

PANOS SAKELIS

OMNIS
AN EVERLASTING
BIRTH

NOVEL

Chapter 0: The Fool, "SHIN"

The card was thrown upside down on the table. It was one of those cards that tell the fortune, a leaf from a deck of Tarot Cards. The scrawny hand touched it with tenderness, almost indefensible. Then, slowly, he or she, whatever was the sex of this creature, turned the card slowly. The "Fool" was illustrated on the other side. He threw it hurriedly on the edge of the table, onto the package with the other cards. It looked like the table, and the cards were the only things in the small room located somewhere on the edge of nowhere. The strange creature that shuffled the cards looked now slightly more like a humanoid. The way he or she looked at those made it seem like this game was part of its participation in a story that was happening far away, both in time and space.

"Young girl, you're perfectly healthy, there is nothing wrong with your stomach. You just need to rest, stop eating and drinking all that junk food all you young people eat, add some glasses of milk in your diet, and you will be as right as rain."

The doctor seemed very pleased with his little patient, although the same could not be said for her. The girl looked uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?" Asked the doctor when he realized that the news were not received, as expected by the young girl.

"Oh doctor, nothing," she responded, "only..."

"Come on, what is your problem? Your stomach is not that bad, at least not yet."

"And the pain I feel?" replied the girl.

"There is a minor problem with your stomach. You have signs of what we, doctors, call the beginning of an ulcer. But it is only at the beginning, and, as I said earlier, there is nothing to be afraid of. Rest and eat proper food."

"This is exactly my problem," said the girl, "I am working in a fast-food restaurant, and the only thing I can eat is what we sell."

"Then you have a problem," the doctor said, "but sit down and let's see what we can do about it. How old are you?"

"Twenty, sir," said Scintilla.

"Come on; you cannot be twenty," he replied.

"Sixteen?" she said.

"What did you say your name was?" the doctor asked again.

"Scintilla," said the girl.

"Well, Scintilla, there is a way to solve your problem, but I'm not sure this is the best solution for you. It is better to return home."

"No, doctor, this is not possible," said the girl. "Up in the mountains, there is nothing left for me after my father's death. Is there any other solution?"

"I can help you if you want to do an extra job for an institute. How does that sound?" the doctor said with something like a smile hanging off the edge of his mouth.

"I do not understand what I have to do," Scintilla said.

"Don't worry, I'll write an address for you, and there, Dr. Connolly will explain everything to you. Well, what do you think?"

"If you say so," Scintilla said, and held out her hand to take the small card the doctor had completed.

With this decision, all of her problems started. The next morning the girl went to see Dr. Connolly; his name featured strangely on the card she was holding in her hand, and what was more bizarre, was to discover that he was a gynecologist.

"The only thing you have to do is give birth to a baby," he said.

"Do you mean I should do with my boyfriend a baby and you will give me money for that?" the girl asked.

"No, you don't understand," the doctor said. "There is no need to do anything with anyone; it is an artificial insemination," he said. "We want some special sperm to fertilize your oval, so you need not worry about who will be the father."

"And what will I do with the baby?" asked Scintilla, more tangled than before.

"We will keep the baby. You will only give birth, and so you will win a lot of money. Think about it," Dr. Connolly said, "and give me an answer."

"Where shall I stay during this period?" the girl asked again as if she wanted by this to delay any severe answer or a possible intended direct engagement.

"We will settle you in the Institute," said the doctor.

"Can I think about it for a while?" she said with the agony clear on her face.

"Yes, we can wait for a while but not for more than a week because I have to admit that many youthful girls are waiting," replied Dr. Connolly.

Scintilla didn't know what to do, but the pain in her stomach resumed so she went ahead as soon as possible in an attempt to shake off any change of opinion from a more profound thought.

"All right, doctor, I think it's the best I can do. Should I have to keep working?" she asked, not believing that everything would be free.

"No, you need not work; you need not do anything. You have just to rest; you will watch television, read some books and do whatever you want to do but under one condition. You will live in the institute. If you want to go anywhere, someone will accompany you. Do you understand?" the doctor said with a solemn voice. Scintilla felt an icy breath freezing her heart.

There is nothing dangerous, she thought. It must be the idea that at sixteen, I will give birth to a baby.

