

Tiamat

By Ward Ricker

Doctor Jensen looked at the girl lying on the hospital bed as Doctor Prescott walked in.

"It's amazing," he said to his younger colleague. "It is just totally amazing!"

Doctor Prescott observed the girl as her friend and mentor continued.

"When they brought her in yesterday, she was mangled almost beyond recognition. And now look at her. Aside from a few bruises left, she looks completely normal."

"What did you do?" the younger doctor inquired.

"Nothing. That's just it. We didn't do anything," the older doctor continued. "We assumed that she wouldn't even make it through the night. We hooked her up to an I-V, but there was little else we could do. Her heart was beating, and she had some very shallow breathing, but there wasn't much we could do. There just wasn't much left to work with. Just to get her hooked up to those things was a challenge, given her condition. The truck that ran over her had ripped her body up so badly that we were amazed that she was alive at all. We didn't think there was anything that we could do."

"But there must be some mistake," Janet responded. "This girl appears perfectly healthy, aside from a blemish or two. Her vital signs all read strong. She just looks like she's ready to wake up from a nap. This can't be a girl who was run over by a truck yesterday."

"But she is, Doctor. She is! I checked with all the staff; she hasn't been moved. This is the exact same girl that I examined here yesterday. And, although she was incredibly mangled, I am sure that is the same face, minus the numerous gashes and the blood and gore. This is the same girl that they brought in here less than 24 hours ago with her arms twisted, her legs broken and her ribs broken into more pieces than I could count. This is the same girl!"

"Impossible!"

"Yes. I know it's impossible, but it's her. I tell you, it is her!"

Janet looked over at the monitoring equipment. The girl's heartbeat was steady and strong. Her blood pressure was normal. Her temperature was just slightly above normal, but holding steady. A nurse came in the room, and Janet asked her, "Is this the same girl that came in here yesterday from an accident with a truck?"

"Yes, Doctor," the nurse responded with her eyes wide.

"And she was in really bad shape when she came in?"

"Really bad shape? That doesn't hardly start to describe it. She was a mess. I don't think I've ever seen anyone in that condition that was still alive."

"Well, what happened? What did you do?"

"Nothing," the nurse responded. "I tried to make the body as comfortable as possible, and Doctor Jensen examined her and said to just monitor her and keep him informed. Doctor Conroy also examined her. I went off duty about an hour after that. When I came back in this morning she looked pretty much like she does now, except that she still had a scar across her stomach. Look!" The nurse pulled the covering back off from the girl's middle to reveal a perfect looking stomach. "Even the scar that was here a couple hours ago when I came in is completely gone. It's like it was never even there."

"You are kidding me!" Janet exclaimed.

"You can look at the video footage yourself. It was all recorded."

Janet looked over at Dr. Jensen, who looked back at her with wide eyes and shrugged. "I don't know what to make of it. It's just ... just not possible. But there she is. Look at her!"

Janet looked over at the girl on the bed, who was slim, with long, light-brown hair and a dark complexion, so dark as to suggest she might even be black, but her features looked Caucasoid.

As Janet watched her, the girl began to move. Janet approached closer to the bed as the girl opened her eyes with a blank stare. Janet looked at the nurse and at Doctor Jensen, who looked like they didn't know what to do, and then back at the girl again.

"Hi, there," Janet said softly.

At first the girl didn't respond, but just stared straight ahead empty.

"Can you hear me," Janet prodded.

The girl blinked a few times and then turned her head slightly toward Janet to face her. She still did not speak.

"My name is Janet," she continued. "You are in a hospital, and I am a doctor here. You are safe. You had a bad accident, but now you are safe. Can you hear me? Can you see me?"

The girl still did not respond, but Janet thought that some life was coming back into her eyes. She reached out and gently stroked the girl's cheek with one hand and took hold of the girl's hand with her other one.

She repeated, "My name is Janet. Can you hear me, Sweetie?"

The girl's eyes fluttered again, and she seemed to focus her eyes on Janet.

Dr. Jensen and the nurse moved to the bed, but Janet told them it would be better not to crowd the girl, so they backed away.

Janet repeated, "You're in a hospital, and you're safe. We were really worried about you. Can you understand me?"

Janet felt a slight squeeze in her hand and smiled. "Yes, I think that means you can understand me. Can you speak, Sweetheart?"

The girl stared a moment longer, and then her jaw began to quiver. A slight sound came from her mouth.

Janet moved her ear down close to the girl's mouth. "Yes, go ahead," she prodded.

