Do you know what it feels like to hold the entire world in the palm of your consciousness? To completely know and understand everything that happens, or will ever happen, in the entire course of history? I do. It nearly killed me, but I understand. They say no one can survive a complete tap-in, or even a partial one, because it would cause their consciousness to implode. I don’t know if my consciousness has imploded, but I can assure you that I am not the same person now as I was then. Before all of this happened, I was just your average girl, for the most part. I was shy, and afraid of revealing too much of who I was, so I pretended. We all do. Who do you pretend to be? I pretended to be complacent, the one who always followed the rules and agreed with them, the one who never really wanted to change things too much. I was content to avoid the world and stay with my flowers. They were safe. They could never ask me to be something, to examine the world I lived in. But then everything changed. Then I made a choice that for the longest time I didn’t even know I had made, but nevertheless, a choice I have never regretted. I chose Tande. I don’t know why I did it, I really don’t. Everyone else assumes that it was my ‘kind and generous nature’ that made me ask the homeless girl with the blue hair and nose piercing to come with me to my house and get a bite to eat, but I’m not so sure. I don’t think I ever would have asked anyone else to do that, except for her. Maybe even then, I could tell that she was different from the others. Maybe even then I could tell that I had the chance to do something for once, rather than simply observing the world. I didn’t think about it at the time – I find it difficult now to even remember the incident. Then again, I find it difficult to remember very much anymore – the present moment seems more important, but I want to tell this story. I remember that I was visiting the park, because it was one of the only places in New York that made me feel comfortable. I was enjoying the business in New York, and the freedom to be away from my parents, but I disliked the city, with all of its fog and ‘civilization’. I was sitting on a bench reading a book about orchids – I can’t recall the title. And then I notice this girl next to me, sitting there. Just sitting there, looking at the tree next to the bench. I think it was an oak. And I noticed her, and how she was obviously homeless, with her tattered hair, ragged clothing, and little can with a penny and three quarters in it, and somehow, despite her blue hair, bright orange eyes, and nose ring, despite the fact that she was definitely not the sort of person I usually interacted with, I started talking to her. I think perhaps it was the way she just sat there, and stared at the tree. Not as though she was depressed, and just didn’t care about the world, but rather as though she had just learned something important, and suddenly nothing mattered to her but that tree. So I said to her, “Is there something special about that tree?” and she replied to me, after blinking a bit, and reluctantly shifting her gaze away, “Of course there is. It’s a tree”.

Obviously, I didn’t quite understand, but I was intrigued. I worked closely with plants myself, and although I specialized in orchids rather than trees, I’d had my interested piqued, and wanted to know this strange homeless girl’s opinion on these trees, these things which we saw daily, but mostly ignored. And I asked her, what was so special about trees? And then she lit up, like suddenly she was alive, and in her element. She turned to me fully now, rather than glancing sideways at the tree, and started to explain. “Trees are special because they don’t judge, they don’t prosecute, and they don’t create any of the noise that permeates the human world. Trees just are. They grow where they are, and if they happen to be in the shade, or on the side of the cliff, well, then, they grow toward the light. They don’t blame others for the darkness, or the steepness of the hill, they just do it. Trees can grow and live for ages, and they have been around for eons before humans. And, to this day, there has never been a way amongst the trees. They don’t fight in the same way that smaller plants do, like weeds competing for space. The smaller trees in the forest can’t survive sometimes, true, but they don’t actively fight each other. It isn’t anything personal, and they don’t want to hurt the other one. If one tree is growing in a space, and the other tree wants to grow to, its first reaction isn’t to harm the other tree, but rather to try to grow in such a way that it can be in the light too. I think trees have more wisdom than most humans I know will ever realize. If everyone slowed down a bit, and started thinking like trees do, then this world would be a much more welcome place”.

She stopped, then, and looked at me. I think she was watching me, my reaction, to see what my response would be. I thought about what she had said, and I had to admit that she had a point. I was further intrigued. “How do you know what the trees are thinking, though?” I asked. “Have you ever spoken to one?”

