responded nonchalantly.
“Through an alchemical Power Aging process.”

That night marks the beginning of Julie Marie’s mystical guided journey with The Alchemist of Time—until the end of her own time.



Ten days had passed since Marilyn's fatal car crash. The pain of loss and separation had not subsided, but the scars of the emotional wound were beginning to crust in Julie's heart. The turning point in the healing process for her was at the wake celebration of Marilyn's life, which was held at the Dramatic Arts Cultural Center where the urn with Marilyn's ashes and a bronze bust of her image were placed at the main garden of the facility. It was a beautiful ceremony with hundreds of people in attendance. Among the attendees there were famous actors, renowned producers, loyal friends, local politicians, and a number of power players in the community who knew her well. And, of course, her last love interest, Mark Smithson, was there, too. Julie observed him from afar and couldn't help noticing how devastated he seemed to be. Although the atmosphere of the memorial service was upbeat and jovial, Mark looked withdrawn and forlorn. Julie's curiosity and interest about her friend's last beau grew piecemeal. After one of the speakers honoring her, the director of Marilyn's last play, made a humorous remark about a comment she made regarding his directorial approach and the crowd burst into laughter, Julie noticed that Mark didn't even smile. At that moment she decided to walk across the garden toward him.

"She was the best friend I've ever had," Julie said standing next to him while looking straight ahead at the dais where speakers were taking turns in recalling memorable moments they shared with Marilyn. "She told me about you."

Mark didn't budge. Like Julie's, his eyes were fixated on the improvised podium in the garden. Although he seemed indifferent and oblivious to the speeches, when she spoke he took notice.

"You must be Julie Marie. Marilyn told me about you, too," he said without moving his head.

Standing side by side and without looking at each other, they discretely engaged in a casual conversation about their common friend for the rest of the duration of the ceremony. It was not until the executive director of the Dramatic Arts Cultural Center spoke the closing statement and bid farewell to the crowd that Julie and Mark turned to face each other and finally made eye contact. It was an eerie experience for her, as she felt like she'd known him for a long time. There was something in his eyes that felt uncomfortably familiar to her; but even more uncomfortable was her growing interest in learning more about him.

"Here is my card," he said handing her his contact information. "Until I get over this loss, I'm going to need all the support that I can muster; and coming from someone who knew Marilyn so well can certainly be comforting. Whenever you have the time and is convenient for you, I'd very much like to talk more about her. Perhaps the next time we'll be able to talk face-to-face from the beginning."

It was the first time in that afternoon that he smiled, albeit vaguely. Julie gave him her card as well and insisted that he contacted her whenever he felt the need. They agreed to get together for coffee in the near future. They said good-bye and Julie watched the tall and good-looking dark hair man walk away until he got lost in the dispersing crowd. He was everything that Marilyn had mentioned about him: charming, intelligent, and obviously a

handsome man. But what impressed Julie the most was how he seemed to be genuinely affectionate of her friend; and that alone was a good reason for her to be interested in getting to know him.

The day after the wake Julie took the day off from work. She was at home lying in the couch reading and listening to Bach's St. Matthew's Passion when the phone rang. Captivated by a new book she'd just bought and inebriated by the heavenly music of Bach's magnum opus, she hesitated to answer the call. Reluctantly, she closed the book, lowered the sound of the music with the remote control, and picked up her cellular phone on the coffee table.

"My name is Annette Clark and I'm calling on behalf of Mr. Maxwell from the Law Office of Goldberg, Maxwell and Associates. Mr. Maxwell needs to schedule an appointment to visit with you here in his office," the identified woman said. "When would be a convenient day and time for you?"

Julie sat up straight and turned off the music right away.

"Why does an attorney I've never heard of wants to arrange a meeting with me?" She asked and there was tension and concern in her voice. "What is it about?"

"I do not know the details, ma'am, but it's in regards to Ms. Marilyn Watts, who has been a client of this law firm for many years," she replied.