She felt the girl's breath lightly on her cheek as the girl tried to speak, but the sounds were not intelligible. "That's alright, Sweetie. You can rest. We can talk when you are feeling a little stronger." She rubbed the girl's arm gently and stepped away.

She walked back out to the hallway where Dr. Jensen was now conferring with another doctor with whom Janet wasn't familiar.

"This is amazing," she heard Dr. Jensen exclaiming to the other doctor as she walked up. "Whatever is going on with this girl could be revolutionary to medical science if we can figure it out."

He turned to Janet as she walked up. "Oh, Janet, this is my colleague, Dr. Michael Swanson. Doctor Swanson is one of the foremost internists in the state."

Turning back to the man in front of him, he announced, "Dr. Swanson, this is Doctor Janet Prescott, one of Uptown Medical's most promising and upcoming young doctors."

"Nice to meet you," Dr. Swanson greeted her.

"Oh, the pleasure is mine," she responded, but was not sure she felt the way that she indicated.

Doctor Jensen was talking again, so Dr. Swanson turned back to listen. "Yes, if we can figure out what has caused her incredible recovery we could have our hands on some major medical breakthroughs."

"So the girl came in yesterday after being run over by a truck?"

"Yes. She was completely ripped up by the accident, and we didn't think she had a chance of surviving."

"And today she is okay?"

"She is more than just okay. She is almost completely healed. There is hardly a mark on her."

"In less than 24 hours?"

"Yes. In less than 24 hours. Isn't that incredible?"

"And you didn't do anything to her?"

“No. That’s what’s so incredible about it! We didn’t do anything. Well, we took some blood and tissue samples, but she just, apparently, healed herself while laying right there in that hospital bed!”

“Healed herself?”

“I don’t know any other way to explain it. We didn’t do anything except hook her up to I-V and monitoring equipment. Then she just... well... she just... got better!”

“Which room is she in?” Dr. Swanson asked.

“Right here in room....” Dr. Jensen started, but were then interrupted by Janet.

“Hold on a minute, if you would. She is a young girl who is just waking up from a horrible trauma. She hasn’t been able to talk yet, and a whole bunch of men descending on her at the moment could be a little scary.

The doctors agreed, and Janet went back into the girl’s room alone. She quietly approached the girl’s bed again, thinking the girl was sleeping again, but when she did, the girl opened her eyes again.

“Hello, again,” Janet said softly, repeating. “I’m Doctor Prescott, and you are in a hospital where you are safe again. Do you understand me?” She looked down at the girl with a smile, and the girl opened her mouth and started to speak.

“Yes, I understand,” she responded, still somewhat groggily. “What happened?”

“You were in an accident,” Janet told her again. “You were scraped up pretty badly, I hear, but you are doing very well.”

The girl looked at her without expression.

“What’s your name, Sweetie?” Janet asked.

The girl hesitated, as if she either couldn’t remember or didn’t want to share this information. After a few moments, though, the girl responded, “Tia. I’m Tia.”

“That’s a pretty name, Tia. Sounds Spanish.”

The girl didn’t respond, but just raised her head and looked around the room and then back at Janet.

“Is it Spanish?” Janet prodded.

“No,” the girl replied and was silent.

Janet then inquired, “Do you remember your last name?”

Instead of responding to Janet’s question, Tia just said, “I would like to leave.”

Janet was rather taken aback by this request, and responded, “Oh Tia, you were just in a very bad accident. Do you remember?”

“No,” the girl responded, although Janet wasn’t sure the girl was being truthful. After taking another look around the room, the girl repeated her request again. “I would really just like to leave. May I go?”

“Oh, Sweetheart, I don’t think you realize just how bad of an accident you were in. You have been doing very well—indeed, incredibly well—since we brought you in, but we want to make sure you are going to continue to be okay before you leave.”

Instead of reassuring her, this just seemed to make the girl more uncomfortable. “I really do feel fine,” the girl responded. “I don’t think there is need to be concerned any further about my condition.”

This statement seemed to be worded a little strangely for girl who appeared to be nine or ten years old, so Janet said so. “That’s an interesting way of putting it for a young girl who is, what, nine or ten years old?” she prompted.

“Yes,” the girl said, without specifying which. She spoke in less than a convincing tone, once again, which suggested to Janet that she wasn’t being quite straight with her, but the girl did indeed appear to be that age. The girl then repeated her request still again, “I really do wish to leave. I’m not a prisoner her, am I?”

