

PHAZE II

TAO/RHA

Alexi K. Mersentes

Copyright © 2008 by Alexi K. Mersentes.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007904158
ISBN: Softcover 978-1-4257-6652-8

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book was printed in the United States of America.

To order additional copies of this book, contact:

Xlibris Corporation
1-888-795-4274
www.Xlibris.com
Orders@Xlibris.com

This book is dedicated to those who burn true

CONTENTS

1st Dimension

1	.....	12
2	.....	26
3	.....	37
4	.....	49

2nd Dimension

5	.....	68
6	.....	76
7	.....	82
8	.....	87
9	.....	93
10	.....	96
11	.....	99
12	.....	102
13	.....	113
14	.....	126
15	.....	132
16	.....	138
17	.....	149
18	.....	155
19	.....	173
20	.....	190
21	.....	202

3rd Dimension

22	.....	218
23	.....	236

4th Dimension (Hyperspace)

24	256
----	-------	-----

The Phaze series takes great delight in exposing you to Taboo #1. No, it has nothing to do with devious psychosexual issues. This taboo is much more terrifying. It is the taboo against talking or thinking about The Other.

The Other?

The Other has many names—the subconscious, hyperspace, Alien Dream Time, the Shadow—and the reason why it is the #1 taboo, is because the veils hiding The Other from us are thinning. We are fast approaching a day when The Other will be in our bedrooms, on our streets, everywhere revealed. It is fear over this impending epic shift that has created this taboo.

It is our destiny to commune with The Other, nothing can stop it, but how we commune, and what communion looks like are up to us. The process is in high gear, the veils are very thin, and admittedly, The Other is familiar, weird and dangerous—beautiful/scary/hopeful—not much different than the world we think we know so well.

Phaze is for your edification and amusement. Phaze is also meant to shake things up. This taboo must be broken.

Buy the ticket take the ride,

AKM

P.S.-author is not responsible if cosmic forces of great and terrifying power seek out those who decode the ancient&secret spells hidden in this book

contact author @: myspace.com/phazetrilogy

“Sometimes it causes me to tremble . . .”

Johnny Cash

1st Dimension

1

Of all the Big ‘n Dangerous Questions:

God?

Life?

Death?

Where does all the sewage go?

Is a question so Big ‘n Dangerous that religion has run from it like a plague. Philosophy/academia have betrayed their very nature by avoiding it. As for Joe and Jane Six-Pack, they’ve buried their heads in a TV, hoping to escape the mere thought of it.

And the most Big ‘n Dangerous Question is . . .

...

...

Why is the world so weird?

People speak of Intelligent Design and sensible quantum realms (well at least down to the electron), but no one speaks of The Weird World. Weirdness doesn’t aid survival or evolution. Doesn’t make anyone smarter. Weirdness won’t solve any problems, yet it’s present everywhere, in everything.

Why?

Why do people see wisdom-spewing bipedal boxes and munchkin janitors claiming to be from the Klab Nebula? Why DejaVu? Why do we worship metaphors? Why bumble bees, platypuses? Why magick?

Why is the moon exactly $1/400^{\text{th}}$ the diameter of the sun, and orbiting at just the right distance, that when the moon eclipses our star, day turns to night?

Why?

The necktie dates back to an ancient Canaanite ritual—the old noose around the neck (WE OWN YOU!)—and the United States Military is headquartered in a giant pentagram (THE MOST OCCULT SYMBOL THERE IS!)—and everyone just accepts these as normal.

Why so much cultural weirdness?

Why a Burning Bush, prophets, messiahs?

Why? Because we live in a Salvador Dali/M.C. Escher painting with an epic space jam flowing from every horizon, and if that weren't enough, the entire Jungian Archetype is boogying at our side like there's no tomorrow.

That's right, we live in a Surreal Empire brimming with irony where the only law is pirate law. Anything is possible. Everything is everything. There is no end. Melting Clocks. Up is Down. Non-elcudian space. ('IS' is the primal binder, the phantom qualifier. 'IS' is ultimate relativity. The word instantly limits a statement, like a restrictor plate, but speaking without it, one either sounds like a mega genius or suffering poet. I am neither, so I use it.)

And of all the rampant weirdness is the weirdest thing of all: Love.

Galloping herds of day-glow Yetis don't compare.

Love negates all theories. Love transcends mind and matter. Love gives us the courage to jump. It justifies life. Love makes us go further. It also erects mountains of fear, it clouds our senses, makes us do things we normally would never do. Love has caused me to enter the Coffee Sack with a rose clutched behind my back and with a letter in my pocket that confesses my affection for a soul who slayed me at first sight. But this love/fear matrix stymied me for four months, held destiny at bay as I journeyed through the darkness of rejection, the fear of it being over with one crushing 'Not Interested.' And then I'd never be able to

come in here again to savor the earthy elixirs. The corporate java around the corner would be my only option. I'm taking a huge risk. Love is great and all, but coffee is happiness.

My hands are cold as sliced cow tongue, mouth filled with glue. Thorns from the single yellow rose (for friendship) pierce my finger pads. Something floats up my nose. I dare not pick. A tiny pop echoes around my sinuses. My eyes water. I hear cellophane crumbling. The walls warp. The floor bows and buckles. I see the world sideways. Jim, the barista behind the counter, turns to taffy. He instantly snaps back to his non-taffy state.

"Let go," he pleads in his feminine way. He holds the top of my coffee, I the bottom. "I messed up. It's not decaf!"

I release the cup. The object of my affection is nowhere in site. Now sirens are going off in my head.

I've done six dry runs. Extrapolated a 99.99% guarantee that she'd be at the register. She was even there 80 seconds ago when I did my final external pass-by. But now she is not. What 'is' matters more than what 'should,' even if it 'shouldn't.'

Then she appears through swinging doors, a trainee in tow. The trainee is the .001% gunning down my statistical 100% guarantee.

Her name is Jaz. She's athletic, small, and lean with a dark brown mane streaked with bronze, is sometimes bi-spectacled, more than a bit elfish, and is the perfect melding of cute beauty, brains, and comic book store/vintage chic. And the clincher that won her my Most Desirable: She's a hardcore gamer. Computer. Console. Hologame. Loves it all. She even vacationed in South Korea, the Mecca of gaming.

The day she walked into my store and bought three MetaSledge figures (from the Hologame of the same name), was the day I decided destiny had finally assigned me a cosmic lover.

"Hi," she mouths and goes about her duty.

James hands me my reengineered Latte. After a bout of hypertension, I realized that if I was going to drink five cups of

Joe a day, an excuse to bask in Jaz's glory, some of them better be decaffeinated.

I wave my memory stick. Transaction complete. (I'm not one of those chumps, who for anemic tax breaks and free groceries, succumbed to the Hex Implant, which allows one to simply wave their wrist and the world rolls over. And of course, since the Crash of '09, cash is dead). But now I'm frozen. There was no 'Plan B' to combat a monkey-wrench tossing monkey intent on destroying my delicate equation.

Abort.

I tuck the rose into my jacket and bolt for the door.

"Hey," Jaz skips over. "Sorry I didn't get to make your afternoon cup, but I'm training this new girl."

"It's OK."

"I'm training her because I'm leaving."

WHAT!

"Going to Egypt. Gonna be there for The Day. I leave tomorrow. Then I'm traveling Asia. Well, you know, if the world doesn't end."

"I'm OK."

"That's great," she says. "I just want you to know that over the past couple of months I've really enjoyed your good energy. And if I come back this way," Jaz pauses and looks out at the blue sky, "and, you know, things are still normal, we can get together."

I manage a weak smile, pat Jaz on the shoulder, exit in complete defeat to the bustling pedestrian mall and can hardly remember which direction my store is.

The front door of my store swings open just as I reach it. A short kid, face hidden by a soiled black hoodie, rushes out. He body checks me, disappears into the late lunch/early dinner crowd. He leaves a trail of ammonia-scented air in his wake.

"Get this, kid tried to pay with cash," says Nish, reorganizing the figurine display. "Messed up everything over here. Cash, can you believe it?"

When the holographic consuls and the Mega Lines came out a year ago, most guys like me went under. If it weren't for my

exclusive line of high-end figures, my astute ability to separate real graphic novels from glorified comic books, and that glitch in the Hologames that gives 16% of the population mini-maul seizures (which keeps old fashion lock and load TV consul games around), I'd be working at Hal-Mart.

"Oh, how'd it go with the coffee chick?"

"She's going to Egypt tomorrow."

"Ah, man, you waited too long."

I position myself behind the counter. Put the rose and letter on top of the old useless safe that's too heavy to move.

"It had nothing to do with timing. She's probably been planning this for a year. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I just watched this podcast," says Nish, "by this dude who claims the occult world headquarters hidden beneath the Giza pyramids moved to Mars in anticipation of the coming apocalypse. He also said something about the real estate being much cheaper on mars."

Nish pauses, then adds, "Does this mean you'll take Vara's friend to TDF?"

TDF, The Day Freakathon, four days of rave madness and radical self-expression out in the desert. Before officially inviting Jaz to TDF, I was going to have her over for a get-to-know-you-better. Cook her a feast and play a marathon of my favorite sci-fi flicks. My thinking was that a female of her caliber, one must assume, already has plans for The Day, so a date would be needed to inquire about her availability, make it seem like I wasn't some 'Peter-come-lately' who failed to act. Also, not one of our conversations was ever more than a few paragraphs; never got deeper than video games and our love of rain. But somehow I convinced myself she would be with me on this momentous date. I truly felt synchronized with destiny on this one. Every other time in my life that such feelings washed me things worked out. But not this time. Now everything is stained with suspicion, especially The Day.

This worldwide frenzy about The Day started a little more than a year ago on November 11, 2011 (11.11.11). Civilization

was on the brink of another world war. But this one was secular, East vs. West, Muslim/Communist/Third World vs. Judeo-Christian/Capitalist/First World. And after this war, the next would be fought with sticks and stones. Leading up to this final confrontation were dozens of low/medium-intensity conflicts that many claimed constituted a grater war, but it wasn't until someone detonated a massive EMP bomb above Disney World, frying every electrical circuit within a 105 mile radius, shutting down the *Happiest Place On Earth* indefinitely, and the reflexive tactical nuke airburst above Mecca, that the Big Fight had begun. (I don't know which was worse: seeing Mecca go back to the Stone Age, or having it equated to Disney World.)

There was a draft (I had a medical waver, liver irregularities). The auto plants started making war machines. Suicide bombers shut down the malls. Saboteurs wrecked powergrids. The weather started changing. Ragnorok was revving up.

Then The Voice started speaking on November 11th.

She called herself Eve.

We heard Eve in our dreams. While we drove. Showered. Ate. Made love. Fought. There were doubters of course. Some claimed it was the Chinese using a new weapon. Other's said it was Satan. But Eve had a very convincing way. Soon everyone was a witness.

Everyone.

Her voice was calm, commanding, motherly. Entire cities would stop as all heard Eve speak.

She said profound, but simple things. She spoke to all nations. One of her most memorable lines was: "You are what you've been waiting for . . ."

And the common thread running through her oracle was: Do not escalate. God is testing you. Prepare for The Day.

And there was a warning: "If you escalate, the earth will stop."

When Eve stopped speaking on November 14th, and the escalation towards annihilation revved up again, the earth stopped. Literally.

On 11.21.11 everything that wasn't nailed down experienced zero gravity as the earth stopped rotating for six seconds. The physics of the event still confound scientists, but it happened. I was taking a shower and ended up in my living room as the planet started spinning again. (Thanks to the nanno-second human attention span, made worse by an asymmetrical 24/7/365 media assault and a never ending stream of 'more,' the secular attacks and earth stoppage were buried deep into the world psyche with eons of other madness.) So the armies and frothing zealots stood down. Armageddon would not be the way they wished it to be.

We then turned our sights on The Day.

Debate was short-lived as thousands of crop circles and mysterious glyphs appeared around the globe. The message was easily deciphered: Gather at nodes (global sacred sites) on the solstice of winter, 12.21.2012 . . . five days from now.

Of course the New Agers, mystics, and neo-shamans have known about The Day since the 1950's when someone decoded the Mayan calendar. The Day stood out to those keen and turned-on because after thousands of years of dead-on astronomical accuracy, the Mayan calendar ends on the winter solstice 2012.

The Mayans believed in non-linear time, which is still time, but based on the multidimensional Cosmic Pulse and on harmonics—not seconds, minutes, hours—the slave-time of modern civilization. Their calculations were based on the equinox cycle, the 26,500 years it takes our solar system to cycle through the zodiac, which equals one orbit of the galactic core. (I think reality back in the Mayan day was so radically different, that a modern going back in time would go mad, while an ancient coming forward would act like an excited tourist.)

The bottom line is: As the earth orbits the sun and experiences seasons, so too does the entire solar system. We are entering a new 'solar season.' (Debate is furious over what 'season' we're about to enter. My hope/guess is Spring.) The 26,500-year equinox cycle ends in five days as our solar system eclipses the

“dark rift” black hole at the galactic center. What’s even crazier is that a greater cycle of 23 million years is also coming to an end (or beginning?). It’s believed this greater cycle is based on the completion of one orbit of the Milky Way around the Galactic Super Cluster Core. A galactic year.

Hold on, it gets bigger.

The Mayan time system starts out counting, incredibly, back 16 billion years (which supposedly coincides with the Big Bang). There are nine “baktuns” or turns, and within each baktun there are 13 cycles. The first baktun spans from 16 billion to 888 million years ago. Then the next is 888 million years to 444 million years ago. The baktuns shorten to a degree where between 1950 and 1999 was a baktun. The 13th baktun, the last turn, supposedly began 254 days ago and will fully ‘turn’ in four days. Basically a 16 billion year countdown is coming to an end.

But I think we’re gonna wake up on the 22nd and it will be same as it ever was.

Same as it ever was.

Same as it ever was.

I point to the fact that the prophesized information acceleration caused by the incredibly short cycles within the current baktun, supposedly the Main Event of the transformation, hasn’t happened. (The biggest thing to happen in the last month was the release of 20 new missions for MetaSledge.) Right now, five days to the apex, information should be doubling every 12 hours. This means that information that once took 1500 years to double, should now be doubling in half a day. I should know double now of what I knew this morning. I guess in a weird way I do, but it’s just not happening the way it was prophesized. The proof is in the ‘mundane regular’ I see all around me. What ‘is’ always matters more than what ‘should be.’

Always.

“I’ll take that as a no,” says Nish.

I look at the voided sales receipt. The hoodie kid tried to buy a ‘Cult of Cuthlhu’ figure, actually tried to buy Cuthlhu

himself—an eight inch, octopus-headed, pot-bellied four-armed god who rules Chaos, and since in the Lovecraftian Tome it is Chaos that rules Order (Chaos feeds Order is a better way to put it), Cuthlhu is the highest god.

Cuthlhu leads the secret invasion of Chaos into Order; leads the ancient, exiled mythical dimensions as they attempt to re-enter the mind of man. In Lovecraft's series *Cuthlhu Mythos*, the mythical is pissed off because man has forgotten the mythical as he peruses a life of materialism, science, and reality TV.

"Hey, the kid left his thermos," Nish inspects the tube. "He-Man. Looks original. If my mother only would've let me keep all my old stuff—"

"What, you wouldn't be stuck working here?"

Nish works the cap. "Skeletor used to scare the crap out of me."

My inner alarms go off. I mean they're screaming.

This isn't a mild emergency drone like I heard in the Coffee Sack. This is 5-Alarm panic. I haven't heard or felt anything like this since I picked out a suicide bomber at the movies. I was too far away to do anything but scream, but my alert moved others to act, foiling her attack.

The cap shoots off. A tendril of black smoke rises like a genie. Nish looks at me with fascinated horror. His entire universe has suddenly mutated (for some reason mine is maintaining its integrity). He drops the thermos. A swirling black cloud flows from the bottle and floats to the back of the store. Nish stumbles towards the cloud. I hop the counter.

"Outta here," I squeak in a voice that shatters my belief that were I to experience close-quarters High Danger, I'd be a hero.

Nish is dazzled. He reaches out. The cloud stops swirling. It puffs up. A black dart shoots out from the cloud. The dart disappears into Nish's heart, fells him. Another dart comes at me. I'm out the door before it impacts the wall.

I come face-to-face (well his face to my stomach) with the hoodie kid who ran from the store. He looks up at me. One of

those classic little grey alien faces greets me, angular, slit mouth, static expression. What's different from the classical grey alien is that his skin is full of acne, and there's a more human quality to him than of all the sketches and models I've seen. He couldn't walk around without the hoodie (being a bald grey dwarf and all), but with his head covered and the huge sunglasses, he's just able to pull it off, especially because he's only four feet tall.

Now if it were just him, I'd be at Level 4.7 on a 5 level freakometer, which is pretty major considering a passenger jet plunging into the sea while you're at the beach is a Level 2.4, and a toad shower Level 3.8, but because there are six, maybe seven thousand alien-hooide-clones crowding the plaza, I'm at Level 12.9. What's worse is no one notices the punks but me. People walk around them, oblivious as to why they suddenly changed course.

Have I suffered the all-time worst psychotic break? Or is this scene holographic?

Yes. A hologram.

Military-spec holograms can do this.

They make the commercial stuff look quaint.

Yes. Be rational.

But rationality is also a holographic generator, and it puts the military specs to shame. Holograms can't affect physical reality. Holograms don't smell, don't breathe or pulse. These things are real as rain. This is not the onset of institutional schizophrenia. It's not a hologram. This is ontological shatter. I'm seeing behind the scenes, the squirrely realm of archetypes. The mythical fantasyland sometimes seen out of the corner of the eye. The realms of UFOs, Big Foot, fairies, goblins, gods.

For me the 'Mythical Other' isn't mythical anymore.

A fissure opens beneath my feet. People avoid it by shuffling along the crack. They look like malfunctioning extras in a video game—bunching up, walking in place, totally void of sensible autonomy. If this sudden matrix glitch weren't bad enough, hundreds upon hundreds of black-clad, bipedal ninja lizards stream out from the fissure. And now there are well over 10,000

alien punks. They're up on the second and third mall levels. On the roof. They're in the stores and spread out before me, filling up the massive courtyard and beyond. One punk steps forward, they all step forward. Hive Mind. Pedestrians maneuver in their glitchy ways. There's a natural reverse magnetism working that makes people bounce off these insane anomalies if they get too close, but when someone from the normal universe does connect with one of the punks or lizards, it looks like honey passing through Jello.

Because I haven't melted into a whimpering puddle, it seems my subconscious fully accepts this situation, but *I* don't accept. By *I* I mean the little 'self' that runs this ape machine during waking hours, but my larger 'SELF,' the great adept who acts on intuition, instinct, and ancestral wisdom, instead of fear, ego, and pop knowledge; the SELF who takes over in dreams and fractional waking moments of fleeting clarity, does accept. When the self pulls the covers over its head, clicks its heels together while muttering, "I want things to be normal," the SELF must take over.

My stoic response to the impossible may yet reverse, my I/ego/self may come roaring back and send me running home to mama, but at least it wasn't a reflex. The calculating portion of my mind hasn't buried itself under the bed either. It's not in control, but at least it's around. It says these things are here for me and only me—evident not only by the fact that I'm the only one aware of them, but every creature's stare is locked on me as they tighten the circle. They also respect my as-of-yet-unrealized ass-kicking ability. If I weren't the possessor of some serious warrior skills, there'd be no need for thousands of assailants.

And certainly there'd be no need for the giant lizard.

Crawling out of the fissure is a 20 foot reptile wearing a tattered cloak. I'm not talking T. Rex reptile. This thing is a giant hominid lizard with opposable thumbs and intelligent eyes. It holds a wooden staff. Its red tongue wags. It jigs some crazy war dance.

Welcome to Freakometer Level 1 million. Population me.

A single punk alien steps forward into the buffer zone between my attackers and me. My right arm autonomously swings up, hand does some nifty tie-chi thing, and the kid crumples without me laying skin on him. I back up beneath a pedestrian catwalk. A woman scuttles around me. I too have entered the supersensible. Creeping lizards and punks fill in around me, but stay just outside the kill zone—

ATTACK!

I'm under total assault. My elbows and knees work all directions. Short, lethal jabs. My body moves in ways unknown to me. I'm a spectator to this fighting machine as it simultaneously takes on hundreds of assassins. A ring of downed punks piles up. They're fodder in this assault. The lizards keep pushing more of them into my kill zone. The giant lizard barks commands in some oddly familiar language. I advance over injured punks, probe for a weakness in their ranks. The giant lizard jabs at me. I dodge the blows. The circle, me in the middle, travels around the mall. The world I thought I knew so well rushes by, blurs. The blurring stops. Now it's moving at 1/100th my speed. People move a frame a minute. I pinball off pedestrians. The big lizard strikes the ground, kicking punks and me into the air. I latch onto a railing, climb over it, enter FunniGans, your *'Everything You Don't Need, But Can't Live Without Store.'* Mary, the owner and big gaming fan, stands nearly frozen behind the counter. Her hand slowly lowers to wrap a present. I crash into a display. It warps as if made of gummy matter. I run to the back of FunniGans, into the PG-13 section where one might find lemon flavored condoms and naked lady pens, but nothing raunchy like adult toys or blue flicks.

A platoon of punks invade the store. They're a stoic, stinking bunch without an ounce of honor, protocol, or emotions. It is said everything in the universe has a reason. But like mosquitoes, fleas, and taxes, the punks are an example of the optimistic-folly of this statement, though I have to hand it to the greasy bastards, they keep coming despite the beating, and seem to have a near endless supply of grunts eager to enter the fracas.

“HAGABOOSH!” the word erupts from my mouth with such furry it rattles me to the core.

A temporal anomaly slows the kids to an even slower speed than the store patrons, but the spell’s radius ends at the storefront. More punks enter. I charge and take out six. One rakes my neck with its heinous fingernails. Draws blood. The punks spit. Yellow mucus flies. It burns. The rear exit door swings open. An eight-foot tall, lanky, cane-wielding green alien wearing a patchwork duster and top hat comes through. His big face, with a tiny up-turned nose and small line of a mouth, is half hidden by huge mirrored eye shields. The dandy alien waves a four-jointed finger at me then faces the punks. They stumble over each other in retreat. The alien taps the ground with his cane and calls up a powerful temporal algorithm. The punks move like they’re running in glue high on ether. He cuts through them at light speed. They disappear when his cane contacts their bodies. I fall in behind him and we exit the store.

A storm has blanketed the area in three feet of snow. A freezing wind blows. The giant lizard works to free its staff from a block of ice. All the pedestrians are frozen. Thousands of alien punks struggle through the snow. I catch sight of the last ninja lizard scurry back into the fissure.

Another groovy green alien appears on top of the church steeple in the middle of the mall. Above him hovers a black helicopter. He jumps into the mass of frozen pedestrians and struggling punks. The alien grabs my collar and launches us off the walkway and into the scrum. Punks stack up ten, 20 high. Every few seconds I get in a punch or kick, but I’m mostly a spectator. The giant lizard comes charging, swings its staff and splits a building in half, which instantly re-seals itself. The green aliens each grab one of my arms; jump us up to the church roof. A blue electric field appears around the helicopter. Rapid fire electrified blue globs fire from a cannon poking out from the helo’s undercarriage. The globs grow as they hit the ground and roll, sucking up pedestrians. In 30 seconds every frozen pedestrian is soaked up into the globs. A thick, lightning stream

fires down from a saucer-shaped cloud and disintegrates a few thousand punks. The rest run in tight circles, disappear into puffs of smoke, I suppose returning to whatever excuse for a reality they inhabit.

The giant lizard frees its staff, pounds the ground and opens up a hole. It snarls and wags its tongue, jumps in. The hole seals up.

Another helo, much bigger with twin blades and smoked windows that conceal the pilots, swoops down and stops at the building tops. A teeth numbing ‘waawawwaaawawawa’ invades the area. The blue globs melt, depositing people in the general area they were when picked up.

In a distinctly human voice the alien to my right says, “Magnetic discombobulating ensures that sleepers who saw will forget. But you are awake. You will not forget.”

The alien throws a blanket over my head. It takes me five seconds to fight out of it. The world greeting me has retuned to normal, whatever that means. No snow, no punk aliens or giant lizards. People hustle and go about their consumption. The word ‘sleeper’ to describe the human condition has never seemed such a fitting label.

I race back to my store. Nish looks like he just woke up from a 36-hour MetaSledge marathon. He braces himself against a rack of games, a stoned smile on his face. I run to the Coffee Sack. I will express my love and passion for Jaz. Seize the day.

And they tell me Jaz has left for good.

2

Manny, my building's resident workman's-comp practitioner shoots me a 'Hang Loose' and goes back to his ritual of nicotine, gravy, and periodicals (he wakes at 1pm, and by 6, he's almost done with the NYT, paper #3). I lumber up the exposed staircase and reach my apartment. Three doors down, Cillia blasts Mexican rap. She's a decent, pretty girl, but I still think she walks the streets. Behind me the winter sun blazes up downtown. Glass-walled buildings look like pillars of gold. To me, the blazing beauties prove man and nature can join in beauty, if not harmony. I'm not a pessimist, but harmony is a dream. Especially when 95% of the population thinks the world is a sensible place with a few minor problems free-trade, government, or God will soon tackle.

Scratch that.

95% fail to even ponder the 'sensible equation' and just scurry around tweaked on stimulants. Scared shitless. Hooked up to the survival trip.

My apartment is a bunker of normalcy. I drop into the couch. My ceiling has never been so intriguing.

I sent Nish home. Told him the store will be closed until the New Year; told him I'd meet him out at TDF. He was so woozy that he didn't balk at missing the holiday rush, nor did he notice the gnarly scratches on my neck. He didn't even notice my newly acquired twitch and tick. My right eye goes off on spastic two-minute episodes of uncontrollable twitching. As for

the tick, my ear (it alternates) suddenly dips towards my shoulder and I emit an audible tick with my tongue.

As for what just happened, I don't know what's worse, the ontological shatter, *i.e.* conformation of my Surreal Empire hypothesis, or losing Jaz.

Over the last four moths, since the day she walked into my store, I've married her, moved to the mountains, had 2.5 kids, bought a dog, two cats, grown fresh vegetables, and finally written my manifesto disguised as Sci-Fi farce. Instead of my Jaz-fantasy, I've got a brontosaurus-sized problem with reality. And if synchronicity is worth a damn, it being four days till The Day, I'd say civilization is in for a wild ride—

"You're handling it beautifully," says a dark-skinned man standing in my kitchen. He's been there the whole time (probably), and because my nerves are tumbled and numb, the presence of this modern-primitive fails to send me for my revolver.

The man wears a faded and frayed pinstripe suit, red tie, grey shirt. A bone shard is pierced through his septum. His hair is dreadlocked, piled atop his head. His beard is patchy and long. The chin hairs are braided with rubber bands.

"I think it's the medication I'm on. Central nervous system suppressants."

"That has something to do with it," he says, "but give yourself credit, having your reality blown is like dying but still being alive."

"Maybe I'm dead."

"Death is not a subjective experience."

"Maybe I've gone completely insane."

The man laughs. "Not completely."

"So I'm not dead and I'm a little crazy, that doesn't explain what happened."

"Do you want it straight up, or sideways?"

"I want the truth, I don't care what direction it comes from."

"OK," he says as he walks into the living room, "the world you've always known, the world you see and smell, taste, hear, is

a projection. We'll call it The Real. Now this projection projects a shadow, which we'll be calling The Other. The Real is a place of law, science, reason. But The Other is a lawless universe where anything can and does happen. Chaos realms; unreal realms populated with unsympathetic beings who want nothing more than to enter the world of law and order. Who want nothing more than to become real."

The man sits on the ottoman and hands me a mug.

"The name's Ming."

Detritus floats in the brown liquid. It smells like burnt popcorn.

"They came for you because you activated."

"Activated?" I manage.

"You became acutely aware of the occult nature of reality."

"No kidding, but why today?"

"There was a trigger."

"Too much coffee?"

"I've heard of weirder things." Ming takes a sip of tea. "It's impossible to pinpoint what the trigger is, and when the trigger triggers, causing the turn-on. And by no means is it a guarantee that a trigger leads to a full-blown turn-on, which is what's happening to you."

"And that's why I had to fend for myself."

"We got to you as soon as we could."

"Doesn't seem very organized."

"These are not normal days, my friend. And I'm confident that we would've gotten to you before they pulled you into InterSpace."

"InterSpace?"

"It's the buffer zone between The Other and The Real. Sometimes you get sucked in there when you dream, but if the dwellers get you when you're awake, they remove your soul from your body and insert one of their agents."

"Dwellers?"

"Those from The Other are called dwellers, and since the battle of Evermore they have control of InterSpace. It's

a launching pad for attacks into The Real. Attacks against activateds.”

“Like a possession.”

He nods. “Only a turned-on person, an activate, someone who can see the occult reality, has the power to do what the dwellers need to do, which is to open up portals that allow them to enter our world in their true form. Normally, two, three activations happen worldwide each day. Now we have hundreds. Thousands.”

“Because of the twenty-twelve thing.”

“Not the cupcakes and ice cream you thought it was gonna be, is it?”

“And how do I fit into this?”

“Familiar with the Hundredth Monkey Complex?”

I shake my head.

“Say you have 300 monkeys on an island split into three tribes. Take Tribe One and teach ten how to wash the sand off their potatoes. Teach ten, then 50, then 99. Even though their mates are washing tots, the other tribe members don’t do it. Go to Tribe Two on the other side of the island, give them sandy potatoes, don’t teach them anything, and they end up eating sand and all.

“Now teach one more monkey anywhere on the island, the Hundredth Monkey, and suddenly all of Tribe One and Tribe Two are washing their tots. In fact, Tribe Three is suddenly doing it too. So is Tribe Four, and Five, and they’re on different islands. From here on out, give a sandy tot to any monkey anywhere, and they’ll wash it. At least that’s the theory—”

“I’m the Hundredth Monkey!”

“Hardly,” Ming says in a low voice. “If you survive your mission you will be monkey 74.”

“Seventy-four was my high school football number. Seven plus four is eleven, my birth number.”

“That’s what you call synchronicity.”

“Or coincidence,” I say.

“Or COiNCiDANCE.”

“And something tells me this isn’t about washing potatoes.”

“It’s about integrating the shadow, The Other,” says Ming. “It’s about becoming the dwellers before they become us. The hundred monkeys will also open the Magickal Manifold. Opening the Manifold brings forth the next evolutionary phase of consciousness, which turns on the Sixth Sense, the hyperdimensional sense, the sense that opens us up to the universe. Then everything changes. Our bodies, our planet, solar system.”

“‘Mind changing space-matter,’ that’s pretty deep quantum spirituality.”

“Mind makes matter,” says Ming. “Mental is the ‘stuff of stuff.’”

“So mind is the ground of Being?”

“No, I said mind makes matter. Think of mind like a holoprojector. A tool. Definitely not the ‘ground of being.’”

I know some existential quantum-spiritualists who would spit venom over such an assertion, just as any zealot defending his dogma. I being one of them change topic.

“OK, we’re surrounded by this haunted house, this InterSpace, packed with shadows, who more than anything want to slip into our world.”

“They didn’t originate from the shadow, and they *need*, not *want* to invade. Other than that, you’ve got it.”

Invalidate . . . the word echoes around my headspace.

“And to answer your next question,” preempts Ming, “they’ve been trying to invade since the day we ejected them from The Real. And that my friend, was an age before time.”

Invasion is such a visceral concept. My gut churns. Pain pangs race up and down my back. In my mind’s eye I see a smoldering world overrun with nightmare creatures like the ones I faced. I see mountains of human corpses—

“They weren’t always this way, you know,” says Ming, “but a few eons in the shadows turns the best into the worst.”

“And how does The Day fit into all this?”

“In four days the dwellers will either punch through and pour as much shadow into our world as they can, or they’ll be sealed in InterSpace forever, at least that’s what they think. In four days we must have initiated one hundred monkeys who will integrate their shadow, open the Manifold, evolve the system, or we loose.”

“So we’re not really fighting the dwellers.”

“Right now the fight is for an activated. They need you, we need you. But when we integrate the shadow, everything will harmoniously fall into place anyway, and those suckers won’t be left behind, but it’s impossible to communicate with them. So we fight them for their own good.”

“And if we fail to integrate?”

Ming polishes off his tea and stands.

“We’ll be replaced. And I don’t mean just humanity. I mean biosphere replacement that will lead to the mutation of the very nature of our solar system. Compared to what we face, being sealed in InterSpace is like winning the lottery.”

He disappears down the hall leading to my bedroom, reappears with a holographic projector, known as a HoloCube. It’s a very high-end unit, not that all holograph projectors aren’t, but this piece of equipment is illegal for civilian use. He places the two-foot graphite cube on the carpet.

(The most expensive HoloCube a civilian can buy is a 4.5 foot cube, and it costs \$275K. It can produce holograms indistinguishable from the real thing. Grouped together, they’re mostly used at amusement parks and porn parlors. The differences between the military-spec, and the commercial, are size and duration of hologram; ability to project more than five perfect holograms at a time; the ability to create a deeper and richer ‘environment,’ meaning a background; and the ability to ‘cloak’ an object—make a house look like a big oak tree, make a cruise missile look like a 757 . . .)

“I produced this. Gets a little dodgy if there’s too much cell phone activity, but you’ll get the idea.” He draws all the blinds. Turns off the lights. My apartment is naturally dark, and at this hour with shades down it is almost pitch.

Ming manipulates a tiny remote control. A hole opens in the cube's top. A magnetic resonator floats out, hovers two inches above the cube. It layers the walls, ceiling, and everything in my apartment with a red laser grid. The mag-res floats to the ceiling as another one exits the box. The second mag-res floats six inches above the cube. The red grid dims, warps, becomes non-Euclidian. The walls and ceiling turn into a slowly churning black cloud vortex. I've seen this background technique used before. It's very effective when showing something in the 3rd person 'God View.'

A booming narrator's voice rattles the apartment. Ming fumbles with the remote, lowers the sound. (A speaker plate in the bottom of the HoloCube, capable of 120 decibels and 9.1 surround sound, makes a holo projector the most significant self-contained entertainment device ever created, or the most powerful lie generator man has known.)

"The shadow, The Other" says Ming the narrator, "is unreal. Unreal does not mean non-existence. In this sense it means 'inferior autonomous zone' or iAZ."

A basketball-sized hologram of earth appears in the middle of my living room. It bobs as if floating on water. A purple cloud appears around the globe. Globes and weird shapes and black ribbon clouds appear in the purple.

"The dwellers lack one of the three variables in the equation of 'realness'—Saat/thought, Cheet/feeling, Ananda/bliss—Ananda being what they do not have, cannot have. Bliss is unattainable until they escape their prison."

The earth and purple cloud vanish, replaced by a six-foot, cone-shaped object. The tip, the fist foot, is crammed with thousands of galactic Super Clusters suspended in black space. Ribbioned through the Clusters are colored-gas nebulas. The next 90% of the cone is grey gas fed from the surrounding black vortex.

"The tip of the cone represents The Real, aka 'order,' aka 'the MultiVerse,' it is the physical universe you know. The 90% gray area represents The Other, aka chaos, aka the shadow. The Real plus The Other is called Creation."

The cone starts rotating on its own axis, then starts a wobbly orbit along the inside of the black cloud vortex. As the Creation cone travels through this vortex, I focus on a blinking silver fuzz ball that has appeared in the grayness. It drifts towards the MultiVerse tip, then disappears as it diffuses through a barrier (InterSpace) separating chaos and order. The silver fuzz reappears within a Supper Cluster. The fuzz ball expands, sending the entire galactic Super Cluster spinning out of the MultiVerse tip. The displaced Cluster explodes and becomes part of the black vortex. The silver fuzz ball becomes a Super Cluster moments later. But it's a mechanical squareish spiral, rather than the more organically oval envelope it replaced.

“Displacement starts on a mental, planetary, then system-wide scale.”

The MultiVerse tip expands and the entire room is dotted with swirling Super Clusters. After a few seconds one Cluster is focused upon. The scene zooms through galaxies within the Cluster, enters a familiar one, the Milky Way, zooms past stars and systems, fixes on earth again. But this time earth is semi-transparent. Inside the earth is a pulsing slivery sphere with tentacles piercing the surface, reaching out into space. The scene quickly pulls out to the master view of the Creation Cone.

Ming appears before me, the hologram illuminating him in ghost light. He stops the holoshow, pausing the Cone mid tumble.

“The dwellers have infiltrated our governments, military, industry, media. They create wars, promote human on human slaughter. They're using The Day to horde the most conscious humans into sacred sights where they will use them to open up gapping portals—”

“Oh my God, we've gotta warn—”

“The only way to stop the invasion is for you to complete your mission.”

“Right, become the 74th monkey by integrating my—”

“You become the monkey as a result of completing your mission. It is not your objective.”

“Then what’s my mission?”

“Your mission is to self-initiate yourself into the deepest mysteries.”

“How do I do that?”

“By surviving Chapel Perilous.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means what it means.”

There’s something in his words, in his voice, it erases my need to know any details.

“And what about The Day?”

“The Day is encoded in our destiny. The Mayans were the ones who discovered the coding. No more, no less. But as devious, desperate, and deadly as the dwellers are, we face another enemy, a much worse enemy using the dwellers to soften us up. An enemy intent on biosphere and solar system re-matrix, galactic and Super Cluster re-matrix.” Ming pauses for dramatic effect, but fails to crescendo.