After hearing Marilyn's name, Julie didn't think twice about scheduling the meeting as soon as possible. They slated it for the next day at 1:00pm. Julie figured that she'd be able to take a longer than usual lunch break and offset it by staying late at work. She tried to resume reading after the phone call, but she was unable to concentrate; not even Bach's enthralling music could bring her distracted mind to focus. She surmised it had something to do with

the car accident; perhaps there was a law suit in the making. She decided to put an end to the useless speculations and wait to find out the next day, which could not come soon enough.

“I’m pleased to meet you, ma’am” Ian Maxwell, the attorney who had summoned the meeting greeted her in the upscale reception area where she’d barely waited for two minutes. “Marilyn always spoke very fondly of you. Please follow me.”

Julie had been antsy all morning waiting for this moment. She followed him through the long hallway in high anticipatory mode. The pleasant medium built gray-haired man who spoke with a lisp engaged her in trivial chatting as they walked to his office. Although she responded to his pro forma inquiries automatically, her mind was occupied with questions of her own that soon would be answered. She stepped into the elegantly decorated room on the 11th floor of the prominent downtown commercial building noticing the details of the environment. A wide mahogany desk facing the large window was surrounded by two matching bookshelves filled with hardbound books. Behind the desk, a tall brown leather chair that resembled a throne suitably fit for a king of the business world. Across his desk there were two matching cushioned armchairs dotted with golden buttons on the edges. With spontaneous gallantry, he pulled one of the chairs inviting her to sit down.

“In all honesty, I never thought I would get to meet you any time soon,” he said with his elbows on the desk and fingers interlaced. “Marilyn’s unexpected shocking death took me by surprise. She was so full of life that I used to joke around with her saying she might need to find another attorney for her later years’ needs, cause I didn’t think I’d be able to keep up with her pace.”

Julie lowered her head slightly and didn't say anything.

"I was introduced to her by a mutual friend at the time of her second divorce," he continued. "After handling the complicated issues of her marital dissolution to her satisfaction, we became friends and she decided to put me in charge of all her legal matters. And since she never took to heart my facetious remarks about her outliving me, she instructed me to proceed in a very particular manner whenever she passed away. Unfortunately, the day has arrived much sooner than I anticipated."

He stood up and walked toward an upright four-drawer wooden file cabinet. He unlocked it, opened the bottom drawer, and pulled out a dossier that he placed on his desk. Julie looked at it with interest and uncontainable curiosity.

"What is this about?" She asked with a rugged brow.

"This is Marilyn's will," he replied. "This is the most important document I've ever worked on her behalf. As the executor of her wishes, I am obliged both by law and honor to disclose its contents to you."

"To me?" Julie said baffled.

"Yes, for you are the primary beneficiary in Marilyn Watts' will. In case you were deceased at the time of her death, then the secondary beneficiary, the Dramatic Arts Cultural Center, would be the next in line, to which she left a significant contribution as well."

Suddenly, the rugged brow in her countenance turned into a flat terrain of surprise as her eyes opened wide. She was stunned, delighted, and immensely grateful. She knew how much wealth Marilyn possessed; and because she was the main beneficiary in her friend's will, then the inference was obvious.

“You have inherited a substantial amount of wealth,” he said. “Among properties, stocks, retirement accounts, and plain old cash, the total sum is the neighborhood of \$68 million.”

Noticing the alarmed expression in Julie’s face, he paused for a moment to allow her to digest the information about her unexpected good fortune.

“There are absolutely no restricting clauses on how you can or should use the money. And incidentally, Marilyn made sure that all attorney’s fees were paid in advance, therefore the only other expense you’ll incur is the required taxes. After we finalize the details of the paperwork, the inheritance should be completely transferred to your name within a month at the longest.”

Julie was speechless. Sitting there looking at Ian Maxwell’s eyes with a vacant facial expression, she realized that all the financial apprehensions that had tormented her for years had suddenly dissipated in a moment’s notice. Never again she’d have to worry about making ends meet at the end of the month. Although her anxieties had always been nullified by unexpected higher balances in her bank account because Marilyn was regularly depositing money without telling her, now everything was about to change in dramatic fashion. Now she could stop worrying about making a living and start thinking about how she was going to make a life.