Janet hoped her shocked reaction wasn't apparent, and reassured the girl, "Of course, not. We are just a hospital trying to care for you, that's all. You can leave when you want, but, as I said, we wish to make sure that you are going to be okay. You wouldn't want to walk out the door and fall down in the street and have to do this all over again, would you?"

The girl looked around again apprehensively without responding, and Janet continued. "Okay, if you are feeling that well, how about I call in Doctor Jensen who originally examined you along with his friend, Doctor Swanson, so they can talk to you and make sure that you are indeed okay?"

The girl grudgingly gave her ascent, and Janet went to the doorway to speak to the other two doctors. "She seems insistent on leaving, but I convinced her to at least talk to you."

The two doctors went in, and Doctor Jensen introduced himself. "I'm Doctor Jensen. I was the doctor on duty when you came in and was the first to examine you. You are a very remarkable girl. You were in very bad shape when you came in, but have been making an incredible recovery."

"Well, thank you for your great work," the girl responded. "Your doctors must be some of the finest."

"Oh, but it wasn't us. That's it. You seem to be doing it all by yourself. We took some tissue samples and hooked you up to an I-V, but we didn't do anything else. It is you. Your body is healing like no other human body I've ever seen. Do you have any idea why that is?"

Instead of reassuring the girl, she got all the more concerned. "You took tissue samples?"

"Yes," the doctor answered. "You know what that means?"

"Yes, I know what a tissue sample is," the girl responded, and then seemed to catch her tongue and regret that she had said so.

"Well, you are quite a smart young girl," Dr. Jensen replied. When she didn't respond, he continued, "Well, we would like to take a look at you again and make sure that everything is really going as well as it looks and that you are going to be okay".

He took the girl's silence as consent and began to examine her, pressing and poking here and there, and, every time he would ask, "Does that hurt?" receiving the same response, "No."

After examining her he said, "Well, I think we should at least take a blood sample and make sure that things look normal," whereupon the girl responded, "Please. I don't want any of that. I really am doing fine and would just like to leave. Can I please go home?"

Reluctantly, the doctor said, "Well, I guess there is no specific reason to detain you, other than our curiosity about the incredible speed of your recovery. We can call your parents and have them pick you up, if you like, I suppose."

"I don't have any parents," the girl said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Where do you live?" the doctor asked.

"I don't live around here. I'm from a small town way up north, several hours from here." Seeing that that didn't seem to satisfy the doctor, she added, "I've been staying here with my uncle for a few weeks. I will just go to my uncle's house."

"And who is your uncle?" the doctor asked. "We can call him to pick you up."

The girl looked troubled, and, like Janet, Dr. Jensen thought she wasn't being quite straight with him and was trying to hide something. "His name is Tony," she finally responded.

"Well, do you have his phone number?"

"No."

"Well, what is his last name? We can look it up."

"I don't remember."

"You don't remember your own uncle's last name?" the doctor exclaimed.

"Look, there is really no need for all this fuss," the girl said, all the time looking more apprehensive. "Just let me go, and I will be alright. I will find my way."

"You can find your uncle's home?"

“Yes.”

“Well, we are several miles away from where the accident happened, and you probably don’t even know where we are. You really should remain here under our care until we can figure out how to get you to where you belong.”

“Really,” the girl continued. “I will be just fine. There is no need to worry. I would just like to leave.”

“Well,” the doctor finally gave in, “at least let someone give you a ride to make sure you get to where you’re going safely.”

The girl still looked apprehensive, but didn’t argue.

Janet stepped forward and volunteered, “I will drive Tia to where she needs to go. I can use a break from the hospital, anyway.” She smiled, but the girl just kept the same apprehensive look and did not smile back.

In the hospital lab, technician Jack Stelling looked with great interest at what he saw. “This is quite amazing,” he said to Marsha Black, his colleague in the lab. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it,” he said and gestured to Marsha to come over, whereupon she came and peered into the microscope at the sample.

“What is this?” Marsha asked as she came back up and gave Jack a puzzled look.

“It’s a sample from an accident victim that came in last night,” Jack responded.

“This is a human cell sample?” Marsha asked to be sure.

“Yes. That’s what they claim.”

Marsha peered into the microscope again. “Well, it does look pretty much like a human cell, but the activity is rather strange.”

“What’s even stranger is that there is any activity at all,” Jack replied. “We were swamped with emergencies and samples last night, so this is the first time I’ve been able to look at it.

“Last night?”

“Yes, last night. That’s what I mean. The sample shouldn’t show any activity by now. It should simply be dead.”

“Wow. That’s amazing!”

Leaving the girl’s room, Dr. Jensen got a call to the lab, whereupon the two technicians showed the sample to him.