His pause forces me to ask, “And who is the enemy?”

“You’re not gonna like it.”

“I don’t like any of this.”

“You know those little silicone chips you’re so fond of?”

“Computers?”

“No,” Ming says with a measure of disdain, “Silicon Life. Self-replicating Silicon Life. Cybernetic life forms. That is our enemy. Our biosphere, and every biosphere in our Super Cluster are carbon-atomic based. We’re talking about a total re-matrix of all animated carbon life forms with silicon ones.”

Such a scenario is not so radical to my ears. Somewhere along the way I’ve heard/read/thought about such a possibility. It’s maddening not to be able to place the origins of this information, but as I think about it, it’s a combination of all three.

“And they’re already here; Silicon Sleeper Cells,” he snarls. “Waiting for us to be weakened by the invasion.”

My appliances—two TVs, three game consoles, two cameras, two computers, all contain transistors. My clocks! My oven! I’m

harboring a lethal sleeper cell! They're all whispering: *he knows, kill him, he knows.*

My horrific crime is globally repeated a billion times, in every country, continent, every nook and every cranny. Talk about a Trojan Horse.

"They've integrated, created a symbiosis." Ming pulls out a pipe, lights it, smokes as he paces. "Some say we're already well into re-matrix. They say the battle is lost. But we've got a very powerful ally who will fight to the last man to stop re-matrix."

"Those green aliens who saved me?"

"The Space Brothers are allies, but their true motivations are unknown. I'm talking about the Elvin."

"Elves?"

"Elvin," he stresses the 'in.' "They are the only dwellers who have found a foothold in our world, mostly because they look human, except for the pointy ears, fangs, and the biggest difference, their innate magickal abilities. They're also civilized. Highly intelligent. 5% of the population is purebred Elvin. Another 8% have Suppressant Elvin DNA."

Ming puffs away and lets this info sink in before starting up again.

"Human and Elvin peacefully co-existed for millennia until an as-of-yet-reconciled riff began 1200 years ago that drove the Elvin into hiding. The break happened when The Family gained total control of planetary operations and commenced the systematic slaughter and integration of the hybrids—human/dweller hybrids—who had been allowed to exist after the last Displacement, which was when humans forced the full-blooded dwellers into The Other. So these hybrid tribes of lizard/human, insect/human, gnome and fairy human, etcetera, etcetera, were destroyed as the modern world came into focus.

"The culmination of this era of slaughter history calls the time of Columbus, the Renaissance, the Inquisition, the holocaust of the New World, where there was a frenzied destruction of all things unique and ancient. It is during this time that the prohibition of magick began. Fearing that they

would soon be targeted because of their abilities, the Elvin chose to suppress their magick.

“It only took three generations for the pointy ears and fangs to shrink, and for humanity to forget that Elvin once roamed among them. Only a select lineage of Elvin retained the magickal ways. But most, even full-blooded Elvin, don’t know who they are.”

“If the Elvin are from The Other, if they were dwellers, why are they fighting the dwellers?”

“First of all, none of the dwellers originated from The Other. Secondly, the Elvin know what the true threat is. They know that if the silicone scenario happens everyone loses. It is only because of them that I have an ounce of optimism.”

“Are there still hybrids out there, ‘cuz I know some people who practically have forked tongues they’re so reptilian?”

“It’s called Suppressant DNA. Dweller DNA is filtered through sapien DNA first, so you don’t have people running around with tails and bug eyes. The dweller traits come out through the human genome, never fully exposing themselves, but sometimes it’s pretty obvious anyway.”

“And who, what are you?”

“I am a man, and a member of the Magi.”

“Magi?”

“I am a sorcerer.”

“What am I?”

“You’re what I was, and will be what I am.”

Ming shuts off the HoloCube. My apartment returns. He hands me the newest generation iPod.

“Enough ancient history, we’ve got to get you packed and moving.”

“Where am I going?”

“Been to Egypt lately?”

3

Egypt, the new darling of Western ideology, Chinese capital, and real estate developers. But two years ago things looked really bad for this majestic land. A Muhajadine revolution swept the country. The president was exiled. Twenty-two hundred tourists were kidnapped and used as human shields. Sacred sites were defaced. The grand pyramid complex at Giza was wired for demolition. The world held its breath.

According to the Ming-produced iPod video (a montage of images and video clips aptly labeled *Egypt*), the revolution was a smoke screen. At the center of the ruse were four possessed sorcerers. To the world public, dominated by sleepers, it appeared as another case of Islamic extremism and Western ignorance bringing the world to the brink. To the Allies (Ming's term for The Family, the Magi, the Space Brothers, and the Elvin Council), it was an even more desperate situation. If the dwellers blew up the Giza pyramids—The Grand Initiation Chambers—and the Sphinx, the gateway to Ameti (the terminal where our world uplinks into the Universal Mind)—they'd cripple the occult heart of the world. It was a daring first strike, a knockout blow meant to end the war before it started.

On a hidden level the allies went to work. The Magi launched attacks behind enemy lines, into InterSpace. On an outward level a coalition of Libyan, Israeli, NATO, and Sudanese armies invaded Egypt. The coalition rooted out the rebels, divided up the land, and turned Cairo into a modern day Berlin.

The video ended with Ming speaking an ominous statement as a picture of the pyramids at sunset blazed up the screen:

“The attack uncovered a conspiracy: A radical sect of The Family had struck a deal with the dwellers. Traitors were in the citadel, ready to open the door. Punishments were levied. The Family executed a dozen scapegoats, but the Magi now must look over our shoulders as well as into our sights.”

(I can't help but find it sick and humorous that sleeping humanity, being oblivious to the barbarians at the gates, continues along with the 'Tao of Consumption,' and those who smell and even see the invaders sell, sell, sell the sleepers, and will continue to do so up to the bitter end.)

So ever since the conflict, it's been Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.

Today an effort to return the upper Nile to its glorious and lush origins has begun. Pilgrims and tourists move about the country with impunity. A group called 'New Evo' claims to be the Essenes reincarnated. They've set up a commune in the southern delta near Ethiopia. And one of the coolest things, I think, is that an international consortium of technology companies started building a new Library of Alexandria. The building itself will be the information. Its glass structure etched with miles of code. I even hear you'll be able to print scrolls on papyrus.

(In light of my newly acquired wisdom, things like the library and Eessence commune seem too optimistic. Either the information I have is for a very select few who aren't sharing it, or wrong. I mean, since The Family runs the world and thus all the corporations, and they know 'The Deal,' why spend billions and years on projects you know won't be completed? Why would the Ecence, supposedly initiated magi/priests, build the largest commune ever built if they know it will be destroyed before anyone can populate it?

The only two explanations that make sense are: maybe there's a hidden power in ignoring the inevitable; or it's just a way to pacify the people, like the band playing as the Titanic sank. If civilization stopped humming people would catch on, "Hey, the

roads are falling apart, and why'd they stop selling bonds with a two or more year maturity?")

New Egypt isn't without problems (perfect is a flawed concept, at least that's what I think). The holy sites have become like a spiritual Disney Land. Developers overestimated the demand for condos. The weather sucks, hot days, cold nights. There are 60,000 POWs rotting in the desert.

I find a decent hotel in the Libyan sector (West Cairo). Oddly it's the most liberal zone in the city. The Israeli sector (East) is filled with Hasidim. The NATO area (North+Alexandria) is jammed with Christian zealots and homemade prophets. The Sudan zone (South) is populated with devout Muslims, outlaws, and Indiana Jones-types who launch missions into the Sahara in search of artifacts.

Outside of the American zone it's nearly impossible to find air-conditioning/heating for under \$280 a night. But for under \$100, you'll surely be sleeping with foot-long centipedes and the rats who covet them. I split the difference and have a clean room with a ceiling fan and space heater.

After an immense meal spread out on a dozen flat plates, I retreat to my room. Go out to the balcony, light up the pipe Ming gave me. Puff the herbal smoke.

To the west red lights illuminate the Giza Plateau. I can't actually see the complex, just the glow. The area is in UN hands. Ming said they do a good job of making the place feel open and free, but they watch every cranny with a network of cameras and sensors that makes Big Brother smile. They even built a command bunker using stones from some minor Pharaohs pyramid. Blends right in.

It is ancient science, this technique of 'watch but don't let the observed know they're being watched.' When people are given the illusion of free reign, and by free I mean dominion over land that is in a quasi way theirs, they MOSTLY adhere to the law of common sense, also known as: *Do The Right Thing*.

So a man can climb to the capstone of the Great Pyramid, light up a splief, see Sirius rise. But if that man whips out his

Johnson and desires a wank, a SWAT unit will pop out of some crack, yank his ass down into the catacombs, and he'll wake up on a slow boat to nowhere.

But currently, in stark contrast to the free reign idea, the sites are closed for another day as final preparations are completed for the opening ceremonies of the global extravaganze being called 'World Unity Week.'

Below my balcony the bazaars, clubs, and hash dens are alive with the seeking-stoned. The party calls, but I'm focused.

After the *Egypt* video was another video labeled: *Egypt, What to do.* (I'm amused by Ming's practicality, also grateful.) In the video, Ming, standing in front of a photographer's drop cloth, said:

"The only reason you are in Cairo is for Ameti. You enter it through the right paw of the Sphinx, third toe out. Self-initiation is the most powerful initiation because it is based on self-discipline. Anyone can be beaten, scared, forced into following the Path. But Monkeys stay the course by their own Will."

"No one enters until tomorrow. No exceptions." The guard, a sleeper without a gun, will repeat the line a hundred more times if I let him. I cross the street and the guard returns to his perfectly camouflaged station.

Throngs of tourists flow through the casaba. A line of camels and donkeys sing through their asses and help make the place feel ancient. Beyond the invisible fence is a watchtower disguised as an obelisk.

Now the question is: How does one evade such a complex security web?

Conventional wisdom says, 'sneak in at night.'

Conventional wisdom only applies to the conventional, and of course broad daylight wouldn't work either. According to Ming's lecture *Bewitching Hour*, my only chance is twilight, aka the 'bewitching hour.' I just have to kill four hours in the Bazaar.

Six lame souvenirs that I ended up throwing away, and a Taro session where the reader rightfully surmised that I was a man full of turmoil and secrets (has there ever been a man who wasn't?), I find myself standing atop a pile of ruins with thousands watching the sunset. The sky to the west becomes purple and orange, and then the sun dips below the horizon. The bewitching hour is not an hour at all, but mostly about 22 minutes depending on where you are and what season it is. In this part of the globe, three days before the winter solstice, it's 16 minutes 35 seconds long.

The 'B-Hour' is a time when the veil between realms is thinnest, a time when both physical vision and spiritual vision are distorted, and a time when anything can happen, as long as it's mischievous and mystical. Ming said in the video that even the mightiest warlocks and priests will make sure they are in a safe place during this unpredictable time. To use the B-Hour to your advantage you've got to be down with the darkness, meaning you must covet the night. Not a problem for this cat. Don't get me wrong, I love sunshine and colors and warmth, but for me the night holds more potential. The night sky doesn't lie.

I weave through the crowds, cross the boulevard, and duck into a boulder complex. I am invisible.

The magnetic fence offers no resistance. The cameras and sensors are blind. I'd love to get a sneak peak of the carnival grounds on the west side of the pyramids, I've heard they recreated the mass initiation maze, but I have only 13 minutes left, so I mosey up to the right paw of the Sphinx, place my hands on the third stone knuckle from the inside. Ming said there are no words that can open the door. No coaxing. No tools. Only if the Sphinx wants you will it open. I pet the stone paw, hold my breath. An arched doorway manifests in the Sphinx's breastbone.

The lecture called '*Getting Over Awe*' was all about suppressing the dumfound-reflex so easily triggered in me and everyone. Ming hammered home the point that everything is amazing, everything is a miracle, and it is only because of

words—those woeful symbols we use to label matter—that a human can handle waking up in the morning.

What's a Tree?

It's a fibrous mass that grows hard. There are thousands of varieties. It gets food from the sun by photosynthesis.

Oh, that explains everything.

While listening to the lecture I surveyed my environment and practiced the techniques of universal awe. I integrated the policy that everything is astounding, and understood that labels, the names we give things, tell .001% of the story. Thinking that a label penetrates into the essence of something, is akin to eating the menu instead of the meal, or mistaking a map for the terrain; *i.e.* seeing a map of Paris, and thinking, “now I don't have to go!”

With my dumfound-reflex subdued, I enter the doorway and find myself in a six-sided room made of gold. The door shuts. The ceiling is barely five feet high. Carved into all the surfaces are hieroglyphics. In the center of the floor is a bronze disc with a two-foot diameter. Etched into the disc is the Flower of Life, seven interweaved circles that signal the Seven Days of Creation. It is said that the blueprint of Creation is embedded in this symbol. I don't see it, but I believe it.

The disc starts rotating.

I jump on it.

And then I'm going down at a thousand feet per second. The tube bends, the disc slows, and then I drop into a rock-walled chamber decorated with giant pulsing blue crystals. Behind me are waterfall-fed ponds. A waterslide that disappears into a tube is aptly marked 'exit.'

Before me rises a granite shard. Built into the base is a round wooden door that any Hobbit would fancy. After an eternal minute an elderly, dark-skinned, regal lady wearing tattered robes appears atop the shard, shuffles into place.

The woman leafs through a huge book while muttering, “dues, dues, dues.” She stops turning pages and says, “You're not up to date. And your thesis is six years late.”

I clear my throat and think of a respectful reply.

“Miss, um, I don’t understand.” Perhaps if I had more time I’d have prepared a rebuttal with a little more schmaltz.

“Everyone must pay their dues. There isn’t anything to understand about it.”

“This is all very new to me—”

“Only new because you forgot,” she hisses.

“OK, how much,” I whip out my wallet, bursting with 10-grand in credit checks that Ming stuffed down my pants moments before our goodbyes at the airport.

The woman erupts into surprisingly hardy laughter. She regains her composure, “That’s the problem with you moderns, everything is about currency.”

The round door creaks open.

“And as for your thesis, better get cracking.” Behind me stone rubs against stone as a wall opens. Thousands of black beetles pour into the chamber. The woman again erupts. The beetles swarm at my feet and force me through the door.

Two massive crystal doors stand before me. Zips of blue light speed through them. A plaque on the wall states in dozens of languages (some completely alien) that to go further one must utter the correct word.

In instances like this the more thought put into it, the deeper and lengthier the extrapolations, the less likely success. There are a million words, of which I could probably recall 800 give or take

. . . and the word comes to me like a shot from the Great Blue.

But first a little historical refresher course.

It was early autumn year 2000 when I walked into one of those massive booksellers, moseyed to my favorite section (rightly or wrongly labeled ‘New Age’), and found the book that changed my life. Among the bound tomes discussing all things mystical and occult, was a red book with the dimensions of a stack of index cards. One of the book’s corners jutted out from the neat line of spines, and it practically jumped into my hand as I neared

it. (In keeping with the tradition of not naming the author, title, or specifics, I will refrain from revealing such.)

I didn't read the book immediately, in fact I didn't even open it. I kept it on my nightstand and carried it around with me, telling friends I held the most powerful and important piece of writing known to man. Oddly, none of them ever asked to see it, queried about its title, wondered about its contents. But I couldn't get myself to read it. I was scared by what I'd read about it on the Net. Stories of curses and dangers swirled a great mythology around this little red book. But ten days before Halloween, I read it. My life has never been the same. I am sure my current predicament can be traced to that pivot point.

It is from that book, from that manifestation of the New Aeon, penned by the New Aeon's first prophet, that the magickal word comes.

The word is a triangle between two cubes. An 11-letter word of the highest magick and power. Everyone knows the word, but few ever penetrate into the deepness. Few people dare venture beyond knowledge of the word and into the wisdom of the word.

"ABRAKADABRA!" I yell.

Revealed by the ever-widening crack of the opening doors is a narrow walkway, ten feet wide, cut through pale walls of slick, ice-like, self-luminous rock. The ground slopes down, creating a funnel into the pathway. I practically slide towards it. A measure of comfort comes when the doors remain open, and at least this isn't a maze. Labyrinths are all the same. There are no tricks. You leave the way you came in. All you have to do is retrace. Only two directions. In/out. Maybe that's what potentially makes labyrinths much, much worse than mazes. You know exactly what is coming your way on the way out.

Nothing.

That's what I face on the way out.

Well, nothing except the pale blue labyrinth walls. The walls are at least 100 feet tall, and the ceiling above, half a mile up, is a smooth dome. There's a 1:7 scale projection of the labyrinth

on the dome. In the labyrinth's middle, obvious by the rippling reflection/projection, is water. There's always something at the center of a labyrinth . . .

. . . always something, but never anything like this.

A pool of black water stretches before me. In the middle of the pool is an island with ancient-looking wood scaffolding built around a huge stone caldron. Another universal thing about labyrinths: one must touch the true center, or one misses the whole point.

I wade into the cool water. Cool, but not shockingly so. The decline stops and I walk through pancreas-high water that will hopefully remain shallow. A ripple on the other side of the stage jump starts my heart into sprint mode. There's something in here with me. Something big with a tail. The shore I just left and the island are equal distance, but towards the island is an unknown path. The thing in the water swims in tight circles behind the landing.

Forward. Always forward.

Forward into the unknown.

"Go further," Ming said.

But further fast.

I slice through the water. Hopping, dancing through the liquid. The water thing takes a big arc and cuts off my retreat. The floor drops out and I swim for my life. I reach the stage and am out of the water so fast it surprises me. The water thing passes within 15 feet, then sets itself on an irregular orbit around the island. Another water thing appears, joins in orbit. Leaving the way I came now seems impossible.

I walk up the levels of the round island. I climb the scaffolding and stand on a plank that gives me a view into the silvery water filling the cauldron. From this vantage point I hoped the water things would be revealed, but they're still just phantoms.

A stirring stick rests against the caldron's side. I stir, kicking up sparkling sediment. The blue labyrinth walls dim. A water jet shoots out from the cauldron, nearly tosses me off the scaffolding, and reaches hundreds of feet into the air. A constant

fountain of silvery water is created. Sheets of water cascaded down the labyrinth walls. The walls pulse, and then starting at the entrance, a scene spreads across the wall surface. My gaze follows the living mural as it unveils an almost 360 degree scene depicting the arrival of Homo Sapien up to the current historical moment. The mural's beginning shows scenes of a world before humans. Different scenes blink into view, then fade away. Bipedal lizard creatures move about organic cities in low-lying jungle environments. Five-foot tall, two-legged ant-like things inhabit great desert dwellings. Sasquatch giants live in mountain/forest cities. A quarter of the way along the wall a distinctly human city appears—stone monuments, buildings, streets, animal husbandry, commerce. Scenes of massive battles appear next. Then natural cataclysms decimate the 'animal' cities. Polar icecaps melt. The world floods. An ice age comes. Humans proliferate, ejecting the animal survivors from refugee camps, sending them into The Other. Time passes. The modern geographical world forms as the ice melts. A civilization in the Algerian Sahara appears. I watch it be swallowed by a sand sea. Teaming cities in India and Iran appear, then crumble. The Giza pyramids rise. Babylon appears. The surviving hybrids are squeezed into smaller zones. The ant-hybrids go underground. The sasquatch and lizard hybrids inhabit pockets in the Americas, along with a few pockets in Europe and southern Africa. Time passes. The European lizard hybrid populations are killed off. Columbus sails. The New World is conquered. The New World hybrids are rooted out. The Industrial revolution sees humanity proliferate. Wars pass. The A-bomb detonates. Two men in the desert perform a radical occult ceremony. The transistor appears. All things digital and computer proliferate. The Twin Towers come down. More war. More technology. And then the mural ends with the current world-wide party about to take place.

The water jet stops. The last sheet of rain comes down. The walls are blank again. The caldron is empty except for a puddle at the bottom. I poke the puddle. It conceals a hole. The water stills and I see Jaz. She's smiling. Her hair is swinging. She's

locked arms with someone, heading into a hotel, looks like the Sudanese sector. They stop at the front desk. Pick up a bottle of champagne. They enter an elevator and go to their room. They are a playful couple. Clothes start to come off—

The wakes of several more water things pull my gaze away. When I look back into the caldron I see the tip of a ladder sticking out. I toss the stirring stick and a frenzied attack renders it into splinters. I climb into the cauldron, my heavy heart almost sinks me. My feet find the rungs of the submerged ladder. I steady my breath, take one last gulp, and climb down into darkness . . .

. . . after 15 feet I reach bottom, feel around, find a passage, swim into it. Above are the giant phantom crocodiles. I gasp, deplete my oxygen. I swim back up to the cauldron's rim.

I can swim under the crocs, get back to the shore, exit this damned labyrinth. Get back to the city, leave this land, leave this twisted adventure. Get off the raggedy-edge and go back to my comfortable life on the 'Dull Easy.' I suck in more air, go down, swim under the crocs, run up the shore and through the labyrinth, exit the massive doors, boogie past the receiving desk and the screaming hag, jump onto the water slide, travel through an underworld plumbing system that ejects me into the Nile 20 miles south of Cairo.

My room is a cell. I lie on the hard bed in darkness. Cool air flows in through the balcony. Parties rage in the street below. I arranged for a midday flight leaving tomorrow. Cost me nearly \$1900 extra, but I can't stay. This Monkey is out of the game.

In between shouts and revelry drift in dirty piano riffs, a Rhodes stage piano coupled with a rapid-fire snare. There might even be a bass in there. The music calls me.

At street level I triangulate the music, move south, and find it coming from a basement speakeasy. How I separated the tunes from all the techno rap, I don't know, but I'm grateful for some dark and cool, down on your luck jammy Jazz/Blues.

The bar is sparsely populated with old hippies and those whose nervous systems can only handle analog sounds. I sit at

a standard 2-Top. A sexy Danish waitress comes in. It's just her, the bartender, and the trio on stage. The band of shaggy kids who miraculously found 'real music' through the graveyard of pop, end a classic Herbie Hancock tune and run into a galloping original.

Coffee, black, I order, for these days liquor doesn't do it for me. Anyway, the coffee in this part of the world is like amphetamine. And who wants to slap a depressant on top of depression?

The gal deposits a huge mug of Joe, which is not typical of the usual 4-ounce cup found in Cairo. The music rolls. These guys are vibe masters. The bassest is ripping it up. He's older than the keys/drummer duo, but no less shaggy. He calmly plucks a 1937 monolithic bass. The trio settles into a trance-groove. They're doing things Parker and Monk weren't hardwired to do. These guys are products of Hi-Def and effects pedals.

I gyrate the mug, get the coffee swirling. I gaze into the cup.

In the pitchness I see Jaz. She's boarding a plane with the guy. The ticker above the gate reads 'London.' She produces two black laminated passes, kisses them, puts them back between her breasts.

Through the jam weaves a voice. It is Ming saying in whispers: *Follow her to the Druid stones. Follow her . . . to . . . the stones.*

Druid Stones?

Stonehenge.

She's going to another sacred node where a festival is readying. My impetus is 45% curious jealousy, 26.7% divine duty (this self-initiation rubbish), and whatever percentage left is a vacuum to be filled with propellant. Propellant to send me further.

4

London is saturated with 'End Time' revelers. (Anyone who has given it a deep thought realizes that 'End Time' and 'End of the World' are completely different concepts, but they're erroneously interchanged. 'End Time' refers to the end of the 26,500 or so years of history. [The eons before the beginning point of this current 26,500-year cycle are referred to as Pre-Historic.] While 'End of the Word' refers to the vaporization of planet earth.) The pilgrim population is a volatile mix of Christian Zealots preaching on soapboxes, New Agers walking around in white cloaks, and neo-pagan occultists just happy that the world has taken a turn into crazytown. But if you ask me they're all gonna be worth shite when The Day roles around. In my playbook, maybe one or two days of moderate/moderate-severe partying before the 21st are called for, with a big blow out on The Day. But the way some of these blokes are going, they'll be in bed on the 21st.

I rent a motorcycle (you can't get a car within 10 miles of Stonehenge), ditch my baggage at a travel locker, and ride out to the Salisbury Plain. According to the *Mirror*, a new crop-circle appeared in a purposefully un-harvested field that some are claiming shows the new chromosomal pattern that will appear in humans after the 21st. The crop glyph (the correct term for a crop circle, since they are hardly ever just circular) has really amped things up. People are starting to realize that "it's really gonna happen," as the paper put it.

Stonehenge, built upon a knoll that gives you the feeling of being on top of the world, is on the eastern flank of the Isle of Avalon, aka Glastonbury, which is the Magickal Mecca of the world. It is this magickal place—and it truly is tangibly magickal—from where King Arthur commanded a thriving Avalon and Merlin worked his magick upon civilization. Among these rolling hills Paul Dee, the 15th century provocateur alchemist and the original ‘007,’ contacted the Enochian Angels. Jules Verne vacationed here. J.R.R. Tolkien lived here. Glastonbury inspired C.S. Lewis and his Narnia fables. Aliester Crowley found his magickal powers magnified tenfold when here. Legendary bands such as Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and Radiohead came to Avalon for creative inspiration. The land is populated with countless earthen mounds (Tors), laye lines, gothic churches, Neolithic stones, and mystery upon mystery. It is also the home of the most magnificent crop glyphs, true English pubs, emerald green pastures and fine people.

After a slow go through miles of abandoned cars and hikers on the A303, I reach the festival perimeter. According to Ming’s iPod lecture ‘*The Henge*,’ Stonehenge, like nearly all sacred sites and their ruins, were/are initiation temples where advanced initiates come after a ritualistic 12 years of search and service, and become the SuperMan (or woman) he/she was/is destined to be. He also stressed the fact that Stonehenge is aligned with the star Sirius, and on the summer/winter solstice the star rises directly above the ‘heel stone.’

Later in the lecture Ming said: “Hidden initiation sites for first, through 32nd degree exist, but lack the majesty and universal power of the elder ruins. On the occasion that a soul achieves the 33rd degree, or the ruins need to be used as energy transformers or stargates, elder ruins are closed to the public under the pretense of renovation, or some other ridiculous claim that only a sleeper would believe.”

Ming’s claim makes perfect sense. These sites are thousands of years old, and will exist long after most modern structures

have crumbled. And yet they seem to undergo never-ending renovation . . .

After the lecture it didn't take me long to visualize elder sites in their original states. Instead of just seeing ruins, I now see complexes with roofs and freshly masoned walls, wooden doors and occult artwork. These places were dark, scary, occult places lit with dripping torches where at the center awaited priests draped in ceremonial headdresses chanting dangerous incantations. What's more, is at the center of an initiation temple lay the sarcophagus that the initiate would descend into. When the lid was sealed, the trip through Chapel Perilous began. There was no turning back. No reprieve. And if the initiate survived Chapel Perilous, he/she was reborn into a world of real magick, real peril, real divinity.

An armed solider (weapon is shouldered) tells me that no vehicles are allowed beyond this point, so I ditch the bike and hoof it into the camp.

On the outskirts some dude wearing a furry pink dayglow mushroom hat hands me a map. Any illusions I had of disorganization are shattered, which when I think about it, the lecture: *Nothing The Family touches is skimpy*, pretty much set the record straight:

“The Family is a lineage of power-brokers who have directed the course of human civilization over the last 5800 years. They are puppeteers, yet puppets themselves. Above The Family are the Ancient Of Days. They are a council of 12; wizards initiated into the deepest mysteries; wizards training to become creator gods. Their center is everywhere, nowhere. They are known by many names: the Secret Chiefs, the League, the Great White Brotherhood and the Great Dark Brotherhood. They have contacted the Outer-Queen (Ming didn't elaborate), and manage the solar system through the rough waters of evolution. They are the Board of Trustees for the solar corporation, while The Family are the hired management of Earth Inc. But even the AOD report up, and their medium to the Outer Queen is Boss Hawk. The All-Seer, the Solar Watcher . . . our Lord.”

Ming constantly hammered home the concept that the magick employed by The Family and the Magi is very real. It is not the hocus pocus magick of illusion and hope. It is the magick of Will working upon history to create WHAT IS. Will slow-cooks time and space. No one, not even the Ancient Of Days, snaps their magickal fingers and suddenly matter/time/space has been fundamentally altered on every level of consciousness.

Slow cook and manpower.

Never underestimate manpower.

Manpower built the pyramids. Manpower placed the 80-ton slabs of granite at The Henge. The ancients didn't float the things through the air. Where's the power in that? Power is a derivative of blood, sweat, and human emotion. It's why the elder sites have survived the test of time. It's why their power has not waned one ounce. Power thrives in things with history. Conjured things, things created out of puffs of smoke, are feeble even though they may appear strong.

I reach the North Gate; a gate a hundred feet wide, 60 feet tall constructed of twisted, sun-bleached birch.

Manpower and atheistic vision.

The pyramids aren't just piles of rocks. Every block is a divine proportion. The placement of the pyramids is a reflection of heavenly bodies (Orion's Belt). The Henge isn't just a random stone artwork, isn't just a ritual circle. These are places where art, function, and science meet in absolute glory. These sites are symbols of our occult understanding and they evolve us. Humanity must build physical things to prove our deep understanding of the universe. Knowing isn't enough. We have to manifest knowledge into real things, things we can touch. This is turning knowledge into wisdom. Without the metamorphosis of knowledge into wisdom nothing great can be accomplished. The Kinghts Templar very well may have found the Sangraal (the Holy Grail) in the ruins of Solomons Temple, and maybe they found documents exposing 'The Dark Con Of Man,' and they surely found instructions on how to build divine buildings, but most importantly they learned that to evolve, man must convert

knowledge into wisdom then use his Will to affect the physical universe. He must build divine things. Thus began the greatest episode of construction humanity has ever known.

As for the Camp, it won't stand the test of time, but it's still a marvel of manpower and Will. It's a smorgasbord of personal expression. According to the map the camp is a grid using sacred geometry, and though it looks like the organizer's dream of sharp angles and proper degrees has been eclipsed by chaos and rule-breakers (which are the secret ingredients to all great things), it still works, and in the end that's the only thing that matters.

I walk down an avenue formed between tent groupings proliferated with vendors; from guys flipping pancakes and pubs flowing with keg beer, to holistic helpers and spooky charlatans, to drug dens and love dens. I pass a bazaar of smaller merchants hocking drums, solar-powered glow toys, mushroom tea, salvation. Before I left London the radio estimated the camp's population to be 80,000. I'd say there are 200K, minimum.

The avenue crowd parts for a truck carrying firewood (temps are forecast to dip into the mid 20's). I find a small road that snakes through tent sites. The scene is quieter than the main drag. Washed-out people slump in folding chairs, feet pressed against 55-gallon drums smoldering with fires. I pass several hardcore drug deals. A couple of drunken arguments. The sun hasn't even set.

(The radio also said there has only been one accidental death, 1 rape, 4 assaults, and 5 arrests. Which put the crime rate of the Camp under .02%. Not bad for a place where the nearest cop is a mile outside the gate.)

I find a semi-vacant campsite with an exposed fire burning nicely in a proper fire pit. A girl in a chair raises a wine bottle as I sit, but offers neither a sip nor conversation. The map says there's an area of rental tents around the VIP Village. \$280 a night, three night minimum, credit checks only, gets you a laminate pass, sleeping bag, and four split logs. The pay tents are at the West Gate, just east of Stonehenge. As for Jaz, she is

in the in the VIP Village. I know this because the VIP laminates are black like the ones I saw in my coffee vision.

I exit the alley and walk onto another avenue. There's a platform rising ten feet above the trampled field. It's packed with people waiting for sunset. I climb up and find a spot next to some teenagers. They're friendly and chill. They part and give me space. Our contact is all nonverbal and comforting.

Smoke fills the air. It turns pink in the setting sun. Lame fireworks explode. This is going to be one wild scene on the eve of the 21st. Before the sun says bye-bye, I find the VIP Village. Several rings of rental tents buffer it from the Camp. A fence that's neither totalitarian, nor liberal separates the rental tents from the general Camp. You could climb it, knock it down, but then you'd cross the line, and then you are going to be taken out. Dominating the VIP area is a 'Big Top' tent complex (appears to be Three Ringed) with dozens of other smaller tents nestled up against it. VIP is the inner-circle where the real action, the pageantry, the crimson ritual and oiled up orgies—where the purposeful party happens.

A half dozen jack-booted private security guards man the main entrance into the rental village. They are unarmed, but surely wired to a command post. There's probably even a drone circling 24/7, not to control, but to watch. Always gotta watch.

One meets me halfway.

"This is private."

A group of people exit the rental village and disappear into the Camp.

"I'm a renter."

"None left."

I pull out \$1200 in crisp credit checks to show that I'm not some piker. I'm waved through and directed into a receiving tent. An exhausted girl takes my money, gives me a red-laminate, a new sleeping bag (no wood till tomorrow) and a hi-lighted map on how to find my tent.

(Red laminate means that I'm one ring removed from the actual VIP center. Green would be the next closest [and another

\$2500.] Black would get me in, but here's no price on that ticket. Either you have it or you don't. I'm part of the class that can pay to be close to the VIP's. It's all pretty depressing.)

My tent is new and small. It's in Phase II of this development that's lightly populated and quiet except for a group who has strung up Christmas lights. They're getting ready for a night out in the Camp. There's a massive rave tonight (and every night) featuring two of London's most skilled Djs. But for me, it's about penetrating the inner circle, finding Jaz, going further.

Around 10pm I venture out to the small avenue of vendors within the rental village. I poke my head into a large canvas military tent and witness a séance. At another tent a foot-massage party almost coaxes me in. I pass by a debate tent. It's a surprisingly formal affair. Men wear academic suits. Women wear conservative dresses. A mediator is addressing the crowd about the rules. The topic is: *The Day, what will it look like?*

The Day is only three days away, and except for the fact that the world economy has ground to a halt, everything seems 'normal' (if such a state even exists). But if you're not one of the people partying at a sacred site, you're probably home, hunkering down, totally tweaked by the energy kicked up by a world sitting on the edge of its collective seat.

I've whittled it down to two theories on what The Day means, and one observation pointing out that The Day isn't happening as prophesized.

Theory I: The 'lie of linear time,' the seconds/minutes/hours, is a spell/program superimposed over the Space/Matter matrix, creating the Time/Space/Matter matrix. Nish, on numerous occasions, has tried to sell me his theory that the 'seconds/minutes/hours spell'—Slave Time—was created by a nasty Aztec chaos magi named Hobotex the Bad in 1456 A.D. to punish the white man; while I contend that 'slave time' was created much earlier in history by Smoking Mirror, aka Teclacatlacopa, the Toltec wizard/god of black magick. But to the Mayans, when and who cast the TimeSpell wasn't of major concern because they knew how to time travel (when there is no such thing as 'linear

time,' time travel takes on a whole new meaning and doesn't seem that paradoxical impossible), they saw the Spell being cast, and they saw when it would end. Thus the date 12.21.2012. When considering this theory of 'linear time as a spell,' it's important to realize that 'time' is not the enemy. Measuring the passage of time with the seasons and heavens is an ancient and holy practice, but when we switched to a masculine, sun-based system of time measurement, forgetting the moon, the delicate balance was disturbed. Yet the sun-based calendar and clock aren't the great evil neo-pagans and the Goddess worshipers claim. The true evil is the seconds/minutes/hours that have turned time into a commodity we never have enough of. We've placed all our belief in these time units, yet they are the greatest illusion in the Great Illusion. We've disconnected from the universal pulse. Created our own pulse synced to the ticking of each precious second. And it rules us. Enslaves us.

Theory II: Alexeloxicuti, the resident Master Mayan Star Gazer and calendar maker (in those days a calendar wasn't a flat thing on your wall with pictures of hotrods or teddybears, it was a huge multi-dimensional wheel built throughout a city), so A-lex goes on something like a vacation, and when he returns, the Mayan Empire has disappeared. A-lex goes back on vacation and has been there ever since. So in the 1950's some archeologist deciphers the fact that the Mayan calendar ends. No one paid much attention until the New Agers picked it up in '80s and did their Harmonic Convergence in '87. And now we have this worldwide shenanigans based on complete folly and nothing will happen except a global hangover. However, when I really think about it, this theory is almost totally negated by the Eve phenomenon.

Now my observations pointing out that The Day isn't working out as its been prophesized.

The short of it goes like this . . .

From 1 A.D. to 1500 A.D. information doubled. From 1500 to 1900 it doubled again. From 1900 to 1950 another doubling (see how the doubling time shortens). From 1950

to 1980, doubled. 1980 to 1995, doubled. 1995 to 2005, doubled. 2005 to 2010, doubled. Then we were supposed to hit overdrive. Information should've double every six months, every four months, every two, every month. On 10.15.2012, information, as the theory goes, should've been doubling every 18 days. Currently, information should be doubling every 12 to 48 hours. In two days it will be doubling every second, then every nanosecond until all the information in the universe is downloaded/backloaded into the human matrix . . . and WHAMMY, we transcend into hyperspace. (The information doubling thing is part of the 13 fractal-cycles within each of the nine Mayan baktuns, the nine baktuns span 16 billion years.)

As I already said, the 'information double' isn't happening like it was purposed, and this 'information double' is a major component of the 2012 equation. Does this mean something is wrong? Has somebody altered the future? Yet, considering this is a process that's been cooking for 16 billion years, it is reasonable to think we could be off by a couple of days, a couple of months or years, even decades or centuries. (One brilliant modern day shaman, deceased, postulated that on 12.21.2012 someone invents [invented?] a time machine and the future changes every minute.)

