

ONE

The paintings hung in the dark like ghosts. Too many to count—not an inch of wall space remained. The canvas eyes looked alive in the darkness, staring at their surroundings as if wondering what alchemy had transported them to this place.

The artist's loft had an industrial air with its Lego-like windows, concrete walls, and cement floor. A dozen bolts of Belgian linen leaned in a corner next to a pile of wood waiting to be built into frames. Four easels formed a circle in the center of the studio, a prepared canvas resting on each. Their surfaces gleamed with white gesso that had been layered and polished to an enamel-like perfection, a technique used in the Renaissance to obtain a nearly photographic realism. This artist knew it well.

The paintings themselves were an eclectic ensemble. Each image captured a different time in history, a different place in the world. Yet the paintings had one thing in common: all depicted the most intimate moments of someone's life or death.

In one painting, a samurai knelt on his tatami, performing seppuku. He was dressed in ceremonial white, blood pooling at his middle. The ritual suicide had been portrayed in excruciating detail, the agony on the samurai's face tangible as he plunged the blade into his stomach. Behind him, his "Second" stood ready, his *wakizashi* sword poised to sever the samurai's head. In the next painting, an imperial guard on horseback dragged a prisoner across a field in ancient Persia. And further along the wall, an old man

wearing a turban stared into the distance, as if challenging the artist to capture his spirit on the last day of his life.

The studio had three walls, and the entire space was closed off by an enormous partition of Japanese silk screens. On the other side was a spartan living area with a kitchen hidden behind a side-wall. Down the hall, there was a smaller room unfurnished except for a mattress on the floor. The artist lay sprawled across it on his stomach, shirtless and in deep sleep.

Without warning, he sat up and gasped for air, struggling out of the grasp of a powerful dream.

“I am here now. I’m here now. I’m here now. I’m here now.” He chanted the words over and over with desperate intensity as he rocked back and forth in a soothing motion. But then, just as suddenly, his body went slack and his eyes grew distant as a strange calm descended over him. He got out of bed.

Entering his studio like a sleepwalker, he selected several brushes and began mixing paint on a well-used wooden palette, whispering words in ancient Greek that had not been heard for centuries.

His hands moved with a strange certainty in the dark. Time passed without his awareness. He painted until the hours towered above him, pressing down upon his body and begging him to stop. His feet grew numb, his shoulders stiff with pain. When the sun’s glaring noon light reached his window, a piercing pain lanced through his head, jarring him out of oblivion like an alarm clock.

I am Bryan Pierce. I am standing in my studio. I am here now. I am Bryan Pierce. I am standing in my studio. I am here now. I am Bryan Pierce. He forced the words into his consciousness, grabbing onto their simple truth like a child reaching for the string of a kite. The words were the only thing that kept him from flying away.

Bryan’s legs buckled and he sank to the floor, leaning against the wall for support. Hands dangling over drawn-up knees, his arms were streaked with every pigment on the studio shelf. His bare chest displayed similar stains.

He forced himself to study his most recent work, knowing that this was the quickest way to assimilate the dream. Only when he felt able to stand did he get up and walk over to the video recorder

in his studio. It was the highest-end digital camera that money could buy and came equipped with an infrared setting to catch nighttime activity. He always kept it on. Bryan didn't need to review the footage to know he had been speaking Greek all night again. But the recording proved that it had happened.

Most mornings, observing himself on camera gave him some sense of peace. But today he didn't feel like watching it—his vision was still too present, like a messenger in the room. Somehow, this dream held answers. But to what?

Origenes Adamantius, a priest from ancient Rome, had invaded his consciousness a week ago, and every night since he had been painting memories from the man's life. He had delivered the first canvas to the gallery before it had even dried. He knew it had to hang in his next show, but he had no idea why.

The opening was tonight. It would be his first show in Boston since he had moved from New York, and all week he had been toying with the idea of going. But then he would dismiss it just as quickly. He could not justify the risk. Being surrounded by so many people, having to stare into their eyes as he shook their hands—his paintings a screaming backdrop—would most likely trigger an episode. And how could he explain that?

When he hadn't appeared at any of his openings in New York last year, the press had pounced, portraying him as some kind of arrogant recluse who spurned the public, when nothing could be further from the truth. He put his work out there with the hope that someone, someday, would recognize his paintings for what they were, that someone else in the world suffered from the same curse. But maybe that hope was delusional. He had been searching for years and was beginning to feel it was a lost cause. Hundreds of paintings and not one answer.

Bryan rubbed his eyes. He could feel a headache setting in—the need to shut off his thoughts had become too great. Maybe he should take the day off, go outside for a long walk.

But first he wanted to go to the exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts. All week, colorful banners had been waving in the wind next to the streetlights downtown, announcing its arrival: “Mysteries

of Egypt and The Great Pyramid.” Every time he saw them, it felt as if the last remaining Seventh Wonder of the World had come to Boston just for him. He’d been planning to attend, and today would be the perfect day to go.

He grabbed his keys and left, passing one of his neighbors in the hallway—a young woman he had seen only once or twice before. She lived at the opposite end of the hall with her husband, and she was looking at him with a mixture of embarrassment and allure.

With a faint smile, he murmured a quick “Hello” and turned around to go back inside. He had forgotten to put on a shirt.