“Wow! This little girl gets more amazing by the moment,” he exclaimed.

“Little girl?” Marsha asked.

“Oh, yes. A young girl was admitted last night after a very bad accident with a truck. She just left the hospital. Her body was completely mangled in the accident, and we didn’t think she would even survive, but she walked out of the hospital with hardly a bruise on her this morning. This activity in her cells must have something to do with her seemingly miraculous recovery.”

“What did you do? How could she recover so quickly?” Marsha pressed.

“I don’t know. We didn’t do anything. Her own body did it all. I think the activity in these tissue cells must have something to do with it. Dr. Frank Nelson over at the university is one of the leading molecular biologists in the country. I will have him come over and take a look and see if he can tell us something more.”

Janet pulled out of the hospital parking garage and turned in the direction of where the accident had occurred. “I will drive toward the accident site, and I hope you can tell me where to go from there to get to your uncle’s place.”

“Yes,” the girl blurted and offered nothing more.

After a minute, Janet prompted conversation again. "So, Tia, where is it that you live up north?" she asked.

"It's a small town. I'm sure you've never heard of it. It's near the northern border."

Janet wasn't sure whether to ask about the girl's parents, not wanting to upset her, but finally decided to ask. "So what happened to your parents? They are no longer around?"

"It was a long time ago," the girl responded abruptly.

"A long time ago?" Janet questioned. "What, you are nine or ten, right?"

The girl did not respond.

"Well," Janet continued, "I suppose to you even a few years seems like a long time. Do you remember them? Do you remember what happened?"

"They died in the war," the girl responded and didn't seem to want to volunteer anything more.

The girl, although abrupt in her answers and seemingly still apprehensive, didn't seem to be angry or upset by the questions, so Janet probed just a bit more. "War? You mean the Gulf War? They were both in the Gulf War?"

"Yeah, that one," the girl responded.

"Were they both in the military?" Janet continued.

Instead of answering, Tia just blurted out, "War is hell!"

Janet, a little surprised by such a blatant comment, responded, "Well, that's kind of strong language coming from such a young lady, but I suppose you are correct. Indeed, war is hell."

Dr. Jensen picked up the phone and listened to Dr. Nelson. Nelson had looked at the specimens at the lab, but had taken them back to the university where they had better equipment to analyze them.

"Well, I haven't found any reason yet for the unusual cytoplasmic flow in the cells. The cells are producing an unusual protein that we haven't completely analyzed yet. More interestingly, is what the cells are not producing: progerin.

"That is a protein associated with the aging process," Jensen rejoined.

"Yes, exactly. We still aren't sure just how it works. There is a lot of research going on into the aging process and how the various proteins and enzymes affect things, but it is slow going, and we still don't know a whole lot. But this girl's system isn't producing any progerin."

"Do you think either of these is the reason for the girl's amazing recovery?"

"It is still too early to even advance a hypothesis at this point, but I haven't yet told you the most interesting finding yet."

"And what is that?"

"I examined the telomeres in the girl's DNA, and they are unusually short."

"Telomeres? I remember learning something about that in med school, but I have never done anything in that area. Remind me of what those are."

"They are the base sequences at the ends of the chromosomes. The thing about them is that as a person ages the telomeres get shorter. And in this girl, the telomeres are unusually short. No, I should say, not unusually short, but extremely short. I have never seen telomeres this short even in the oldest patients whose DNA I have examined."

"But this is just a young girl we are talking about."

"Yes, that is just what boggles me. You are sure that the tissue samples didn't somehow get mixed up at the lab?"

"Yes. I had both of the two technicians retrace the entire steps of the intake and transfer process. They assure me that there was no mix up of any kind."

"Well, I don't understand it, then. I am having an analysis run of the girl's DNA, though, to see if that turns up anything. While we are doing that, would you find any hair or anything left behind by the girl in the hospital room that would contain her DNA and have it sent to our lab, as well. I don't mean to

question your processes or competence, but I would like to just verify that the sample is from the same girl that was there the next day.”

“Sure. No problem, Doctor,” Dr. Jensen responded, and then hung up and called the head nurse on the floor to have it done.

“You don’t know the half of it,” the girl responded to Janet.

“What?” Janet asked, but the girl seemed to wince in regret of what she had just said. It was rather grim to be discussing war, particularly with a girl that had lost her parents in a war and had just gone through a major trauma, but the girl seemed for a moment, at least, to be coming out of her shell, so Janet pursued. “What do you mean by that?”

“Never mind,” Tia said, seeming to draw back into her shell again.