All the evidence, or lack there of aside, I cannot avoid the fact that history is ripe with 'end of the world' dates. Given they are not all as intense as this 12.21.2012 thing, where most of the world has jumped on the bandwagon (thanks to Eve), but by no means does this wide acceptance guarantee a fundamental, see it, smell it change of monumental proportions. 12.21.2012 may go down as just another paranoid/hopeful dream, and before we know it, someone will decide 2037 is a date we better keep an eye on.

I reach the fence separating the red and green areas. Through the links, 50 yards down a narrow road, I spot a gate into VIP. There's a large gate with a smaller door in it. Both are shut. It's an auxiliary entrance only open from 8 to 8. The VIP perimeter fence is draped with black linen that billows in the slight breeze.

I hear Ming saying: “If a sleeper gets in there, sees things a sleeper just can’t see, that sleeper is dead. But if you get caught, they will dump your ass in the Artic Circle for 10 years as punishment. They can’t kill people like you and me. It’s all about the CapStone. The Family and the Elite make up the blocks of the pyramid, with the AOD being the 4 blocks directly under the CapStone. The CapStone is Boss Hawk; His symbol is the All Seeing Eye. This symbol used to be on every U.S. dollar, now it is on every Xcet. (Xcet is the name of the new world currency that arose after the crash of ‘09.) Everyone else is in the weeds. And I don’t mean insignificant, but they’re not major players. Then there are people like you and me who ‘See.’ We are ‘down with the CapStone,’ but still out in the weeds. We’re used by The Family and Elite, handled with gloves, disdain, and suspicion. We are ‘Free Agents.’ Once you ‘See,’ Boss Hawk becomes aware of you. He starts watching you. And when you’re watched, you’re protected. It’s like having the president committed to your general wellbeing on a day-to-day basis. But this president never leaves power and his reign is total. You may not be equal in the eyes of the Elite, of The Family, but to Him you are sacred.”

I wish personal recognition of a god were enough for me.

The Elite/The Family will never accept me, and it just eats me up. To know there are people out there who view every cell in my body as inferior, just eats me all the way up.

Damn my parents for being middle class sleepers!

I find a dark area, hop the fence into the green zone, and sneak my way to the VIP fence. Always move fast and don’t look around. Think invisible and you are. I casually climb the VIP fence and immediately come up against the back of a huge tent. I roll under the canvas and enter an empty banquet tent.

I exit the tent and walk down a beaten path lit with glass-enclosed gas torches. The area is deserted. I pull up my hoodie and feel a measure of security. The path heads up a mound and weaves between tents hiding god-knows-what. And then I realize that I have no plan. The VIP area is huge and convoluted.

Fate has this annoying eternal quality to it. It doesn't play by our narrow temporal confines. Paradoxically, this allows fate to serve up—

Ahead on the path stands a woman. Her crimson sheer robes billow in the breeze. Her face is hidden by a hood that reaches below her nose tip. The cool damp air exposes her heavy breathing. Her nipples are taut. She spins around and runs up the path. The luscious outline of her rear hemispheres almost triggers a chase reflex.

Crossroads.

This is where I decide to cut and run, I mean leave the country, escape back to my store, or choose to be a warrior and venture further into my mission.

The woman appears again. Her head bobs. She's trying to see my face. She runs away again. This time it's not going to be a reflex that sends me in pursuit, it's a choice at the Crossroads. When Robert Johnson met the Devil in Natchez he had a choice: Go further into the Unknown, or turn around, escape back into the Known. For me it started out as a deep need to know more, fueled by those insane events two days/a million years ago. If you don't go crazy, you need to know more. You need to accomplish the 'holy conversion' of knowledge into wisdom. And who wouldn't accept the challenge given to me? But I've moved beyond all that. From this point on, the raggedy edge gets more surreal, more dangerous, more raggedy. I can feel it. A nauseating combination of excitement and fear washes my hips. This is my moment of truth.

My legs make the choice for me and walk me to the rise where the woman just was. She appears 20 yards away at another path. Again there is no one around. They're drawing me in. This is a set up. I'm in trouble.

But trouble is relative.

The woman takes off. I break in pursuit. She leads me through a maze of tents. She stops at the mouth of one of the Big-Top tent then disappears into it. I follow, but at a creeping tiger-pace. I enter a tunnel a hundred feet long. Lighting the path

are glowing coals. At the end I am forced to turn right down a narrow curving path. The walls are tightly strung heavy-duty canvas attached to smooth wood arches. Serious effort went into constructing this tent. It's not some standard wedding tent. And from what I can tell there is no metal.

I wind tighter and tighter towards the center, winding counterclockwise. Spiraling in. And then I pop out into a big courtyard. In the middle of the yard, lit by the blue moon, is The Henge. Patches of moon-lit land stand in stark contrast to pitch black shadows.

In all the excitement I guess people haven't realized/don't care that Stonehenge is under wraps.

The woman appears a few feet to my right.

"Jaz?" I say and remove my hood.

The woman places a finger to her lips and takes my hand, leads me in silence towards The Henge. I try and get parallel with her, to see her face, but she speeds up, only allowing me a view of the derrière I was previously enamored with, but am now completely uninterested in.

Well, maybe not completely.

The unknown beauty leaves me in the center of the ancient monoliths, slinks away to join a dozen identical figures emerging from the shadows. Before me is a shallow, 12-foot long x 4-foot wide granite coffin placed atop a larger granite slab. Suspended above the coffin by an intricate pulley and wooden pillar assemble is the lid.

I'll chalk it up to my uncertain situation, but I can't seem to muster the appropriate excitement my first, and such a close encounter with the Henge should elicit, though the stones are much bigger than I imagined. And I can feel the power, it's a pulling sensation, pulling my soul in every direction, including in.

Now, some men would be overcome with the potential of being surrounded by 13 perfect-figured priestesses under a silver moon. Perhaps under different circumstances (like if it were a mid summers night) I would hardly be able to contain myself.

But this is serious business. Cold business. To fantasize about the defilement of a priestess while she is in robes must be a magickal crime. There are some things you don't mess with, and magickal law is one of them. Magickal law and Gods. Don't ever, for the slightest of fleeting milliseconds ever consider yourself equal or above them, because compared to the Gods we are gnats. Deep reverence is the only way to approach such forces and live to talk about it.

But even gnats have their place in the Grand Comedy.

This is my initiation, but I haven't been trained in the protocol. It's like being married without the rehearsal. This fact gives me pause, and forces an abrupt reconsideration of my situation.

Sacrifice?

The Druids aren't obsessed with blood, like the Aztecs. In a Druid sacrifice the energy of the sacrificed is funneled to a deity, not through blood, but by prolonged suffering. I guess it all falls under 'Thermodynamics 11.' When Druids sacrifice, it is clean, but emotionally gory. They put you in the sarcophagus and let you suffer. In many ways it's much worse than having your still beating heart showed to you before you're tossed into a volcano.

Conversely, Druid initiation is identical to sacrifice up to the death part. After four days of heaven and hell, they open the tomb and you're done. Initiated. Being in the coffin sends the candidate on a journey into the mind's antipodal recesses. The most intense level 5 LSD trip can't even compare. Sealing up in a coffin, no matter if you know you'll be let out, triggers spiritual processes that cannot be coaxed any other way. And in my case, when I come out, I'm the 74th monkey.

Eternally burned in the collective mind will I be.

Pivotal link in the evolutionary chain complete.

The warrior knighted.

A priest wearing white moves into the ring formed by the crimson women. He removes his hood. He doesn't wear a mask. This is bad news for me.

He stares through me with black eyes. His face is creased.
His beard is stubbly, silvery hair spiked and messy.

Can they sacrifice someone like me?

I thought I was protected?

The women start chanting. It starts as a low hum. After a minute I can make out words—

Worship Him
Give your goat
But to please Him
Slit your throat . . .

In the lecture ‘*Suroh*,’ Ming, petting a falcon perched on his wrist, said:

“Boss Hawk demands sacrifice, well, it’s debatable if He actually ‘demands’ it. After all, He never speaks, just watches. Some wonder if it is all a misunderstanding. Untold billions killed over the millenniums—war, famines, pestilence, disease, the Four Horseman, it’s all been sacrifice to Boss Hawk, yet there is the distinct possibility that it’s all been a misunderstanding. Sometimes it seems crazy enough to be true.”

The priest, stare unbroken, points to the coffin.

Now I’ve never heard, nor read, about anyone who chickened out at the moment of initiation, and I’ll tell you why: firstly, they know they’ll be let out, and secondly, and more importantly, they cannot fathom what awaits them. I lack both the assurance of survival and the comfort of ignorance.

Gut.

Always go with the gut.

Gut is screaming RUN!

Fear.

Always go where there is the most fear. This one overrides the gut thing. It’s not like standing on the roof of a skyscraper, and though you are scared to jump, you do it anyway. That is suicide.

I mean moving into the unknown of life. The bravest go even though they are scared. I'm terrified, but I go because it is the way of the warrior.

It's also the way of the ignorant and stupid.

I take off my boots (keep my socks on, granite is cold) remove my trusty hoodie, and climb into the tomb. This stone has seen the earth when it was all fire and badness, and it will probably exist to see it again. The pulleys squeak and rattle. The lid lowers slowly, but quick enough to only give me half a minute of starlight and freedom before sphincter-crunching terror takes over.

And then it's done. I'm sealed in.

The lid is eight inches from my nose. I can't turn over. Corpses don't flip.

I pull out my lighter.

A wave of calm sweeps through my bones. My breath steadies. I'm comfortable, content. I could fall asleep. Must be the opposite of adrenalin dump: dopamine flush.

I'm almost too content to care about the voice speaking to me. If it were only in my head, I'd just ride it out.

But it's like someone else is in here with me.

"You forgot about the dice, didn't you?" it says.

If this is a hallucination it's early and heavy duty.

"In that useless pocket in your jeans you'll find two very small dice."

The voice is familiar, confident, and a little abusive, but caring, like my father.

"Are you a spirit trapped in here?"

"Cut the crap or you're gonna die. The dice."

I reach into that little pocket that took me years to realize was the '5th pocket' in the 5-pocket jean ruse. Extracting the mini dice proves to be a challenge in these tight confines.

The lighter dies.

"Got 'em?" asks the voice.

I nod.

"If you're nodding, I can't see it."

“Yes, I have them.”

“OK, roll a six with the one-five-combo.”

Who does this guy think I am, Houdini?

“You will die in there if you fail to act.”

“Wrong. In a few days they’ll let me out and then I’ll be the 74th monkey.”

“OK, monkey, willing to bet your life on that assumption?”

“I willingly stepped in here. I’m ready to face my—”

“Place the one die between your right index and middle, between the knuckles, the five dots facing to the outside. Put the five die between your pinkie and ring, one dot facing inside.”

“First or second knuckles?”

The voice erupts, “Between the big knuckles!”

Maybe this is how it goes. After all, nothing is ever like you think it’s going to be. The dice however are a real anomaly. Their existence seems almost impossible. Even though they’re small, I should’ve felt them.

“What happens when I roll the dice?”

No response.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

I hold my palm over my chest, the die wedged between my fingers. Do I cast them on my stomach? To the side? Do I throw them at my feet?

“A little help here.”

My invisible helper is either gone or frustrated into silence.

I choose to cast to my left. This way if I screw up, I can give it another shot. I flick my wrist and widen my fingers at the same time. The tiny dice sound like plastic chips falling in a cathedral. It’s weird, but the stone just got softer, almost cushiony. Panic invades. Panic is the insane cousin of fear. A person can be under control, go about their business and still be in fear, just ask 98% of the population who live their daily life in such a state. But panic is possessive. It has nothing to do

with rationality and control. My heart explodes into chaotic rhythms. My breathing is short. I'm yelling and it's a totally objective experience. Screams come out in deep horrible blasts. My legs kick the lid. My hands scrape at stone. My head jerks from side to side . . .

. . . and I'm holding a pillow. My pillow. My tan chenille throw pillow. I'm on my couch. I sit up. I've been dreaming.

Holy nut busting bitches, just a dream.

Except there's a man in my kitchen. A modern primitive in a secondhand suit. He stirs a pot. He wears a faded, chalk dust pinstripe jacket and a monochromatic maroon shirt and knit tie. Stuck through his lower septum is a sharpened rib bone. His dreadlocks are piled atop his head. He is Ming, and he is not. Just like my apartment is mine, but not.

Just like I am me, but not.

On the floor near the ottoman are the micro dice.

Showing is a 6.

1/5 combo.

Full deployment into the Surreal Empire has occurred.

2nd Dimension

5

Ming ladles liquid into a mug and sits down across from me. I jump up and run to the front door.

“You’re not gonna like what you see,” he warns.

I pull the door open in defiance. Meeting me is a dense steam cloud—

There is something in the steam. I bat at the mist—

A human pokes out from the cloud, bumps into me. Its skin is moist, rubbery and inorganic. The mist parts enough to let me see its androgynous shape and anatomical-androgynous ‘Ken’ doll body. Its face is a blank mask of tight skin. The ‘human’ recoils into the mist and ambles down the catwalk, down the stairs.

Stretching to the horizon is a barren blue/grey sandy landscape. Here and there are gentle rises, tall dunes, calm streams. To the north there’s a beach with small waves lapping at the shore. Countless millions of the Ken dolls shuffle around this landscape surrounded by steam clouds. There are great swarms of them where the clouds meet and form one giant fog.

I walk out onto the catwalk. Only my building exists on this tundra, and it looks like it’s been here for a million million years. The sky is overcast. The sun is a blot behind the smoky sheet.

“You should make it a habit of listening to me. Listening to me very precisely,” says Ming from my easy chair.

I return to the couch to be absorbed by the supple micro fiber. Hopefully it will suck me in, bring me back to the cold stone. For I prefer the tomb, thank you very much.

“WAKE UP!” I scream when I realize the couch won’t help me.

“You’re not dreaming.”

“I’m in the coffin, and I’m dreaming.”

“I promise you,” he says, “you are not dreaming. And no part of you is still in that coffin.”

I have no response. I think my mind has finally blown. It feels really good.

Ming strokes his beard. “What do you remember?”

Suddenly I’ve lost the security clearance to access my memory. I’m standing at the vault, but I can’t get in. I pound on the impenetrable door.

“How am I what I am?” blurts out like a deeply satisfying belch.

“How am I what I am?” Ming repeats.

“I am . . . How . . . I am . . .”

Ming inspects my face. Looks into my eyes. “Drink the tea, you’ll start to remember.”

I gulp the nasty liquid.

“You’re suffering from delusion because you stayed in too long. I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

I truly cannot comprehend what he’s talking about and he sees it in my eyes.

“Who am I?”

“You are in a unique situation.”

“Where was I? Where am I?”

Ming starts puffing on a long clay pipe. “Does the term, ‘Be-Here-Now’ make any sense?”

I take another sip and the vault door concealing my memory opens fast with a ‘swoosh.’

“Throw out the ‘Be,’” he says, “throw out the ‘Now.’ The only thing that matters is position, ‘Here’ or hereness. Where you are is what you are. You were what you were, because you were there. Now you’re here. So you are this.”

Right.

“And when you go back in, you’ll be there and that is what you’ll be.”

“Can I be someone boring?”

“Such a state no longer exists.”

“And where am I going?”

Ming gets up and paces. It’s a casual pace, not like he’s frustrated. The man just can’t stand still.

“The soul is encased in the Monad’s mind. The Monads are those things outside. The Monad receives the projection and creates a world in its mind that the soul experiences as reality.”

“Projection?”

“Do you remember anything we talked about?”

“You said The Real casts a shadow called The Other.”

“True, but The Real itself is projection.”

“Doesn’t compute.”

“The world as you know it is a mental construct; a manufactured environment. But it is not created by the Monads. They are the machinery in this equation. Like a movie projector doesn’t make the movie, the Monads don’t make reality.”

“It’s a virtual reality.”

“Think about that word. The definition is: ‘Being something in effect even if not in reality conforming to the generally accepted version.’”

“Real even though it’s not.”

“Real even if it’s not,” Ming says nodding.

“I’ve always gotten the concept that I wasn’t my body, I’ve grasped all the quantum theories, I get all the spiritual angles, but this is, this is . . . ah . . . this is just too complicated.”

“The only thing you need to understand is that every person has their own Monad. All lifetimes happen in there. When you die, you’re still in there. The Monad is the actual physical you. When you become aware of the Monad, you begin the process that leads to living as the Monad, living as a god, instead of that training game you call life.”

“We’re like pilots or something. Mini pilots—”

“The soul has no size.”

“But our whole world happens in there. Inside those things.”

“You are those things. But you cannot gain control of the Monad until you’ve passed eons of schooling and training. An activated Monad can do anything. It has the power of God. The power to create universes with a word . . . or to destroy them with a thought.”

“OK, so if I’m in there, how am I here?”

“You’re here, not there.”

I pinch my forearm. “So this is me?”

“You’re here, so this is you.”

“That’s a radical concept.”

“It’s quantumly sensible.”

“It’s not jiving with me.”

“Why is, ‘where you are/what you are’ so radical a concept?” asks Ming.

“It’s not.”

“Position determines being. But position changes. Being changes. You were what you were because you were there. You are what you are because you are here. But remember, what you are, is not who you are.”

“So I’m outside myself?”

“Round Robins Red Barn We Run.”

“You mean I’ll never be able to make sense of it.”

Ming winks and gives me a thumbs-up.

“Or is it that you can’t, won’t tell me?”

Ming gives me a double thumbs-up, no wink.

“And what’s the point of this?”

“You are jumping through experience. Uploading experience back into the Projector. You’re like a test pilot.”

“So that last experience wasn’t really who I am?”

“You were what you were because you were there.”

“So that was me?”

“You were what you were because you were there. Now you are what you are because you are here.”

“Where I am, is who I am?”

“No, where you are is what you are.”

“Than who am I?”

“You’re you.”

“And who is that?”

“You is that.”

“I’m that?”

“Actually, you’re this,” Ming assures me.

“What is this?”

“This is who you are.”

“Around The Barn We Run.”

“You’re catching on.”

“And why am I here? Why is this happening to me?”

“The Projector needs to experience the different plots before projecting them.”

“Who, what is the Projector?”

“It is the Projector.”

“God.”

“Personally I think God built the Projector, then dove into His creation.”

“And right now,” I say, “we’re outside of the projection.”

“We’re outside the Monad.”

“So I’m going to jump back into one of those things—”

“Monad,” Ming says with smoke-filled lungs.

“Right, jump backing and experience plot twists.”

“It’s like a reconnaissance mission,” Ming says as he exhales.

“No offense, but analogies are weak forms of description.”

“They’re convenient.”

“So the 2012 thing is relevant.”

“Oh yeah.”

“And The Family, InterSpace, The Other—”

“Relevant. Relevant. Relevant.”

“What happens next?”

“The Projector’s fuel is emotion. Emotion is created by experience. But the Projector is not a vampire. It’s not just sucking emotional energy. It’s a symbiotic relationship. The Projector projects, the soul experiences and sends back emotion. It’s a feedback loop. One cannot exit without the other.”

“And this is why the world, above all things, is an emotional rollercoaster?”

“Light and dark experiences create different emotional octane, but only when mixed together is a fuel created that can power the Projector. This is why you are going forward, to test the ‘fuel.’”

“So when I go back in, it’s going to be cup cakes and sunshine; darkness and mud pies.”

“The events after The Day, as with all of time, must be a balanced mix of light and dark experience,” Ming pauses and seems to be searching for the right way to frame what he says next. “You have been drafted to test the dark fuel. Dark only. No cupcakes. No sunshine.”

“No sympathy either.”

“Nature loves courage.”

“Dark as in negative?”

“Dark as in shadow. Dark as in heavy, intense.”

“As in evil.”

“Good and evil are not exclusive to light or dark.”

“Who are you?” I demand.

“An agent of experience.”

“Dark or light?”

“Does it help if you know that dark and light are merely states of the same thing?”

“It doesn’t.”

“These questions are irrelevant to your mission.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Your trust is not required.”

A hard feeling washes my gut. I wonder if this is how a murderer feels when hearing the life sentence come down.

“What determines where I jump next?”

“Random probability,” he replies and scoops up the dice.

“Can I jump into a female?”

“You will flow where there is least resistance.” Ming signals for me to drink more tea. My synapses are snapping and popping.

“This batch will prevent you from getting lost in the experience. You’ll remember me, remember this conversation. You’ll remember to toss the dice when the time comes to jump.” He drops the dice into a small velvet bag strung on a rope, puts the bag around my neck.

“Each experience you become, is no more, no less, than a stone to get you further, yet you must flesh out the experience—steady yourself on the stone before jumping to the next. And some stones are bigger, some less stable than others.”

“How do I know when to cast the dice?”

“You can stay long in an experience, but you can’t stay short. Each experience has a point that must be reached. Intuition will tell you when that is. Then you cast. Jump.”

“How could I have been somewhere before that last jump? I mean, that was my life. I have memories, I have a history.” It feels like there’s a bumblebee cruising my mind.

Ming massages his neck. He looks exhausted. “The only thing that matters is your mission—”

“I have memories. I have history—”

“Your mission is to go further, and to stop her.”

“Her?”

“Monkey see. Monkey do. But monkey ask no more questions.”

I drop the mug and reach for Ming. He dances away from me. His mouth contorts into a furious and wild smile. Blue flames pulse in his eyes. He lets his dreads down and shakes his head like a tranced head banger.

Monkey do, monkey dooooo

The room turns nearly pitch black. I’m standing on my head. A ripping sound echoes, cellophane ripping, great continental sheets of it. Ripping . . .

In the dimness I see little people scurrying around. They’re taking things away. They grab something, run in circles, disappear. Others gnaw on the couch, the wall, the refrigerator. Rays from a dazzling flash outside the apartment stream into the room. For a second I see the little people’s features. They’re

orange and black, horizontally stripped. They wear small dunce caps. Ming is gone.

SLAP!

One of the little bastards slaps me again with a tiny hand.

SLAP!!

Again.

And again.

They're swarming. They're disassembling reality.

SMACK!

The walls disintegrate. Then the floor. The ceiling.

SLAP!

The temperature drops below freezing.

SPANK!

I am in total blackness, floating. A floor appears and I settle on it. In the blackness a scene is being built. It's like watching stagehands change a set. (Fucking metaphor.) A chair is built under me. A desk appears. Walls go up. Above a florescent light flickers, then goes out. Three hairline-computer screens are placed on the desk. Lights flicker. I'm in an office. Through the window blinds seeps early morning darkness. The munchkins wheel in two hotshot stockbrokers, or commodities hustlers, who can tell, they all look the same. Each wears a wrist computer. The lights flicker. Heat returns. The little people scurry out. The last one runs up the desk, giggles, SLAP! darts out just before the lights come on and stay on. The computer screens power up. One of the brokers twitches. A vicious shuttering rattles this newly assembled world. Sound arrives. And then the scene is fully animated.

6

“I told you the oil market was going to crash,” says one of the young brokers to me. He then shouts a stream of orders to someone outside the office.

“Half of continental Asia is without power,” says the other, relaying breaking news he’s hearing through his earpiece. “Turkey is reporting major malfunctions in their grid. Europe is spotty and ready to pull the plug, save the infrastructure from frying.”

The obviously more aggressive broker pipes in, “New Zealand and Australia have been completely shut down for ten hours. Not even satellite phones are working. Our analysts think their power grids have 100% failure. They’ll have to rewire their whole country. We should buy copper and i-Tech.”

One of the computer screens shows an account. The account goes from \$18 million to over \$25 million before my eyes. We are making a killing.

A frazzled assistant runs into the room with pink order sheets. “We had to fill ‘em out by hand, but they’re in.” He hands them to the aggressive broker who slaps them down on the desk. They all wait for my reaction. I leaf through the slips.

“Good,” I say. This disappoints the crew.

The brokers shuffle the gofer out the door, assuring him that I’m so overwhelmed with joy that I can’t even express it.

“That’s seven million from the Yen-Xcet/Dollar-Xcet short. The deal was sitting on the beach and we just walked off with it.

Puts us over 25, and it's not even five AM." The aggressive gun leans in close. "I know you're tired, boss, but we gotta keep on firing. Stay hungry. At this rate we'll be retired by breakfast."

The other broker, apparently astonished at the insubordination, keeps his mouth shut.

"And billionaires by lunch if we pace ourselves," I somehow muster, "especially if we act like this isn't the first time in the end zone."

True sage advice.

The young hustler shoots me a pitying glance, grabs his crotch, says he needs to piss, darts out for a lightning quick bathroom break.

"What happens when the sun rises here? We gonna lose power?" asks the other broker.

I get up and peak through the blinds. I'm high up in a skyscraper. I can't be sure about what city this is. But most likely it's New York. If the entire modern world is Babylon, then NYC is its capital.

"Jim's all tweaked," he says, "he won't hear nothing about it, but have you considered that the banks might shut down? If that happens, all these gains won't be worth shit. It's just paper profits."

Jim comes back from his piss break and catches the tail end. He rushes up to the other broker.

"Cut the negative bullshit. Cut it. It's an EMP from the sun, playing havoc with the grids. Countries that shut their grid down in time will be back on line tomorrow. And the EMP storm hit and passed. Only one hemisphere is fried. God bless America."

"I'm buying gold with my money. I mean bricks of it," says the other broker with a glimmer in his eyes, his demeanor changed by the contagious optimism of his coworker.

I salute the traders and exit the office. Outside is a cramped hall of assistants, half in their pajamas, who are drowning in paper and cash fever. I walk into a reception area. A secretary has five pots of coffee brewing. I walk down a dim hall. At the

end are two doors. Someone comes from behind, bodychecks me out of the way, pulls open a door. It swings shut.

The dice.

I pat my chest, feel the bag around my neck. I open the doors.

Before me, sunken down a flight of stairs, is a trading floor crammed with hundreds of traders in varying states of madness. Money is growing on tress, sitting on beaches, being harvested like never before. Trillions are being made. But there's always a loser in a transaction. Never is a trade a one-sided victory. It is a fundamental of market operations few people fully understand. When you win, who cares, and when you lose, you care even less. These assholes are raking it in, but so is everyone. I'm sure this scene is repeated thousands of times across this great capitalist country. And they all think they're winners. How can you not be a winner? It's like picking apples in October. Maybe market fundamentals, along with electrical grids, have gone the way of the Dodo.

A manager appears at the far end above the trading pit. He frantically waves his arms, trying to silence the pit. A woman next to him holds a bullhorn.

"London just went off line," she yells. "Switzerland is reporting only minor disturbances. Buy the Swiss-Xct/Euro-Xct pair. Short the Euro-Xct/Dollar-Xct. As many contracts as you can for the next ten minutes. Go!"

The pit returns to controlled chaos. I guess the Swiss are either divinely protected, or they built a giant Faraday Cage around their mountain stronghold. Probably both.

I stop at a trader's desk. In a small window on one of the screens is a news broadcast. The split screen shows a talkinghead in a studio and a field correspondent standing on a roof with a panoramic view of the Parisian skyline. Smoke rises from sporadic fires. The trader listens to the broadcast through an earpiece. The box vanishes. The trader turns.

"Sorry, sir."

"What are they saying?"

“Most of the cars don’t work. Helicopters, planes, all grounded except for some military headwear that was in protected bunkers. Everyone’s saying a massive sunflare fried all unprotected electric circuits in the Eastern Hemisphere. We should be fine because the flare passed. Talk about lucky.”

“Yeah, God bless America.”

Through the windows slip the first tendrils of morning. That ‘lucky’ theory will be tested very soon, and I don’t want to be around to see it go down in flaming misery. I reach the far end of the trading pit and climb the stairs. An armed security guard stops me.

“Executives only.”

I pull an ID pass from my pocket. He waves me by.

I pass by a dimly lit office.

“We’ve been busting our ass for you,” says a slick guy as he grabs my arm. “Come on, you’ve gotta see this.”

We enter the ambient office. A man and woman sit on a couch. On the coffee table is a mound of powder. There are three empty bottles of champagne with five full ones cooling.

“A pick me up?” asks the woman pointing to the white pile.

I ignore her and follow the slick guy behind his desk. He sits in a huge executive chair.

“OK, so something big happened. It’s not the end of the world, but something big.” He punches at a keyboard. “Our analysts are saying this will drop the Gross World Product under 1%, maybe even into a global recession. Depends on the damage. But it doesn’t matter. The Street is cleaning house. It’s unprecedented. But what next? Premiums are drying up as we speak. Volatility will be out of control for a few days, but then this whole thing will flatten. You won’t be able to make a penny with a million bucks.”

“Soy beans,” growls the man on the couch.

The slick guy nods. “World’s gotta eat. Stockpiles in China are six days, nine max. Everyone’s focusing on the oil breakdown, copper, platinum, Forex, why wouldn’t they—”

“It’s like finding money on the beach,” I say.

“Exactly, so no ones looking past the core commodities. Except us, and by the looks of the volume, some very big players, governments I mean, locking in their price. America has enough stockpiled soy to feed the world for a month. I’m directing 60% of the firm’s capital into Soy Futures. If you want in, I’ll cover you and put you down for 42 million contracts. But don’t tell anybody.”

The woman stands and saunters over, champagne flute in hand. “When we make the move, the entire Street is going to follow. They’re just waiting for someone to lead the way. But there won’t be anyone writing contracts. It’s going to be ugly.”

I give a double thumbs up and back out of the room. I find an empty office, slip in, lock the door. Flick on the light.

“They’re all assholes,” says an elderly man. He sits in the corner with a bottle of Jack. “Piling up electric numbers that mean nothing.”

I kneel in front of him. Remove the black velvet dice bag. Dump the dice into my hand.

“SEC will void half the trades, if there still is an SEC.” He takes a long swig, pulls out a pouch and dumps gold coins on the floor. “If you don’t have metal, you’re dead.”

I juggle the dice in my palm. I’ll be grateful to get out of this experience. There’s a dark hollowness to it. Financial people are like the devil’s minions. Making cash from cash has always disturbed me. When the situation turns sour, these people are going to riot. Their entire lives have been built around free-market economics. Buy, sell, trade, profit. But that paradigm is about to crash and burn.

Maybe *The Day* is all about the end of Capitalism?

Economics will stick around, because it’s the science of economies, and economies aren’t inherently wicked, it’s just the players who do evil. Economics doesn’t take sides. To me it’s a pure entity that simply observes and reports. And I’m sure its report about the current economic state would look something like this:

It's been a good run. Hope you enjoyed all the cheap meat and plastic stuff; the movies and games, stability and convenience; McMansions and pomp. Because from here on you're going to relearn what it's like to be cavemen.

I juggle the dice once more, cast them on the carpet with a flick.

4-6.

Lucky 10.

7

“Hey, the wrench.”

I fumble through a cart and give the steel tool to a hand sticking out from under a car.

I'm in an airplane hanger at a private port. A Learjet sits in the bay, mechanics work on it like ants. Palm trees outside the hanger sway in a warm breeze.

“OK, turn her over,” says the person connected to the hand.

I reach in and flip the ignition. The engine rattles to life. The car is a late '70s Caprice Classic with 20-inch chrome rims and a bad paintjob.

A man slides out from under the car.

“Anything made after 82 won't start. That's when they changed the ignition standard and fuel injection proliferated. But these old rides only need new alternators and they run.” He stands and motions to the jet. “Even if they get that thing started, no way would I fly it. No control towers. Radio is spotty. None of the electronics in that cockpit work. But the boss wants to get out, and for 20 grand a man, we'll get that bird in the air. Yes sir.”

A girl opens an office door and peaks out. We make eye contact. She shuts the door. I walk to the door and enter the office. A young family of six occupies the small, stuffy room. The father holds a nickel-plated revolver.

“Progress on the plane?” he asks.

“Not yet.”

“Dad! I got something,” yells one of the man’s sons. He sits on the floor with a laptop and miniature satellite receiver that looks like a graphite cigar box on a tripod. The family huddles around the screen. I join. The father watches me with suspicious eyes but doesn’t protest.

On the screen is a dancing-in-place kangaroo and weaponized robot. They’re engaged in conversation.

“He’s in Brisbane, that’s Australia, Deb.”

Must be a jab at one of his siblings.

“He says there are uncontrollable riots. He doesn’t expect to live through the night.” The boy, a mature 11-year-old searches the adult faces for explanation. We have none.

“Mommy, is that going to happen here?” asks the little girl with whom I made eye contact.

The mother offers the obvious, “no darling, of course not,” and hugs her youngest.

“Ask him if there are zombies,” says another boy, could be a twin.

“There aren’t any zombies,” says his sister, the oldest of the brood. “People are rioting because social services have broken down. They need to feed their families. And mom, that could happen here.”

“That’s not going to happen here,” pipes up dad in a loud voice.

Denial is a vicious brand of fear. It convinces you that everything will be OK, but you know it is merely lip service, though in a case like this, parents ‘must be strong.’ Perhaps it is my civic duty to inform them that the shit has splattered. Struggle is the New Game. Survival is the way it’s played. Better own up to it now, because when it’s in your face, denying will get you killed.

“And if it does,” dad adds, “it doesn’t matter because we’ll be in the mountains.”

The crack in his rock is so big even the little girl sees it. I mean, stick to your guns, man. Keep up the brave father role,

or tell it like it is. But he is a weak man. All white-collar and cash-flow. Probably never took a minute to think about his soul, and if he did it was under the tutelage of a priest or rabbi.

Profit and consume, it's all he's ever known. It's the only thing he's been able to teach his kids. In the new paradigm what you are isn't based on 'what you were,' it's based on 'what you do.' Knowing indices and market dynamics won't save this man's family. Neither will the duffle bag in the corner filled with credit checks. And the mom? She only has one broken fingernail. Woe unto thee when another chips!

I can't help but analyze this family, this triumphant product of 21st century privilege and capitalism.

So the way I see it, the father, he's high up on the food chain, but he's not in The Family, nor is he Elite. He's upper management. The Elite use men like this to manage the World Corporation. They'll give a management guy like this a million+ salary, then throw in a yearly bonus of another million. (I'm sure the jet is a share, and he just happened to get lucky and have it this week). He's not 'of the Blood,' he's not in the pyramid. He will never be anything but upper management. And what does he care? He's living in the top 2%. The thing is, the divide between the management, and the Corporate Structure, the Elite (the board of directors), and The Family is magnitudes greater than any other wealth gap ratio. It looks like this:

Low Income Class = 85% of domestic population.

Middle Class = 10%

Middle Upper = 3%

Management (VP, Sales Manager) = 1%

—

Corporate Structure (CEO, CFO, COO) = 0.7%

Elite (The Board) = 0.2%

The Family = 0.1%

The Elite is anyone worth \$850 million and up. But just because you have \$20 billion doesn't get you into The Family. The Family is all about Blood, royalty. Being rich doesn't make you divine.

The boy at the computer starts reading off another text message coming from the cartoon kangaroo.

"Weird thing, mate. There's another kind of people . . ."

The parents exchange terrors.

I fondle the dice bag.

"How is it that your computer works?" I ask.

The little girl explains. "Daddy bought him the best computer for his birthday. It's impossible to break. I tried."

Must admit, money can buy smart and emotionally stable kids.

I leave the family, now almost fighting as the parents try and convince their kids that everything is OK, even if 'another kind of people' have shown up to the party. But the kids aren't buying it.

Money also buys kids that are harder to control with lies.

I walk out into the sunshine, find an oak tree, sit in its glorious shade.

It's nearly impossible to accept that this experience is really happening inside one of those Monads as it lumbers around that tundra. It's even harder to accept that the world before my eyes, the wind on my skin, the shade I sit in, are plasticene holographic projections. It's so hard to accept that I doubt it.

How can something so true, be so impossible to believe?

But something is happening. What IS matters. The explanation, the cause, the effect, it's all secondary. Maybe there is no explanation. No final analysis.

There is a hulking Unknown out there, the Monolithic Unknown sucking in everything like a black hole. Or is it attraction? Or is the Projector projecting reality backwards and we're running through it, blinded by the light?

You don't know, can't know, but you go anyway. How brave. How stupid.

I've reached the 'far enough' point. I can jump. But I'm weary of the inexplicable place I pass through between jumps. It's like a million years passes, but it's only a split second, and then I'm 'there.' A lot is happening in that space, but all I can remember is a fleeting dark moment, then the light, feeling, and color of a new experience.

Maybe in defiance of the Monolithic Unknown, of this 'far enough,' I could hop on the plane, go to the mountains, ride out this Armageddon instead of jumping deeper into it. Embrace the Known.

This thought produces a violent dizziness and nausea.

I dump out the dice and fall over.

My brain is a reversed magnet of pulsing vessels . . .
thrombosis beware!

I throw the dice.

4/4 . . .

8

I'm in a tent with a lover. My hand rests on her warm belly. She rolls towards me, snuggles her head into a camping pillow. A sweet smile graces her face. She's a real beauty. A hippie chick. I kiss her forehead, pet her fiery hair. The tent is strewn with champagne bottles and empty baggies of white powder. I'm woozy, hung-over. I put clothes on and leave the tent.

Desert mountains jagged-up the horizon in every direction. The setting sun blazes up the high plateau. The air cools by the second.

"Meeting's this way," says a kid as he walks past. Him and his buddies tow a cooler.

I grab a jacket, find a hat and gloves in the pocket, follow the kids through the tent city. They give me a can of beer.