“Ma’am, are you all right?” Ian Maxwell asked the silently apathetic woman sitting across his desk.

“Yes...yes, of course,” Julie mumbled. “I’m sorry but this caught me completely off-guard. I thought the reason for this meeting had to do with Marilyn’s car accident.”

“Oh yes, that too,” he said while opening a drawer and putting a manila folder on his desk. “The paralegal team of our law firm gathered all the results from the police investigation of the accident, as well as the testimony and contact information of a few witnesses. I think we have a very strong case for a significant monetary settlement. However, as Marilyn’s primary beneficiary, only with your authorization I can initiate the process.”

“By all means, please go ahead with it. What do you need from me?” Julie replied still sounding and looking aloof.

Attorney Maxwell handed her some documents to sign and scheduled another appointment for the following week to iron out the final details.

Julie walked through the streets in disbelief of the unforeseen turn of her fortune. She thought of how her life would never be the same again.

“Financial independence must be unbelievably liberating,” she said to herself between her teeth. “Economic emancipation at last! No more dependence on slave-wage. No more subordination to a boss I don’t respect. No more servitude to daily drudgery of a job I deplore. Oh yes, and the breaking away from restraint of a schedule that has kept me like a dog on a leash. I am a free woman and now I have the means to buy the most precious commodity of life: my time.”

When she got home at the end of the day after having quit her petty job, she opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate her freedom. She raised a toast of gratitude to Marilyn and she could feel her best friend’s presence in the living-room. After hours of solitary revelry in which she mentally outlined the new course of her life, she finally succumbed to fatigue and retired to the

bedroom. With the effects of the champagne still bubbling in her head, she tucked herself in bed staring at the ceiling wondering about what she'd do with the last years of her life. Then, she moved to her side to turn off the light and she saw the large bright red digital numbers of the bedside alarm clock. She paused and sneered while looking at the device she loathed. She grabbed it with her right hand and hurled it against the wall shattering it into pieces.

“Good night,” she said turning off the light imbued with a great sense of personal satisfaction.



The golden chariot with embroidered brass wheels rolled slowly through the narrow greenery pathway leading to Khronos' cabin. The soothing sounds of the flowing creek nearby intermingled with the gentle trotting of the stunning white horses pulling the carriage. Holding the reins of the beautiful animals whose long manes bounced with every step forward, an elegantly dressed man in a black suit sat poised with his eyes focused on the road ahead. Riding in the pink cushioned covered cabin in the back, Julie Marie enjoyed the view of the trail she'd walked so many times in the past, but this time from the comfort of an effortless motion. When the luxuriant wagon arrived at its destination, the attendant descended from the riding bench to open the door for his boss before accompanying her to Khronos' cabin's doorstep. She signaled at him by raising her eyebrow and

he knocked on the door three times. There was no response. She was about to request her escort to knock on the door again when it suddenly opened.

“Who are you?” Khronos asked frowning while looking straight into her eye. His voice had a grave tone of disapproval and displeasure.

“What do you mean who I am?” She replied disconcerted with the question and disturbed by the bright red circles around the iris of his emerald eyes that she’d never seen before. “Please, let me in because I have a lot to talk with you about.”

She stepped forward to walk into his cabin but he blocked the doorway with his brawny aged body. She looked at him feeling unsettled and concerned. The attendant stood motionless by her side.

“What’s the matter, Khronos? You obviously know who I am, so why are you acting so hostile toward me?” She asked almost defiantly.

The crimson aura circling the iris of his emerald eyes turned red hot and shone brighter than the ruby on his headpiece. His gaze was like a laser beam piercing through her unwelcome demeanor. After looking at her for a long time, his eyes scrutinized her immovable companion and then the carriage parked down the pathway. He looked peeved.