“Well, you are an interesting young lady,” Janet continued. “Please tell me more about what you are thinking? I’d like to hear.”

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. And please don’t call me a young lady.”

“But you are still very young, Tia, and...”

“No,” the girl almost shouted and then seemed to think better. “Look. I know I may look ...” Tia paused to clear her throat. “... be young, but I’m not just a dumb kid.”

“No. I don’t think you are,” Janet responded and looked over at her.

Tia seemed to be getting agitated.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Janet continued carefully. “We can talk about something else, if you wish,” Janet continued.

However, Tia continued. “Why does your country fight so many wars?”

Janet was going to say that she always asked the same question, but, instead, she focused in on the way the question was asked. “My country?” she asked in return. “This is your country, too, isn’t it?”

The girl once again evaded the question and kept on. “First it was with England. Then it was warring and driving back all the native Americans. Then there was the Mexican War. Then it was the war between the states. Then the Spanish-American War. Then you got involved in World War I and World War II. Then it was Korea. Then Vietnam. And now Afghanistan and Iraq.”

“Well, you certainly are not just a dumb kid! How do you know about all these things? That’s a lot for a young lady, or whatever you would like to call yourself at your age, to know about. You speak about them almost as if you had lived through them.”

Once again Tia seemed to pull back and regret that she had spoken. When Janet looked back over at her questioningly, she just blurted out, “I learned a lot in school.”

“Well, you sure learned a lot somewhere,” Janet responded. “I can’t imagine another girl your age knowing about all that. Are you sure you learned it all in school?”

Tia didn’t answer, but, as they had at this point approached the accident site, Janet asked. “So here we are where we found you. Do you know where your uncle’s place is from here?”

Tia looked around and seemed unsure. Actually, if she had thought about it, she might have decided that it wasn’t that Tia seemed unsure, but that she didn’t seem to particularly care, but before she could arrive at that thought, Tia pointed and said, “Go that way.”

Janet drove in the direction Tia had pointed.

“Yes, Dr. Nelson,” Dr. Jensen spoke into the phone. “I’m glad to hear you received the sample from the girl and have been able to do the analysis. What have you found out?”

“Well, the samples matched. It seems that the young lady in the later sample is the same person as the tissue sample taken when she arrived.”

“Good. I’m glad to know that our staff is doing its job correctly. So what can you tell me? Do you have a good idea as to what is going on with this girl?”

“Not a lot, but we did identify a couple of unusual gene sequences that we haven’t seen before. They are in the section of genes generally believed to control some of the age-affecting proteins such as we have been discussing, but, as I said, our knowledge on this is still pretty limited. Although we have sequenced the human genome, we still haven’t done a very thorough job of figuring out what all those sequences mean.”

“And the telomeres? Any idea on what has caused that aberration?”

“Well, we can only assume at this point that the change in protein makeup has influenced the chromosomes and caused premature aging of the telomeres. As I said, I have never seen anything like it before. Normally, the cells stop reproducing before the telomeres get to be that short, but in this girl’s case, obviously, they are dividing and replicating much faster than usual. All I can say is, it will take some time and some research to figure out how it all fits together.”

“Please keep me updated,” Dr. Jensen requested and hung up the phone.

“So how did you learn so much about history?” Janet asked as they headed off in the direction Tia had indicated.

“I told you. I studied in school.”

“What grade are you in?”

Avoiding an answer, the girl responded, “Why do you ask so many questions?”

“Because you are such an interesting yo... ah ... person.” Then changing the subject, Janet asked, “So why did your parents name you Tia?”

“You don’t like my name?” the girl responded.

“Oh yes, I like it. I just wondered why they chose it. Are you named after a grandmother or great-grandmother, perhaps?”

“No. My parents just liked the name Tiamat,” Tia responded, and then acted like she had said something wrong.

“Tiamat. Well, that is different,” Janet said. I’ve never heard that name before. It must mean something. Do you know what it means?”

Tia just looked uncomfortable and said nothing.

Arriving at a red stop light, Janet quickly pulled out her cell phone and punched “Tiamat” into the browser. “Aha! It’s an ancient Babylonian name. It means a primordial goddess!”

Tia looked even more uncomfortable now. As they took off from the stop light, Janet smiled and said, “That’s a really neat name. Your parents must have thought you were a goddess. Hmm, that must be why you made such a quick recovery. You must be a goddess!”

Janet thought that remark would cheer Tia up, but she just looked more distressed than she already was. “Up there,” Tia suddenly blurted out. “That is where my uncle lives.”