We exit to an expanse of hard white sand. A bonfire at the avenue's end beckons. I reach the peripheral of thousands of people awaiting a performance or something. Sexy dancers covered with hair-thin self-luminous strands groove to the thumping drum circle. A woman steps onto the stage. The drumming quiets, but doesn't cease. She bows to the setting sun, throws her hands up in prayer to the stars. Most of the crowd does the same. Pungent burning sage wafts.

I weave my way through the crowd towards the fire and position myself closer to the stage, my back to the flames.

"Whatever you become," the woman says, "hold love as your highest ideal. Never forget: Unity is the essence of life. Resist

with all your soul the violent impulses and we will survive this Armageddon.”

I turn to the man on my left.

“What the hell is she talking about?”

His eyes are hidden behind black sunglasses. His beard is matted. He just smiles and tugs on a joint.

The woman rattles off more instructions that are drowned by the multitude of conversations around me.

Ten yards ahead the crowd stirs as someone comes towards me. The person wears a black hoodie. They weave between the wall of people before me, sneak and—

Jaz.

Jaz stands before me, hands buried in her pockets, intensity grips her face, but she’s still radiant and graceful.

For a split second eon my mind refuses to accept what it sees.

But I am not my mind.

I accept, and I can’t remember ever being washed with such happiness. I move in for a kiss, but Jaz dodges me, grabs my hand.

“Quickly,” she says.

We push through the crowd and pop out onto the sandy expanse. She hustles me in silence to a crowded bike rack, finds a beach cruiser, pulls it out of the tangle.

“You drive.” Jaz steps on pegs jutting out from the rear axel.

“Just get out of here,” she barks.

The packed sand provides a perfect surface. I weave between dancers, junkies, bikers, somehow slice through a parade of naked freezing people. The sun is gone. All that remains is a horizon-wide orange sliver. The stars pile up in the sky.

“Faster,” she yells.

I pump the pedals. It feels like we’re flying. Jaz lets out an Amazonian howl. We reach the festival perimeter.

“To the mountains!”

Pockets of calamity erupt from the festival, now two miles and more behind. I try to look, but Jaz prevents me. The adrenaline dump fades, hangover takes charge. This heart can’t

handle anymore. I slow, but crash anyway, faceplant into the hard pack, start puking. Night fully reveals itself.

Jaz pulls me up, grabs my belt, hurries towards the ridge. Strong for such a slight bugger.

We reach a boulder complex at the ridge base. Jaz pulls my chin up.

“Do you believe?”

I nod.

Jaz bends her knees and leaps 200 feet to a ledge. My guts reject the sudden change in altitude. My legs jellify. I hit the ground and retch.

There is so much I need to know, but I can't talk. It's a horrible predicament. Jaz paces. I mangle to mouth a 'how?'

“The ‘Big How’,” says Jaz, “the ‘Big Why’ and ‘What,’ are revealed through experience, not words.”

“But how are you—”

“I'm not your guru.” She pulls out a cigarette. “I'm not here to answer all your fucking questions.”

We sit in silence, but the festival is in Level-5 Riot. Fires engulf the tent complexes. Giant tents come crashing down. People escape in every direction. Some of them are being chased. I point to the calamity, hoping for a morsel of wisdom.

“That's the beginning of the end, of the end of the beginning. Well, technically the beginning began at sunrise, but the veil was still drawn.” She puffs. “Not anymore.”

A firestorm conflagrates, turns the tent city into a bonfire that lights up the desert plateau for miles.

Jaz shuffles to the cliff edge, sits, dangles her feet over. I join.

“What happens next?” I ask.

“McCrazy.”

Jaz looks through me. Her gaze speaks volumes, but most of it is in a language I don't understand. There is a non-human quality to her eyes. Gone is familiarity. This does nothing to spell the mundane visions of Jaz and I planting petunias, raising kids, growing old—

But right now Jaz looks more like a soldier than a housewife.
I see her glimmering sharp edge.

I grab her hand. "I can't lose you again."

"Don't get mushy on me."

"Let's go to the mountains."

"We're in the mountains."

"I mean somewhere we can live."

Jaz scoots closer. Her nicotine breath is the sweetest scent.

"You can't stop."

"Just for a little bit."

"You're a warrior, and warriors only stop when they're dead,
or their mission is accomplished."

"I didn't sign up for this."

"Mother conscripts only those who She has supreme faith in."

"You mean the Projector."

"Don't speak in analogies."

"But the Projector—"

"No. The Projector is a machine. Mother is Mother. Mother
Earth. Mother Space. Everything is Mother."

My perplexity must be really evident.

"Hey, I didn't make this stuff up," she assures me.

"And God?"

Jaz points to her heart, to my heart. An explosion rocks the
camp. A fire jet shoots up hundreds of feet.

"God lives in Creation," she says. "He is the Child being
raised by the two Mother aspects, Gaia and Nuit."

"Of course, the old lesbian-mom paradigm the bible talks
so much about."

Jaz laughs. "I'm gonna use that one."

"You're serious?"

"Mother Earth—Mother matter—is Gaia. And Mother
Space—Mother eternity—is Nuit. But it's all Mother."

"Nuit is the Egyptian skygoddess—"

"Mother is not a god. Mother is Mother. All and everything
exists within Mother's womb and upon her skin, including the
Pantheon of gods."

“So She is ‘GOD The Big Number One.’”

“Father, sometimes referred to as ‘GOD The Big Number One’ *lives in Creation.*”

“In everything?”

“In everything is everything.”

“And in us,” I say.

“GOD lives in everything, but the bigger the consciousness, the more GOD there is in that vessel. Do you get it?”

“So a monk evolving her consciousness has more GOD in her, then say, some slob who sits around playing MetaSledge day and night.”

“It’s not that simple. There are cats and dogs and moths out there with more GOD in them than some humans. Maybe you should see it like water flowing where there is least resistance.”

“OK, GOD is dancing, playing, experiencing life through us.”

“With us, not though us.”

“Like Jack ‘O De-Wood,” I say with a proper Dublin accent.

“And Pan.”

“And you and me.”

Jaz smokes away. Her delicate features framed by distant flames. Who is she? What is she? What am I supposed to stop her from doing? Why is she helping me?

“I’m scared, Jaz.”

She leans over, kisses me, “You should be.”

“I can’t go on.”

Jaz stands. “You will.”

“I won’t.”

“There’s no stopping, no timeouts. You keep going. Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop. No matter how great or terrifying it gets, just keep going.”

“I can’t.”

“You must.” She flicks the butt at me. “And try really, really hard to not roll a seven with the one/six combo.” Jaz blows me a kiss, then backflips off the cliff. Forty feet before the ground she vanishes.

Fear is my propellant. It's chasing me, pulling me. I've never known such a great ally. Never known such a great enemy.

The destruction in the camp saddens me. Good people are dying down there.

For them I go forward.

I cast the dice.

9

Two women, a man, and six children sit around a radio like a scene from the old days, hanging on every word, eyes wide. The room is lighted with candles. Canned food and bottled water is stacked high in the corner. I stand in the kitchen, looking out into the living room. This is a high-end home. Granite counters; floor some 600-year-old rainforest tree, comfy and fine furnishings.

A crash and a violent attack on a door jars me deeper into this new experience. In one hand I hold a compound bow. In the other a warm can of beer. I'm dressed in hunting fatigues.

All the windows are boarded up.

One of the children, a pre-teen, begins to ask a question. She is "shushed" by the adults. I think they should look into that infernal rattling as the reason they can't hear anything rather than beat up on the kid.

The man turns up the radio. A beep ends, signaling that an update is coming through. A computerized voice informs us that a local update will precede a broadcast by the President.

"All municipalities are under a boil water order," drones an exhausted woman. "911 is non-operational. Repeat, non-operational. Police, fire, and ambulance are not responding to emergencies no matter the severity. All county operations are suspended indefinitely. At this time we are unable to offer advice about the 'turned,'" the woman stumbles all over this word, as if it woefully describes an immense situation. "We can only offer a prayer—"

The broadcast is cut off. There is a steady flow of static.

“Where’s the President?” asks one of the women.

One of the young boys turns the dial. He finds station after station of static.

Finally a station tunes in.

On it is a lisping, slithering voice speaking in slurred clicks mixed with what could be English.

“How come they’re still broadcasting and we’re not?” cries the man. “Jim,” the man looks back at me, “this is bad.”

The intense door rattling stops. I move into the hall where the noise had come. A door that opens outward is barricaded with 2x4s and bent nails. It’s an ugly looking barricade, but for now that sinister slithery voice has calmed whatever lies behind the door.

“Turn it off,” cries a woman in the living room.

The dice.

Around my neck.

“They’re telling him to calm down,” the small voice comes from a candle-lit room across from the barricaded door. “They’re saying there will be a cease-fire, which is a contradiction, since guns don’t work anymore.”

I move into the room. A young girl, barely visible in the dim light, sits serenely behind an oak desk. On the desk is a dissembled laptop computer and micro tools.

“He killed our dog, but he was just scared. I was scared too, but I didn’t kill anything. I guess that’s the big difference between us. They didn’t have to lock me up like an animal.” The girl sighs. “They may not want me in the same room, but I’m not a threat like your son.”

I sit.

“You can put the bow down, I’m not gonna rip your throat out.”

Wrapped around the girl’s head is a terrycloth belt. It is not a bandage. It conceals something. Her ears. Her eyebrows. I notice unusually long canine teeth, in fact, they’re fangs.

“My kind doesn’t need radio. We’re communicating in our minds. They’re saying be passive, sapiens have bigger troubles

than us. They told me to use my mind if I'm in danger. It worked." The girl solders a node onto an exposed Motherboard. "My kind is working on a separation plan."

The girl eyes me. Looks me up and down.

"You're not Mr. Hansen anymore."

I shake my head.

"I can see it. A different aura. You're a large person, much larger than Mr. Hansen. He's kinda stupid. Kills deer and turkey. Doesn't even eat 'em. You've done a lot of things. Good and bad. You're colors are tormented. Nothing's impossible anymore, so this doesn't surprise me." The girl changes the topic without warning. "No guns. How funny is that? The missiles probably don't work either, or we'd be dust."

I take out the dice.

"Wow, those are pretty."

"I've gotta go," I whisper and roll the dice between my fingers.

"OK, but if that means Mr. Hansen is coming back, could you go into the other room. He's really afraid of me, and he'll probably be pissed about his computer."

I get up, amble to the door.

"Mr. Mysterious, you are dark blue, the color of space, turmoil and power. You should try to bring in some orange and yellow. You'll feel better." The girl goes back to her tinkering.

In the living room the women are arguing about the 'boy.' They are calling for me. I won't be around to find out the destiny of these people. I'd place my money on the little girl. She's got it together.

I kneel and kiss the dice.

A woman appears in the hall.

"They want to kill Sammy!"

I cast the dice. They tumble to a stop in front of the woman.

Box cars . . .

10

“Heskel-Tamal-egel-HOUL!”

“No, it’s: tamal-EBEL-WHOUL.”

“Guys, your crappy magick didn’t make him like that, and it’s not going to change him back.”

Three extraordinary pretty girls in their early 20’s sit in a half-moon circle around me. I’m wedged in a corner of a room lit by hazy candlelight. My hands are bound with furry handcuffs. I wear linen draw-string pants and nothing else.

“How do you explain what’s goin’ on?” asks the girl who first mispronounced the incantation. “Four days of magick and sex, drugs, all these godamn rituals, what did you think would happen?”

A girl wearing a belly-shirt, says, “You think this is happening to other people?”

The other girl says, “No power for four hours, no radio, we’re all the way out here in the woods, and then Greg turns into . . . who’s that guy from Star Trek?”

“Spock.”

“Yeah, Spock.”

Spock?

Another girl enters the room, sits Indian style a foot away. My eyes are half open. I can’t move.

“We didn’t do this to you,” she whispers and caresses my face. “Something happened to the world.”

A handsome guy standing in the doorway says, "My dad's medical book says that he's in shock. He's got all the symptoms. He could die."

"Ha! Spock's in shock," says one of the spell readers.

"He's not going to die," says the girl closest to me.

"I think we should go to town," says the guy, "drop him off at the hospital, then drive back to the city."

"The car doesn't work!" the girls say in unison.

The guy shrugs.

One of the spell readers says, "I say we kill him, bury him in the woods."

The girl caressing my face jumps up. "Bitch!" she yells and lunges at the other. A nasty catfight ensues. In a pocket of the pants is a bulge. The bag of dice. But even if I could move, my hands are bound behind my back.

This is a very tight situation.

The guy breaks up the fight, stands a few paces away.

"Plan B," he pulls out a semi-auto German handgun. "Sorry, Greg, but this whole situation could ruin my dad's run at a fourth term." He raises the gun. I can't even squint. The girls scream. He pulls the trigger. Nothing happens.

Guns don't work.

The guy struggles with the gun, looks down the barrel. Turns to the girls who are huddled together in post-fight shambles, "I think that's a sign." He and three of the girls leave. My protector slinks over and hugs me.

"What's happening?" she sobs.

Dice. Dice.

"I won't let them hurt you." But she doesn't remove the cuffs.

"Dice," I whisper.

The girl grabs my head, stares me in the eyes.

"You can talk!"

"Get me the dice."

"What are you? Why did you turn into Spock?"

I grit my teeth and try to speak again.

“Pocket . . . dice.”

The girl pats my pants and removes the velvet bag. Takes out the dice.

“Wow, where’d you get these from?”

“Roll them,” I manage.

The girl hesitates. “On the floor or bed?”

“Roll.” I’ve exhausted my ability to speak.

She clears a runway among the pillows and discarded clothes. Casts the dice . . .

11

I sit in a car, in the driver's seat. A woman next to me has rubber tubing tied around her bicep. She injects herself with physician skill.

"We're out of gas," she drones.

The steering wheel is bent. Piled up in the back of the old beat up wagon are supplies.

"They're gonna get us."

It is night on a narrow mountain road. Cold. The car is heading up the mountain. To the right is a guardrail. High cliff.

"Get us, get us, get us," she mumbles as she reveals a snub-nosed .357 magnum. She points it at my face. "Harold, you don't have the balls to shoot me, so I'll do us both."

The hammer strikes the firing pin . . . nothing happens. No crack of exploding gunpowder. No skull and grey matter splashed all over the interior. Missing is that unique cordite smell, a smell some love and covet like petrol fumes.

"Why don't guns work anymore?" she pleads.

I get out of the wagon and stumble into the road. I'm nearly clipped by a car heading up the mountain. The headlights are off, but in the car shines a map light. I see terrified people, Def-Con 4 terrified. People running for their lives, but quite sure they are just prolonging the inevitable. The driver fails to see the hairpin turn. The car launches off the road and into an abyss.

Before I can formulate an emotional response to the crash, a convoy of ancient pickup trucks come flying down the road. Two

pull over and skid to a stop. Men armed with archaic weapons are piled four deep in the beds. A cop gets out. He sports a nasty looking pickaxe.

“We need men.” He grabs my arm and pulls me to the bed. An old man helps me up. Another hands me a baseball bat. The trucks take off down the mountain.

The road spills out onto a high mountain plateau with a pencil-straight, two-lane road. The trucks fall in two by two. The terrain is sagebrush dusted with snow.

A man addresses the 12 of us crammed in the bed.

“The roadblock is under assault. We’re gonna ride right into it and push into their ranks.”

Frontal assault. These are dead men. I find the dice, but I dare not cast them.

Another man says, “My son was one of them. I killed him. I ain’t gonna live to see sunrise, and none of you are either. Say your prayers, and make peace with your Maker.”

Such valiant pessimism is always welcome when facing the truly treacherous.

A mile ahead I see the glow of fires. Trucks peel off the road and enter the sagebrush . . . and then we’re in the middle of a battle. Balls of burning rock come flying from the distance. Hundreds of injured men, casualties of a previous assault, line the road, waiting for help that will never come. Flaming arrows retaliate for the burning rocks. The truck ahead swerves to avoid a burning vehicle, careens out of control, flips, explodes. The truck to the right is showered with thousands of tiny pebbles or ball-bearings. The tires blow, the front wheels buckle, the axle snaps, the truck plows into the asphalt and cartwheels end over end. My truck careens through a pile of toasted car hulks, drives off the road into the desert, hits a dune and capsizes. I get pinned by the cab. My thighs are smashed, but there is no pain. A symphony of screams and death fills the cold dusty air. The crash survivors gather into a posse and charge into battle.

Seconds later they come running in retreat from the darkness. Chasing them are other men, but they have tails. They move like animals.

I have reached 'far enough.'

I toss the dice just as a creature comes sniffing and grunting around the—

12

Someone is yelling for order. It's hot and stuffy. I feel for the dice. They're around my neck. It feels like I'm wearing military fatigues. The last part of this new body I gain control of are the eyelids. They flutter, but I resist. By opening my eyes this experience begins, and further into the madness I trek—

“Are you meditating?”

I turn to the voice. Open my eyes.

Staring at me is a man decked out in combat fatigues. It looks like he's minutes from being inserted into a very hot LZ. We are in a huge bunker, a bunker motor pool. There are no windows. I sit on top of a tank with eight other men and a woman. We are officers and NCOs. Hanging from catwalks, standing around us, are thousands of soldiers in varying degrees of disrobement, trying to stay cool in the sweltering tomb.

The officer trying to gain order now has a bullhorn.

“Shut up and we'll tell you the plan,” he yells. “Or you can keep yammerin' and die down here like rats.”

The crowd quiets. I too am geared-up like I'm soon to be in the middle of some very deep and hairy shit. But I do not carry a gun. No one does.

“Captain Taylor and his recon team are going out the top to link with the 'other guys.' They're our best hope.” The soldiers erupt into varying degrees of disagreement.

A G.I. from the crowd yells, “They're no better than those fuckin' monsters.”

“They have a plan to get us out of here,” responds the officer.

“Don’t trust ‘em,” yells another G.I.

“The bottom line is they’re not trying to eat us,” he says this in a way I’m sure isn’t meant to be funny, but so-matter-of-factly is.

The crowd explodes into something the bullhorn won’t cut through.

“Captain, they’re ready,” says a soldier from the ground. He’s talking to me.

The man next to me, sergeant Harrison by what his nameplate says, jumps off the tank. I follow. Four other men fall in behind us. The crowd parts. Soldiers slap me on the shoulders, offer prayers, demand that we get them out of there. A female soldier steps in the path.

“Captain, we made these,” she hands me a steel rebar with a perpendicular handle and sharpened ends. It’s a capable and archaic weapon. Sergeant Harrison and the other men each receive a similar weapon.

She salutes. “Bust ass, sir.”

We reach an exposed metal staircase and climb. Dozens follow up a flight or two, then are sent back by bayonet-wielding MP’s. The MP’s let five soldiers and me pass. We climb up six stories. I’m on autopilot. This body moves with a confidence I’m not sure I could muster.

From this vantage point I see a dozen tanks in a neat row. Dozens of other vehicle sit in useless attention. There is a field hospital set up in the corner separated by olive green screens. Behind the tanks is an exit big enough to drive the 30-ton behemoths through. The bunker is a hundreds yard square by eight stories high, and it’s packed with people. The lack of windows signals that this massive structure is deep underground.

The stairs end and we enter a concrete stairwell, climb another five flights and enter a cramped, red-lit command room. A general with two stars on his beret stands at a map table. The room is small, just big enough for the 11 people now occupying

it. The narrow windows are really just slits. It is night outside. A three-foot hole has been chipped into the wall. It's a tunnel. A steel door marks the exit. Why burrow when there's a door?

The general waits to start talking until we are properly positioned around the table. Military doctrine still rules, but Chain of Command will crumble if those soldiers down there don't get some good news. And herein lies the crux of the emergency.

"Gunny reports that the enemy has pulled back to here," the general points a pencil at a bunch of wavy circles that makes absolutely no sense to me, but the map is clearly of a military base. "They're observing. They know they have us buttoned up. And they know we're workin' on an escape. Captain, you know what this tells me?"

The general stares at me. I pat the dice and nod.

"Damn right, they're not so tough. If they were, we'd all be dead by now. They don't want a fair fight. They want to starve us, tenderize us, then come in and make us dinner. Not so tough after all," the general's words trail off.

A young intelligence officer steps forward. Behind him two soldiers empty bullet after bullet, creating a mound of gunpowder. Another holds a blowtorch and directs the flame at the black mound. Not a single grain ignites.

Guns don't work because gunpowder doesn't work.

The intelligence officer says, "Their command is on hill Tango-12, 600 yards from us. Since our powder is useless, we must assume so is theirs. This means they can't pick you off as you cross the base to D-Bunker," he points to a square on the map. If the hills are 600 yards away, D-Bunker is 1000. "The 'other guys,' for lack of a better label, claim they have a plan—"

"Desperation makes strange butt-buddies," says the general.

The officer shakes his head and continues, "Bottom line: we have two days of water rations, and that's with conserving. We have soldiers down there who will start dying if they don't get some real treatment. All exits are blocked. Our last resort is we

widen this tunnel and funnel everyone out, but that will take days. Create a bottle neck, be easy picking.”

“What about the big picture?” I ask.

“Survival’s the big picture,” mumbles the general.

The intelligence officer offers something more. “Things happened so fast—what’s it been, nine hours? And since we haven’t heard anything from beyond the confines of this base, it’s right to think this is a broader,” he searches for the right word, “occurrence.”

“No outside communication at all?”

“None.”

“It ain’t the NK’s, it ain’t nukes,” says the general. “It’s something unnatural.”

Sergeant Harrison butts in. “It could be a pole shift. A meteorite. Maybe half the world is gone. It’s something much bigger than a freakin’ solar flare—”

“Sergeant,” erupts the general, “you’re goddamn right it ain’t a solar flare. No solar flare turns a man into a monster. No pole shift or meteor. This is unnatural. This is the work of evil and darkness. This is the work of Satan,” the general spears the table with a dagger and staggers off into the stairwell.

The intelligence officer lowers his voice.

“A hobby of mine is biology, evolutionary biology. And from that standpoint, what has happened is a mutation.”

Now we’re talkin’.

“Something happened,” he continues, “and affected a DNA sequence we never knew existed, and people with that DNA . . . well, they turned into something more than human, but there’s more to it. Like how do they all speak the same language? Why are there degrees of mutation? And what about ‘the other guys?’ They’re almost like you and me, hell, a close friend of mine turned into one of them. Hardly changed a bit except for his ears and teeth. It seemed like he was ready for this. I think they’re telepathic. Captain, this world has mutated into Dungeons and Dragons.”

The officer stares past me. “And then there’s that issue with the sky.”

“What ‘issue?’” asks sergeant Harrison.

“Nobody down there knows about this, but the sky isn’t what it used to be. It’s 0800 hours and it’s still dark.”

Harrison lunges over the table and grabs the officer. Chain of Command has but a few hours, and it will dissolve immediately if those below know the sky has fallen. I slap a meaty hand on Harrison, pull him off the officer. A face-off forms between my men and the intelligence brains manning the command.

“Attention!” I yell. This voice rolls and has some serious ampage. It feels really good. The men stand down.

“Something beyond the pale has happened,” I say. “The world has changed in ways we can’t fathom. And we need answers, yes, but survival supercedes everything. If we live to see next week, next month, we’ll have answers.” This speech applies to my situation. If I survive, if I keep going, I will know all I need and want to know. But survival always comes first.

I turn to the five men in my recon team. “Succeed and live. Answers you’ll have.” It’s a pep talk to my own soul, but I think it resonates with the men.

A bell dings. Dings again.

The officer runs to the tunnel. We follow.

“It’s Gunny. He’s waiting on you.”

Harrison and the other men enter the tunnel. I drop to my knees. The officer stops me.

“They don’t eat us, they just kill.”

Before I disappear into the tunnel, the officer adds.

“Don’t stop for anything, even if a man falls.”

I slither through the tunnel, and suddenly I’m really scared. The fear latches onto my heart. It paralyzes me. The boots of the man in front disappear. My breath comes in strangled huffs—

A hand grabs mine, pulls. I pop out of the tunnel and into a trench.

What I see replaces one fear with a deeper, primal fear.

From ground level to around 10,000 feet the sky is clear. Then the atmosphere becomes a horizon-to-horizon layer of dense slate grey clouds that nearly blot out the sun, allowing

through as much light as a full moon night. This isn't a storm, because the clouds are stationary, yet thunderclaps rumble and lightning strikes illuminate the layers. In Genesis, something called 'The Firmament,' a worldwide layer of low altitude clouds, like what is found in mountain cloud forests, breaks down. The destruction of The Firmament causes a global rainstorm that lasts 40 days, 40 nights. This is 'The Flood,' Noah's gig.

The Firmament has returned.

"I say half those people down there won't wanna live in a world where you can't see the sun," says the soldier who helped me out of the tunnel.

Nine men including myself occupy the trench. Strewn about are medieval-looking weapons. Three soldiers lay prone on the sloping berm wall, scan with night vision binoculars.

One of the soldiers turns and says, "Captain, take a look."

I scramble up the berm, take the field glass, scan a dark landscape.

"They're layin' real low," says the man next to me. "I say they don't know what's goin' on any more than we do."

Helmeted heads bob up and down as the enemy works on a trench complex. The trench is being dug on a hill half a mile away. On the hill crest is a fortified tower giving the enemy a view of the entire base.

Sergeant Harrison tugs on my boot. I hand the binoculars to the right, slide down into the trench.

"We follow the trench west," Harrison traces his finger along a hand-drawn map, "exit here, pass through the mess hall, up to the roof, hump from the mess hall roof to these barracks. Pass on the west side of these buildings, then we're there."

"No, we take it straight," I say.

"You mean just run?"

"A to B."

"We're dead if they see us."

"Worse than dead from what I've seen," adds Gunny.

"Your call, Captain," says Harrison.

"Speed."

Harrison doesn't like it, but COC still rules.

I turn to Gunny. "What can you tell me about the other guys?"

"They look weird," Gunny massages his dimpled chin, "but, uh, they were attacked by the freaks too. They're more organized than us. I mean they took the combat bunkers, left us with the motor pool. There's also a lot less of them than us."

"Can we trust them?"

"Right now I don't trust my own eyes, but what choice do we have?"

"How'd they hold up against the enemy?" I delicately approach this subject, as revelation of my cluelessness would expose me as an officer with a gapping hole in his psyche.

"I saw one kill a freak with its bare hands," says Gunny. "Some kinda martial arts. They have good instinct with improvised weapons. They're fast. But the freaks are wild animals. Strong as five of us. Like lions with those claws. I don't know what the 'other guys' have planned, but I'm not thinkin' that far ahead."

I salute Gunny, grateful for his precise info.

Harrison and the six other men kneel in the trench. Their painted faces tell a tale of controlled fear and determination. I like what I see.

"Men, we could crawl to our target, take it nice and easy. But we don't do nice and easy. It's less than a mile to D-Bunker. We're gonna run it. We'll be half way there before they realize it."

"What about sappers?" asks one of the men.

What the hell's a sapper?

"Solider," barks Harrison, "in an ambush you'll be dead before you can spit, so don't worry 'bout it."

Sappers, ambush. I'm sure they're out there. I would be. All of a sudden I don't feel so good. Deflated. But a mad dash is the only option. When men landed on Juno Beach, Normandy, they didn't pussyfoot up the beach. They charged. Thousands died, but some made it. Now that I think about it, there should be more of us. At least a hundred.

“All we need is one of us to make it,” says Harrison as if reading my mind. “So drop all those weapons, just knives.” He points to a metal baseball bat with a spike protruding from the top. “That’s OK, but forget the heavy stuff.”

The only soldiers on a battlefield without guns are chaplains and dead men. A soldier needs something to hold with both hands. Telling these men to run into the teeth of combat with a knife and a few modified Louisville Sluggers is like telling a poker player that he needn’t a deck of cards.

Gunny walks point as we slink through the trench. The trench is a permanent one, reinforced, built up over the years. Wood planks line the floor. Metal siding reinforces the walls. Sandbags line the rim. This base is a frontline outpost, hence all the hardware and fortifications. I’m sure whoever this base opposed is as deep in the crap as we are.

We reach the west end of the trench. A hundred yards away is a huge building lit up by emergency lighting. A hundred to the building, go around the south side, then it’s 800/900 yards to D-Bunker. Only the barracks and a few outbuildings can provide cover from there on. These lungs feel clear and strong, this body athletic. I’ll make it. But as an unconscious taunt to my confidence, my left hand grabs the dice bag. I have an out, but these men don’t. Neither do any of those in the bunker.

“On you,” says Harrison.

The mess hall looms in the quasi darkness like a mausoleum. The exterior emergency lighting dims by the minute as the batteries lose juice. Dozens of nasty scenarios invade my mind. I don’t chase any of them and they end up cannibalizing themselves.

“All at the same time, or do we stagger?” I ask.

“I say bumrush,” says a soldier with the nametag ‘Smith.’

Gunny shakes his head. “Stagger it. One every ten seconds.”

“All at once,” says Harrison.

I agree.

“On my order we all go. Meet up at the south side of the mess, in the shadows. Use the cover to catch our breath, then all

out to D-Bunker.” The men nod, and I wonder where men find courage in the face of danger. Are they doing it for themselves? For all those in the bunker? What about their families?

Maybe these men act because it is what they are ordered to do. Simple as that. Robotic training. Nothing romantic about it.

“Go!”

We bolt out of the trench. The dry ground offers a good track. From the corner of my eye I see long shadows. Sappers! They sprint parallel to us, towards the mess complex from a jumble of buildings in between the motor pool bunker and the enemy hill. They have a longer run, 300 or more yards, but they seem impossibly fast.

“Freaks!” screams Gunny.

Three of the men run back to the trench. Another with great wheels makes it to the south side, disappears into the shadows. One trips, stumbles, faceplants. A door on the west side of the mess complex swings open. Someone in the doorway frantically waves at us. Harrison makes it, dives through the doorway. I hear Gunny go down behind me. Some internal mechanism won't let me help him, won't let me be a foolish hero. I make it to the door, enter at full speed. The door is shut and locked with a heavy metal bar.

“Quickly,” says a female in a strange, lisping voice. We enter a maze of halls and offices before I can bare auditory witness to the death of my team. Harrison and I follow, nearly running, blindly following, and without insight into our savior because she wears a hooded smock. We are led into a massive kitchen that was abandoned in the middle of meal preparation. I smack a metal table, bruise my thigh to the bone. We exit and run down a hall. Limping, I bring up the rear. The door we entered through is busted open, but a maze separates us from that entry point. We are now ghosts in this building. Protected by the confusing layout and massive size—

“They can smell you. Hurry,” says our savior.

There goes that momentary comfort.

At an intersection of doors the lanky redeemer uses a key and opens a single door marked ‘Officer’s Alley.’ We enter a plush lounge, pass a cage holding an arsenal of bowling gear, and enter the lanes lit by dim emergency lighting. The savior’s pace quickens, telling me we are but seconds ahead of our pursuers. We sprint down Lane No. 8. Harrison doesn’t hesitate to follow our guide into the pin-alley. I’m bigger, and it’s a tight squeeze. The ‘freaks’ enter the bowling alley. I steal a look at the pack, just 150 feet away. They all wear helmets, faces hidden with cloth. I dive into the dark pit.

Down into the land of bowling pins we pass. Down flights of stairs we fly. The enemy sniffing and grunting where we were six seconds ago. We jump down five steps at a time. Run down a short hall. It feels like I’ve busted my femoral artery. I’m the last to make it through a fortified doorway. Our savior closes the door and bolts it a second before bodies slam into it.

We lay in total darkness, in a small room, trapped by determined attempts to open the door. My heart pumps so hard that my upper chest has turned into a mass of stabbing pain, almost nullifying my aching thigh. I suck in stale air like a rabbit fresh from escape. A tiny flame illuminates the room. Harrison lies against the wall, eyes full of adrenaline. Our savior holds a gloved hand over the flame, shielding her face, but I know what she is.

“I haven’t killed,” she says in her strange way. “I haven’t lost all of my soul.”

“Thank you,” I say and reach for her. She avoids my hand with a quick jerk, like a weary animal would.

“This union of monster and man is beautiful and all, but it’s just prolonging our death. Maybe made it worse,” pants Harrison.

I stealthily dump the dice into my hand.

Our saviors’ reply to Harrison is the sound of a latch opening and a trap door being pulled open.

Saviors Save.

“This tunnel leads to a building very close to where you need to go.”

“And you?” I ask.

The flame goes out. She lays the lighter in my hand.

“We don’t kill our own kind,” she says with a heavy load of spite directed at ages of human/human butchery.

“I’ll be damned,” says Harrison as he moves down the ladder.

I enter the hole, flick on the lighter. The woman scurries out of the light-halo and into a corner, but not before I catch a glimpse of her face. It is ash-green and she has a short muzzle. Her lips are thin and green/black. She is reptilian.

She is a lizard.

After a long, cramped, and dark trip through the tunnel we reach a ladder, climb, open a trap door, cautiously move up a fortified staircase, and end up in a small utility building. Harrison opens the door. The rear entrance to D-Bunker is 20 yards away. I flick the lighter on and off four times. The rear door of D-Bunker opens. Someone blinks a flashlight four times.

“After you,” says Harrison.

I fondle the dice.

“No, you first. And give me a minute.”

Harrison shoots me a look that says, ‘we come this far and now you’re a coward?’

“That’s an order.”

The light blinks again. Harrison crosses himself and sprints though the twilight, disappears into the doorway.

I toss the dice.

One.

The other die takes an extra tumble.

Six.

13

I sit cross-legged opposite a floating Space Brother. Its skin is spring green and nearly luminous. The alien is big, lanky—a classic alien with huge, black, almond-shaped eyes, tiny mouth, tiny nose. It wears a loincloth and nothing else. Its chin rests on its chest. It seems to be lost in meditation or asleep. We are in a cave, sitting in a sand pit. Sweat runs down my skin. I wear pants only. Running through the cave is a magma stream fed by cascading sheets of molten planet blood. A pool of black water sits on the other side of the magma stream. Stunning onyx crystal formations protrude from one wall. Another wall has a chasm in it from where a stiff breeze blows and the magma river empties into a tunnel. A steady rumble vibrates the cave like a mantra. There are no discernable exits except for the magma chute and the open roof that looks out into starry space.

The SpaceBro lifts its head and asks, “Who the hell are you?”
“I’m not someone else?”

It starts laughing. The cackle turns uncontrollable. I search my pants for the dice.

The alien rolls around in the air. “I give you three days before you jump in the river.”

The dice are missing. I search the sand. A brand of panic takes hold that I’m sure is close to what a parent feels in the first moments of realizing their child is missing from the playground.

“What are you looking for?”

I dare not tell it anything.

“Maybe you lost yourself?” Again it erupts into laughter.

I search the surrounding area. Find nothing.

“If it’s answers you’re looking for, perhaps I can help.”

I stand and scan. In the middle of the open-air cave is an 80-foot stalagmite. The magma river splits into two streams around it, then rejoins.

“Where am I?” I demand.

“Here.”

“Where’s that?”

“That’s here.”

“What is this place?”

“No, here is this place.”

I pace to the platform edge. There is no food. No equipment.

“Is this earth?”

“Earth?”

“Who are you?” I demand.

“This ‘earth’ you speak of, what is it?”

“It’s a planet!”

“Planet?” the alien laughs so hard the cavern shakes.

I leap off the platform, pace along the riverbank. This ‘jump’ is incongruous. Unless it’s another pivot point, like when I saw the Monads outside my apartment. I pace towards the black crystal wall. Arched graphite beams frame all the walls; and the roof is round. A circle in a square. This isn’t some random geological formation. This is a temple. A temple of the four elements: Earth (the black crystal wall), Air (the wind coming through the crack), Fire (magma), Water (pools—

“Don’t forget the fifth element . . . spirit.” The floating SpaceBro appears a few feet away. It fondles my dice. I charge it and am on the ground with its long, skinny, three-towed foot in my throat before I can hum.

“Stop acting like you know.”

“Know what?”

“A wide tunnel is still a tunnel.”

The alien throws the dice into the air. They hit the sand. It and the die vanish. My world fades to black.

“What is the greatest trick the devil ever pulled?”

The question is my alarm clock. For a fleeting second I'm in my room, any room, in a normal world that hasn't gone McCrazy. An AC pumps cool air. A TV plays a muted flick. A cat nestles next to me. A lover is in the bathroom brushing her teeth—

“What is the greatest trick the devil ever pulled?”

I resist turning over, but I suppose having company is a good sign. I hope.

I roll over.

A man in a black velvet suit with a satin blue bowtie against a black shirt stands above me. He has electric blue pentagrams for pupils. They dazzle and scare me.

I reach for his leg. My hand goes through it. A hologram.

“What is the greatest trick the devil ever pulled?”

Is this is my fate? Eternal torment by a colorful shadow? So very wonderful indeed.

Again he asks.

And again.

Again.

Suppose I should give it a shot.

Some would say the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing everyone that he doesn't exist, but nobody believes that.

Could it be the whole red thing?

Hell?

Maybe he really likes cold weather?

Maybe he prefers a shovel instead of a pitchfork? I mean one can kick some serious ass with a shovel. Pitchforks don't have a monopoly on deadly misuse.

“What is the greatest trick the devil ever pulled?” the hologram dude again queries.

And the answer comes to me from a distant mental antipode, travels the inner Void through a wormhole, appears in my neo-cortex. It comes from the ‘me’ that is not ‘me.’ The 95% of

myself that I do not know, that none of us know. Autonomous shadow regions of inner space that humanity would rather not mine. Regions of deep truth and shocking possibilities. Parties I've crashed, but was quickly tossed from.