In the beginning, everything was smooth. Scintilla could sleep as much as she wanted, the food was excellent, and even the boyfriend she had was happy with the possibility that they could buy a car and have fun on some remote beaches. But suddenly one day, he vanished. Just like that, he was gone without an excuse, without a word, with no problem. He just left. Scintilla did not give a second thought. Then again, it was not the first time something like this happened to her. After one month, everything was nothing, but a blurred memory. The young boy had just disappeared from her life. The information that some of his friends got when they were looking for him at the place he was staying, was vague. They said he had gone to Mexico. 'Lucky he,' they said, 'but where did he find the money?'

As for Scintilla, the days went by doing nothing. Three months later, though, something strange happened. She thought of the baby. At first, she asked Dr. Connolly if she could visit the family that would adopt it. When He replied that this was impossible, his answer stimulated her feelings. She loved the baby, and before she realized what was happening, she changed her mind about the promise she had given to the obligations assumed and organized a fleeing from the institute. For the young mother, no harm would happen if she and her baby remained together in some distant place. Her age did not seem to be a problem and going back to her house didn't even cross her mind. She

was almost ready to leave the institute when she heard some whispers in the corridors. 'It was an institute for pregnancy... something like a research institute.' The second thing she discovered was that cameras monitored the stairs and courtyards.

At the same time, Doctor Connolly worried about the young mother mainly because she had a narrow pelvis and perhaps already two abortions.

"Come on, Connolly," said Dr. Johns, "the drug is almost ready, and we would have to wait at least another six months. It's a long time. Stop worrying, everything will go as expected. You know very well that we were in a hurry and we had to move the program at a faster pace. The lab had already prepared the drug. The government will never give us permit us for official experiments. We should move on by ourselves and Scintilla is our guinea pig."

"It is easy for you to say whatever comes in mind but think for a while. Can you imagine a baby with full consciousness of the world before birth? Can you imagine that this child will know about life before birth?"

"I hope everything would be as easy as you claim," replied Johns. "But although we will not have a memory loss, the baby's brain is not yet formed. In other words, it contains no pictures, there are no perceptions and the functional system is not even built, so I doubt if it is possible for the baby to sustain these memories for long."

"Then why on earth were you putting so much pressure on me to find you a chit to start the experiment?" Dr. Connolly replied. "Don't you worry about the results?"

"The experimental injections that applied to rats, showed no reaction. So, stop worrying, and everything will be fine," doctor Johns said.

"She is very young and has a narrow pelvis. It's possible that Scintilla to give birth and survive will need cesarean and perhaps the removal of the uterus."

"Even in this case, we have all the means," said Johns.

"And her future? She cannot give birth in the future."

"Stop worrying about the little whore. When she realizes her good fortune..."

"Stop it. Do not say a word!" doctor Connolly said. "She is a silly chit, but many of these girls later become useful individuals in society."

"She will be useful, even without knowing it," Dr. Johns added.

Doctor Connolly was very sensitive in such cases and could not forgive himself that the other doctors had convinced him to take part in the experiment. He was a gynecologist and had nothing in common with this genetic team studying the DNA. They told him they had identified a specific hormone produced by the uterus capable of erasing the memory of the newborn. They produced another hormone, a substance that hedged the first, and so the child that would be born under these conditions would have all his memories from the moment of conception. The whole idea was fascinating. But who could attest that any human born under such conditions would be rational and not crazy?

No one, even for a second, ever bothered to think, that, maybe they were negotiating with a much more significant experiment. For example, an experiment that would be a proof and in parallel a study for life in other dimensions. Still, they could face so many concepts that might exist in the human mind, that it was impossible to conceive and that even the spirit of philosophers would not understand. Scintilla would finally be the one to pay for the knowledge that not even the ones that started this great story would know that existed. Because at the end she was the one that was eventually selected for the experiment, it was she that had been given the needed drugs and would soon become pregnant after an artificial insemination. In the period that followed, they continued to administer her the medication. At the third month of her pregnancy, they gave her the last dose. From that moment the anticipation period started.

She had to leave the institution at any cost, and step by step prepared her escape. She did not know that a particular camera monitored her every move day and night. So, when she tried to escape from her room during the night, she discovered that the door was locked and that any hope for fleeing at night was impossible.

An entire month passed by until the first opportunity presented itself. The young driver who accompanied her when she wanted to walk or go somewhere out of the institute, certain of his charm, hit on Scintilla. She pretended that everything was possible as long as they had somewhere to go for this purpose. So, one day, at noon, he took her with him. They both knew that soon an investigation would start for the escapees, but the young man believed that before they were aware of their absence, they would return, safe and sound, to the institute.