Janet saw a tall building where Tia was pointing and drove on toward it. “The red brick building on the right?” Janet asked, to be sure.

“Yes,” Tia said sharply.

Pulling up in front of the building, Janet saw that it was a large office building with a sign “Abbergon Incorporated” in front.

“Oh, but this is an office building, Tia. This isn’t an apartment house. I don’t think your uncle lives here, does he?”

Tia looked confused for just a moment, but then regained her composure and said, “Oh, no. It’s not actually this building. I just pointed to it because it is the one that you can see. There is a smaller building in back that you can’t see where my uncle lives, but this is fine, I can just walk around from here and go to my uncle’s apartment.”

At this point Janet’s phone rang, and she was about to cancel the call, but she saw that it was from the hospital, and, thinking that it could have to do with Tia, she said to Tia, “Just a minute,” and

took the call. It was Dr. Jensen, indeed, calling about Tia, but before he could explain why he was calling, Tia opened the door to get out of the car.

"Wait a minute," Janet almost yelled at her. "It's Dr. Jensen. He might have something important to tell us."

"That's alright," Tia responded, closing the door without stopping. "I'm fine. I don't need anything more," and she hurried to get away from the car.

Hearing what was going on, Dr. Jensen almost yelled into the phone, "Don't let that girl get away! We need to know where she is."

Janet jumped out of the car and started after Tia, who picked up her pace to almost a run away from her.

Janet called loudly, repeating, "Tia, it's Dr. Jensen. You really should hear what he has to say."

Running by the back of the brick building, Janet saw a large parking lot and then a large grassy area beyond. There was no other building such as Tia had described.

Trying to hold the phone and run at the same time, Janet heard the doctor saying something about proteins, telomeres and aging. Tia was running at full pace now, and veered behind a building up ahead.

She couldn't let Tia get away! Whatever the story behind Tia, there was surely something strange going on. Not only had she had this remarkable recovery, but she had lied about her uncle, and now there was a doctor shouting some crazy stuff about proteins, telomeres and aging—all about an apparently young girl. Besides that, it was crazy for a young girl to be running around in a city like this with, apparently, no one to look after her. She had to make sure Tia would be alright and try to find out what was really going on.

She rounded the corner of the building and dashed as fast as she could through the alley beside it. She stopped quickly at a junction of alleys and saw nothing but some trash dumpsters and trash strewn along beside them. She continued running straight ahead to the next street, where there were few cars and only about a half dozen people walking around. None of them looked like Tia.

"Damn!" she exclaimed and looked all around. When she looked behind her, though, back down the alley, she saw a movement next to one of the trash dumpsters. As she ran back toward it, Tia ran out and headed down one of the side alleys. Janet ran after her and followed her as she turned down another alley and then out onto a street. When Janet looked up ahead, she saw that Tia had run into a woman, and both were picking themselves up from the sidewalk. This gave Janet the chance to catch up, and when Tia tried to take off again, Janet was able to overtake and grab her.

"Tia!" she yelled. "What is the matter? We are trying to help you, not hurt you? Your uncle doesn't live back there. There's no building. What's going on? Why are you being so deceitful?"

Tia looked like she was ready to cry. Janet felt like she might also cry at any moment.

"Look, I told you I would be alright. Why can't you just leave me alone?" Tia whined.

"Tia, you're all alone in a big city. It can be dangerous out here. We are just concerned about you staying safe. What's going on? Why did you bring us out here if your uncle doesn't live here?"

"I have been living alone for a long while now. I can manage on my own," Tia shot back.

"A long time? But you're only nine or ten ... well, how old exactly are you, anyway?"

"Older than you think, and I have been managing on my own without you."

"And getting run over by trucks!"

"Well, I'm alright now, ain't I? I would have gotten away if that woman hadn't been in the way."

"Look, young lady, I don't understand what this is all about or why you have to be so secretive and deceitful and run away, but I'd really like to know just what the hell is going on. You perform a miracle on yourself, and you expect us not to ask questions. Why?"

Tia just looked at her and tugged to get away.

"Look, Tia. I don't know what you have been through or what's going through your mind, but we really do care about you. You have nothing to be afraid of from us. Why can't you just cooperate a little bit and let us help you?"

Tia yanked again to get away, but Janet held her firmly. She knelt down so she would be at Tia's height and asked, "Don't you believe us that we want to help you? Do you really think we want to harm you?"

"No, but," Tia began to respond, "but".

She didn't seem to know what she wanted to say, so Janet just lowered her voice and spoke quietly. "Listen, let's just start over. How about my question? How old are you, anyway?"