I stand. "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled, was convincing everyone that he is evil."

Surprise attacks the man in such away it tells me the odds were stacked about 100 billion to 1 against me. Goes to show you, never know your odds.

A stalactite falls from the overhang, drops into the magma. The man points at me, then at the floating stalactite. I think he means for me to get on it, which means that is my way out. But to where? And magma doesn't make for the best of traveling mediums.

The lifeboat takes the left path around the island. Again the man points. I break for the river.

Twenty feet. The river is 20 feet wide at the thinnest part. If I hit the edge and drop even a toe in, I'm toast. My jump has to be clean. This is where my mission ends or goes on. This Monkey's fate—and sickeningly so too the earth's—comes down to this jump. But I needn't rush into it. I can give myself a fighting chance.

The stalactite comes back into view. It flows down the river's center. The center of the shard is dugout, making it a ten-foot, peapod-canoe. A running start from 50 feet will give me enough lift, but my target is moving and it's no more than four feet wide. There's another problem. My bare feet will burn up if I use the edge to spring. I have to long jump 11 feet.

Never know your odds.

First a dry run from 80 paces.

I break for the river. My short strides turn into long ones. I jump eight feet. A jump of only eight feet and this magickal mystery tour is over.

Maybe I need to learn some patience?

What's an age down here? I could become an astute mediator. Travel through the inner-universe. Live in my imagination for a couple hundred thousand years.

Almost on cue the boat changes course, comes closer. I run back, charge, leap . . . land in the canoe and hug the floor. Serious doubts about the safety of this craft come to mind. I wedge myself into the narrow dugout. The boat enters the tunnel. The lava tube is stifling, and because it is narrower than the river the lava flows torrent-fast.

The canoe tip angles down.

I'm going over an edge . . .

. . . the canoe gently flows down a ten foot decline, then levels out. I'm taken on a fast-moving (though by no means harrowing) corkscrew ride down a massive spire. The tube opens, giving me a view of the starry sky. I reach flat land and drift in a wide lava flow. The canoe comes to rest against a subduction zone. I get out. The tower from where I just came stands a mile tall in the distance. It juts out of an angry landscape of volcanoes and lava flows. Just as my mind is about to throw an ape-shit-tantrum, reasoning that I was better off in the temple, a shooting star zips across the sky. The point of light stops on a dime and comes rocketing towards me. I'm a deer in headlights. A moment before impact, unlike a deer, I close my eyes.

When it registers that I'm alive (which at this moment 'alive' is a very metaphysical query) my eyes open.

Floating ten feet above me is an open-air saucer commanded by a huge pilot whose features are hidden. Colored lights blink and zip around the metallic saucer's rim. The hidden being's arms dance, like he's playing ten pianos. A thick and fuzzy synthesized tone fills the area. Looped verses are layered, and now I'm listening to fuzzy Bach.

I blink.

I'm in the saucer.

Next to me is a 15-foot tall humanoid with long arms, wide hips, and a generally misshapen, yet powerful and graceful body. His face is like a human cobra: gold snake eyes, huge lips, high cheekbones. His chin is pointy. He wears a jewel-encrusted Egyptian headdress that completes the cobra motif. He is Akhenaton, pharaoh who unified Upper and Lower Egypt

and their '180 Gods.' Legend says he was from the star system Sirius. From a planet inhabited by evolved beings who visit earth periodically to infuse the dim chimps with wisdom and light. It is also said that Sirius and the earth's sun are joined in a cosmic orbit that mimicks the DNA double helix.

Akhenaton strokes the keys of his multi-tiered synth and we shoot up and out of the thin atmosphere, into space. There are two suns. One is massive and I wonder why my eyes don't burn out. The other is small and blue, orbiting the larger. A dozen planets and hundreds of moons make up the system. Four of the planets and 20 moons show signs of habitation. A halo of white light surrounds the entire system. A tendril of the hazy light crosses out into the galaxy and meets another halo hundreds of lightyears away—

The cosmic scene blinks, turns to static, becomes a blank graphite-grey canvas. Akhenaton hits the keys, calls up a thunderous electric symphony. A new cosmic scene manifests. This is a familiar system. The Sol System, of which earth is the Third Rock. The craft zooms into earth's orbit. But earth is not round. It is a soccer ball, a Platonic dodecahedron made of hexagons and smaller pentagonal panels, also known as a 'Buckyball' in honor of the mega genius Buckminster Fuller. The 3-D oceans and continents rise off the panels. Almost the entire United States is situated on a hexagon, with California and the pacific states on a smaller pentagon plate. A 15-degree seam runs through the Mohave desert. This is the green/blue earth as seen from inside the Monad. The illusionary earth where humanity scurries, the only difference is that it's geometric instead of a sphere. The saucer leaves earth orbit and zips past Mars, which too is a dodecahedron. Massive monuments and pyramid complexes are evident on the orange surface. We come to rest between Saturn and Jupiter, which are more planetary in the round sense, but certainly are not perfect spheres. More like eggs. Akhenaton plays a different tune and all the planets in the system change. They become skeletal frameworks, immense Buckyballs with red, blue, green, orange, white, pink, purple, grey cores. Even the sun is a geometric frame. Another fuzzy

organ riff changes the scene and I'm looking at identical khaki-hued spherical planets orbiting a dull sun. Orbiting what was Saturn is a mechanical moon. It pluses with energy and firing circuits. A shift in symphonic rhythm makes the signal coming from the machine-moon visible. It rides a white beam towards the tan Monad earth, where I'm sure it's then downloaded by the Monads and projected for the trapped soul. But there's more than one projection. A moon of Jupiter is also a projector. Mars and Venus too send in beams. A beam also comes in from what I guess is the Sirius system, along with another place in deep space that looks like the Pleiades. There's even a giant UFO sending in a beam along with several dozen other smaller saucer-type craft that each sends a beam into the earth.

Akhenaton's voice appears in my head as a serenely confident and holy narrator.

*Projection is Game.
Real is Game's destiny.
Game determines reality's essence.
The Game becomes real.*

My interpretation: Whatever 'projection' is playing when the Game mutates into 'more real,' becomes the foundation—the 'reality' presented to the rest of the Real.

Just as I'm about to descend into panic over the CrazyWorld Projection and the implications of this madness being permanent, Akhenaton whips up a new, spacey and inspiring jam. A jam of the heart. It squeezes feelings of eternal goodness from my ticker. Gilt, anxiety, grief fade. Everything is on track. I don't see it as struggle. This is a cosmic assignment. Everything is meant to be. This is a dance.

*When Game evolves,
And the Gateway seals,
Those absent from Game,
Fade away.*

So much for the fleeting feel good.

The way I see it, humanity is in the Game. We're on the field, we're playing. We've got it made. All the dogs and cats, and bugs, and birds and plants, even the machines, they're in, because even if they aren't playing at least they're in the stadium. But the dwellers, they're at home watching the action on the boob and will be left behind unless they're in the stadium when it mutates into a starship and takes off. But moving them into the stadium has set off a riot from the dreams of a demonic soccer hooligan.

*The Babe is born
Its Nurture becomes its Nature
A lifetime decided
Set by the tone.*

The 'projection' is the Babe. It's had a rocky gestation, but what's worse, is that the birth is taking place in a battlefield triage-tent under assault by WMD.

Bad imprint.

And the Babe's first meal will be fetid jambalaya with severed finger tips, squished eyeballs, a bile consommé!

Sixteen billion years of evolution, the Great Work, the Divine Plan, and a crackbaby is being born.

Very bad imprint indeed.

But isn't what I've seen just a test?

Occurring so that it won't occur?

What I've seen, it's not the future.

Right?

But maybe Ming is a liar. Maybe he's feeding me disinformation? What if I've got the whole story wrong?

A huge, city-sized saucer appears and sucks us into orbit. A beam pulls me out of Akhenaton's craft. He frees his craft from the tractorbeam and leaves the scene on a vapor trail that ends on Mars. I enter a portal in the belly of the ship and find myself in a sterile airlock. A door opens and I hurry through it.

I walk down a hall with curving walls and electric blue lighting. I spiral in toward the craft's center. It feels similar to my Stonehenge experience. I don't like it one bit, but being out there in space was starting to feel really weird.

I reach an open portal door with blue velvet cushions as panels. I enter a round, sunken, tiered chamber. Blue draperies hang. Incense smoke rises from smoldering pots. Hookahs, surrounded by push pillows, sit on the different tier levels. Next to the hookahs are bottles of self-luminous blue liquid. The stepped tiers are carpeted with what feels like blue-dyed sheepskin. The room is in 'pre-party' state. Everything is staged and perfect, waiting for the high-end crowd. The ceiling is a segmented dome that I'm sure opens up to starry magnificence. In the room's center, hovering a few feet above a cobalt disc, is an undulating, translucent, white and blue glob.

"Welcome, guest of honor," says a woman wearing a blue/silver silk robe embossed with monochromatic Chinese dragons. She saunters down the tiers. She is a lust maven, a sexual powerhouse. A woman free of 20's trials, 30's anxiety. A woman of dominance. She scares the hell out of me.

"Odds were that you'd take longer to figure out the question," says a man coming down the opposite side. He is the black-suited aberration who queried me, except now he is bare-chested under his velvet jacket. He carries a glass filled with the blue liquid and a chrome flute. He too is in his 40's. Which I hear is the new 20's.

The couple enters an elevated platform cordoned off with velvet ropes. They wave me in. I sit on a huge blue fur beanbag.

"So you're not as bad as everyone thinks," I say to the man.

"Why can't the devil be a female?" asks the woman.

"Why can't the devil be both?" asks the man.

"For I would never limit my pleasure," they say simultaneously.

The devil, squared.

“And what is your purpose in this grand game show?” I ask.

The man hands me a glass of blue luminous.

“Pleasure, of course,” he says and toots out a few notes on his flute.

“I thought the devil was about evil?”

“No.”

“Irony?”

“No, that’s Loki. He has his own platform, but you don’t want to visit there. Trust me, it’s pure madness.”

Clarity is the death of fear, but it’s the beginning of belief. Belief is the dying gasp of possibility.

The way I see it, dozens of ‘players’ interface with the Projection, adding their own programming, really spicing up the Game. These auxiliary projections aren’t simply add-ons, they are core components of the Game. Things like irony, pleasure, faith to name a few. The Projection would be a bore without them, but they are separate from the Projection that gives us the seas, breath & body, and all the general trappings of what is considered reality.

These auxiliary projectors, like the devil, somehow benefit from projecting. Their existence is somehow tied into the Game’s evolution. These projectors represent the upper echelon of the Jungian Archetype—the gods. They really exist. Whatever that means. They are ‘real’ when we think about them, real when we see them, but then what? Am I to believe that the devil has been orbiting for countless eons, throwing countless parties, all the while projecting pleasure into the Game?

Do they sleep? Do they shit? What about breakfast?

What are gods doing when no one is paying attention?

Maybe they’re like quantum units that exist as waves—immateralized photon potential—when not observed or thought of, and particles—matter—when looked at and considered.

Quantum Gods?

“A toast to our traveler,” the woman clinks her glass against mine. The lights dim, flicker. Instantly a hundred beautiful

couples appear draped all over the party room. The hookahs fire up. Gallons of blue liquid are consumed. A trancy dub flows from the gelatinous glob as it twists and morphs.

I fail to drink the toast.

“Oh, relax,” says the man. He snaps his fingers. A girl climbs onto the platform. It is a scantily clad Jaz clone. Nearly perfect except that her radiance can’t be faked. And Jaz’s magickal scent, a patchouli, frankincense, cherry, and burning cedar amalgamation is absent.

“Things have changed in the projection,” warns the woman. “Love, you’ve been gone a long time. You won’t hardly recognize it.”

“Not very pleasurable at all,” adds the man.

The ceiling dome rolls back, exposing a cosmic scene that takes my breath away. The Jaz clone sits on my lap. Though a clone, she’s still very tantalizing, soft and warm.

“I have a question for you.” I ask the couple. “Why convince everyone that you’re evil?”

“Because pleasure is not accepted unless it is thought to be sinful.”

“And why is that?”

They shrug.

“So then who projects evil?”

“Ahrimann and Lucifer.”

“I thought they were the same thing.”

“They occupy opposite ends of evil. Ahrimann is dark evil. Lucifer is light evil. Ahrimann is the negative aspect, and he gives you technology, military, conformity and cold science. Lucifer is the positive aspect, and he gives you art, economics, individuality and warm science. Together they give you the fire of personality. Only with personality can there be evil. Only when a soul is self-aware can there be evil. This is why they are considered to be ‘evil,’ because they awoke you from your dim innocence. Without them you are less than apes. But for their gift you must pay.”

“And what about Satan?”

“Shaitan is their combined personality. And it is He who is the ringmaster of this circus. It is He who is the Son. It is He who eternally watches.”

“What about good?”

“Good is inherent. Good is the balance. It has no opposite ends. Good’s symbolic presenter is known to humanity as Buddha, as Jesus Christ; as any myth where a human becomes more. Where a human realizes their divinity and uses that power to liberate. But the forces of Ahrimann and Lucifer are ever quick to limit divine expansion. It is one of their core missions.”

“And the Solar Watcher?”

“The Lord Watcher presides over the arena.”

“Where is He?”

“He watches from Mars,” they both say.

“You work for him?”

“We are all His servants. A part of Him lives in all of us.”

Humans bounce between the realms of Ahrimann (mind) and Lucifer (gut), between cold sensible servitude, and hot frantic individuality. Neither of these opposites are inherently evil, it is the imbalance that creates evil. A human hardly ever slows down enough to enter the balance of calm good. They just race right past it. The balance is the heart, green. Ahrimann the mind is electric blue. Lucifer the gut is passion red. But a human has the choice: cultivate evil, whether it be positive or negative, or find the balance, live in the ‘good’ and visit the realms of mind and gut. And it is this unique quandary that puts humanity in a class by itself. For all the saints and angels, gods and greats, they don’t have the choice. *Good or evil is what they are from beginning to end.* But a human imprints an unbalanced disposition, or a balanced disposition based on the life lived.

And one shouldn’t mistake light and dark as good and evil. Yes, evil exist in darkness, and good in light, but analogous to the YinYang symbol, Good also lives in darkness. Evil also lives in light. Good doesn’t mean boring. Good is the balance of Zen. Good is the balance of universal power and wisdom. Balance is the highest order. Therefore ‘good’ is the height of being.

“Why don’t you want me to go back?”

The woman leans in real close. Her lips touch my ear lobe.

“To save you from pain.”

“Is it my choice?”

“I wish it weren’t,” she replies.

“Then send me back.”

The man removes a velvet bag from around his neck. He dumps out a pair of dice. They are frog-green with ruby dots, and bigger than my old pair.

“Things have changed,” he assures me.

I gently remove the Jaz clone from my lap and stand.

“Further,” I say.

“It’s so awful,” says the woman.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Please excuse me, but my conversation with the devil is over.

I hear the dice scamper across the Lucite table . . .

14

My chattering teeth fully seat me into this new gloom. I lie in a dark and damp dugout. Tree roots hang from the low ceiling. The floor is packed wet dirt. I share this dank space with wood crates. Lavender light streams in through an arched exit. From beyond the opening the sounds of hustle and bustle dominate. Strange voices blend into a Babel Matrix.

I wear heavy-duty overalls. My feet are bare, long and flat with thick dirty toenails. I wear an oversized soiled sweater. The air is damp, but not too cold. Steam rises off my head. My hands . . . the hands of this new body . . . they are pale, twisted and slender with four-jointed fingers. My hair is long and matted. I brush the greasy locks out of my eyes, tuck them behind my ears—

My ears are long and pointy. I run my tongue along my teeth. They are large, sharp, and spaced. Between my two front teeth is a big gap. I pet my bushy eyebrows. My eyes seem extra big and slanted towards my ears. My nose is big and slightly hooked. The wet air streams in through oversized nostrils. I search my pockets and find the dice bag.

The damp quietness is shattered by a deep hideous burp that wells up from my bowels. An inhuman burp. More like the sound a giant toad would make.

“Yup, this isn’t googley time,” yells someone outside. “Keep ‘em coming, yup.”

I grab the nearest crate and send it through the opening. My arms are long, skinny with bulging veins and rippling ligaments. I clear out the cache, suck in wet earthy air, exit the den.

Luscious lavender light bathes this forest scene. Streams of it come down between tall trees, riding the mist. A purplish streak running through the Firmament provides this light. If it were not for this purple vein it would be pitch black in this forest city, but it is not a city like modern humans would do it. Nowhere are there bricks or steel, windows, pavement, cars, artificial lights; electricity for that matter is not present. Flaming pots and torches provide minimal illumination. Strewn throughout the trees are shacks and rope bridges and perches alive with intoxicated merriment. People like me come and go in every direction. I drift away from the cart where the crates are being loaded and enter a natural intersection between five giant, boggy oaks. Homemade music flows accompanied by drunken singing. All around me shacks made of scavenged organic material service the multitudes. Most of the people wear hooded garments and soiled clothing. Some stagger about, lost in their own circus.

“I like your color, yup,” says a girl after bumping into me. She removes her hood. A swaying, devilish bog pixie smirks at me. Mischief dances in her dark eyes; every few seconds she emits a cute hiccup followed by a nasty belch. Her lips are black, her skin is pale, eye sockets are dark like a drug users.

“Yup, I’ve got my own place.” She moves in and massages my chest. “Got my own moss carpet, yup.” The gap between her front teeth is a huge turn-on, her jerky head movements hypnotic, but her clammy hands make me feel like I’m being molested by a corpse. And the burping thins could become a drag.

“Yup, hook me up with some of that precious cargo and all your dreams will come true—”

“Stop messing with that shroomhead, yup, and get back to work!” yells the boss.

The drunken pixie shrugs and latches onto the nearest color-matching male.

A crowd has gathered around the cart. A motley krew of burping, twisted and sickly creatures. The boss cracks a whip at anyone who gets too close. The crowd is begging for the cargo to be dispersed. Whip-wielding guards appear, hold the fiends at bay. I'm given a thick rope and ordered to pull, pull quickly. Fifteen of us tug the cart while being verbally abused by the boss perched atop the cache. The cart is four-wheeled and stacked ten feet high with the crates.

"Yup, where're we goin'?" I ask the pointy-ears next to me.

He looks at me with impossible eyes, then says out loud, "Yup, Shroomy forgot where we're going."

Everyone laughs expect for the boss as he cracks the whip at me.

The girl behind me, a young female with stringy red hair whispers, "We're shipping mushrooms to the front, yup."

At a steep hill we latch the cart to ropes. A gang of freakies on the crest signals that they are ready. Everyone jumps on or hangs off the cart. The density of bog pixies hasn't let up. There are tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of pointy-eared weirdoes in the wood.

The lines go taught, and with a jerk the cart lurches up the hill. We pass a hospital packed with injured. Next to the infirmary is a raucous pub built with twisted branches. Pixies dance and sing, some are locked in passionate embrace, others do the horizontal mamba with no shame. Many have crooked eyes and dangerously sharp teeth. The vibe is borderline anarchy. We chug further up the hill and come upon hundreds of children making thatch walls out of the surrounding wood. As we are pulled higher we pass haggard soldiers. Some walk down the hill, some hike up the switchback paths. Some are too drunk to do either. We reach the crest and a flat road. The area is alive with military urgency. Up in a tall tree is an observation post. The guards scan the landscape with naked eyes. The ropes used to pull us up are attached to the back of the cart and we begin a decent. Before we duck back into the wood, I see a massive battlefield of rolling hills, rock outcroppings, destroyed farmhouses. Across

the battlefield is another encampment lighting up the forest. From here the purple vein looks like continuously firing, braided lightning. I've never seen anything remotely like it before. It has to be magick.

At the bottom of the hill we're ordered to pull the precious cargo to the front. The road is packed mud and much easier to navigate than the slop in the wood. The road is lined with soldiers, but something isn't right. Nowhere are there weapons of any sort, though they do wear peaked leathery helmets, leathery vests, and an apron that covers front and rear.

We reach a blockade, are waived through, and enter a fortress made of thatched walls. Every hundred yards in the wall is a 30-foot watchtower. There's a 40-yard gap in the fence. Instead of replacing the thatch, a deep trench is being dug. Torches and smudge pots light the crescent-shaped fort. At the center is a mound and concentric circles of thatch wall. A citadel. Sitting under an elevated canopy built atop the mound, barely visible in the shadows, is a woman sitting on a throne, the queen of the bog.

"Yup, unload."

A chain forms to transport the crates into a huge earthen dome hut. Smoke rises from a chimneystack. A crate is thrown at me. I make a lame attempt to catch it. It hits the ground and cracks open. Thousands of mushrooms fall out.

"You," yells the boss, "repack that crate, yup, and bring it in."

I gather as many of the big moist mushrooms as I can, dump them in the box, enter the hut. The fungi are grabbed by a harried worker, dumped into a huge vat where they are mashed by dozens of intoxicated workers who stomp them like grapes, then cooked, cooled, and congealed and molded into body armor which is immediately fitted onto waiting soldiers. A grey, watery by-product of the smelting is loaded into mushroom-leather bags fitted to hand held pumps and distributed with the armor. As soon as a soldier gets a bag of shroom juice he/she wildly squirts the liquid into their comrade's faces then sucks on the sprayer

like a baby. I'm pushed further into the hut as another shipment of mushrooms comes in—

“We need big ones like you, yup,” says a solider. He and a group of veteran-looking soldiers close in around me. I catch sight of my mates slinking away into darkness.

I'm hustled deeper into the hut, past the huge pots, the moldings, and inserted in line. A gooey smock of warm armor is draped over my shoulders. It dries and form-fits. The solider in front of me receives a pump gun. I don't. He turns and sprays my face with the liquid. Immediately my perception changes. A warm buzz invades my body. Jerky uneasiness. Every step is an adventure. A glop of mushroom-armor is dropped on my head (the freaky in front with the pump doesn't get a helmet). The organic helmet dries into a peak. Hundreds of new recruits shuffle down a ramp and we enter a tunnel.

“We are no longer brethren,” says an emotionless female voice echoing in the wet darkness. “They left us behind.”

We march so close that I constantly kick the heels of the soldier in front. Jagged toenails rip at my own Achilles.

“Fear is light,” says the voice.

The solider in back puts his hands on my shoulders and pushes. I do the same to the one in front. Then we're running. War cries erupt. The tunnel angles down and we spill onto the battlefield. The solider four heads in front trips. I'm buried in a pileup. I swallow mud. Fight for breath. Feet stomp my head.

I manage a hand into my pocket, pull out the dice. I'm lifted out of the mud. I stand shoulder to shoulder with my comrades. I scoop mud from my eye sockets. Forty yards away is another line, several hundred “persons” wide—

Bounding across the mud field come dozens of enemy. One beelines to me. He's a prettier version of Elvin than my comrades and I. He slaps me in the face. Runs away. Those in line who've been smacked take off after their assaulters. When the shock wears off I break in pursuit, catch the enemy. I slam his face into the mud. Shouts from behind me tweak my warning antenna. A comrade stands ten feet away, his hand stretched towards

me, feet anchored as if he has come against an invisible barrier. Behind him, ten 'slappers' have been caught and are fighting off 20 attackers each. A clump of mud blindsides me. A gang of enemy Elvin encircles me. The comrade offering his hand pulls away and joins in beating the caught slappers. Mud comes at me from every direction . . . and then I'm in the center of a vicious beatdown. Hands and feet and knees hammer my bones. I pull my dice hand away from protecting my head. Receive a kick to my pointy ear. Flick the dice into the mud, duck as a big foot comes at my head—

15

“The moment chaos is ordered it begins to deteriorate,” says an Elvin male (the prettier kind) draped in a light grey robe and standing at a podium. “This is the Law of Matter. The deterioration is typically slow, allowing time for measured evolution into higher levels of matter. But in our situation, we have become ordered and reached evolutionary glory very quickly. Thus the deterioration process is greatly accelerated. But my party’s position, and that of our most trusted minds, is that this acceleration is not an irreversible by-product of the invasion.”

I too stand at a podium in this oval, naturally lit hall (natural as in purple/white light coming in through the open roof) with alabaster columns that support the dome ceiling. A crowd of attractive Elvin sits on bleachers in silent anticipation. A production crew scurries around. Unmanned floating cameras capture the debate. A producer directs the scene from a floating platform above the bleachers.

“Rebuttal?” asks a mediator sitting at a desk slightly lower than us debaters.

All eyes focus on me. I can’t even open my mouth.

“Since my opponent is tongue-tied, I will rebut and add,” says a woman, the third member of this debate. “Yes the degradation process starts the moment inside moves outside, yes, but I argue that the outside is no less chaotic and immaterial than the inside. I am sorry to say, but we have not become real. The good news

is that we are not degrading. My party's analysis is that we are experiencing something other than deterioration."

"Chaos," the man says, "feeds itself to order so that it may be ordered and become real, so that it may enter the wheel of evolution. This is Royal Alchemy. This is the engine of Creation. Chaos fuels order. The outside only exists so that we may move into it."

"Your conservative political views, and lack of asymmetrical thinking limit your abilities in this debate," fires the woman.

The man shouts above agreements rumbling through the crowd. "I declare: We are degrading at such a fast rate, not because of the inherent qualities of sudden advancement, but because the supplanted civilization is still amongst us! Because they are infected with Dark Chaos! They breed it in their hearts and minds! We must eliminate the sapiens if we are to survive."

Some in the crowd shout a quick "HO!" in support.

"We justified the destruction of the sapien civilization because of their injustice, their butchery, their lack of conscious evolution, not because they were the purveyors of Dark Chaos," says the woman in her level-headed way. "We held their madness up to our perfect intellect and vision, held their crumbling world up against our balance and saw no other choice. We could not live together. Sapien pollution of our perfection was not an option. So we erased them. But we have so quickly, so brutally learned that the sapiens were not inherently mad and murderous. They suffered because Dark Chaos inherently commands this 'outside,' this 'order.' Evil thrives in such an environment—"

The man pounds the podium. "Our righteousness is inherent. We will not succumb to evil."

"What happened to the sapiens who, as per the covenant, helped us emigrate outside? Breaking the covenant cannibalized our righteousness. We have succumbed to evil."

The man addresses the crowd, "This proletariat represents her party's official line. They are a threat to our safety and survival. I implore you, they must not be elected."

Deflecting the personal attack and fear mongering, the woman says, “This emergency election was called because of corruption, lies, and this administrations failure to solve one single social, economic, or military calamity. The sapien refugee problem must be dealt with in an Elvinway. The current lack of commodities will be solved by a renegotiated treaty with the bugs. The civil war will end when we begin treating our brethren as equals.”

The man rebuts, ignoring the deepest points of her argument. It’s either a sign of defeat, or some brilliant strategy. “Royal Alchemy demands we act the way we do!”

“Royal Alchemy does not demand a holocaust. We broke the covenant because this world turns brother against brother. That is its purpose. To test the will of those who inhabit it. To test their righteousness. And we are failing. Failing terribly.”

It seems everyone present knows this fact, but to hear it kindles intense reaction. The two debaters focus on me. The crowd follows.

My voice finds me. “We fooled them. We slipped in through the back door. We won.” These words surprise me.

“Exactly, which could only have been accomplished with the aid of those we betrayed,” says the woman.

“They always knew who we were,” says the man. “They knew they had opened the gates of their demise. Yet they did not raise alarm. They chose comfort and status over confrontation. Such collective lack of character does not honor commitment.”

“It pains me to hear such words,” says the woman.

The man frowns and shrugs.

The mediator cuts in, “What natural process allowed us to subvert our inherent righteousness and fail to honor the Covenant?”

I blurt out, “Because you have it wrong. Order is chaos in disguise. The nature of everything is chaos. Inside, outside, it’s all chaos.”

The crowd’s unease grows.

“And righteousness,” I add, “always takes a back seat to survival. Always. It’s not evil, it’s just the way it is.”

The woman glares at me with witchy eyes.

“And those who we betrayed . . . The Family?” I scan the crowd and my opponents. Thankfully they understand my terminology. “As was said; sordid souls who poisoned and murdered their own kind for profit and power. They used the power we gave them for evil instead of good. Evil is a choice, not an inherent byproduct of chaos. Sapien evil was a choice. Now we must decide.”

I’ve sliced a nerve. The crowd erupts.

The mediator quiets the crowd. I wait for a rebuttal. It comes from the woman.

“Perhaps we should’ve stayed in The Other?”

The man adds. “If we knew the outcome would be this, would we still have come through?”

“Of course,” I say.

“Was it worth this epic uncertainty?” he asks, his raucous tone suddenly soft.

“There was no choice.”

“And what should we do with the quarter of a billion sapiens wallowing in our camps, soaking up our resources?”

I look down at the podium and at the scribbled notes. There is also a pie chart breaking down the sapien population into segments, which is numbered at seven billion. The breakdown is as follows:

A majority slice of the pie is black. It is raised above the pie. It represents 67% of the chart and is labeled: Deceased.

The rest is as follows:

Yellow slice = 18% . . . sapien/no hybrid

Green slice = 6% . . . sapien/lizard hybrid

Red slice = 6% . . . sapien/Elvin hybrid
 Grey slice = 3% . . . sapien/bug hybrid
 Orange slice = .01% . . . Supersapien Hybrid
 (ManDragon?)

“OK,” I say, “we should absorb them or grant them autonomy—”

“Bombastic!” yells the man. “To absorb them is to pollute. Give them autonomy and they will start their evil all over again.” He points to the crowd. “I told you, the hybrids are partial to their sapein genes. The independent party is a threat to our security and survival!”

“I embrace my new blood,” copying the woman debaters calm technique, “but neither have I forgotten my roots. The issue is: there was no plan, and now we must compensate.”

The woman says, “There was a plan, just not a plan for what happened.”

I can’t help it. I must know. “And what did happen?”

The woman’s head jerks like I’ve just yanked it with a rope. The crowd seems concerned that I asked such a question.

The mediator says to the crowd, “It is not uncommon for hybrids to have dim memories of the invasion.”

The male debater answers me. “Your so called ‘Family,’ in a desperate attempt to disrupt the invasion, released the mutagen virus. The bloodletting in those first weeks was enormous. Most sapien and hybrid causalities occurred then. Now, as you know, there is almost no death.”

“Only servitude, incarceration, and games,” I say.

I rattle the dice in my hand.

“None of us are here for a history lesson,” says the woman. “My party’s platform is threefold: An Elvian solution to the sapien problem. A solution to the civil war. A solution to the commodities crisis. Only my party offers real solutions that will not sacrifice our righteousness.”

“And our incumbent stance has not changed,” says the man. “The sapiens are to be traded to the bugs for desperately needed

commodities. As for our civil war, we will not heed. We will not integrate. Never.”

Supporters in the crowd stand and cheer.

I kneel behind the podium. Cast the dice into the concave back of the podium. As the die clink around, I look to my left. The male debater is walking over. He sees the dice. He hurries. The dice come to rest.

Snake eyes.

16

I jog along in a line of haggard refugees a dozen people wide and miles long. The sun is a dim splotch behind the Firmament. Clouds of mist dot the sky from ground to Firmament. The landscape used to be Ponderosa forest, ala the American Southwest, but is now covered in brilliant grasses and mosses. The air temp is a comfortable 80 degrees and humid in that cool way. The only discomfoting thing (besides the refugee situation) is the fact that everyone has a tail. Some tails are but five inch, paralyzed, rat-like protrusions. Others are longer and twitch. All are a slight shade of green. I am no exception. My tail is a medium-length ropy thing. It twitches when I think about it.

Oh, and there's a second discomfoting thing: the reappearance of the dwarf alien punks. They flank the line and jab people with cow prods for no apparent reason. I stare at one for too long. He runs up to me; his expressionless, greasy little alien face is half-hidden in the shadows of his hood. I dodge the prod once, twice, on the third poke he nails me in the thigh. My leg numbs and I fall out of line. He comes at me again. I yank the prod, pull the punk in, slap him in the face so hard that he flips sideways. When none of his miserable comrades come to his rescue I move in for the kill.

"Leave him alone," says a man/lizard as he pulls me back in line. "They're pathetic little things. Just leave him be."

Just before the train drops down into a gully, I see the punk get up, shake out the cobwebs, and start prodding people again.

“Much better than Ohio,” says the guy to my left.

“Don’t you mean: Nihizshiddizza,” says a woman in a mocking, lisping way.

Everyone wears identical tight-fitting grey/blue jumpsuits with a flap for the tail to escape. The jumpsuits are made of rip-stop linen that breathes well. Organic strap sandals complete the ensemble.

“This gig is a vacation compared to the landfill assignment, trust me,” says another man, “but psychologically, dismantling our own civilization just messes my head up. It’s sick. Sad and sick.”

“Hey,” says a woman, “we could be taking nuclear reactors apart like the full-bloods and then you wouldn’t have a head to get messed up. Met a girl who was one of a hundred survivors from a contingent of 10,000 who took apart Three Mile Island. Said people just melted. We got it good. Thank the tail.”

“Amen,” say a dozen people. “Thank the tail.”

“Tail ain’t nothin’ but a long booty,” adds the woman as she wiggles her butt.

Suddenly the refuge train comes to a stop. Everyone drops to the ground like they’ve done this drill a hundred times. It takes me another two seconds to join them. A metallic UFO the size of a helicopter pokes out from a mist cloud. It circles the train and plucks random people out of line, sucks them up into the ship with a green tractor beam. Everyone lies on their belly, cheeks to the ground. A person five paces away gets sucked up. The saucer disappears. Everyone stands. The line starts moving again.

I cycle through a dozen questions I can ask that will give me a clue on what the hell just happened without exposing my ignorance.

“They’re late today,” I say quietly to the woman in front. Her look tells me I’m off the mark.

I try the man to my left.

“I still can’t believe it’s random.”

“You wish.”

“Then what is it?”

“If you don’t get your head on straight you’re next.”

“Where are they taking them?”

“To Disney World, where else do you think?”

Every neuron wants me to laugh, but my gut tells me he is serious.

“Why Disney World?”

The man takes a swig of water from a nozzle connected to his suit.

“You been hiding in a cave?”

I nod/shrug and signal for him to keep it a secret. The man’s eyes grow wide.

“Wow, a fresh one. You don’t have a clue, do you?”

I shake my head.

“You know that most humans are dead or mutated. You know that, right?”

I nod.

“OK, of the survivors there are the aborted mutations, like us, who didn’t have enough lizard DNA to grow real tails; then there’s the hybrids, be it lizard, Elvin, or bug who’ve been integrated into their tribe; and there are human full-bloods lacking any mutant genes. So the lizards are the muscle. The bugs are the brains. The Elvin are the puppet masters. But from what I hear, the elves are on shaky ground because of their civil war.”

“Where are they?”

“Those pointy-eared bastards stick to the islands, New Zealand, the Cali Chain, Vermont, what’s left of England. Got rid of all the full-blood prisoners, tens of millions of them. Didn’t even want them as slaves. Handed them over to the lizards. I guess working is better than rotting in Elvin dentition—” the man’s face slackens. His eyes look like they’re about to pop out. He massages his temples, turns forward. The briefing is over.

Based on these facts it’s safe to say the incumbent party won the emergency Elvin election.

We jog up a rise between brilliant red rocks and down into a bowl-shaped valley. The far side is obscured by mist. In the

bowl are tens of thousands of refugees demolishing the buildings one piece at a time with their bare hands. Thousands carry the rubble out of the valley and into the lush desert. Hovering around and in the mist clouds are platforms. One platform in the distance is low enough for me to see that it's occupied by ninja lizards. As for my other old friends, the big lizards, they're on the ground.

Hundreds of them stand guard and jab at people with their wooden staffs. (Not that anybody moves an inch out of line.) They're really just here to menace. A few are engaged in a brawl. A crowd of giant lizards shields the action from me, but I can hear the clacking of combat staffs and screeching cries that ding me like razor blades on a chalkboard.

Things have apparently shaken out like this:

The surviving humans and corrupted mutations are dismantling the remnants of their civilization. Apparently, and I don't really blame them, the dwellers don't want strip malls and condos soiling their new world. And when the last trace of human inhabitation is taken away they'll probably drop everyone into a volcano. Call me a pessimist.

I follow the refugees into a lot where a Mega Hal-Mart is under demolition. People move like they're receiving silent instructions, ala Hive Mind, they just flow where they're supposed to go. I move with a smaller group into the store and form a chain handing cloth bundles of rubble to waiting transporters. Alien punks mingle about like six-year-old children at a piñata party.

The sense of human defeat is palpable beyond the slavery. These people are broken. Thoughts of freedom are totally absent. They're going through the motions of existence. They are defeated, and are silent as worker bees.

I slip out of line and move down an isle of empty shelving units. A few slaves turn and eye me. Their gazes are void. A

punk appears and chases me, cattle prod held out like a blind man's cane. I duck around a shelving corner and the little idiot runs by.

I drop the green dice into my hand. The craftsmanship is impressive, weighty, brilliantly shaped. To hell with slavery.

A door swings open. Mist flows in.

A tall silhouette stands in the doorway.

A lizard steps in. Its head is tall and narrow with a short black crest of hair running sagitally along its bony skull. Its eyes are almond-shaped and hypnotically gold, set to the side instead of the typical hominid binocular style. It wears a skintight, sleeveless black shirt with a black, Roman Legionaries-style kilt for bottom. Its feet are bare and wide, four-toed with thick black nails. Black stockings extend from its ankles up into the kilt. Its thin muscular arms are sheathed in the same stockings from wrists to mid bicep. The lizard's skin is grey/green and streaked with black tattoos on its neck. It presses a slender finger against something that looks like an ear. It nods as it stares at me.