Moreover, it was not the first time that the young driver led in the small apartment he occupied in the suburb, one of the various nurses or patients of the institute.

For over twenty-four hours, Scintilla was the mistress who did not spoil any of his wishes. Sometimes even she felt the pleasure from his various caprices. On the second day, she left him with no excuse and fled to an unknown destination. He returned to the institute, pretending to be unaware of the incident. The whole section was in a state of alarm. But after discreet inquiries of several weeks with no result and no word from Scintilla, everyone thought for obvious reasons the case should be closed and with it their lawless efforts end.

Scintilla worked in various places doing various jobs, but as time went on, her problem was growing increasingly. When she tried prostitution, the police caught her and only thanks to her young age and her late pregnancy, the judge put her to an asylum for girls in her condition. But Scintilla had no intention to give birth to her child in such a place.

She escaped from what euphemistically was called "Asylum," one day before the birthing pains begun. She was starving, she was exhausted and the worst of it all was that she had no one to help her. She wanted to pray, and immediately her mind went to the priest in her village, the only good man she knew when she lived up in the mountains. Then she decided that the only thing left for her to do was to seek help from another priest, the support that father Michael never refused to anyone. At that moment she did not know that the last day of her pregnancy was so close and that the birth was a matter of hours.

A day after, the first pain had occurred.

"Oh, my God, no," she cried. "Please, not so soon. One, two, three..." she counted to find how much time it was left until the birth. She ran. She was running, and at the same time, she felt that her body was ready to collapse. She did not want to admit that she had lost the game, a game that, according to common sense, was a case lost from the first moment.

"One, two, three, four... Oh! God, please help me!" the young girl cried, holding at the same time her pregnant belly with her hands. The pain was extreme, and it was clear that she would soon give birth. She walked a few steps, and then stopped, again a few steps, and stopped once more. She could not move quicker.

"Come on, Scintilla," she said to herself, "you can do better than this! Try to run faster..."

"One, two, three," now the pain came quicker.

The critical moment was approaching faster and faster. Scintilla turned at the corner of the street in this slum of New York without knowing where she was. A few meters further was a church. She started walking towards it when she felt she was about to faint. Her last memory was that of a little girl running toward her. Or maybe not? Was it a dream? No, it couldn't be. Not for her, not for the baby.

The little girl saw her faint just out of the side door of the church. It was late in the afternoon, and she was only there for the regular afternoon meeting with Father Alfonso, a priest who among others taught the young Mexicans the language of their new homeland.

"Father Alfonso! Father Alfonso!" She yelled. "Come quickly, please!"

The priest ran as fast as he could after hearing Costanza's screams. He found her next to an unknown girl who, as he instantly realized, was ready to give birth. The whole birth process had even begun. Immediately he searched for her pulse. It was barely there. He prayed while he sent Costanza for help in the neighborhood. The ambulance came quickly, and everyone joined to help the young nurse with the birth, which was already in progress. The little boy came to life without a single cry, born in the ambulance at the very moment his mother died. The nurse felt so bad about his fate.

"Father, I'm not sure that this little thing will make it," he said.

And she was right because the baby was sneering at them without crying, without making the slightest effort to move, with none of the known symptoms that all newborns have. He looked at all of them in the most strange way, without the slightest cry coming out from his lips.

"What a beautiful baby!" Costanza said.

"Unlucky, however," added Father Alfonso. "What would we do with it?"

"We don't even know for sure if it will survive," said Costanza. "Maybe we should baptize it?"

"Let it be so," said the priest. "What name would you give him Costanza?"

A black curtain fell on Costanza's mind. She could not find a single name, not just an appropriate name, absolutely no name came in mind. It was like someone else had taken over her soul, and it was impossible for her to intervene.

'My name was and should be Johannes; ' she heard a voice in the back of her mind.

"Let his name be Johannes," she finally said with great effort.

"Let it be so," said Father Alfonso. "Let thy name be Johannes."

The ambulance finally arrived at the hospital. The body of the dead mother was removed, and the baby accompanied by the priest and the little girl headed to the nursery. Costanza saw the baby stretches out his hand towards his mother. She went to him and tried to say something sweet, as if the baby could understand.

"What should I write as the name of the baby?" the nurse asked in the receiving chamber.

"His name is Johannes, last name unknown," replied the priest.

"Where is his mother?" the nurse asked again.