“You entered my dominion through a clandestine entrance that I neither authorize nor condone,” he said vehemently. “Take your lackey and carriage out of my realm immediately, and don’t you ever again attempt to come to me through any other way but the one I showed you, otherwise you shall never be allowed to come here again.”

He slammed the door shut in her face and walked back into his cabin.

“Oh shit!” Julie uttered springing up to a sitting position as she woke up abruptly. Sitting in bed panting with cold sweat soaking her forehead, she realized she’d had a nightmare. She looked at her nightstand where the clock was to learn the time when she remembered she’d broken it into pieces before falling asleep. Discombobulated with her unrecalled nightmare experience, she went to the kitchen for a glass of water hoping to alleviate her distraught nervous system. As the soothing cold water passed through her parched throat, she regained a momentary sense of stability. She sipped on it slowly wondering what could have rattled her so intensely in her dream.

“Maybe my aggressive behavior hurling the alarm-clock against the wall had something to do with it,” she pondered out loud standing in the kitchen with the refrigerator door open. “Yep, it was definitely not a conducive way for a tranquil sleep.”

After unsuccessfully trying to remember the dream, she decided to go back to sleep and get some good rest this time around. Lying in bed with closed eyes and an open mind for a positive soporific experience, she fell asleep even before the first sheep jumped over the fence.

“I’m back,” Julie said when Khronos opened the door of his cabin. She looked down unable to make eye contact with him.

He smiled and shook his head. Then, he lifted her chin with his thumb and indicator fingers forcing her to look into his emerald stare.

“Come in,” he said putting his strong arm around her shoulders while leading her into his sacred abode. “As you mentioned earlier, we have a lot to talk about.”

Once inside, she looked out to the magnificent panorama through the large glass wall and released a sigh of relief. There she was again, the space where she felt comfortable, nurtured, and safe; the place where she’d come to learn how to live and how to die. Her eyes moved about surveying the humble quarters of a man of power and his magical bird that perched on a golden rod above an enigmatic hourglass. Observing her from the closed doorway, Khronos beckoned her to sit down on one of the colorful pillows on the top of the thick straw mat on the floor. Then, he picked up a small round cushion that looked and shone like Athena’s eyes, and sat cross-legged a couple of feet in front of her.

“Among all the temptations and traps of the material world, none is more dangerous to corrupting the development of the individual than the sudden access to abundant financial resources,” he said looking straight into her right eye. “Ironically, none offers more opportunities for the enrichment of character. Money is, indeed, a mighty double-edged sword with which you can either raise it up for noble causes or slit your own soul’s throat by the greedy fleeting desires of your mortal existence. In the hands of an empowered woman of knowledge, money can be like a magic sword; a lightning bolt striking the darkness of a selfish world. It can be a most valuable tool with which to do good and make a difference in the lives of your brethren. Conversely, in the hands of an egotistical ignorant woman, money becomes the dagger with which she may stab through the heart of her own soul.

And as you well know, ‘in the end it’s heard no more; it’s a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.’”

Julie was overwhelmed with shame. Now she understood why Khronos had sent her away in the nightmare session of that night’s sleep. She recalled leaving the attorney’s office daydreaming about the lavish opportunities that had become available to her out of the blue: international travels, regular dining out, superfluous luxurious items; anything she wanted was now within her reach. But until that moment she had not given a single thought to what she could do to gift the world with her fortunate blessings. Being the wise man he was, Khronos quoted her beloved Shakespeare to get her attention and remind her that death awaited her patiently; and only an idiot can be fooled by the sound and fury of selfish pursuits that in the end signify nothing.