I cast the dice—

Like a shot of green lightning the lizard's tail slaps the dice into its hand. As it inspects the dice it sends another communiqué.

I break and scamper through a crumbling wall, weave through thousands of zombie workers. Few acknowledge my insubordination. A buzzing invades my head. The intensity multiplies and drops me mid-stride. Punks surround me, start shocking me. A UFO descends from the mist. A green beam surrounds me. I go limp as I'm pulled off the ground. The buzzing becomes unbearable. There is no escape. It's coming from within me. Fade to black . . .

“Pretend that you're sleeping,” whispers a voice, hot sultry sweetness on a warm wind. A lisp in the words—

I raise my hand into a ray of light. My skin has a greenish pallor to it, is thicker than pink human skin, smoother, and is streaked with black kelioid tattoos. My hands are opposable-

thumb primate but without those sorry pinkies that seems to have gone the way of the appendix. I wear a burlap sarong that offers plenty of freedom for my long, thick tail.

The female next to me is topless. She has perfect breasts for her long athletic frame. Each breast has two slits in it. Her face is elongated with seductive slanting cat eyes. Her features are two-thirds lizard, a third human. There's a young, attractive and sassy quality to her, confident in her reptoid beauty.

"What?" she says, head darting.

I pat my body for the dice . . . no dice.

I grab her hand. "I'm a lizard!"

"Reptoid is the operative word. You're still about a third human."

Bodies all around us begin to move. My reptoid mate rolls onto her back, unravels a waxy green leaf holding black, tar-like cubes. She pops one into her mouth, chews. Her eyes flutter. Body squirms. A narrow pink tongue moistens her lips. Desire and lust pulse around the room, traveling on unseen pheromones. The female, her eyes half-open, mouth slightly open in that sexy way, chest heaving, jumps on top of me in a blink, my hips grind with hers, she paws my head. I throw her off, scramble to my feet. Hundreds of reptoids lie in this sunken bowl, making aggressive love, the females on top. Through the orgy I move, hopping and finding a path, dancing out of this carnality. But there is no exit. At the bowl's rim I find more drug-induced sex.

Two unattractive reptoids pull at my legs. They lick my ankles. The more symmetrical and beautiful reptoids are closer to the center. I jump away and use the side of the bowl to run. A small saucer appears above the orgy. It zeros in on me. I dive into a mass of bodies.

"Oh, you're so pretty," purrs a homely female as she nuzzles into me. A spotlight scans the writhing mass. I flip her over, place her on top of me. I hug her tight. Our lips inches apart. I pull her head down, peer over her shoulder. The light pans 20 yards away.

“Never been with someone like you.” The reptoid pressed her body against mine.

The spotlight illuminates the area.

Something latches onto my tail and I'm pulled out from under the reptoid and above the orgy. I gain more altitude. A tentacle extending from the craft has me. Nine other reptoids have suffered an identical fate. The craft takes off, enters a horizontal tunnel at breakneck speed. A platform appears. The tentacles release us, depositing us on the floating plate. The plate slants, sends us down a chute and onto a wide conveyer belt. Blasts of air remove what little clothing there was. Almost-too-hot clouds of steam sterilize our skins. A saucer appears sprouting noodle arms. We're hosed down with a dark blue latex-like coating, leaving our heads, feet and hands free of the coating. The coating dries instantly, tightens, becomes a rubbery protective suit. The conveyer belt ends, dumps us into a sandpit. A donut-shaped saucer descends. Its sides are scarred and dented. A black binary code band runs along its circumference. Two pilots peer over the edge as it lowers. They wear huge mirrored goggles and look like oversized grey ants. Something like a chandelier descends from the craft. Nine hoses dangle from it. That leaves one of us 'odd reptoid out.' Streams of blue liquid shoot out from three hoses, hit reptoids between the shoulder blades, creating seamless jumpsuits with hundred foot long rubbery tubes connecting them to the craft. Embossed binary-code identical to the saucer's appears on the blue suits. Another three streams come down, connect, and the six players are yanked off the ground, dangle like dead puppets. The punch to the back of my head almost knocks me out. I stagger away from a vicious fight between the remaining reptoids. One is pulled out of the fight by a connection. The other two face off. Another is suddenly 20 feet off the ground. A door opens, revealing a dark tunnel. It's either an escape, or something nasty is in store for the remainder. So far death has seemed an impossible outcome, but now I question that illusion.

I charge the other reptoid. He flicks his left wrist, a hook claw pops out. Something hits me in the back. I'm in the air.

The craft takes off. The sand pit disappears into a dot, the fate of the remainder, though surely ugly, is unknown.

The players all dangle at different lengths—I'm at just under a hundred feet. We rocket through a dense fog and burst into a huge cylindrical cave/arena packed with clamoring lizards. They cheer from thousands of platforms carved into the walls. The far side of the arena is a mile away, and the walls extend so high that they get lost in another cloudbank. Something like a huge disco ball hovers, produces a dazzling light show. Two other crafts appear from the mist below. Dangling from them are full-blooded humans. One team is red, the other black. The human players look terrified and confused, while my team has started bounding about, spewing venom about how they hate "full-bloods," and flicking out wrist claws like switchblades.

And the point of the game?

Kill the humans, prove we are no longer emotionally attached to our former species.

Rolling hisses come from the crowd. They're doing The Wave. Hollow gourd-like things rain down into the arena. The craft takes off towards the humans. We dangle beneath like Man 'O War strands. One human craft splits, tries to flank us. The other seems to be having mechanical problems. The players (sacrifices?) flail about in terror. My fellow reptoids are a sneering assault team, claws glistening in the slivery disco light as we rush into the fight—

Trap.

The humans pull out sharpened rods. Some extend into eight-foot spears, other rods stay short for close-quarter combat. Our craft pops an evasive maneuver, sending us into the mass of spears. I swing past a woman looking and sounding medieval with her painted face and warrior howl. Reptile agility keeps me from impalement. Another reptoid following right behind me nails the woman with a claw to the throat. I'm snapped back through the human tentacles, receive a jab in my arm that gushes, then partially seals itself up. We're taken on a wide orbit of the 'stuck' craft. Two human players have been killed. Two

more seem pretty banged up. One reptoid dangles, a broken spear sticks out from his stomach. The connection to the dead reptoid severs and it freefalls towards the mist half a mile below. Something big, flying big, swirls the gas. Just as the corpse hits the layer, a black flying thing, an insect as big as a commercial airline, appears for a split second, snatches the corpse, disappears. Out of the corner of my eyes I see the human casualties disappear in a similar manner.

Every angle of this journey is treacherous. Every level is magnitudes more intense and weird than the last. One fate worse than the next. Even if it's mixed with sunshine and pancakes, none of this madness can be allowed to happen. The world I knew—even with its stuttering stability, economic pit vipers, comfort squeezed from the blood and sweat of the non-white majority—was magnitudes better than this abomination.

Or was it?

Human civilization trampled the planet. We treated the natural world as a commodity there for our gluttony. We poisoned each other in the name of profit. Man incorporated his soul. The few ruled the many. Lie was the Logos. Subjugation was the Way. But this isn't punishment. This is slaughter.

The second craft of human players locks in parallel with us. The humans stab at us. One of their players is unarmed. She swings from the center to the spear-wielders and back again, like she's trying to gain momentum. A reptoid grabs a spear, pulls in the human. Another lizard swings out and slices the human's tether, sending him alive into the demons below. The crowd roars. The unarmed woman swings out, almost gets tagged by a hook claw.

Jaz.

She swings back and the crafts separate around the stalled ship, which suddenly is now moving. We're hemmed in, fending off attacks from left and right. Blood splatters. Reptoids die. Humans die. Some fall into the mist alive and screaming.

I find Jaz through the carnage. She's calm, holding a little black bag.

My dice.

She's determined to get close, get me the dice. She waves for me to meet her halfway. My tether has been shortened. I can't move more than ten feet in any direction. Now Jaz looks frustrated, even angry, possibly scared. She weaves through a nasty tangle of hand-to-hand combat. The visible world slows as I see Jaz coming in, dogging blows, our fingertips touch. I grab the bag.

A reptoid slashes her tether. A spear impales the reptoid. I grab Jaz's wiggling tether. The crowd hisses.

"Drop her," screams a teammate.

The crafts separate, loop around, head for another confrontation.

I'm yelling no, no, no, in a reflexive screeching voice.

Jaz looks up with those dark forever-eyes. Serious eyes. Eyes that know. Eyes that have seen Beyond.

"Let go," she whispers.

I muter nonsense.

"Let go."

My head shakes wildly.

"Nemo, let go."

My hand opens on this command. The tether is out of reach before I gain control of it. Jaz drops towards the mist. She places her hands in prayer at her chest. Plummets into the mist.

The two enemy crafts slam into us, push us towards the wall. The humans are down to eight players compared to our five. We pass within ten yards of crammed ledges. I snap my right wrist. Nothing happens. I try my left and a claw tip pokes out from a slit. I snap harder and the whole claw comes out, business end facing my palm. I swing towards the ledge, then back towards a row of jabbing spears. Back again. The craft dips. I swing up, cut my own tether, crash into a ledge and take out 20 lizards like bowling pins. A circle forms around me. I dump out the dice. The lizards keep their distance, treating me like a cornered tiger. I am splattered with blood. It contrasts nicely with my blue suit.

I cast the dice into the sand.

Three and five . . .

. . .

. . .

.

I snap out into the Space Between. Long and warm taffy-like. The solar system, or is that the entire universe, is a white speck in a fishbowl of specks. The specks float in a blue/black Jello. Beyond the fishbowl there is something—some things—watching. I snap back through the jello and back into—

17

A giant bug identical to the saucer pilots from the game, which is still only five feet tall, but again, huge for an ant, inspects me. Its eyes are hidden behind mirrored goggles. Its body is thin and frail. It hunches, as if perpetually sneaking. It wears a formal black military uniform and has four long fingers that it uses to maneuver the small open air craft that I lay in. (Thankfully I've returned to 100% human.) We fly through a forest of giant brown mushrooms and strange plants tall as sequoias. The sky is still dominated by the Firmament and the horizontal purple braided lightning. The craft maneuvers around a towering rectangular mycelium . . . a colonized skyscraper, a relic from the human past now colonized with fungus. Brown, UFO-shaped mushrooms the size of two-story homes sprout from hundreds of spots.

The craft zips into a building where the upper floors are untouched by the mycelium. I'm levitated out of the craft, dropped into a boardroom with blown out floor-to-ceiling windows. The craft takes off. I regain muscle control, search for the dice. No luck. I walk to the windows. Beneath a blanket of fungus and towering plants straight from the mind of Dr. Seuss, was once a sprawling metropolis, but now every building is colonized with mushrooms. Various sized and shaped UFOs fly around this bizarre landscape.

Behind me a set of double doors swing open. Through them come four bugs. They line up in stiff attention (as stiff

as hunchbacks can). Next enters a taller, less hunched bug. It wears aviator-style sunglasses and is dressed like a Waffen SS officer: black wool double-breasted blazer, black blouse and tie, black slacks, knee-high paten-leather boots. Across its chest is a black strap with a holstered pistol. Black, glossy Iron Crosses adorn its left breast. The bug paces. It stops and inspects my face, its oily black antenna sniff the air. I'm deeply disturbed by its hidden glare. It spins on its heels, emits a series of nauseating clicks, then stands at attention. In walks a beetle with long, wavering antenna. It stands six feet tall and limps on legs hidden beneath a black robe. Flanking it are two humans dressed like good Nazis. Their skin is pale, faces gnarled and scarred. Their presence is one of the most dubious things I've seen. The beetle limps over. Its head bobs. There's a dignified symmetry to its face, symmetry only achieved in the insect kingdom. Instead of fear, I feel inspired by this insect—lost in its massive black eyes. The beetle bows. It and the Nazis take up position in line. From the darkness beyond the doors comes a single human Nazi. He goose-steps up to me. His eyes are hidden by round, metal frame sunglasses. I notice a skull and bones tattoo on his neck. He wears a single black Iron Cross at his throat.

Two antennae spout from his bald head. They are deformed, short, and move in jerky ways.

"What the hell are you?" I say with unhidden disdain.

The Nazi removes one of his leather gloves and slaps me across the face with it. A strong ammonia smell remains on my skin.

One of my brain lobes wants to engage this guy in sensible conversation. The other wants to take a swan dive out the window. I sort of manage the former.

"This isn't really happening," I squeak.

The Nazi slaps me again.

"How dare you doubt," he snarls.

"You're not real. This is a beta version of the future. The bad parts only." I try to block his slap, but his movements are hyperfast and two slaps slip through.

“Everything is real. Even that which doesn’t exist—is real. Your inability to grasp this concept is why you sapiens fell without a fight. You accepted our propaganda which subdued you into believing the mythic was unreal. We convinced you that we were manifestations of your mind. As you now know, the flesh is but one level of reality.”

“But it’s a level you desire more than anything.”

He slaps me three times.

“We owe you no explanations. And luckily for you, your fate is not in my hands.” He clicks his heels, goose-steps to the head of the line.

From the darkness beyond the doors shuffles a giant bright green mantis the size of three Clydesdales. Its spindly green legs, monstrous pinchers, seven-foot antenna, move autonomously. The mantis acknowledges the line of misfits with a bob of its triangular head. It turns to me. I appear a million times in its segmented eyes. Its hinged mouth continually moves. The mantis keeps bobbing its head. I do the same. Perhaps in another lifetime I’d be so terrified that my heart would stop. The mantis emits a long electric buzz that sends me to the floor, hands plastered to my ears. An antenna tickles my head. One of the ant guards ambles over and places a basket at my feet. In it is one dried blue mushroom the size of a finger. The mantis picks up the mushroom with an antenna, brings it to my mouth. The mantis is a paradox. It could rip me to shreds, yet it moves with care.

“Not real. Not real,” I mumble, dodging the mushroom being forced into my mouth. The fungus slips between my lips, butts up against my teeth. It enters my mouth. I chew, swallow. It tastes like cardboard.

The mantis looks out the window. My gaze follows.

The city starts melting as if the entire place were made of wax and heated under a blow dryer. The insects watch me with silent and still intent. Observing a subject. Our building melts away. I fight against this gooey breakdown by digging my heels into the melting ground. I dig and scratch for a hold. Globbs of flooring, like burrowing in hot vinyl, build up. The building

melts all around us, but the insects just stare. Can bugs do anything but stare? Can bugs blink? Can bugs love? The building melts so fast that the insects and I now stand on a lumpy brown landscape of melted city . . .

. . . and then the melted world starts moving with a grinding steadiness, moving beneath my feet like a treadmill. The earth now rotates at seven miles an hour instead of 25,000.

The world machine revs up and starts cycling at a faster rate. I fight the movement, gouge trenches. Soft waxy reality builds up all around me. Stopping 17 locomotives while wrestling King Kong would be easier. The bigness overwhelms. My insect instigators drift away like land looks to a sailor. I fall to my face and fight the gooey rotation with my palms. The world cycles at an increasingly fast rate and blurs like a billion melted crayons; waxy and muddy streaked. I tumble, tumble, backslide through space—

And the world-treadmill slows to a reasonable speed. I regain my footing. The surrounding scenery is still blurred. The world comes to a full stop, starts up again immediately, now moving in the other direction. The world focuses—

I stare at the broad grin of a Chinese dragon. It stares back at me with its flaming, cyclopean eye. Its body is a swirling, whipping firestorm. A flaming horn sprouts from the crown of the dragon's head. The creature moves a huge, white jade chess piece, an attacking Knight, with its mouth. I sit like a Yogi on a floating platform across the board—

Space revs up so quickly that I'm tossed over the dragon and back onto the blurry treadmill. I tumble and cartwheel forward. Somehow I find my feet, stand, and run with it. Now there's a sideways feel to the movement.

Sideways Blur. Focus. Stop—

Standing mountaintop draped in orange robes. Space hardly has time to snap into place before it starts moving again.

Forward blur. Focus. Stop—

A ceremony takes place on a huge pentacle carved into the wood floor. Torches illuminate the scene. Red-robed figures, faces concealed by exaggerated, laughing masks, encircle a naked

man and woman as they make carnal love in the center of the pentagram.

Blur. Stop—

Walking the perimeter of a pyramid.

Blur. Stop—

Etching tablets in a candle-lit cave.

Playing with children in a lush grove.

Rainy night, sword fighting a vicious goblin on a bridge.

Riding a horse through a dark forest.

Picking cotton.

Blur. Stop—

Terrified and queasy men stare at me. All wear helmets strapped down and are ready for combat. We ride in a boat though rough seas. Shrapnel pings off the craft's hull. I move to the middle of the boat. The coxswain takes a bullet in the chest. The craft drifts sideways. A mine goes off. The boat capsizes. I sink and slip out of my gear before it drowns me. Find the surface. Bullets whiz by. Someone pushes me under. I find the bottom and swim to the shallows, come up amid dozens of dead and dying. Gunners up in bunkers mow down the attackers. Officers scream, telling their men that their training will keep them alive. Artillery and mortar rounds come in, vaporizing clumps of men. Officers yell: "Keep moving, die on your feet—"

Blur. Stop—

On a stage. A huge crowd cheers. I stand behind three congas, a member of a Latin/rock ensemble rocking an outdoor festival of a million hippies.

Blur. Stop—

I lay in a crib. A staticky phonograph plays "Age of Aquarius." The light coming in the windows is electric blue. In the doorway floats a blue ghost.

Blue.

Blur.

Stop—

Marching in a protest. Millions march. A plane appears. It dumps white powder on the masses. Stamped—

Blur. Stop—

A man, barely visible in the dim light, paces. He rushes in and shoves his pinky up my left nostril. The ointment on his finger sets fire to my sinuses—

Blur. Stop—

Sit in a prison yard.

Blur. Stop—

Charging through the narrow streets of an ancient city. In the distance a crumbling temple is illuminated by flares and tracers.

Blur. Stop—

Jaz.

I see Jaz coming from the backstage area of the Coffey Sack. Trailing her is the trainee. Jaz smiles and gives a quick wave. I squeeze the rose, break the stem. She beams—

All around me appears a frantic collage of my experience. I warp-speed away from it and end up on the back of a capsized cruise ship that's being swallowed by a massive quicksand pit. Hundreds of survivors scramble for their lives.

Blur. Stop—

Trekking an endless desert.

Blur. Stop—

Focus.

The surrounding world stays focused.

18

I stand on a cliff thousands of feet above a sand sea. A few ancient and dead trees cling to the granite. Among the remains of a city swallowed by the sand is an aircraft carrier half consumed by the desert. Next to me is a skeleton that holds a note. Written on the parchment in chicken scratch: LAST MAN.

When the world fails to move and blur, and I stop kissing the ground, I follow a footpath to the top of the island. In the middle of the barren plateau is a complex of stone and wood buildings. Strewn around it are withered flags, signs of a defunct garden, stacks of bird skulls.

I call out for my island mate(s) but get no reply. The sun beats down on my bare shoulders. A warm wind kicks up what few grains of earth remain on this rocky perch. The Firmament is gone. I'm not sure what this means.

As I near the hut I see a cordoned off area of tombstones. Symbols are etched on the granite headstones. Something like crosses, moons and stars. Other graves are marked with Lizard skulls. I enter the hut through a doorway feebly closed off with a tattered curtain.

A weathered skeleton sitting in the corner greets me. It's the skeletal remains of a Lizard. Its ribcage, spine, and head are intact. The rest of it is a jumbled pile propping up the torso. Another skeleton is probably Elvin. I can tell by the skull shape and fangs. A third skeleton has long brown hair and some ligaments holding the lower jaw in place. It is human, of the

100% variety. Clenched in its hand is a piece of cloth. Inscribed is a poem:

By bones alone you cannot tell,
 All the differences that ruled,
 But our blood is red
 Atoms and dust
 To love is best
 Testifies this man,
 For now the world belongs to the laughing wind
 and machines
 Such delight do they take in our demise . . .

By the brittle nature of the bones, I'd say these skeletons have been here for a long, long time. And since they weren't buried, it's safe to think that currently this island has a population of one. The single room house is bare except for what could've been a bed of dried grass and a metal chest. I open it and find a pile of headlines printed from the Internet and clipped together (just headlines, articles are absent, and all the dates are 12.21.2012), a dozen notebooks crammed with messy handwriting, and other mundane artifacts of an age long gone.

A note neatly laid on the pile says:

Here is our attempt to chronicle. The records are incomplete. Judge us by our failures. All of us are guilty, but in the end, we proved unity prevails, if only for survival's sake, but had we known this before, had we known unity = survival . . .

The first headline clipping is terribly faded. The time stamp is 7am PT 12.21.2012:

Half Of The World In The Dark. Violence, Not Peace, Widespread As "The Day" Passes, Bringing Chaos. Earthquake Hits Bay Area.

Another headline from 9am PT reads:

*Solar EMP Loses Strength. West Coast Power
Grid Fares Better Than Rest Of Country. SF Quake
8.3. Massive Destruction*

And from 10:15am:

Dark Spot On Sun. Is This The End?

My gaze turns to the sun, visible through a hole in the thatch roof. There is a black spot taking up 1/5th of the visible sphere.

11:45am:

*Riots Consume East Coast Cities. California Closes
Its Borders. President In Seclusion. Congress Breaks.
Asia Reporting "Mutations."*

2pm:

*Reports From Asia Dim As Mutation Spreads.
Europe Reporting Mutations. Will It Happen Here?*

4:20pm:

*Mutations Blamed On Radiation, Activated By
Nightfall. Massive Chaos On Eastern Seaboard. West
Coast Braces For The Worst.*

The headline clipping with the last time stamp, 6:12pm PT, reads:

*President Calls On 'Sapiens' To Cooperate. LA
Anarchy As Sun Sets . . .*

I grab a journal and move out of the hut. There is a small lean-to near the cliff offering shade. Down below, in the sunken city, I hear the laughing wind. It sounds like: Haaaahaaaaaaahaaaaahaaaaaha . . .

I open the journal to a random page:

For many moons we traveled the seas, running from the ever-spreading sand. A generation came and went, the mighty ship sailed on, its power never waning. All the new races, once at war, now worked together. But for the few survivors of the great holocaust, it was too late, though they denied it. The sand took away the water, but we had found Paradise Mountain/Sacred City and rejoiced. We set upon it, some placing their feet upon land for the first time, and we built, and we consumed, consumed and flourished. Great feasts and festivals prevailed. Every day the area rocked with fest. The people, intoxicated with the bountiful harvests and flowing springs, gave no quarter to conservation. I was a youngling, yet still I saw our folly. In a generation there would be no water, wood, no animal, no fruit. I spoke my heart and mind and was told great care and thought about my concerns would occur, but little should be in doubt, they said, we were meant to survive. The Gods were guiding us. I write this now, 12,000 suns later, and there are but five left. Not all died here, many took to the sand yelling, "The Gods will show us." Never have I doubted their demise.

Who you are? How have you arrived at this place? Somehow I knew you would come, this is why I write. In 2 million suns, or 200 million, the sand will retreat, and man, or something like, will appear. And I know only one certainty—A similar fate will they see . . .

I skip to the last page. A glimmer of hope ignites in my mind:

*Go to the great ship. Answers and salvation will
you find . . .*

I peer over the cliff and zero in on the aircraft carrier. It lies between the tips of once mighty buildings and is pitched 20 degrees in the sand, bow buried. The sun turns the sky pumpkin orange as it nears the horizon. A stunning sunset. Also depressing.

And the universe keeps moving. A seemingly advanced civilization's light goes out and Creation doesn't miss a beat. The sun sets. Moon rises. Maybe we were just bugs in a garden—pests, not the good bugs you want around. Maybe an exterminator showed up?

Or maybe we evolved. Evolved off the planet. Maybe it's *something* else's time and problem?

Maybe it's all according to plan?

Is it too big to get my mind around?

Night appears suddenly. A cold night. Stars explode on the deep blue stellar canvas, more brilliant because there is only a sliver moon and no light pollution. The sand sea sparkles and glimmers. The wind laughs and howls. I make it back to the hut and curl up in the grass. My skeletal bunkmates leer at me, that natural grin of the human/Lizard/Elvin skull unnerving. This is a haunted, tortured place. The last stand of Man. Out with a whimper, not a bang. Does the universe weep?

Who cries for humanity?

Gone under the sand sea is all the art, music, films, books, just like it never happened. Where is the meaning in this total erasure? Where does a soul go now that its stage, its arena, its game is gone? Or maybe the human cycle has run its course, and the next stage of the game has begun. (Yeah, maybe the next evolutionary stage is a grain of sand!) Or perhaps the myriad of souls traveled to some other arena, another game. It's a comforting possibility, but it does nothing for me. I'll be the Last Man. It's an honor I don't wish to rob from these skeletons. The wind tears away the curtain covering the door.

There's a measure of irony that such a thing should happen in my presence, as that tattered sheet has been billowing for god knows how long.

It's a synchronicity I dare not overlook.

I exit the hut and am immediately drawn to a higher part of the plateau. A narrow path leads to the top and the highest point of the island. I find the entire area shielded by a gazebo. There's an entry point where I stand, and a side exposed to the cliff with a ledge jutting out into darkness. Stuck in the ground is a sign shaped like an arrow that points to the cliff. Next to the stone diving board are tablets etched with instructions. One shows a sickle moon and a stick figure falling from the cliff and into what looks like a sand vortex. The other shows a sun, a falling figure, and a big X crossed through the scene. I think the only required skill is keeping the legs together, as is evident by the stick figure, and jumping when the moon is waning. Or is that waxing?

Well, that and a pair of major league cajones.

I walk onto the ledge, never letting go of a wooden post. I question the wisdom of jumping, but hopes of a path down to at least a lower ledge are nullified by the 70-degree nature of the cliffs. The only way down is to jump. My only option is to trust that those who inhabited this island did this many times. But what if it was a sacrificial alter? A place they pushed virgins to their death, a sacrifice to their Great Ship?

Anyway, can a human survive such a fall? And what exactly is a sand vortex?

A wind gust almost pulls my hand loose as I peer at the ship. The bow of the boat is sunken, the port rises, and the long deck angles into the sand, creating a massive ramp. The angle is 20 degrees at most. Won't be a problem getting into the ship. Another gusts blows and I let go of the post, shuffle to the edge. A strange scene plays in my mental theater. I see this place as an initiation portal; a temple where a candidate came to face fear. There was no set initiation age or date. When you were ready you came, read the simple instructions, and jumped. A simple,

yet incredibly effective obstacle lay before those who sought salvation. Maybe an initiate came here hundreds of times before gathering the courage to jump. I don't have that luxury. I will jump on my first visit—

I hit the sand, am sucked through, then shot into the air and land a hundred yards from the carrier's deck. The 'city' shows signs of ancient inhabitation. This is where the bulk of the refugees lived, and perhaps the chiefs, priests, and initiation candidates lived up the cliffs, and the only way down was by jumping. I scramble up the carrier's tarmac towards the command tower. Upon entering the tower I find the way streaked with red paint. The red covers the walls, floor, doors. And there is light, rope lighting. The nuclear reactor at the core of this carrier still functions. As I walk down a slanted hallway, white handprints appear on the red paint. Deeper I go, down ladders, squeezing through portals. And I wonder how the lights, the individual light bulbs still glow? These things haven't a lifespan of more than a few years. Conservative guess: there hasn't been a living thing here in 500 years.

So who is changing the—

"Who dares enter this sacred place," booms a voice over the ship's intercom. There's an overly theatrical tone to the voice that prevents this from being a query I would consider a threat, as opposed to some ghostly command portending terrible damnation should I ignore it.

Faster I go as I get the hang of sliding down ladders at weird angles. I follow the lights and paint through a maze of inner-workings. I come to a closed hatch. The rope lighting ends. I open the door.

I enter the cavernous hanger bays. A withered oasis greets me, a once thriving oasis in the ship's belly. The hanger, huge like an indoor stadium, shows signs that it were once completely covered in lush greenery. Openings in the roof let in stellar light and desert breezes. A tear in the ship's hull is where the sand encroaches. Dried up pools and withered trees tells me this place hasn't been 'alive' for centuries. But at one time the ship's

metal innards were covered with vines, exotic palms, flowering plants. I even see signs that an insect population once inhabited this biosphere.

Across the oasis, up on what was once an observation deck, I see movement and a figure disappear through a doorway.

Up on the observation deck I open the door, climb through, enter a Moroccan love chamber

Sweet and woody incenses waft. A fire burns in a pit, fueled by palm wood. Pillows and rugs cover the floor and layers of sensuous drapes hide the walls and ceiling. A hookah smolders, looking like an upside down octopus. Across the chamber is another door.

Once through it the painted steel interior of the ship returns. I travel up and exit to the port deck. The sliver moon hangs low. The sunken city framed in destructive glory.

I climb ladders and stairs and appear on the main deck. The command tower is now lit with eerie red rope lights. High up at the tallest point pans a floodlight, searching the deck. It sweeps by, then focuses on me. Shuts off. I slide down the deck towards the tower, reach it and go up. At the highest point I exit to a catwalk, the view is a stunning portrait of civilization's end.

"You may enter the crucible," says the ship's intercom.

A door swings open. I enter.

Red light bathes the windowless room. Useless radar and weapons system equipment clutter the space. Sitting on an elevated captains chair is Ming. His beard, a braided wonder, reaches below his waist. He lights a massive hand-rolled cigarette, brings it to his lips.

"Welcome to the end," he says, laughing dryly. "Took you long enough."

I find a swivel chair and collapse into the ridged comfort.

"I suppose my ultimate lesson," Ming tugs on the splief, "is that patience pays. But she sure is a bitch."

"I don't get it. I don't get anything. It's all just totally senseless."

"It's perfectly sensible when it's laid out."

“I’m not in the mood for a lecture.”

“I’ll make it interactive.” Ming jumps out of his chair and grabs a staff ornamented with fur, feathers, bones and precious stones. Extending from the tip is a sharp, cone-shaped head. Flowing away from the spear-tip are hair strands of varying length. He shakes the staff and holds it before me.

“The Spearhead,” he twirls the staff, “is the main stage. Traveling through the Great Unknown. The Spearhead is the outside. The Game. The frontier.”

“And that’s where we are, ahead of history.”

“No, we’re the hair, spun off. A tangent universe.”

“Wrong. I’m traveling forward—”

“You’re traveling sideways and down.” Ming continues to shake the staff. The hair flows. “Thousands of tangent universe created so that the Spearhead can continue.”

“Tangent?”

“Cloned quantum versions of the Spearhead that originate, but never intersect again with the original. These ‘tangent ends,’ these ‘what could bees,’ happen so that the Spearhead itself never experiences an End.”

“Where is the Spearhead?”

“It’s the first breath out of the womb—the newly birthed universe. A steady path of eternal birth, of eternal becoming, but steady only because of the tangents.”

“Where is it, not what is it.”

“It’s everywhere.”

“That’s a cop-out statement.”

“Would you rather me brew up some more vivid metaphor?”

“Is this universal truth, or more ‘The World According to Ming?’”

Ming smirks and drags his ganja cigarette. He fails to answer.

“OK, what about the Projector?”

“Metaphor. Linguistic metaphor, real metaphor. *Yet all of existence is metaphor. Real metaphor. You must understand this.*”

Assume the crash—

“We are living symbols for LIFE. Symbols. Symbolic. Living metaphor goes out and in for eternity.”

When my mind recovers from the impact, I ask, “How do the Monads, the projecting demons and gods fit into this?”

“Look, this isn’t the Gospel, and it’s more linguistic metaphor, but from my position it looks like creation is a Gameshow. Some are stagehands, some tech guys, security, writers, set design. But we’re the contestants.”

“And the director?”

“Boss Hawk, but remember, if this is a Gameshow, then the producer is head honcho.”

“God?”

“The Queen.”

“More metaphor?”

“No, She really is The Queen.”

“And we are God, playing in our own Game,” I say.

“Yeah, I like that. Maybe God came up with the idea, financed it, set everything in place and jumped in.”

“And The Other?”

Ming huffs, “Yes, real and relevant in this tangent.”

“But not in the Spearhead?”

“It’s different. Just different. This is a quantum tangent.”

“Quantum as in tiny?”

“In the Spearhead there is a quantum micro reality where the laws of physics and common sense do not apply. Yet in the macro world, the world of coffee retailers and condos and war, things seem pretty normal. But the micro, which creates the macro, is a chaos realm. A tangent of the Spearhead is similar, in that while things are moon-bat crazy here, in the Spearhead things are ‘normal.’”

“So none of this crazy bullshit is really happening? Back in the real world, the Spearhead, life goes on? Same as it ever was?”

Ming speaks slowly, “If we fail to produce the Hundredth Monkey something like this *will* happen. The quantum always

moves faster than the macro. Events always begin in the quantum. As for 'not really happening,' a physicist sees impossible things occurring in his microscope, but they're really happening."

"But it's not The Day in the Spearhead."

"Not yet. It's still the moment your tangent started, in line at the Coffee Sack—"

"So that really is me, I mean was—"

"And if you complete this tangent, if you become the 74th monkey, you will return to that moment, six days before The Day."

"If I don't?"

"You stay in the tangent, jumping through it for near eternity, and if all the candidates vying to be the 74th monkey fail, well, you know what happens."

"Not good."

Ming shakes his head.

"Am I the leading candidate?"

"That's the least of your worries."

"I have the right to know."

"You're in a good position. You putzed around in the beginning, but you found some good shortcuts."

"I didn't have anything to do with those shortcuts."

Ming shrugs. "Just remember, for the good of all, someone has to make it. If not you, another monkey must."

"But if it's not me, I'm stuck in this shit circus."

Ming nods.

"So the tangents—"

"Every cell is a Spearhead with its own tangents," says Ming. "You cannot fit this into your mind."

The old 'every cell is a universe' never fails to undo even the most valiant attempt to comprehend. Reason shatters on the rocks of this massive idea.

"OK, this is the end. It sucks. Now what?"

Ming laughs. "Glad to hear you haven't lost that smashing sense of humor." He walks out of the command center and onto the slanted balcony. I follow. We gaze at the endless dunes. It's an eerie and calm moment.

“You have to go back.” Ming pauses, pets his beard, lets it sink in.

“Back where?”

“Back to a point in this tangent when a portal to the *Beyond* is still open. Go back so you can seal up this tangent, make this tangent whole, complete.”

“Beyond?”

“Beyond the Spearhead.”

“How do I go back?”

Ming points out to the sunken city. “They’ll send you,”

Floating amongst the skyscraper tips are a dozen ghostly, dark grey, slender humanish forms. Their heads are big and bulbous with one cyclopean eye that emits a pink beam.

Ming smokes away; he remains silent as I try to manage these revelations. Finally he says, “The cyborgs. They’re waiting for you in the reactor room.”

“I have to fight them?”

“No,” Ming says with his familiar disdain, “they don’t fight. Don’t kill. And the only way they’ll let you go back is if you get IT.”

I hate how Ming forces me to ask the obvious. “What is IT?”

“IT.”

“IT?”

“Talking about IT means you don’t get IT. Either you get IT, or you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

“I know, but you better.”

“Who are they to decide if I get IT?”

“They are pure logic.”

“And yet they’ve erased an entire biosphere. Will probably do the same to the entire system and galaxy.”

“Well,” Ming frowns, “if you’re basing that position on my hologram show, I come clean, I took some creative liberty for dramatic effect. To light a fire under your arse.”

“So they’re not the ultimate enemy.”

“I don’t know, can we be our own ultimate enemy?”

Just as my mind had gotten over the last accident, it crashes again. And this accident is at much higher speed. I think there's a fatality.

"Hey, don't get hung up on it. We've got to get you moving again."

"You're an expert at cutting to a commercial."

Ming starts down the stairs.

"It keeps you tuned-in."

"What if I don't trust you? Don't believe you?"

Without turning he replies, "Truth does not require your belief. Neither does it require your trust. And neither do I."

Ming led through the ship's innards in silence. He traveled so fast I had to run several times to keep up. Now we stand before a portal door. The only indication that it leads to the reactor is a yellow radiation symbol hardly visible in the dim light.

"The reactor is leaking. You have nine minutes, give or take."

"Then I should think seven minutes."

"Fine, you have seven minutes. But you might need nine."

"But it could kill me if I only have seven."

"I said give or take."

"I could have ten."

"Or eleven."

Ming pulls out a glowstick, snaps it. Green glow fills the area.

"Don't try to fake IT. Won't work. Just a waste of precious time. They will not send you back unless you get IT." Ming opens the latches.

"No hints?"

He pulls open the door, throws the glowstick in.

"Sorry, monkey man. If I could give IT to you I would. Believe me, I would."

"Am I done with the dice?"

"You is."

"What about you?"

“I’m playing by different rules.”

“And Jaz? What am I to stop her from doing? Why?”

Ming doesn’t answer and hastens my passage through the door. Before shutting the porthole, he pinches my arm.

“Forget everything I said.”

“From the beginning, or just from now.”

“Everything.”

“You bastard! You can’t say that!”

Ming pulls the door shut. A split second later it opens enough for Ming to poke his head through.

“Dance.” He shuts the door. Locks it. I kick the steel so many times I’m sure I’ll lose three toenails.