"Old," Tia responded.

"Old?" Janet couldn't help but crack a smile. "How old can you possibly be? Are you older than ten years old?"

"Yes," Tia responded.

"How old, then? Eleven? Twelve?"

"Older."

Janet looked at her with surprise. Tia was small even for a ten year old. "Okay, I'll venture 13. You can't possibly be any older than that, right?"

Tia looked around and obviously didn't want to answer the question, but finally she said, "Okay, thirteen."

"Well, you're kind of small for a thirteen year old," Janet responded, smiling, "but you are a lot smarter than a ten or eleven year old, or even for a thirteen year old, for that matter. How did you learn all that stuff about history? How much more have you learned?"

"A lot," Tia simply responded.

"So why are you running from us, anyway, Tia, or Tiamat, my little goddess?"

"I am not a goddess," Tia insisted.

"Well, maybe not exactly, but with what you did back at the hospital you could almost convince someone that you are."

"I am not a goddess," Tia repeated loudly.

"Okay, not a goddess. Alright. But what are you, other than a very pretty and very argumentative thirteen-year-old with an amazing ability to heal yourself? Can you tell me how you came by such an amazing, even goddess-like, ability?"

"No," Tia simply responded.

"No?" Janet questioned. "Well, has this ever happened before, that you were badly injured and healed up so quickly?"

"A few times," Tia responded.

"A few times!" Janet marveled. "Only thirteen, and you've already been through this several times. Tell me about the first time. How did it happen?"

Tia looked at the ground and didn't respond.

"Come on, Honey. I'd really like to hear about it," Janet coaxed.

"Don't call me 'Honey'", Tia responded.

"Well, you sure do have a lot of complaints about how I address you, don't you? Okay, I'm sorry. I'd really like to hear about it, *Tia*."

"There's not much to tell. I was injured, and after a few hours I was better."

"Well, indeed, that wasn't much. How were you injured?"

"I was stabbed."

"Stabbed? How were you stabbed. Did another child jab you with a pencil or did someone else stick you with a knife or something?"

Tia looked down at the ground again, not wanting to respond.

"I'm sorry, Honey ... I mean, Tia. I'm not trying to make you relive bad memories, but I would really like to understand what you've been through. You say you have been through several such injuries in just your short thirteen years? What has been going on? How is it that you were stabbed?"

"With a sword," Tia responded.

"A sword?" Janet responded in surprise. "Well, that's unusual. Not many people use swords for anything anymore. How did you get stabbed with a sword?"

"It was a war—one of those awful wars. The enemy came and killed many in my village, and stabbed me and left me for dead."

"A war? With swords? Who fights a war with swords these days? Where is this village you speak of?"

"It's far away from here. It was a war with swords, before they had guns."

"Before they had guns? What do you mean, before they had guns? You lived in some far off village where they had no guns, and someone came and stabbed you with swords? I don't understand. Where could this happen?"

"It's not where?"

"What?"

"It's not where, it's when?"

"When?"

"It's not where it happened that makes it confusing, it's when it happened."

"What do you mean?"

Tia looked down at the ground again. Janet still didn't understand, so she repeated, "What do you mean, it's about when it happened?"

Tia looked up at her with tears starting to form in her eyes. "I'm not thirteen years old."

"Well, I didn't think you looked it. How old are you, then? Was I right when I guessed nine or ten?"

"No."

"Well...?"

"I'm much older."

"Much older?"

"Yes, I'm much older."

"How much older?"

"Well, I'm not sure exactly, but it's a lot."

"Well, how much is a lot? At least approximately, how much is a lot?"

"I was stabbed by one of the barbarians' swords."

"Barbarians?"

"Yes. The barbarians started attacking Roman defenses, and they sacked many of our towns and villages."

"Roman defenses? What are you talking about, my dear? What Roman defenses? What barbarians?"

"What you call the Roman empire," Tia said. Janet's eyes widened in amazement. "When the Romans started losing control of their empire, the Barbarians invaded and wreaked havoc, starting with our villages at the edges of the empire."

"Are you telling me that you were alive in the days of the Roman Empire?" Janet asked, disbelieving. "That's impossible!" she exclaimed. That was two millennia ago."

Tia continued, "The barbarians invaded and destroyed our villages. They killed my mother and father and stabbed me and left me for dead, but I healed and moved away. I have been moving ever since."

“Come now, Tia. What kind of a far-fetched story are you trying to tell me? No one can live for two millennia?”

“And no one can heal up back to normal in less than a day after being virtually torn to pieces underneath a big truck, right?”