“There are no accidents or coincidences in the Universal Law of Encounters. Everything that happens, regardless of how insignificant or grandiose it may seem, fulfills an unknown purpose in the grand scheme of a reality unbeknownst to all. The same happens with everyone you meet in different stages of your chronological existence; each also accomplishes a specific objective.” Khronos paused noticing how Julie was absorbing everything he said. With his eyes fixed on her attentive countenance, he continued. “Your friend’s inheritance offers you an extraordinary opportunity to make a significant contribution to better the world and the lives of people who will continue on living after you’re no longer around. It’s not about fancy carriages, lackeys, and short-lived hedonistic indulgences. It is about enriching your soul through the gifts you bestow to Life with your limited time on Earth that’s quickly dwindling.”

“Is this why you slammed the door in my face?” Julie asked with a tinge of resentment.

“Figuratively speaking, yes; I slammed the door and turned my back on you. But in reality, you were the one who was about to close the door of opportunity in your Life. By succumbing to the illusory temptation that money exerts in the vast majority of people, you were about to miss out on an extraordinary opportunity for self-empowerment. And since that was not the purpose of the ‘accidental’ happenstance of your inheriting a small fortune, I had to intervene somehow.”

Julie turned her eyes away from his for a moment. She looked at Athena’s serene expression while trying to emulate the magical bird’s state of mind. However, she was confused with some details of Khronos’ rational that made no sense to her, and therefore she could not achieve the tranquility that Athena’s image inspired.

“Let’s suppose that Marilyn had left her entire estate to the Dramatic Arts Cultural Center; or infinitely better yet, that she was still alive and well. I would have to continue working on my petty job until either my old body or intolerant boss quit on me. I’d have to work until I died; really, there is no way I would be able to survive on a meager social security allowance. In that case, which happens to be the situation of most aging people these days, are you saying that I and the majority of my generation cohorts would be unable to make a worthy contribution to society because we don’t have the financial resources? Are you telling me that being economically disadvantaged is a hindrance to doing good? After all, when you don’t have enough money to survive, the pursuit of it consumes all your time and attention. There is no time left to focus

on anything or anyone else but the immediate needs of yourself.” She said in disgruntled frustration.

“Well, you have a valid multidimensional observation to which I have two responses,” he said stroking his long white beard, which he seemed to do whenever he was immersed in deep thoughts. “One relates to opportunity and the other to responsibility. The former is created by the willing individual regardless of her circumstances; but the latter is a moral obligation of those with access to money, which is the most essential artificial resource the world revolves around. Many poor and older citizens commit both their limited time and finances to reach out to even more underprivileged brethren and the betterment of their communities. In fact, it was reported in your awake hours world that a 90-year-old man, with limited financial resources, was arrested for violating a city law that prohibited feeding the homeless, which he did defiantly on a regular basis because he considered himself to be ‘his brothers’ keeper’. This man, at the final stretch of his allotted time on Earth, is still committed to making a difference in the world he’ll leave behind. But for those with the influence of money in their hands and the Power of Love in their hearts, their contributions are not merely opportunities but honorable responsibilities they must carry out; and that happens to be your case.”

“I’m sorry and ashamed to have faltered,” she said. “But having struggled financially for so long, I couldn’t help wanting to have all the good things of life for whatever time I have left.”

“Things you would not be able to take with you. As the old saying goes, ‘you make a living by what you get; and you make a Life by what you give.’ But you not only make a Life by what you

give, you enrich your soul as well; a wealth that empowers you and is yours to keep—forever! And all major religions and philosophies in history have pointed in that direction,” he said musing while still caressing his beard. “As I mentioned to you earlier, money is a most dangerous tool; one that can betray and seriously harm the possessor. In any case, what’s important now is that you’re aware of it and prepared to take action.”

“If only I knew what to do,” she said as the spark of excitement in her eyes faded slightly.

“You don’t have to worry about it, for you’ll know what to do when the right time arrives,” he replied with utmost confidence. “You do believe in The Natural Law of Encounters, don’t you?”

Julie nodded positively in anticipation with what he was going to say next.