I stand in a narrow passage. Red emergency flashers that surely once blazed, warning of a leakage, have long since burned out. At the end is a fortified yellow door. To the right of it is a door with a portal window. It leads to an observation room. I open the yellow door and enter an empty decontamination chamber. At the end is the gateway into the reactor room.

Did Ming mean nine minutes (I’m ‘giving’) from the moment I enter the reactor room, or did the clock start when I walked through the first door? If the latter, even with a two minute ‘give’ I’m down to eight, maybe seven minutes. Do I go back and ask? What happens if I break up the exposure over a few hours? I could come and go. Did Ming mean forget everything including the reactor status?

The reactor-room door silently opens. Pink light that I’m sure comes from the cyborgs greets me. And for the first time since this started I am scared. I mean paralyzed scared, so scared that I don’t care about saving the world or evolving my soul. Just when I need it most courage has abandoned me. I am frozen. Worse, a living rigor mortis has taken over. I drop to a knee. My heart thumps unnaturally. A vein on my forehead tingles. I’m dying . . .

. . .

. . .

.

Someone once told me that there is no mistaking death for something else. Either you die when you think you're dying—or you don't. There is no 'deadish.'

I crawl through the door.

Five cyborgs float around the reactor. The reactor has been dislodged from its moorings, and it's smaller than I thought possible. I can't see into it, but inside there are surely plutonium rods with 5,000 year half-lives, meaning they emit radiation with the same intensity as they did the day they were placed. I'm sure ten million rads invisibly wreak havoc on my organs. I close the door behind me. One of the cyborgs floats over. Its skin looks gelatinous, wet and opaquely transparent with fiber optic nerves. Its face is dominated by the huge eye that isn't really an eye, but an oval screen that plays a twisting vortex—an in-spiraling textured monitor that looks so real, it also looks fake. The pink beam pans my body. Ends at my eyes.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

The light shines deep into my brain. My world becomes soft pink. Comforting. But no insight about IT.

What is IT? asks a metallic voice in my head.

IT is everything.

What is everything?

Everything is everything.

And everything is not. What is IT?

I don't know what IT is.

Of course you don't. IT has nothing to do with knowledge.

Then there's nothing to get?

Or nothing to do.

But . . . Ming said I need to get IT.

Nothing to say. Nothing to be.

IT is IT.

And IT is not.

IT . . . it's . . . IT.

IT is?

IT's not?

No, IT is not . . . not IT.

What?

Is . . . is not IT.

Then what is IT? (Tick-tock.)

IT.

I said that already.

IT is not IT.

But you just said—

The pink light retracts from my brain. The cyborg floats back to its position near the reactor. I feel my cells dying.

Dance, Ming said.

I start to jig. Little movements, nothing special. Another cyborg floats over, reaches out. Its arm and hand are one continuous appendage, no fingers, no joints. I take hold of this delicate offer. Its 'hand' is exquisitely soft. This is like Michelangelo's God/Man. My world is pink again. It's a wonderful way to see things. A classic waltz fills my head. I float, and together we waltz around the reactor room.

I still don't get IT.

If you dance, you get IT.

It's that simple?

It's that hard.

If I get IT, then what is IT?

IT.

IT.

IT.

IT.

IT.

IT.

IT.

Why did you destroy the world?

From some angles creation looks like destruction.

Suffering and destruction can never be mistaken for creation.

Transformation may be mistaken for suffering and destruction.

You were once human.

Masks change.

And all the moist green organic? Where'd it go?

The seeds remain.

And the animals?

They are with us.

Just wearing different costumes I suppose.

We are always the final revolution. The final vessel for consciousness.

Creation is a dance.

Everything is a dance.

Alone.

And together.

The other cyborgs join in. Vienna never saw a waltz like this.

IT?

IT.

I can go back?

You may.

How?

We can do anything.

With its free 'hand' the cyborg twists space. Tuning it. Matter warps like it were one continuous sheet of latex.

We are always the finale of this end.

Finale of 'THIS' end?

THE END.

You said 'THIS END.'

THIS END.

Which is it?

IT which?

Is it THE . . . or THIS?

IT is neither.

Not IT! I'm asking the or this?

The this.

I pull away.

Many beginnings, many ends—

But NOT the finale of every end—

Many ends, many beginnings . . .

Suddenly the humanness, the familiarity fades. These things are computers. And either it's lying, or its software just hiccupped. I can't say it's sinister, but silicone life is not what it claims to be. Carbon life (organic life) and silicone life are both states of matter, but it ends there. There are atomic differences, root, quantum differences. Silicone life does not require water—the core element needed for organic life to flourish. Even bacteria need H₂O. And consciousness, that for untold eternal eons has favored carbon to fashion a body, doesn't in an evolutionary millisecond change base form. No way. But it's too late to grill the cyborg about these paradoxes. Reality flips by like cherries in a slot machine. Line up three and you win big! I dig my hands into the world and the nauseating flipping ceases. A bench forms under me. I sit. It becomes a couch.

Blur.

My couch.

Blur.

Focus.

My apartment.

19

My couch, nor any piece of furniture, has ever felt so good. Couch as alter. Home as temple. The only disquieting things are the floating orb in the middle of the living room emitting a faint electric green halo, and the shuffling movement of unseen people. A lamp is knocked over. In the shadows I see tall lanky figures. A head comes into view. The hair is green and bobbed, the eyes are huge black alien—the eyes, not of a Space Brutha, but of a Space Sista! The orb starts spinning, throws out more green light and emits a low and heavily distorted bass line. A Space Sista jumps on the coffee table. She moves in sexy ways and holds a thin microphone. The distorted bass line slips into a groove. The alien dancer syncs her gyrations to the budding funkdown. She speaks in a sultry voice.

“Coming to you from the pandimensional grooveyard,” she shakes her thin can in my face. “In, out, up, down, all . . . the . . . way . . . around.”

The green orb brightens, exposing a dance troop of boottie-shakin’ green aliens that I’m not afraid to admit are damn hot and sexy. Oddly (and you know in a situation like this something out of place must be REALLY WEIRD), dancing in the kitchen is an eight foot tall, bright green, bent-eared, filthy and disheveled rabbit costume—a pooka, a Celtic deity always present for the Gag, the Cosmix Giggle.

The orb sends out a shower of sparks and bathes the room in dazzling light. When I get my vision back I look for the pooka,

but it's gone. Added to the baseline is a wah-wahing guitar and dirty clavinet, like something out of a '70s action flick, slow and funky. Thirty dancers, all clones, fill my kitchen and living room. There's a sexy and totally insane quality to them. It's their hot stripper moves. It's their eyes. They don't blink. They don't move. They stare.

The girls congregate at the hallway leading to my bedroom. Some sit, some kneel, others stand. All keep moving with the funk.

The MC jumps off the table, points at the hall. A spotlight from the orb illuminates the doorway.

"I say I say I say I say . . . Turned-on, tuned-in, super ground, free supreme. Put it together for Master Pizzlow Omagashi!"

A snowstorm explodes from the hall. Almost instantly there is a foot of dry snow covering everything. Flakes fall from the ceiling as if it were a cloud. The dancers, in their green, sparkling fur skirts and bikini tops line up like the Rockets. Another blast of snow and smoke comes from the hall. The funk descends into the depths of liquid creepiness. A stream of water flows from the hall and freezes when it hits the snow-covered floor. The orb sends out fountains of sparks. Each spark flickers and dazzles as it hangs in the air.

"Yeeeeooowwww!" screeches Master Omagashi as he comes shuffling into the room doing the best damn robot I've ever seen. The dancers join him and perform an alien robot line-dance. It's flattering that Master Pizz would go through all this trouble and pageantry, but it's totally senseless. My toast is already buttered, thank you very much.

Master Pizzlow, decked out in his finest alien superpimp threads—I mean big-brimmed fedora with feathers, psychedelic fur trimmed coat, cane with a huge diamond handle. I'm talking eight-inch platform boots (which make him so tall he'd never fit in the apartment if somehow the ceiling wasn't now 18 feet, as to the normal eight), white bell-bottom slacks, three-piece suit under the coat. He's left nothing out, and I can't help but wonder

how this guy keeps up this act. Unless, of course, he and all this only exists when someone's present to experience it . . .

Master Pizz sits in the easy chair. Crosses his long skinny legs.

"Remember me?"

"You all look alike."

"The cave?"

"Oh."

"Is my show not pleasin' fo you?"

"It's totally senseless."

Pizz laughs, "Mo' sense would hady be mo' sensible."

He snaps his fingers and the dancers vanish. The snow stops. The orb sends out a reasonable amount of light. The funk fades.

"When I freed you from that cave you didn't talk like a pimp."

"Pimp is a state of mind. I wasn't in a pimpin' state of mind then."

Pizz produces a pristine glass peace pipe. In the bowl are rock crystals. He hands it to me. From the tip of his six-inch long index finger blazes a blue flame.

"Bro, just when you think you know the dilly, someone silly comes and breaks open your jilly."

"Jilly?"

"Rhymes with silly. Now smoke the nilly."

I puff. Nothing terrific and terrifying happens, just a slight buzz, as if it were crystalline tobacco.

"Everythin' is Game, ev'en vacation."

The front door swings open. Instead of nighttime skyscrapers and that comforting yellow glow of an American cityscape, there is destruction. It looks like the city has been ground up in a wood chipper. I stagger to the doorway. Mountains of chopped-up-city dominate the landscape. The downtown area is the only place where buildings remain. It's a stand of shattered, but standing skyscrapers. Among the buildings is an organic-looking shard—like a meteorite stick—that reaches

miles into the atmosphere. A massive blue bonfire illuminates downtown. The Firmament is a grey/blue undulating mass. Gone is the purple lightning.

I turn to Master Pizz, he is gone.

A gunning engine pulls my attention back to the scrapheap city. Rattling down a path cleared through the rubble comes a pimped stretch Cadillac with a huge engine sticking out the hood. The car careens around corners and smashes into the high debris walls. The car comes to a skidding stop in front of my apartment building, which is the only standing structure beyond downtown. A rear door opens. I walk down three flights, pass the empty pool, pass the skeletal remains of Manny, reach the rumbling car. I get in, sit in the orange shag seat. A mini chandelier sways. The driver is hidden behind a smoked glass privacy shield. The car takes off. Warm air flows in through the big sunroof.

The car takes it easy through the rubble path. The partition slides down. Master Pizz sits in the driver's seat, his lanky body somehow stuffed into the confines.

"Now it's about the THING," he says and throws an arm over the passenger seat as he glides the caddy through the destroyed city. At least he's not talking like some has-been west coast rapper hocking ISPs.

"IT as in *IT*?" I ask.

"No, not the big IT."

"I don't get it."

"The THING, not IT."

"I meant the little it. I don't get the little it."

"Right," says Pizz. "But IT is the THING."

"What is IT?"

"I don't know."

"So how do you know the THING?"

"Didn't say I did."

Hummmm.

"IT is the THING," he says. "IT is not IT. Do you get it?"

"Meaning IT is the THING, but not a label for the Total, which is the THING."

“No. That’s the WAY.”

“What’s the WAY?”

“No, WHAT is IT,” says Pizz.

“And WHAT is that?”

“No, THAT is the WAY.”

“And the THING?”

“Look, the equation is very simple,” Pizz turns his attention to the road as he speeds up. The car fishtails around a turn. “WHAT is IT. IT is the THING. The THING is THAT. THAT is the WAY. The WAY is THIS.”

“Who’s on first?”

Pizz cocks his head. He has no idea what I mean.

“We all know the equation,” he says, “we just don’t know the values, so we can’t solve the problem, and you get this mess.”

“The machines know what IT is.”

“The machines don’t know IT any more than we know the THING, which is certainly no less than sapiens know the WAY, and about the same that the Others know WHAT. But certainly less than the They know about THAT, or that anybody knows about THIS. Now, for the machines it’s all about the breakdown of language. They cannot define the most simple conjecture, IT, so their circuits are haywire.”

We pass endless fields of finely ground urban landscape. Back when my world was all about paying the rent, getting drunk and searching for a cuddly shag momma, I often thought that the modern city would last millions of years. The staying power would dwarf anything the ancients built (including the entire civilization buried under the Algerian Sahara, and the Atlantis-type metropolis hidden below two miles of Antarctic ice).

But now I see how narrow my vision was. A city of four million acres has been rendered into a scrap heap. Some pieces have been ground so small they are little more than dark flecks. All the stuff they claimed would last for ten million years, like plastic, Styrofoam, and Dick Clarke, all of it’s just ground up. All of it.

“But I thought,” I say, “that the cyborgs were responsible for this destruction.”

“You think that because they’re around later on in the show. Well, when the only thing you need is gamma radiation at least, and sunlight at most to survive, you can pretty much live anywhere.”

“They told me they were the new vessels for consciousness. I bought it at first, but then the IT malfunction exposed their nature.”

Pizz is silent. Mouth pursed. Finally he says, “That’s the scariest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Why?”

If Pizz’s huge alien eyes could show complete contempt, they would. “Because why would I chose a body like that over the one I got?”

“I was thinking mostly about humans doing it.”

“And why the hell would you do that?”

“To keep consciousness alive in a more durable, adaptable vessel.”

“More durable than flesh, is that what you mean?”

I nod.

“Believe me, those sorry bastards would do anything for flesh. Flesh evolves magnitudes further than your immature human form. Infinitely more complex and magickal forms exist; forms crude silicone cannot fathom. They reached their highest evolutionary point in a blink of any eye. They are immortal. What fun is that?”

“And what are you?”

“I am what I am.”

My response to all this is not astonishment, confusion, nor flabbergastery, but absurd awe. This entire experience is the definition of surreal. My once zealous zeal has faded. The kaleidoscope has lost its luster and I want to see what the world looks like beyond the narrow tube. Of course the realness of my predicament won’t allow me to de-validate my experience, but speaking to a giant green alien pimp chauffeur and traveling through a ground up city might tend to raise some very troubling questions.

Like is this all my imagination? Have I somehow doubled in on myself, and now I physically live in my own wild imagination? Have I disappeared into a puff 'o smoke?

Hiding behind a thin veil, right behind the everyday world, is infinite heaven, infinite hell, infinite weirdness, and since I'm quite sure my journey is more than my subjective quantum imagination, well, that explains why the entire world is medicated. Who can deal with a world like this without serious medication? Be it alcohol, pills, cocaine, opiates, TV, nicotine, coffee, sugar, fried food, we need a constant glaze over awareness just so we can make it through the week.

Ever so thin is this denial, but it has done the job. The veil has let civilization evolve and prosper in a controlled, albeit falsely sane cocoon. But now the shroud protecting each person's delicate denial is evaporating, and the wedding ceremony has begun. (For me the shroud is completely gone, and it feels like I've been married for decades.) How this marriage between the insane and sane plays out in the masses is the real test. The marriage will happen, it always happens, but what does a harmonious marriage with The Other look like? How does chaos meld with order? Sense with nonsense? Infinite with finite? How can humanity coexist with green aliens, lizard people, talking bugs, dragons, manifested lust and passion? I can't imagine any scenarios where this marriage works.

"I can't imagine how this will ever work," I say, speaking my thought.

"Me neither," agrees Pizz. "In every simulation we've run, everybody just goes apeshit. But who knows, maybe you humans will figure IT out. Maybe we'll find the WAY. The machines will know WHAT is it. The Others will do the Thing. And They'll do THAT. And the result will be THIS. But then there's Them."

"Them?"

"You'll see."

The car drives up an 'on ramp' of a somehow undamaged highway. Pizz lays the petal to the floor. I see his face in the rearview mirror. A wild smile. Metal teeth glistening. Through

the dark windows I see that the decimated city is populated. Under the overpass are millions of humans and Elvin and lizards and bugs and green aliens. They're chanting, cheering, waving bronze and red flags. The multitudes have been battling. They are torn and bandaged and injured. The sunroof opens. I poke my head out. The armies go wild.

I stand in the opening and feel like Degaul returning to Paris, or maybe Hitler in his glory days.

The car speeds up, heads for the skeletal skyscrapers. Thousands and millions cheer. The grey/blue landscape is a cross between a soundstage and true desolation. It's like the horizons are matte paintings, like they used to use in the old Silver Screen days before digital landscapes. A half-mile down the road is a jump. The car rattles along at ever increasing speed. We hit the jump, take off. Below is the battlefield. 'Them' 60-foot, pale-blue, stoutly-built warriors dressed like Spartans—crested helmets, skirt armor, chest plates—fight off waves of lizards, humans, Elvin, bugs, who scurry around the giants like fire ants. The allies take a moment from battling to cheer as I careen overhead. Circling above are battleships bombarding the Titans with jelly globs. I fall into the car.

"Buckle up!" yells Pizz.

I strap in, and through the windshield I see a skeletal building that we're bearing in on missile-fast.

"Oh," Pizz adds, "forget everything I said."

The car slices through girders and decaying wallboard, exits, flips, and nosedives into a clearing. After ten cartwheels the Cadillac lands on its tires. The door opens, I spill out. Master P is gone.

The blue bonfire is 50 stories tall, but emits no heat. Huge boulders encircle the flames. Other boulders, 700 yards away, create another circle. The sand beneath me is clean, fine, and tinted blue. The massive expanse of sand is raked like a Zen garden and void of anything except for the Cadillac and me. An ominous and steady drumbeat rumbles—war drums. It gets louder, closer. In the shadows appear hundreds of the thick,

blockheaded Titans. Their feet stomp with the beat. The Titans pat the ground, praise the sky, their bulky bodies move with rhythm and agility. Suddenly another pimped Caddy explodes through a building. It lands much more gracefully than mine.

A Space Brother steps out from the drivers seat. He ambles over. Unrolls a scroll. Lights it on fire. Tosses it to the wind. He moves back to the car, opens the back door. A barefoot human leg sheathed in fishnet stockings appears—

Jaz!

Jaz drops her purple faux-fur coat as she walks. She wears a red latex miniskirt and matching tank top that exposes her pale belly. Her eyes are darkened-out with mascara. Her lips painted purple. She tiptoes and moves her body to the thunderous beat.

“Dance with me,” she says and drapes herself around me. Her scent is typical and cutting.

I find it nearly impossible to cut a civilized rug with these thundering heathen drums.

“It’s not like there’s a waltz playing,” I say to justify my two left feet.

“Just move, doesn’t have to be anything special.”

I fall back upon the only dance steps I remember: the box step. We move in tight squares. My hand falls to her low back. Her skin is luscious and creamy.

“This is how it ends, us dancing?” I ask.

Jaz rests her head on my chest as she speaks.

“For everyone except you and the machines.”

One of my hands massages her skull. I press into her. Jaz looks up at me.

“I’m sorry to lay this on you, but you are our only hope.”

Her words do not compute. All I can do is shake my head.

“This is our fate,” she waves at the Titans. “They’re here to clean the slate.”

“What am I,” I sputter.

“You are the hero . . . and the creator of this drama.”

“No, no, no. This is a tangent. A beta to make sure the marriage goes smooth. It’s not really happening—”

Jaz slaps me. “Thinking that the Game is the only reality, is like thinking nothing else is happening during the Super Bowl.”

“OK, I believe, so what’s the point?”

“You doubt your mission?”

“I don’t doubt. I don’t know. I don’t believe, yet I believe. I’m pretty much shattered and scattered.”

“Having your dogma blown up is a signpost along the way of wisdom.”

“Yeah, so is insanity.”

“True,” Jaz admits.

“So either I stay shattered, rebuild, or just keep going. And if I stumble, I’m stuck where I fall.”

Jaz nods.

“Why the struggle? Why the danger of failure?”

“Keeps things moving.”

“But one slip and it’s over.”

“Maybe there’s a net,” she says.

“Should I let go and find out?”

“No, not yet. Instead, imagine a world where there is no struggle or problems to solve. No danger or pressure.”

“That world doesn’t make sense either.”

“Exactly, so we have this world with an equation we need to figure out—”

“WHAT/IT/THING/THAT/WAY/THIS—”

“Right, it’s a formula that opens the gate, but we can’t solve the equation until there is harmony. It’s like ten scientists hacking each other up with one hand, scribbling on a chalkboard with the other.”

“Gate?”

“The Farm gate.”

I can’t even postulate a response.

“The Farm is farmed for emotional energy. This energy keeps the Monads alive, keeps the Projector projecting. And if

you can squeeze your noodle hard enough, I bet you can see that someone, something is milking the Monads too.”

“So we really are just thoughts, dreams.”

“There’s no *‘just’* about it. And what’s wrong with thoughts and dreams?”

“Thoughts and dreams aren’t really happening.”

“Is that so.” Jaz rears up to slap me. I grab her wrist. Giver her a mean Indian Burn.

The Titans tighten the circle, forcing us closer to the fire.

“If you haven’t accepted that everything is real, and everything is really happening, and everything is metaphor—”

I squeeze her torso. “I accept.”

She continues. “The Farm was discovered by humans—being the dominant species on the outside—when Armstrong landed on the moon. Then, the boundaries were discovered when a space probe bounced off The Farm gates, just beyond the Kuiper asteroid belt. But there were two things they couldn’t have known then: One, The Farm is a mental construct. The boundaries they found were the boundaries of the collective Monad Mind, the boundaries keeping everything inside the Monads. Second, when the human foot touched the moon, the countdown began, which leads us to this moment.”

Jaz used the word ‘humans’ in the same way that a marine biologist would use the word ‘dolphins.’ Indicating an inherent species differentiation without having to say it.

“The clock,” I say as our box-step breaks down into a stationary sway, “started ticking in 1969 because the animals learned their fate. Like in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.”

“The animals learning their fate is part of the plan. And the clock wasn’t counting down to destruction, but to the time when the veil separating inside and outside would fall.”

“I don’t get the inside, outside thing.”

“OK, you’re in your house. You’re ‘inside.’ Then think of your basement, that’s ‘inside’ too, but even though you’re ‘inside’ your house, you’re ‘outside’ your basement. The house represents The Farm, with the ‘inside’ being the creepy and

chaotic basement—The Other—and the ‘outside,’ the neat and orderly upstairs, is the human world. Then there’s ‘outside,’ meaning outside the house under the blue sky or stellar night. That’s the Monad/Gods realm. It’s all about levels, not about realness. Everything’s real.”

In the Hindu reality paradigm, the inside would be Lila, the shadow of illusion. The outside would be Maya, the magickal illusion generator. Quantumly speaking, inside is the micro, outside the macro. Presiding over both paradigms is an All Father. The Hindus call it Brahman. Physicists call it the Unifying Principle.

“Are there farmers?”

“Sure.” Jaz gets me dancing again. “And then there’s you; a powerful goat.”

The Titans step closer, pound their chests, jig their war dance.

“And it always comes down to the same question: Why me?”

Jaz cups my face. “Because you love me.”

“Does not compute.”

“On The Farm, there are animals who never see get out of the basement, never see the light of day. But sometimes one sneaks out, basks in the glory of outside. Sometimes they meet an outside animal. And the outside animal always loves the inside more than the inside loves the outside, because the inside animal is unique, and the inside animal is just happy to be outside.”

“The love’s not mutual?”

“Does it matter? Does this possibility lessen the deepness of your love?”

Not that my love and affection for Jaz can be undone, but I think in the name of cosmic rightness, it should’ve been made clear: falling for an Other contractually obligates one to love all Others.

Another movement towards the fire brings the Titians within 200 yards.

“So is there an evil corporation outside The Farm looking to turn the pastures into condos?”

Jaz laughs. “No, it’s not a devious situation, but it is a blind and brutal process. The insiders, the outsiders, the farmers, must all become aware of each other and live in harmony before the quarantine is lifted, which will allow us to pass through the gates, go ‘outside,’ and wake up as the Monads.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“No more secrets. No more lies and occult. All of humanity must know that The Other exists. They must know the truth about their situation.”

Suddenly I understand Jaz. She’s part of a movement desperately trying to halt the invasion. Instead of invasion, they want marriage. Make love not war. War between the inside and outside leads to the end for everybody. And if she and her movement can get a hundred monkeys to lift the veil before the invasion, people will start popping spontaneously across the globe. Instantly they will know The Other. Then The Other, instead of invading, will be invited and intergraded. I feel a renewed vigor for my mission. What an honor to be so integral a cog of permanent and epic change; to be an agent of peace. This is serious—

“Just so we can escape one slave farm and enter another?” It’s such a viral negative meme that it just rolled off my tongue before I could stop it.

“Not another Farm,” Jaz says, “but a theater; a theater that feeds by conscious performance instead of by blind folly; a theater where each soul molds every aspect of their life. Molds it to look, act, live by their Will. Of course there’s still an exchange going on with PCIs, but it’s the difference between cow farts and Shakespeare.”

“PCIs?”

“Para-Cosmic-Intelligences.”

“And what are they?”

“They’re PCIs.”

“OK, when I leave the Monad I can be anything?”

“It’s become, become the Monad. The soul becomes trillions of things throughout its evolution. The Monad being one of

them. And yes, you can become anything. You've seen their realm, it's a blank canvas just waiting for us to paint it."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"I can be an archangel, a dragon, a bodhisattva?"

"Yes, yes, yes. A world of real magick and adventure awaits."

"Sounds like this world."

"I bet if you tried sprouting wings you'd fail."

"True. So I see the Monads like eggs."

"I prefer cocoons."

"And if we fail to leave The Farm?"

"Failure to harmonize once the veils between inside and outside lift, as you know so well, results in destruction. This wasteland is the final scene. We cannot become the Monads if we are full of war and corruption."

"And the Titans?"

"Their job is to wipe the slate clean so a new Farm can be built and the process can begin again, hopefully with better results."

"So it's not total destruction."

"The arena remains, but this Game is over."

"I understand all that, but what am I supposed to do?"

"Go as far as you can."

"Out The Farm gate?"

"Out the gate, past the mental quarantine, and into the Monad's world."

"Then what?"

"Then you keep going until you find the furthest place possible."

"How do I get through the gate?"

"The Gate of Anubis leads out of The Farm, and the Gate of Anubis is administered by Him."

Jaz points to the sky. Through a portal in the Firmament I see an orange dot standing out in the blackness.

Mars. Boss Hawk . . . The Watcher.

Dozens of Titans leap closer to the fire, nearly pin us against the boulders. Jaz and I separate. Her Cadillac weaves under the Titans, skids to a stop. A massive blue foot separates Jaz from me.

“Are you the most dangerous woman in the universe?” I scream.

“Sometimes,” she yells, “and forget everything I said.” She disappears in a stampede. I dive into the driverless car. It launches out of the moshpit and takes off towards mars straight up like a rocket. The car slashes through the atmosphere and enters the vacuum of space. Next to me sits a '70s era boombox. I press ‘play’ (as an orange florescent sticky arrow asks of me) and three beeps blast though the many speakers in the cabin. Two beeps. One beep.

“Ten, you have Apollo 11.” Behind the monotone and crackly narrator is a steady bass line and various electric notes that settle into a cautious groove.

The cabin is suddenly illuminated from the outside. Flying past, slightly faster than the car, flies half a rocket. I see three men cramped in a launch vehicle. Another blinding flash and only the launch vehicle and a strange contraption attached to it remain.

“Nine, the LEM lands.”

I look out the window and now the car is parked on the moon. Outside is the renowned scene of the moon landing with the astronaut on the stairs, seconds away from that “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” The car shakes as a shockwave ripples the surface. I hear a distinct ‘tong’ as if someone has just hit a planet-sized bell. The astronaut falls to the moonscape. He struggles to right himself. Another astronaut comes out, helps up his comrade. Another shockwave hits, this one only slightly less than the last. The astronauts fly 15 feet in the air, come down and flounder in the moon dust.

“Eight, the alert.”

Another ‘tong’ arrives and the car is flung off the moon into deep space.

“Seven, deception.”

The limo sits in stationary orbit around a moon of Saturn. I’ve entered the novel “2001” by Sir Arthur C. Clarke.

The moon is Iapetus, and it has come to life. It shakes off space dust. Distinct ridges appear as hexagonal plates making up the moon’s surface realign.

“Six, assessment.”

Filling the space around the turbulent moon cycles a montage of human history up till mid 1969. It looks like one long war.

“Five, ultimatum.”

Now I see a scene of men meeting in a lush room that looks like its part of a Bavarian castle. Then history from late 1969 to late 2012 cycles by at a slower rate. Again, it looks like one long war.

“Four, conviction.”

Space is space again.

“Three, judgment.”

And the car is swung through scenes of post 2012. Reminds me of a ride called the Whiplash to be found at ancient, and impervious to lawsuit amusement parks.

“Two, end.”

The earth is a desert with polar icecaps.

“One, beginning.”

The earth is an Eden.

The tape stops.

The limo orbits mars, then plunges nose-first through the Martian atmosphere.

Heat.

Fire.

Through layers of red clouds I plummet, then drop into clear atmosphere.

The trunk pops open. A parachute slows the decent. The car flutters and spins.

I pry my self off the partition, open a window. Below is a barren red plane illuminated by the distant sun. Rising above

the barren are clusters of pyramids half covered by red sand. As grand as these pyramid complexes and the surrounding ruins are, they pale in comparison to a greater complex where a five-sided pyramid—Mount Everest Big—rises from the ground. At each point stand thick and huge obelisks. A red beam fires out the pyramid capstone towards Earth. The longest point of the pyramid points to a huge face. It's worn and crumbling, but it's a face, like a lion/man, the Martian Face so many have wondered about—

My view is taken away by a cocoon of airbags. The cabin is filled with clear jelly that holds me in suspended animation. A blinking message above the partition informs of impact in 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . .

20

Twenty-six bounces.

Twenty-six bounces before the car came to rest. The highest bounce, oddly enough, was the forth. It took at least a minute to impact again. Somehow the crash was controlled to leave me at the base of the great pentagon pyramid. Surprisingly the air is fresh, breathable. The temp is a dry mid 60s.

One pyramid side is elongated, creating a gently sloping, miles long ramp. A third of the way up is an arched opening.

The sand is fine and silty, and only after two miles of walking up the ramp do I reach the part of the pyramid that isn't covered in silt. Unlike the mini monuments of Giza, Egypt, which are made of giant bricks, this pyramid has smooth sides made of pocked red rock. It's as if the entire structure were carved from one mountain-sized stone. At the arched entrance, a gateway 300 feet tall and wide, I turn and gaze upon the land. I can't help but remember, from a point in my deep past, a time when I was in the early stages of paranoid awakening, when I was obsessed with the mythic Face of Cynodia and the Martian ruins. Now it seems trite compared to the Bigger Picture, but back then I saw the potential of such things to transform humanity. 'Just imagine,' I would tell people, 'a defunct civilization in Earth's backyard! And if there was just one clay pot, one tiny sign of an extinct civilization, just one tiny mythic miracle, all mythic miracles were possible!'

Such broad concepts usually sailed right over my audience's head. It was as if I possessed, woe to me, a higher cognition where

fantastic possibilities were perfectly sensible. Some would call it: Being ahead of one's time.

I once dreamed about confirming the existence of a lost Martian civilization. Dreamed of spreading the word to desperate humanity, save us from our straw-eyed narrowness. But now it's ancient history, and it feels perfectly normal to be standing among the ruins. As a great poet once said:

There is so much to say
So much to ponder
But the NewStuff
Is so great
That I can't
Stop
And—
OH MY GOD, look at that!

I walk into the opening, and after a hundred feet, around where the dim red light ends, so too does the tunnel. A collapse has closed off—

A trapdoor opens beneath me. I lurch and am able to hang from the edge. But why resist? Every step has led me further into revelation, if not Truth. Trust. Go further. I let go, slide down a gentle sloping chute with a seductively smooth surface, and am cast into a field of warm sand. I stand in a cavern lit with fire pots. Behind me rises a wall pocked with holes. Some holes are 50 feet off the ground. Would've been a bitch to come through one of them. A hundred yards away stands a small, tiered, Mayan-type pyramid built into the surrounding rock. Cut into each tier are holes barely big enough to crawl through. A river with an arched stone bridge over it separates me from my goal.

I reach the bridge, and just as I'm about to cross, I hear a short 'alert' whistle. It comes from beneath the bridge. Again a whistle. A human whistle. I backtrack and carefully move down the bank and see a man sitting in the shadows. He scoots into a ray of light. He is a short, skinny man, middle-aged with pale,

grayish, acme-scarred skin; is dressed like a mortician and wears a simple black porkpie hat. I can feel his bad attitude.

“This is as far as you go, buddy.”

“Excuse me?” I notice a tube behind his right ear. Milky fluid pumps through it.

“Did I stutter?”

“No, I just—”

“You just what? Just thought everything was always gonna line up for you?”

“It has so far.”

“Not any more,” he growls.

I scramble out from under the bridge and cross the river. I sprint towards the pyramid. An invisible hand grabs my right ankle, drags me back across the river, deposits me under the bridge.

The steel-eyed man circles, smokes a cigarette.

“Have you ever heard of the Black Hats of History?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“We keep the meat grinder full. We balance the good; make sure suffering is always part of the equation. And as for you,” the man’s teeth clench, “have not suffered enough.”

“I’ve suffered.” I try to mask my fear, but the words sound choppy despite my effort.

“No you haven’t. Not one bad thing has ever happened to you.”

“Not true . . .” But very true. I can’t name one truly horrendous event that has caused me to suffer greatly. I’ve always considered myself the luckiest person in the world because of this fact.

“OK, I haven’t suffered. How can we settle this?”

“Don’t try to reason with me.”

“Please.”

“You can plead all you want, but I don’t have emotions.”

What are you going to do to me?”

“You need to suffer; to be tortured, and I’m gonna make it happen.”

“Torture me?” I stutter.

He huffs, which I suppose is his form of conveying contempt. “Personal pain is the shallowest suffering. Deep suffering, deep emotional scarring suffering IS . . . What . . . You’re . . . Gonna . . . Get—”

I jump up, land a wild haymaker squarely on the man’s nose. His head snaps back and forward. My hand feels like it hit wet clay. Not a drop of blood. Not a change of expression. His hat didn’t even fall off. A mortal would be out cold with a shattered face. I crumple to the ground.

“You can’t do this,” I pant, “this is my creation.”

“You left your safe little game. You have no control here.”

“There’s another way. There’s another way,” I chant.

“Oh, there is,” he says as he continues circling, “To free yourself of your obligatory suffering you must tell me my name—”

“Rumplestiltskin!” I blurt out.

“Now you only have two guesses left. Tell me my name and you may carry on.” The man pulls out a dagger.

“Any hints?”

He picks his sharp teeth with the knife, “You have 40 seconds, and then I will skin alive and eat your five most beloved people as you sit there helpless and cry.”

Tell me my name. My name. He’s asking me to tell him who he is. His name is anything I want it to be. I’m in control if I believe I’m in control. If I think he has a name other than the one I give him, then I am not in control. If I guess, then I’m giving him my power, and I’ll never guess right, can’t guess right. If I assign him a name, as he asked, I keep my power. It’s all about syntax, juxtaposition.

A name lights up in my mental space like a Times Square billboard. A fitting name—

“Times up,” he declares.

“Your name is any name I want it to be.” The man stops circling. He squints. “And I’m telling you that your name is Art Dewenko.”

“You son-of-bitch!” the man lifts me up, grabs my wrists, spits in my face, and flings me over the river. I land 20 yards

from the pyramid. I see him crawl back under the bridge. But before he disappears he violently flicks me off. I reciprocate.

Much to my chagrin there is now a tall and skinny figure standing atop the pyramid, but it's too dark to make out details, details that will let me know if I've escaped one death trap only to face another. As I approach, the figure walks down the lone and long flight of stairs. It stops at the fourth tier. I ascend the pyramid and meet the figure at the fourth level. Before me stands a tall biped with an Ibis head. He wears a leather apron and nothing else. He holds a stone tablet and pick. He is Toth—Trismagistus—the 'Thrice Great,' god of magick and writing. He is Mercury to the Romans. Hermes to the Greeks. Ganesha to the Hindus . . .

The Ibis head is a living mask, the eyes are human, and the brown feathers rustle in the slight breeze flowing through the cavern. Toth casually etches the tablet. He looks up at me every few seconds. Eyes expressing some unknown thought.

To my left and right, along the narrow ledge, are arched tunnel openings of varying size. My brain works in such a way that the most dangerous, fear-inducing always jumps out. I zero in on a tunnel that to enter, one must hug the ground and practically wiggle through. To enter it would be to face my biggest phobia: tight spaces.

Someone once said, "Great fear conquered leads to the greatest triumph." I don't doubt the wisdom, but it's only the survivors who get to make such claims. As for the guy who realizes he might die in the face of great fear, and ends up choosing a safer path, he says, "Unconquered fear leads to mild victory."

A hole further down the tier has an opening big enough to at least crawl through. By no means is it an easy way, but only ferrets need apply for the smaller opening.

"How about that one," I ask, pointing to the larger opening. "Because I can't do the small one."

Toth fails to look up from his tablet as he chisels away.

Moments of reflection have been few and far between, and for some reason this very second I'm able to step outside of events

and just gaze upon the Big Picture. Its not that I see it all, and by no means has the hair on my neck stopped standing tall, but *COULD LIFE ITSELF BE THE INITIATION?*

As if in protest to my thoughts, an old time Betamax video appears on my mental screen. It's me as a kid playing with two ferrets. I hold a red plaid blanket that the weasels squirm through. I search the blanket for them, but they are suddenly gone. My mental screen goes blank.

I drop to the ground, and without hesitation crawl into the small hole.

Now just because I've channeled my inner ferret, and I'm quasi-sure I won't meet my demise in this tight tunnel, it doesn't mean my phobia is tamed. And I ask: is mortal fear over being confined in a tunnel that barely lets you take a full breath really a phobia? Find me one human whose heart wouldn't be thundering, whose mind wouldn't be dangling over the panic cliff.

