

**Ava** blinked her eyes and knew there was no one there. The cave was empty. There was no life for miles in any direction of this place. She was acutely aware of this problem. Had been, for at least twelve hours now. She stood alone in a pile of boulders which had toppled together, conspiring to create a shield of mercy against the desert winds whipping through the empty valley.

Ava knew she was very alone. She wasn't dehydrated to the point of complete delirium yet... Maybe? Also maybe she'd passed that point? Because as impossible as it was, she was definitely seeing an ancient old woman sitting here in front of her. A woman whose image was made of a thousand more colors than Ava had ever imagined.

“What a pretty way to lose my faculties,” Ava thought.

Light radiated from the woman in a way that was not bright, but rich. As if all of the colors that made her Being were fully saturated, vibrating deeply, intensely. The blue of the shawl wrapped round her thin shoulders, more deeply blue than Ava had ever seen. The green of her eyes, as if a light shone through the deepest emerald. Her hair glowed pure white in a wild pile atop her head.

The woman was more than three-dimensional. She somehow occupied more space than the cave itself, while she occupied no space at all. Her body looked as if one could fall into it forever. She was beautiful and ancient and ageless. She was utterly familiar, and fantastically exotic.

Stumbling into her presence, Ava felt a warmth wash over her. Her aching, parched body felt warm and light, ever so slightly as if she were suspended in air, and refreshed as if she'd had a long drink of water. The sudden relief from her bodily suffering was a shock that made Ava glance down to check her feet were firmly planted on the cold stone boulder beneath her. They were. Her hands met the rough sides of rocks which leaned against each other, meeting at a point six feet above her. Cold pain. She was here. The feeling

of lightness and warmth faded slightly, until Ava turned her gaze back to the ancient woman.

Ava's eyes widened, she felt some undefinable space open above her head, and she saw the woman again for the first time. Illuminating the entire crevasse impossibly with her deep, rich glow, Ava realized that the woman was in fact as young as she was old. More impossibilities.

Her face was old, but not wrinkled. Her emerald eyes deep and bottomless, seeming to shimmer with autonomous light. They looked of age, yet the skin around them did not sag. Fiery life shone in her cheeks, deep smiling lines framed her full plum lips. The piled shape of her hair radiated opalescent light, so subtly, and her head swayed atop her neck as if attached to the lightest marionette string.

The ancient young woman looked like magic, personified. Older than the imagination. She looked like ages and ages of suffering, ages and ages of deepest love. She looked like the freshest, newest joy. Personified.

“Absolutely delirious,” thought Ava.

“Breathe, child,” the woman said. Her voice was like music, made of many notes and sounds. Ava couldn't tell if she'd moved her mouth.

“You're not real,” Ava said out loud.

“Oh, I am real,” the woman replied, her voice a tinkling echo, bouncing off of boulders.

“But you're not here,” Ava started.

“Am I not?” the woman smiled, “Breathe, I said.”

Ava's breath rushed past her lips as if pulled by some outside force, and she gasped for fresh air. She inhaled deeply and smelled the burning sweet scent of creosote and wild flowers. Again she felt satiated, energized. Her parched throat, watered.

The desert wind whipped about the opening of the boulder cave. Ava heard it but she could not feel it. A coyote's call pierced through the whistling wind. Ava had the foreign sensation that she could *see* the coyote's call, she could see the shape of the wind. She could see all of the desert sounds in colors indescribable. In the same colors

that created the image before her, of the woman who wasn't here. How could it be possible to see so many things at once? How could it be possible to see *sound*?

“I'm sick,” Ava thought.

“You are perfection,” said the woman.

“I'm going to die here.”

“Not this time, my darling. You will find your way back.”

“Will you take me?” Ava asked.

“Oh, no,” the old woman smiled curiously.

Frustration flared and Ava's weariness broke through the soft feeling of lightness that had suspended her.

“Great,” she snapped acidly. But her frustration quickly melted away, requiring too much energy to maintain. She let it go as if unclosing her hand around a heavy object. She was left with, simply, “Please?”

Bottomless wisdom shined through her emerald eyes, the colors of her glowed even deeper, and the woman opened her arms, “Sit, Avaligniti.”

“What, who?”

“You.”

The woman smiled a thousand smiles, and the thickness of unconditional love poured from her, echoing off of boulder walls, warming the air.

Dizzily, Ava sat. She could barely feel the rock beneath her.

“Softest boulder I ever felt,” she thought. “There are so many levels to this crazy.” Ava giggled, sending a little ‘thank you’ to whatever handle in her brain had broken off to make this version of death so comfortable.

“Hush, child. I told you, not this time,” said the woman. “This time, Listen and See.”

Ava's eyes fell shut as the woman spoke, and a circular pulse of blue-white light flashed against her eyelids. She gasped. And then she Saw.

Ava saw the path out of this wilderness. She saw the next month, the next year, the next decade of her life: the things she would create, the people she would love, the ones she would lose. She saw the mistakes she would make. She saw the ages to come, and she saw the ages passed. She saw the unimaginable number of times she'd made this very same meeting. She saw the role she would play for the new world and where she must go. And then she saw Nothing.

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**Ava** awoke in the familiar makeshift tent, next to the heat of a dying fire. She breathed deeply, and felt fine dirt catch in her nostrils. She felt desperately thirsty, dry in every possible way. The ground was hard and cold, and she felt the hard coldness in every part of her body. She knew she'd made it back before she ever blinked open her eyes.

Inside of the sharp, cold pain of coming back, she felt a shapeless space within that had not been there before. It was bottomless warmth, bottomless Knowing, and a lightness of Being that floated in the core of her. It was space for all Creation. She heard the musical echo of a voice floating through the space saying,

“This is why you sit with me at every new year. This is why you forget. This is why you come back. To be made new. To be made known. To be Seen and to See. Your highest self. Which will guide you home, which is ever guiding you home.”

Ava stared into the fire, Listening.

“I've never seen your eyes look so green, A,” Matthew whispered from across the fire.

The ancient young woman smiled.

“Listen and See”

-a short story from *End of Days*, by Elle Prothero

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