“Right,” Janet had to admit. “So you are telling me that you were alive nearly two thousand years ago?”

“Yes.”

“And you saw the downfall of the Roman Empire?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, come on. I know you have miraculous recuperative abilities, but no one can live for two millennia! Even Methuselah wasn’t reputed to have lived that long!”

“No *normal* person can live for two millenia,” Tia corrected her. “Somehow, when I was born, I was different. I grew up to be about ten or twelve years old, like you see me now, and then I didn’t change after that. I was already nearly a hundred years old when the Barbarians came, and I still looked like this. It wasn’t my real parents they killed; they were already long dead. It was the Roman couple that adopted me into their home that was killed. Anytime anything happened to me I healed from it, no matter how serious or life threatening it was, and I would return to just as I am now.”

Janet was speechless as Tia continued. “Since that time I have moved around to many places in the world. I would stay for two or three years and move on. If I stayed any longer people would start to wonder and would start to fear me. They didn’t understand me. They would think I was a sorceress or a witch or some other person with evil magic, so I learned to keep moving so that no one would grow suspicious. I was living in Massachusetts when the Salem witch trials took place. It didn’t take much to make people suspicious and think that a woman or girl, just because she was a little different, was somehow possessed with demonic powers. Now, with science and the study of genetics unfolding, I may finally find out why I am different.”

“But if what you’re saying is true, why do you continue to hide? Surely, things are different now. You are in the United States, a modern country with laws and a consciousness about human rights. There is no need to hide because you are different.”

“Who do you think you’re kidding?” Tia contested. “Yes, things have improved over time, particularly in countries that have adopted a democratic basis, but have you looked around? There is still plenty of fear and hatred toward people who are different. You have skinheads and the Ku Klux Klan and other Neo-Nazi or white supremacist groups. You remember that fellow, what was his name? He was killed. Oh yes, Matthew Shepard. He was killed just because he was gay. You had a person in your own Congress just a short while back who, because of his religious beliefs, suggested that anyone who was gay should be shot between the eyes. His legislation didn’t go through, and many people deplored what he had said, but you still have plenty of people around whose fear and hatred of those who are different drives them. You may not be old enough to remember Martin Luther King, Jr. being shot because he stood up for those who were different, but you still have people who hate or fear others just because of their skin color. You have this so-called Black Lives Matter movement now because of the prejudice against black people that still exists in your law enforcement system.

“Yes, anyone who is different has reason to be nervous, and I am very different. You still have ‘In God We Trust’ on your currency. Is there any guarantee that you won’t start attacking those who don’t trust in your god? I have witnessed so much violence because one group of people couldn’t stand some other group’s “heretical” beliefs or “false” gods. There are still people fighting religious wars today in this world. With the conservative religious mindset of much of your country, what would happen when someone discovers that I have this ‘miraculous’ power? There will be those who will swear that it is from the devil. Will there be another Salem witch trial? Will I be burned at the stake?”

My body may have great recuperative powers, but I'm sure there is a limit to it. I doubt I would survive being burnt alive!"

"Well, I don't know if I can bring myself to believe your story," Janet responded. "A child nearly two thousand years old! I can't wrap my head around that one, but you certainly have wisdom beyond that of a thirteen-year-old. I wish you would come back with me and let us help you."

"You mean study me," Tia responded. "I don't need your help. I've already survived for dozens of your lifetimes. If I go back with you, you will put me under your microscope. You will hold me. You will analyze me. And will you ever let me go? Will you ever trust that I am not evil, that I don't have some wicked secret that you need to be afraid of? Will you ever fully trust that I won't bring some great curse of the devil down upon you?"

"Tia, we don't believe those things anymore," Janet replied.

"No?" Tia looked her in the eyes, and then softened a little. "Well, okay, I believe that you personally do not. I think that you are an honestly good person and would never hate or fear someone just because they are different, just because you don't understand them. But can you vouch for everyone in your hospital? Everyone in your community? Everyone in your society? The human race, and even those in America, still have a long way to go before people who are different can feel safe and not have to fear because of other people's fears."

Janet looked her in the eyes, and she could feel the sorrow and the weight with which Tia talked. Whether she was as old as she claimed she couldn't know, but she seemed to have the wisdom of ancients. She let go of Tia's arm. She tried to hold back her tears as she thought that she could see tears starting to form on Tia's face.

"I need to go and look after myself," Tia said. "Maybe the day will come when I will no longer have to fear, when I will no longer have to run. Maybe, in that day, I will come and find you again."