She paused, as though contemplating her response, and then nodded to herself, as if coming to a decision. “Yes, I think I may have. I think I may have”. She looked at me again, as if waiting for me to scold her, or look panicked and back away. But I didn’t. I may have wanted to, I won’t lie, but I didn’t. I couldn’t. And perhaps that was when my fate was sealed, even before I asked her to come home with me. Perhaps it was my acceptance of her, even though we obviously had nothing in common – outwardly at least. I was the ‘sweet’, ‘quiet’ and ‘talented’ one, and I had no idea who she was, this homeless girl who spoke of trees. I examined her again, took in the blue hair, and the silver stud in her nose, and the tiny tattoo in the shape of a star that marked the skin between the corner of her eye and her ear. “Wait a minute” I said, “Isn’t that tattoo the mark of one of the gangs in this area? How does a girl who talks to trees end up in a gang? I thought they were pretty harsh.” I knew it may not have been the best thing to say, but I was a little afraid now. It’s easy to be accepting of a poor homeless girl who talks to trees, but if that homeless girl is in one of the more violent gangs that inhabits the neighbourhood, you begin to change your mind.

She smiled softly, and shook her head. “I was” she said, “but no longer”. She rubbed, perhaps unconsciously, the skin with the tattoo. “I quit. I was with them for eight years, but then I quit. I don’t know why I let it go so long – it was like a charade. Them, always asking me for something else, some other piece of me, and me, the one who was always willing to give it for a little bit of money, enough for some food, and maybe a change of clothes. I think, in the end, it was the trees that did it. They never liked the gang, but I always said it was okay, they didn’t harm anything that wouldn’t have harmed itself anyway – humans are bound to cause themselves pain, even without help. But then, on one of the missions, we were looting an old barn. There was a stash there of something, some kind of drug or whatever – that was someone else’s business – that we were supposed to retrieve for some money. Some of the rich folk in the area hire us gang members in exchange for some cash. Anyway, we had to retrieve the drugs from the old barn. We got it, but I guess someone had tipped off the cops that we were there, and they found us. We ran, obviously, but someone had the bright idea to light the forest on fire. To burn the barn, and cause a distraction that would let us escape. And they did it. *They did it*.” Her eyes actually clouded a little here. “They lit the fire, and burned down the forest, and as we ran, all I could hear was the sound of screaming. Screaming that only rang in my ears.” She shuddered. “And then I quit. After eight years of making excuses, I finally realized that the gang was not just some way to survive. It had consequences. That wasn’t strictly related to the trees, but I think that helped me realize it. They were always telling us about how they were helping us, doing a community service by giving us money and a way to live. They said that the others – and by this they meant the cops, and the other gang members, and anyone else who got hurt – would have had it coming anyway. ‘Never worry about the others’ they said ‘they don’t worry about us’. And they were right – no one did. But the trees, and the way they screamed – they felt the pain, and they didn’t deserve it. And suddenly I wouldn’t be a part of it anymore. I left that night, running away. I left that part of New York, and came here. I’ve been here about a year now, and I’ve stayed to just begging on the streets for money, rather than stealing or joining another gang. It still isn’t very helpful to the trees, but it’s better than before.” She frowned. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. I don’t generally ‘spill the beans’ so to speak, to a stranger.”

I nodded. “I don’t know...” Then, on an impulse, and one I still don’t understand, I did it. “Do you want to come home with me? I can feed you, and let you stay the night somewhere more comfortable than a park”. Maybe I felt bad for her, felt that she was a good person, and didn’t deserve her life. Maybe that was true. Maybe I wanted to learn more about the trees. Maybe I wanted, subconsciously, a change in my life, and knew that she would cause it. I don’t know. I do know that she was the cornerstone in changing my life permanently, just by her very nature. That one day ended up becoming four and a half years, and then it happened. The journey began.