"She died during the childbirth," replied Costanza. "Johannes is alone."

"Do not worry, little one!" said the woman. "He will find a family and be happy."

"I do not think so," said Costanza. "Don't you see how quiet the baby is?"

"You're right," said the nurse. "I should call the doctor to examine him in case something goes wrong. Meanwhile, can you go down to the reception to see whether they found any papers on his mother," said the nurse, "because if so, there could be a relative somewhere?"

Costanza left for the reception.

"Father," said the nurse. "I sent her away on purpose to tell you something. I am already informed that there was nothing on her. Obviously, she will stay in the morgue for a few days, but in my experience, no one will care. The baby seems to have a serious problem. In the best-case scenario, he could be deaf. At any rate, we send babies in these cases to orphanages where they usually stay since it is extremely rare for an adoption to take place of a sick baby. I have notified the Children's Welfare officer to take care of the details. Do you want me to do anything else?"

"No, nurse, I think you did whatever was possible," said Father Alfonso. "My concern is about Costanza because she is a very compassionate girl, and she was the one that found the young woman."

"I'm sorry, Father," said the nurse, "here's nothing I can do about that."

The lady from the welfare came after a while, almost simultaneously with Costanza that was carrying the bad news, as expected.

"Father Alfonso, his mother, did not have a name," she said. "What will happen now?"

"Costanza, you should not lose your hopes. Johannes is a healthy baby, and we must be able to find his relatives. Soon he will be with his grandmother or his aunt or another relative who will take care of him."

"I care about him," Costanza said. "Does..."

"You're only ten Costanza," the priest said, "and your parents are so poor that they cannot afford to feed another mouth."

"I know that Father, but he is so little, little and all alone," Costanza said, "and I do not know what to do."

"The first thing you should do," the nurse said, "is to let him rest because he is tiny and very exhausted."

"Johannes, don't be afraid, I will come to the orphanage to see you every Sunday. This is a promise. Be happy. I love you. I'm your god-mother, am I not? From now on, I will be your mother. But you know I'm only ten years old, and so you should wait to see me on Sundays. Is that possible, madam?" Costanza asked the woman from the Welfare.

"Tell me your name and I will arrange it."

"Costanza Toros, mom, and his is, Johannes. Thank you very much."

Father Alfonso took Costanza by hand and left. The little girl turned back while exiting the room and said: "Do not worry Johannes, I'll see you soon."

The baby was looking at her as she left. The nurse and the lady from the Welfare felt his look and got scared.

"I do not understand why this baby is creeping me so much," the nurse said. "There is something strange about his eyes."

The baby was sneering at them the entire time they were talking as if he understood what they talked about.

"What kind of baby do I have here?" the nurse said.

"He is cute," the lady of Welfare said, "but isn't he so weird? Look at him. He is looking at me as if he understands what I'm saying. Isn't it strange?"

"What is strange is being here so long without crying at all. The baby is looking at me with this strange look. Other babies have this far-away look, but his eyes show no fear, only despair that cannot be real."

"Okay, this whole thing went too far," the lady from the Welfare said. "Put him to a cradle and let's hope that tomorrow everything calms down, and all will go back to normal."

After a while, the baby slept among the other babies. That moment, no one could say that Johannes was a tragic mistake, no one could tell who the father was or what was his nature. It was just a little baby in the nursery ward of the hospital, just a baby, among many others.

The humanoid with the unknown sex stretched out his hand to the card he had just before thrown to the package. The "Fool" was walking toward the ravine. A wolf was biting his leg. In his sack, something heavy seemed to hang over his cane. The Spade, the Sword, the Cup, and the Pentacle, according to tradition, were the objects that tipped the bag. Where they? Were those items really for him or were they just a dream hanging in the pouch? Who is to decide on this?

"Who are you, Johannes?" asked the card. "Are you the Fool or am I the Fool? Is Doctor Johns the Fool, or eventually we're all a bunch of fools? Do you realize that you are the son of yesterday that has to prove the existence of tomorrow? And you Costanza, what do you want this time and who will you be? Are you going to be the sister or the loving one? Are you the driver or the one that will follow?"

The card of the Fool remained silent. The tarot cards are not talking. The Fool of the Tarot always goes into the ravine, the wolf always bites his foot, the pouch is always full of unfamiliar objects. This is the fate of a tarot card. There is only one exception when the game of life and destiny is played by the hand of the Unknown.