“The Natural Law of Encounters is the strategic plan of the intelligence of the Universe in action. It connects individuals, situations, circumstances, and all sorts of events in remarkable timely fashion. It is as effortless as it is precise. It requires neither thinking nor planning, for it unfolds as naturally as a rose blossoming in the springtime. And even though you’re approaching the winter of your chronological Life, it doesn’t necessarily hinder your possibility to embark on extraordinary experiences, some of which you could only have dreamed of in the spring and summer of your youth.”

Julie stared at him in amazement. She looked at his emerald eyes and they looked like bright green crystal balls that seemed to reveal the future, as his mouth announced the foretelling of a meaningful time to come.

Khronos stood up and walked toward the glass wall looking out at the splendid panoramic view for a long time without saying a word. Athena rested peacefully on the golden rod with her eyes closed. The mystical hourglass with brilliant fine purple sand trickled down unremittingly as a testimony to the eternity of time in the realm of mysterious enchantment that human consciousness knew nothing about. Sitting on the large white pillow with shimmering golden sequins on it, Julie observed the scene and was flooded by a wave of serenity that appeased all the anxieties, fears, and insecurities she'd harbored for so long. At that moment, she realized how fortunate she was. And she knew that she didn't want to be like those ladies she encountered in the restroom at Bentley's restaurant who boasted about the luxurious lifestyle of their ephemeral worldly existence. She wanted to do something worthy and meaningful before the sand in the hourglass of her life dropped the last grain to the lower vessel filled with the experiences of time.

"Your Life now has the potential to be like a candle emitting light in the darkness of the world," Khronos said with his back to her while beholding the beauty outside through the glass wall. "You have an opportunity to shine it bright before the flame extinguishes."

As soon as he finished speaking, an image of a large lit golden candle came to Julie's mind. Then, the reflection of the swaying flame externalized and gradually spread through her entire body until she became the flame itself. After experiencing a long blissful moment of physical and emotional warmth, Khronos walked toward her and with a gentle puff he blew the flame out.

Epilogue

Julie was gliding through a luminous open space where light radiated from all directions. Far below, she could see a narrow alley where throngs hastily moved in the opposite direction of their destination. Although they looked jolly and enthused, she could see through the guise of their mannerisms and the terror in their eyes that they were desperate. Her first impulse was an urge to descend to the shadowy alleyway to offer some guidance to those lost souls. She was about to drift downward when she was halted by Khronos' voice echoing in her mind with a familiar warning of prudence: "Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never tastes of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear; seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come." She smiled recognizing the passage from Act II Scene II of William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. Then, she looked ahead to continue on toward her own destination hoping that those beings below would learn that Shakespearean wisdom in due time.

Her gentle gliding turned into a full-fledged flight that picked up speed piecemeal. The excitement of the awareness that she was flying freely in the open sky triggered an irrepressible urge to shout the joyful sounds of freedom: "Ah! Yes! I live! I have again returned to life!" She yelled out quoting the lines of Violetta in the last aria of Verdi's *La Traviata*. "Yes! I am such a thing as dreams are made on! I've become the dream itself!"

She was so consumed by the ecstasy of the moment that she didn't realize she was flying above Khronos' realm until she spotted the majestic waterfall from the distance. Suddenly, she flew straight through the glass wall of Khronos' cabin and landed right in front of him. He smiled broadly and the shiny glow in his emerald eyes revealed that he was beaming with elation. Athena, whose wide open kaleidoscopic purple eyes rotated continuously, hooted nonstop perching above the magical hourglass where the thinly triturated amethyst sand inside was frozen in time and no longer percolated between the two vessels of dream and reality.

"Well, here I am. I have overcome and fulfilled the challenges of my life, of aging and dying. Now I am free," Julie said with pride and self-satisfaction resonating in her voice.

"Yes, you're free," Khronos remarked. "Free to start over."

"Start over?" She questioned with a tinge of anxiety about losing her newly acquired freedom.

"Indeed, another adventure in the perpetual pursuit of Power," he said. "You wouldn't want any other way, would you?"

"Of course not," she replied without hesitating. "So, what's next?"

"What always has been," he said. "Another journey through the endless realm of the unknown."