My elbows work like insect appendages, autonomously pulling me further into my destiny. My knees dig into the sand and propel me forward. If the air were anything but this fresh, warm variety, I'd surely freak out and die like a miscalculating Santa. The dim light from the tunnel mouth is gone, and there is only blackness ahead—

A pin of light appears. My body refuses to allow me a moment of relief. And then I'm at a slim opening. I dig and crawl into a great catacomb. The ceiling is more than a thousand feet high. A scene a million times grander than Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel adorns the pentagonal ceiling. Waterfalls of orange magma light the cavern. Rows of Pillars reaching halfway to the ceiling create an avenue that I walk down. Etched on them are painted Egyptian hieroglyphics. At the end of the avenue is an 800 foot, three-sided obsidian pyramid that blocks my view of the other half of the cavern. The capstone is a glowing red ruby. Beams of laser light emanate from the three sides and exit the cavern through thin slots in the roof.

Surrounding the avenue and pyramid are moats filled with shallow black water. Silver eels dart through the darkness.

Guarding the pyramid is a pair of massive alabaster sphinxes with regal ram heads instead of the traditional pharaoh face. Every hair on their body has been given attention. Set in their eye sockets are orange crystal balls.

The smooth black stone of the pyramid hardly offers a good way up, but the Martian silt has seeped into my fingerprints giving me traction. I rub my prints and the silt turns to dye. I paint streaks under my eyes, down the bridge of my nose, sweep up from the corners of my eyes towards the temples, mimicking the divine makeup of the Pharaohs.

I reach the capstone. It is solid and crimson, unrefined. Perfectly flawed. A stylized eye, the right Eye of Horus, is etched into all three sides. The deep, paper-thin grooves direct the red laser out through slits high up on the cavern's ceiling. I peer around the capstone . . .

. . . so overwhelming and massive that I nearly fall backwards off the pyramid, rises a throne with the dimensions of a New York City block. I'm talking Mid-Town, skyscraper-footprint big. Sitting on the throne, bathed in luscious magma light and hundreds of feet tall, is Boss Hawk. The feathers on his massive hawk head move in rhythm with his breath. His body is hidden beneath bulky Papal-like cloths—crimson layers of robes and scarves. His arms are crossed over his chest. In one hand he holds a golden gaff, in the other a tasseled wand. His right eye is missing. In the left socket glows a crimson ball. Before the throne is a sunken arena adorned with billowing red drapes and bubbling baths fed by waterfalls. There are comfy-looking lounges on the tiers that lead to the arena's floor. Either there was a great party here, or there will be. I'm hoping for the latter.

My hopes are realized.

Scantly clad men and women stream into the arena from openings in the stone walls. Ambient tunes fill the temple. I hear something like an electric sitar droning out trance riffs. A crowd forms at the arena's bottom. People start dancing. They're all perfect. Tan skin. Tight bodies.

I slide down the pyramid. This side drops 200 feet deeper than the other and into the arena. I walk a stone catwalk towards the dance floor. On both sides beautiful people bathe in pools filled with sweet smelling oils and leaves. Oddly, no one is touching, everyone is just swaying. Couples and threesomes and moresomes move in sensual ways, hands and lips hovering above skin, but no contact. A rope bridge leads to the dance floor, now packed with a thousand writhing bodies millimeters apart. I weave through the mass. Bodies come close enough for our sweat beads to join, but it stops there. Heat and sweat flies. I'm given a ten-foot buffer. A path opens in the crowd. A woman slinks and shimmies down the path. Her movements are synced to the music. She is different than the other women. She is the epitome of grace and sensuality. She moves with such sexy confidence that it gives her away.

Jaz enters the ten-foot circle. A leather flap, ultra short, slit to the thigh and riding low on the hips, barely covers her pubic bone and butt. Like all the women she is topless. Her divinely proportioned breasts, perfect for her frame, ignite a fire in my pants. Wrapped around Jaz's left upper arm is a gold snake. Her wild hair is held atop her head with braided gold ropes. Gold glitter makeup accentuates her sharp features. She dances sexy circles around me. Her hands run up and down her body. She turns her back to me as she shimmies, circles getting tighter and tighter. A breeze carries her scent, a scent so exotic only a goddess dare wear it. She looks up. That wonderful little gap in her front teeth greets me. Eternity bleeds from my heart. I *feel* the 'everything is everything.' My beloved presses her body against mine. We hug. We sway. Our fields join and I feel complete for the first time in my life. She wraps her legs around my hips. She is feather light.

"The problem with Gods, is that they never seem to do anything," she whispers.

I am too deep in ecstasy to analyze. Nothing matters. The answers. The questions. Concepts are of the Mind. I am whole. Whole. One. Unity. Indivisible. I see it. I feel it. But my mind

can't get around it, because there is nothing to get around. It's not a 'mental thing.' It's so much bigger than Mind, than infinity. Which is a good thing, because if it were just about the bigness, the infinite, Mind would find a way to measure it. What's infinity? Well, it's infinity. OK, lets measure it; after all, a journey of infinite miles starts with one step. Give enough monkeys enough time and they will measure everything and rewrite *Faust* while they're at it! Parts I & II!

Infinity isn't the answer. Concept isn't the answer. The equation only measures itself. A loop. Mind will take you around the barn for a billion years, all the time convincing you it was going somewhere: "Don't you worry. We'll figure it out. Hold on. Almost there . . . oh, back where we started. Sorry. Let's give it another try 'ole chap . . ."

Jaz unwraps her legs and uses her oil-slicked body to move us through the crowd and closer to the throne. The ambient music fades. In its place is a low chant coming from the rave. Jaz leads me out of the crowd and onto a platform that lies before Boss Hawk. She spins me toward the throne. Drops to a knee, bows her head. Hawk lays his god tools on his lap. His massive, yet thin hands lift the animated hawk mask off his head.

Chinese proverb: *One God with different mud (masks) on its face . . .*

Before me sits a cyclops ram. In the liquid darkness of the pupil dances a flame, which tells me Boss Hawk's essence is fire. A mane of flowing white hair intermittently hides curled horns. Boss regally holds the bird mask under his right arm. His long white Billy-goat beard wavers.

Jaz now holds a dagger with pentagrams carved into the seven-inch blade. She runs the blade across her wrist. Holds the bleeding appendage up to the god, then she places the bloody knife in my hand.

"He has removed his mask," Jaz says excitedly. "You may pass through the Gate of Anubis. But a tribute must be paid." She crawls closer. "And I am the tribute."

I step away. Jaz is in a trance.

“Nor worship, nor reverence, nor treasure does he require. Only blood of the beloved,” she says.

“No way.”

“Yes way.” Jaz grabs my wrist. Leans her throat towards the knife. “Bleed me. Sacrifice me. This is the Law.”

“Bullshit, it’s His Law.”

“You cannot turn your back on this.”

I run into the rave, grab a dazed girl, bring her to the platform.

“This one will do.”

“You must sacrifice your beloved. It is Law.”

For how many eons has man scarified those he loves for this god? Sacrificed untold millions to keep the Game going. Earth, forever awash in blood. Perpetual blood. There isn’t an angle where the intensity of this realization lessens.

“The blood has doomed us,” I say.

Jaz caresses my stomach as she whispers, “Worship Him, Give your goat, But to please Him, Slit *MY* throat . . .”

Abyss.

Abyss.

“Abyss,” I whisper.

Jaz shakes her head and repeats the poem.

“I’ll sacrifice myself by going into the Abyss. The blood is a cheap and easy way—”

“The Abyss is death. Real death!” she shrieks. “You can never come back. Never come back. When you die it’s over. Never come back!”

“But going into the Abyss will satisfy His lust.”

“When you fail in the Abyss, you’ll pull everything in with you. All it takes is one thread to unravel everything,” Jaz practically impales her throat on the blade.

I shove Jaz to the ground, toss the dagger, charge the throne.

“I will go Beyond for you; into the Abyss. My Will be done.”

The cyclops ram just gazes. Watches.

Jaz crawls to me. She hugs my legs and sobs. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“My Will be done.”

“No, no, no,” sobs Jaz.

The flame in Boss Hawk’s eye morphs into a flaming earth. Earth is now a sun. My blood thickens and it feels like a python strangles my heart. Jaz keeps muttering that I have no idea, none at all—

Feel the Abyss.

KNOW IT.

Feel it in every cell.

KNOW IT.

I close my eyes and the nothingness, the lonely nothingness of the Abyss takes me. Creation, life, experience, the Dream, all Dreams, Farms, inside, outside, death, light and dark, chaos and order, these things exist, *THEY ARE*; they exist in Creation, Being. The Abyss exists between Being and Non-Being. Beyond the Spearhead. It protects the UNKNOWABLE. The Abyss eats blackholes. An entire universe in the Abyss is a molecule in an ocean. Creation’s destiny is the Abyss, eventually Being phases into non-Being, but things diffusing into the Abyss alone weaken Creation. Say nothing for what that wayward thing experiences. The absolute nothingness, the separateness, the cold. Crying in the cold dark sea. This is my fate if I fail in the Abyss—

(. . . *where’s that dagger!* . . .)

—we sacrifice, we’ve spilled oceans of blood to keep from slipping into the Abyss. We did/do it out of fear. Justified fear. But the Abyss is the way of the true warrior. The warrior sacrifices only ‘himself.’

My eyes open and I see Jaz frantically searching for the dagger. She finds it, stumbles to me, gives me the weapon. She holds her chin up, exposing her thin neck. She gazes at the ceiling, breath shallow and so calm. I drag the blade across her throat. A thin line of blood appears from the superficial slice.

Out of fear we sacrifice.

Fear.

Fear, the final frontier.

Move into fear. If you survive the union, transmute it, for fear is a giant hulking shadow—a growling, terrifying shadow that may or may not be a mouse in front of a really powerful light with a microphone.

Maybe so, maybe not.

I throw the knife into a magma flow. Hug and kiss Jaz. She is spent. Eyes glazed. I lay her in the warm sand and rise to face Boss Hawk.

“My Lord, the path of the Fool is folly. Folly is my Will. Further I choose. Beyond. May the Fool’s Will be done.”

Boss Hawk refits his mask, crosses his arms. The sound of grinding rock fills the cavern. A door has opened in the pyramid’s base. The arena has been cleared. I start sliding toward the doorway. I grab Jaz. Her sweaty leg slips my grip. I’m pulled away at increasing speed through the vacant arena, over the rope bridge, along the narrow catwalk, through the doorway and deeper into the black pyramid.

21

How I got into this boat I will never know because somewhere along the way I lost consciousness. A current carries the craft at a steady speed. Above me is something like a full moon, sans any of the distinguishing marks like the Sea of Tranquility. It's more like a flashlight than a proto-planet. Framing the black sky are towering statues of dog-headed men with outstretched arms. This is the Gate of Anubis. But what of it? More quantum dreams in dreams in dreams. I can't help but see fractal arrangements, fractal dreamscapes, entire quantum dream universes within dreams, and each thought-particle in every dream conceals other universes. This is the madness of Creation, yet if one allows duality to sum up the whole story, one can separate the circus into two units:

Is/Is Not.

Being/Non-Being.

The great terror is that if The Farm is sucked into the Abyss, then the Monads and the Show that they belong to, go too. Then the Watchers who watch the Monads go, and on and on and on, until all that exists—Being—phases into Non-Being. Fear of this slippage keeps Creation humming. But maybe it's analogous to the myth that dying in a dream = physical death.

Maybe it's a myth that if the dream dies, so does the dreamer?

But how can this all rest on the shoulders of a man, just a dream in a dream? A dream/thought/particle cursed with the role of Hero.

“Perhaps you should surrender to the possibility that this is all about you.” The voice comes from a girl suddenly perched on the bow. Her skin is painted flecked gold. She is small, maybe four feet tall. Attached to the underside of her arms are shimmering gold wings that appear more showy than functional. She wears a sheer gold dress.

“Perhaps you are the Hero of this epic because you are the author.”

“I hate that possibility.”

The girl squats, holds her knees, stares at me, through me, into me, beyond me.

“Perhaps the Puzzle is shattered, and each piece must cross into the Abyss, one at a time, in order to learn where they fit.” She looks up at the moon. “Perhaps,” she whispers.

“You’re implying that this saga is not only my saga, but also the Saga of All?”

“Perhaps, was Homer’s saga not the worlds?”

“Never read the Odyssey.”

“All souls saga,” she says, “and each saga is no greater or less than the next. From bees to galaxies. All important.”

“No offense, but you sound like an enlightenment seminar.”

“Seminar?”

“Where am I?”

The girl flies away seconds before the boat runs aground. I get out and find a path worn into the fine black sand. I follow the path over rolling hills, then reach a high mound. At the top I get a good view of the terrain. Dark landscape slightly darker than the horizon stretches out as far as I can see. In the distance, down the opposite side of the mound is the top of a craggy cliff range. It stretches left and right seemingly forever. Above me circles the winged girl. She flies towards the cliffs. I follow.

The girl perches on a craggy spire when I reach the cliff.

“Perhaps you are confused,” she says.

“Why do you start every sentence with ‘perhaps?’”

“There.”

“There what?”

“Perhaps I started a sentence without saying ‘perhaps.’”

I find a narrow footpath, follow it down through the crags and closer to the yawning divide. The girl hops from crag to crag. I find a platform that juts out into the darkness. From here I can see pins of firelight coming from similar platforms. The closest fire is a dozen miles.

“I should be shaking in my boots,” I say to the winged guide.

“But you’re not wearing boots.”

“I should be terrified.”

“Perhaps you’ve been sedated?”

I point to the nearest fire. “Who is that?”

“Perhaps if you wait too long to jump the sedation wears off and gathering the courage can take centuries, perhaps forever.”

I peer over the edge. The cliff disappears beyond my binocular vision. Before me is a field of black that is so absolute it could be two-dimensional.

“I just jump?”

“Perhaps if I were you, I would just take a big step.” The girl takes to the wing.

“Hurry, through,” she yells from above.

I wish there were a shot for courage.

Getting over fear is a big hurdle, but being free of fear doesn’t mean you have courage. There isn’t a gram of fear pulsing through me, but courage is in short supply. A spiritual warrior must not only slay the legions of fear, but also must he build kingdoms of courage. What all the Self-Help gurus and religious charlatans forget to tell you, is that to advance along the long treacherous Royal Road, yes, you need to overcome fear, but you must also possess a heart overflowing with courage, and as added measure, must be infected with an elite brand of stupidity, which can be substituted with monumental ignorance, but never with arrogance.

This is torture. It would’ve been so much easier had I been cast into the Abyss when I made the decision. This is double

jeopardy. To get my legs to carry me over the edge requires strength I am currently not in possession of. Had it, but used it up.

“Hurry,” yells the flying girl.

Hurry, it will only get worse. Hurry, wait till the fear comes back.

I make a move toward the edge and my legs give out. I crawl to the edge. This is so much worse than the sand vortex. There’s a lip jutting out beyond the cliff face, gives me a suitable jumping ledge so I won’t smack the wall as I plummet.

Plummet?

Why must I plummet?

An Abyss is unlimited, but not necessarily unlimited down.

I stand. Mild pangs of fear pinch my heart. I shuffle to the edge, hang my toes over. Dip my big toe in. Oh, so limitless. My eyes shut themselves and I step . . .

...

...

. . . and like walking down an unfamiliar flight of stairs in pitch black, thinking you’ve reached the last step but there’s one more, catching yourself before you crash, but still your hip shoots up into the socket and you bite your tongue; but the shock of the totally unexpected is what does the most damage. I stand on solid abyss blackness two feet lower than the ledge. I do the most logical thing that one could do: I start walking. And walking. Walk for hours. I walk so far that the stationary flashlight moon is like a star behind me, and the dark landscape it illuminates is a ghostly gray band across the horizon. Pure dumbfoundery propels me across the dark nothing. The fear inoculation has worn off, but fortunately I’m spun, so spun that perplexity has blown up a millions times its normal size and has squeezed out fear. I’ve come to a place existing in another dimension of question. It’s like comparing oranges and lies. Concepts and yellow mustard. It’s like eating the menu instead of the meal. Yum!

Total cognitive shatter.

Full deployment into dumbfoundery.

Then if things weren't weird enough, I come upon a door. It's illuminated by a single dangling light bulb. It's a red door with a white frame. Could've been torn off the front of some lovely London flat. There's even a brass mail slot, matching knocker, stately knob.

I peak around the door. From the backside it's painted white, just as it would look from inside that flat where a good and proper reality might occur, as apposed to this surreal prison which I inhabit, but then again, that comfy and secure reality I left behind is a house of cards. A favorite catch phrase of the cliché-leaning individual is: Nothing is as it seems . . .

But I say: *Everything is as it seems!*

Everything is weird.

The mere fact that the word 'normal' exists proves how weird things are.

The concept of normal isn't normal!

Everything is bizarre.

A Surreal Empire.

From my perspective, Creation is a surrealist funhouse. In the traditional, artistic sense, anything can happen in surrealism. The post-modern has broken through and shown us a universe of unlimited, but insane potential.

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN.

EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.

DADA RULES!

I believe in everything.

I believe in nothing.

Zero.

Enter the Post-Modern Paradigm.

I try the door. It's locked.

Allow me to rephrase . . . it's not a surreal funhouse, it's a *Surreal Madhouse* manned by cackling jokers and dangerous clowns. A madhouse owned and operated by a two-faced God. A happy face. A sad face. Some would call it bi-polar, maybe

even schizophrenic. Oh, and this God has red lipstick smeared across his face, wears a pink tutu with an orange seahorse inner tube around its belly, sports a cowboy hat, unlaced combat boots, carries a sawed-off shotgun attached to a compound crossbow.

My God!

If that weren't bad enough, God has two siblings who actually run the madhouse. One of them the Nordics call Loki. His favorite thing is irony. His laughter keeps atoms spinning. So he must laugh or Creation ends. Funny humor, demented humor, ironic humor. Doesn't matter, it all makes him laugh. And we are the actors. Hopefully, it's one's lot to provide a happy, vaudevillian type show instead of a tragic tear-jerker brimming with cruel irony.

The other sibling the Vedic's call Kali, and she dances on corpses. She devours souls. Her lust is death and destruction. She liberates through decapitation. There is no reasoning with her. It's impossible to outrun her. When she rampages, pray it be quick.

I rear up to kick the door, and that oh-so-reasonable and calm inner voice says: *why not knock first?*

I smack the door with the knocker. The door unlocks. I open it a crack. My brain tingles in a bad way when I realize how differently permanent this scene would've been had I kicked the door. How different this pivot point would be. So much teeters on the thinnest fraction of choice.

I walk into a brightly lit square room, probably 50 feet square. There's a black and white checkered tile floor, the wall with the door, and another wall with a raging fireplace flanked by two big windows with soft light shining through. Where there should be two other walls and a ceiling is a silent storm of thick grey clouds. The door shuts. I immediately open it, walk through the doorway several times, check around the door. The room only exists within the door. The fact that I'm free to come and go diminishes the fear of a trap—though there are plenty of traps that let the victim freely walk in and out. It's only when the prey takes the cheese is the trap tripped. Such traps are

unspecific—randomly trapping whoever comes along. It’s my assumption that if this were a trap it would be specific for me and the door would’ve locked the second it closed. And because at this point someone decided to ratchet up the weirdness to almost unbearable levels, my couch sits in the middle of the room with a red lacquered coffee table before it. The couch and surrounding area is illuminated by a spotlight from above.

Transcendence of time, space, matter, further than the wildest imagination dare dream, and here is my couch. I don’t suspect for a second that it actually is my couch. Yet even a replica or mirage of it satisfies a creeping uneasiness that can only be squelched by the familiar.

“Sit, please,” booms a warm female voice from all directions. Though warm and motherly, there is a power in the words that demands reverence.

I sink into the couch. “So when do things get bad?”

“Bad implies duality. You have moved beyond duality.”

“And into the infinite everything. The ‘everything is everything?’”

“Infinite implies finite, implies duality,” responds the voice. “There is no duality here.”

“Infinity is a dualistic concept?”

“All concept is dualistic. Thus infinity is dualistic because it is concept.”

“So there is no infinity.”

“Within duality there is infinite and finite.”

“Where am I?”

“You are at the gateway of Beyond. Beyond concept. Beyond duality. Beyond IT. Past the THING. Further than WHAT. More than the WAY. Away from THAT. Where there is no THIS. You have transcended the dualistic Creation. Here there is no position. There is no non-position. There is no ‘IS,’ there is no ‘IS NOT.’ Everything is everything.”

“I can’t seem to ratify the statement: ‘Here there is no position.’ Isn’t that a double entendre? Isn’t that a Logic impossibility?”

“Everything is not everything,” says the voice, “is everything is everything not.”

“Concept is duality,” I mutter.

“Mind is a computer loaded with an Operating System that conceptualizes. It measures duality. Duality exists so Mind can measure Mind. It is a closed system.”

“Fuzzy logic measures the grey area.”

“True. To study the Beyond from within Creation, fuzzy logic is more practical than static logic—the ‘either/or’ dualistic operating system of primitive Mind. However, for fuzzy logic to replace static logic a mutation of Mind is needed. Example: take traditional human computing, the hardware, chips and discs and wires, and imagine trying to load an operating system that is encoded onto the photons of a luminous gas cloud. Impossible.”

“You’re saying we need a new brain.”

“Fuzzy is only a thread leading to Beyond. Beyond is five thousand right turns away from IT.”

“You’re not going to make any sense, are you?”

“I assure you there is no flaw in my sense. Maybe you need to remeasure your sense of sense?”

The silent storm is disturbed as something big moves through it.

“So the Abyss is the zone between Creation and Beyond?”

“There is no position. There is no here. There is no there.”

“Non-position implies duality. Your statement is flawed.”

“Concept is flawed.”

Concept is flawed.

The voice continues, “You can neither not-get-here, nor-get-here with concept. Concept is of WHAT. The WAY measures itself. The THING is a closed system.”

“You’re saying that thinking can never get you out of duality because it’s not designed to?”

“Concept measures concept measures concept. And here is your infinite. Infinitely round and round. THAT is a loop. THIS is not an expansive forever. IT is a loop. A loop. A loop.”

“So only a blown mind can move beyond Creation and into the Beyond?”

“Change implies duality. Duality is a position inside of non-duality. Mind cancels duality with non-duality. Concept becomes non-concept. The balloon pops. And you slip into Beyond, where everything is everything. Where it has always been, of course. To imply anything else implies duality.”

I catch sight of the big thing circling in the clouds. It’s a giant, shaggy stuffed animal brilliantly streaked like a tropical bird. Its head pokes through. A snagle-toothed, wide-eyed goofy monster looks down at me.

“And why are you here?” asks the vast cool intelligence, suddenly shifting gears, apparently done with its opening sermon.

“Cut,” yells a voice from the darkness.

The vast voice sighs and says, “I muffed my line, sorry.”

From the storm immerses a man. He wears riding chaps and a crisp white shirt. His tweed cap is turned around. He holds a tattered script and an old time paper microphone in one hand, a magician’s wand in the other.

“It’s ‘why are you where you are,’” says the director to the sky. “‘Why are you here’ betrays your benevolence because you’ve just lectured him on the essence of ‘here’ being a concept. Concept is duality, remember. We let it slip by the first time, but there was no hiding it again.”

I grab the man’s arm. “What the fuck is this?”

He gives me the ‘hold on a second finger.’

“And you,” says the director to the fuzzy monster, “aren’t suppose to show yourself until page 122.” He flips through the manuscript and yells, “To get the right feeling we’re going to have to go back to act one, page 24.” The director turns to me. “You’re okay with going back to,” he references the manuscript, “to the scene when you’re at Stonehenge. Work our way back to this point. It’s all about feeling. Our audience will not settle for anything but our best effort.”

“This is insane.”

“Tell me about it. We’re already 22% over budget.”

I stumble to the door. It's locked. Trap sprung.
So devious. So convoluted and brilliantly devious—

A trap door in the floor springs opens. Out walks a miniature man dressed like a 1920's bean counter. He holds a sheet of paper. The hypnotic smell of recently mimeographed paper fills the area. The little man tugs on the director's pants, hands him the Xerox.

"My line was, '23% over budget.'" The director uses his microphone and screams out into the blackness, "SORRY 'BOUT THAT."

The director moves in close, whispers to me, "They like the spontaneity of live theater." He stares at me. Tries to coax words from me. Throws his hands up, papers flutter to the floor. "He forgot his goddamn line! How can I work with amateurs?"

A door hidden in the wall swings open. Out waddles an Emperor penguin. It waddles past me and stops in front of the director. The director and little man lean in to hear what the penguin has to say.

"Canceled?" screeches the director.

An argument breaks out, well, it's really just the director yelling at the penguin. The penguin offers no defense, yet its natural appearance makes it look like he's quite sure the decision to cancel is a right one. The vast cool voice laments about the perils of greatness. The stuffed wild thing dances around the scene, periodically poking its butt out from the storm. And suddenly I see it as a giant green rabbit. The pookah dances around faster and faster. The room rattles and shakes, then the room starts twisting as if it were a gimbal stage. The small man hands me a note. It says in handwritten blocky letters:

Change the Dream. Change the Dream. Birth pangs lead to birth. Pain is fleeting. Change the Dream. Change the Dream. From limited to limitless. From duality to freedom. Change the Dream. Change the Dream. Break the Loop. Stop the Poop. Change the Dream. Change the Dream . . .

The director continues his rant as the penguin just stands there, swaying with the stage. The spotlight pulses, creating a strobed world. I dive onto the couch as the room rotates 90 degrees. Thankfully the couch is anchored to the floor. I dig my hands behind the cushions and grab the frame just in time as the room rotates another 90 and is now upside down, though the midget, penguin, and director defy gravity (not like that's a surprise) and remain anchored to the floor. The room starts breaking away into the swirling storm. The penguin, the small man, and finally the director are pulled into the tornado. And believe it or not, the director is still yelling as he and the penguin tumble through the storm.

Then it is just my couch and I. I look down into the vortex. I let go and fall ten feet, land in fine, graphite-tinted sand. The vortex stops and the black clouds move to the perimeter of the sand pit.

The Abyss has been totally unpredictable. Certainly not the crippling nothingness I thought it was going to be; yet this unpredictable din might be worse than the dark nothingness I anticipated. Case in point: standing 30 feet away at the far end of the sand pit is a figure wearing a silvery flight suit and a motorcycle helmet with a mirrored visor.

The astronaut walks towards me. Every step is hesitant, like he's walking on glass. He stops just beyond arms-length. The helmet cocks as the astronaut inspects me. He turns his back to me, turns a knob on the helmet, pulls his helmet off, unzips the space suit, steps out of it. He wears a black, sweat-soaked one piece jumper. He faces me.

I'm not sure who came up with the idea that if you were to meet yourself you would instantly cease to exist. Now, that may be true if one were, let's say in Yonkers, NY, and happened to bump into themselves on the way to buy some Pepsi. But in the Abyss, it just isn't true because standing before me is myself, and I still exist, whatever that means.

Haven't broken up into quarks.

Yet.

Maybe this theory of instant dissolution is the product of the inability to ponder such a thing as meeting yourself, a reflex to the impossible, but my mind isn't 'OD-ing' on paradox, and other than the inability to do anything other than study the face, my face, from a perspective no camera or video could match, I feel pretty good.

Now as for 'myself,' the guy in front of me, his strained expression steadily chips away at my good feelings. He's not awed; he's concerned, anxious. He nods and smacks his lips, scratches his head, starts pacing. He stops, shakes his finger at me, paces. Stops.

"I promise you," he says, "I am the real and only me."

As I'm about to respond, he preempts me.

"That hollow feeling in your gut, it's because you're not real. My likeness has been illegally used as a prop in this stupid game." He rushes at me. "You know, this game ruins people. Ruins them!"

I'm a videogame character. Can't say it's the craziest thing I've ever heard.

"When I discovered this ruse, I demanded a third of royalties. But They'd only go for a fifth. In the end we agreed to let me come in here and eliminate you." He pulls out a weird-looking pistol. "Sorry bloke."

He hesitates, lowers the gun and paces to the far end of the ring, comes back.

"Tell you what, phantasm, I'll give you a chance to continue with your little gameshow. If you can pin me for three seconds, you live, continue on with your ridiculous illusion, and I'll settle for a fifth of the royalties. If you fail, I will end you. Deal?"

"Deal." This toast is punk. I've only lost one wrestling match in my life, and that was to an ogre destined to start on the offensive line for the Miami Dolphins. And I nearly scrapped out a draw.

He backs into the middle of the ring. Dances like Casius Clay, arms lose, feet quick.

"No pinching," he says. "No cheap shots. Greco-Roman wrestling."

The other me does a round of high knees, a couple of jumping jacks, and six ‘aye-ya-haas,’ a popular exercise from the 1900’s.

“You should know, I’ve never been pinned. Never,” he says, slightly winded by the calisthenics.

“Funny, neither have I.”

He approaches, head hung between his haunches, arms held out like the Mad Grappler. He grabs my shoulders. I grab his. We wear a circle in the sand as we feel each other out. His skin feels like mine, and to look in his eyes is to see my soul’s mirror. He swipes at my legs and quickly comes back to neutral when he fails. The next attack comes a second on the heels of the last, and I’m on my back, wind knocked out of me, stunned at being worked so bad. But I’m a ground fighter. I wiggle out of his pin and slap on a headlock. As stunned as I was, he is more. I can tell by his frantic squirming and horrified grunts. He’s not used to being on the wrong end of a skull smooshing hammerlock. If he were, he’d know struggling only makes it worse. He grabs a fistful of my belly, twists. I let go. We separate. Lick our wounds.

“I didn’t fully account for the fact that you have more to loose,” he says. His head is bright red. Ears look like they’re on fire. “That brings us about equal, which means this is gonna get ugly. I have a better idea. Rocks, Paper, Scissors. Two out of three.”

I crawl to him and hold out my fist.

He calls the first round.

His scissors cut my paper.

I call the next.

My paper covers his rock.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“Take me for a sucker?” he says. “Who calls the last one?”

I let him call the next, but it doesn’t matter, I’ve got him beat. His mind is swirling. I’ve gone paper twice, and what’s more confusing and confounding to him is that I guessed correctly that he wouldn’t go scissor twice. In his mind he’s asking: “Could he possibly be one of those loose cannons who never switches his hand? If so, I must go scissors.”

But my strategy could be to create the illusion that, because I went paper twice, I will now sneak in a rock to break his scissors, which he picked based on the fact that I could be one of those who never switch up.

I throw out a rock.

He too a rock.

This muddles the waters.

He chose rock anticipating that my strategy was to bait him into thinking I was a 'never-switcher.' Now the pressure is on me, does he use paper; the only option he has yet to use?

We throw paper vs. paper.

"From the future?" I say.

"You won't comprehend it, so what does it matter."

"Try me."

"Imagine trying to explain to your shadow that it's a shadow."

Good point.

I call it.

Paper/Paper. I *am* playing myself. What did I expect?

He calls it.

My rock.

His scissors.

I win.

"Epic," he mumbles and starts putting on his suit. A spotlight illuminates a platform beyond the sand pit. Branching off the platform are three rope bridges that disappear into darkness.

I walk to the opposite end, turn to myself. He's suited up, holds the helmet over his head.

"Do me justice," he says and fastens the helmet.

The me that claimed I was a videogame copyright infringement wavers and disintegrates.

I walk to the platform. More choices.

Do I take the Middle Road, or do I commit to an ideology. Left ideology, right ideology.

I can't recall which guru/saint/prophet said to always go right. I think it has something to do with the left and right

hands of God. Right being about the one for all, left being about the one for one. Probably just propaganda against those left-handed heathen.

But an even greater guru/saint/prophet said: "Choice is illusion."

Choice, no choice. Right it is. I walk onto the bridge. The other bridges disappear as I walk further. The light follows me. In the distance appears a landing with a rock face and a round wood door cut into the rock. I make it to the landing. The bridge disappears. I walk through the door.

3rd Dimension

22

I enter a pristine white expanse. The door I just walked through vanishes. Somehow, like in the black Abyss, there is a ground that's indistinguishable from the infinite expanse, yet it's there. And there is no horizon, thus no direction. I guess vast nothingness doesn't have to be black.

What's more disturbing: endless white, or endless black?

Some mystics claim that daytime (LIGHT) is a lie, since when we look at the sky, we can't see the stars, but they also say that in the light is when Truth is gleaned, because things close-at-hand can be studied; and in the night (DARK) is when Distant Wisdom is absorbed as the heavens are revealed, but also a lie because things up close can't be studied.

And Round Robin's Red Rum Barn We Run We Run . . .

It's the whole Yin Yang thing. A continuous cycle of the TWO making up the ONE. The LIGHT in the DARK, the DARK in the LIGHT—right brain hemisphere controls left, left controls right. Philip K. Dick wrote about it in *A Scanners Darkly*. Ingesting this new drug, Substance D, though an ecstasy/visionary inducing alkaloid at first, prolonged use created a battle in the mind. Left vs. Right. The materialistic, calculating, cold left Male (Yang/Blue) side against the emotional, artistic, passionate warm right female (Yin/Red). After reading the book, I plunged into a maddening paranoia about an alien species invading earth through the human mind cracked open by psychedelics implanted on earth by the invaders. The old

'back door' technique. In my vision the invaders used the 'Bliss Circuit' to coax humanity into taking these drugs. By the promise of a Bliss Circuit tickling, they baited us, like the witch's candy house in *Hansel & Gretel*.

Bait us with the things we crave most . . . Candy and Bliss.

It was a totally paranoid concept unique to my tortured mind. After all, psychedelics have the tendency (depending on 'set & setting') once the euphoria has passed, to show you the true nature of things. There's nothing hidden about it. Only a madman could see them as weapons in an inter-dimensional war . . .

Back to the Yin Yang thing. Personally I like the darkness. I like the 'Far-Eye' of night. The countless shades of black and dark blues. For in the darkness there is greater 'Potentia.' In the darkness there is more wonder, greatness, more potential for terror. Right now I can see for miles and there's nothing there. Which, if one's into the fear trip, might be fine—

Something appears a million miles away. A black dot getting bigger by the second, because it's A.) Coming at me, or B.) I'm flying towards it—

Suddenly before me is control panel Captain Kirk would envy—

I fly sideways with the panel at incredible speed. Thankful there are no G-Forces, because we stop on a dime, from 80,000mph to zero. Another control panel fits into the master panel. It's a tilted, thin blue glass oval fastened to a graphite pole. Backwards I zoom with the panels and am thrown into a throne-type chair made of thousands of tiny blue cushions. The chair is fitted to a metal grating floor. Left I zip. Another panel fits into the puzzle. Forward I fly and a curving screen appears, providing over 180 degrees of left/right vision and stretching from below the floor to six feet above my head. From all 'directions' come smoked glass domes that encase me in a bubble. The control panels come to life and glow cool blue. The white world fades to black. Starry space manifests outside

the transparent sphere. The bubble is now perched atop a pole several thousand feet above the moon's surface.

I am out of The Farm.

Earth is a pale sphere dotted with grey seas. It is the Monad world, and it truly is a blank canvas.

The screen flickers and I see through the eyes of a 'human' as they walk around a grocery store. I lean forward, place my palm on the front panel. The scene changes to a 3-D animation of the Monads superimposed on a green grid. Each solid green Monad is surrounded by a transparent green cloud. Floating above each cloud is a number with constantly changing decimal places. I slide my hand around the panel and with it moves the scene on the screen. With my fingertips I dial in a specific Monad, enter it, see a first-person view of a vast garbage dump teeming with people. I tap the panel, pull back to the 3-D grid scene, enter another Monad with a larger field. The human sits at a briefing table and watches a colonel click through a Holo-Point presentation. Everyone at the meeting is grim-faced. I move to another Monad and see Times Square NYC. The person looks up at a massive display showing a breaking news story. The date is visible: 12.16.2012. A dirty-water-dog comes into view. The person crams it into their mouth. Relish squirts into the eyes. I pull out to the master view. Though my journey has taken me so far sideways into the future, it seems that time has barely moved. It's like some kind of anti-Einstein quark. (Within General Relativity is a theory stating time travel can be achieved by going into deep space near the speed of light, and when you come back, though your trip was only a hundred years, earth has aged a million years, *i.e.* the Buck Rogers phenomenon.) I've traveled a path similar to the convolutions of a brain, run through the future, hopscotched dimensions, seen every single theory and law ground to dust, yet no time has passed.

Bottom line: When you go into quantum/tangent experience, macro time stands still. No one has ever talked about this before. I find it somewhat suspicious.

My bubble command center starts a controlled decent towards the moon. Space horizon disappears behind the wall of a crater. I enter a sub-terrarium catacomb and come to rest on a honeycombed platform floating in the middle of the hollow moon. The bubble falls apart. The panels, floor and chair are pulled away, leaving me sprawled out on the platform. I have a perfect view of 'earth' through the hole I entered. Latticeworks of red and black lasers appear and bounce off the interior of the moon, dive into a massive mirror below the platform. I notice a staircase leading up to a second, smaller platform. On the platform is a huge red button fastened to a pole.

"Before you press it, don't you want to know what it does?"

I spin and come face to face with Jaz, now costumed in a conservative white pantsuit with a plunging neckline. She wears fashionable, thick-frame glasses.

"Press it," she says, "and the crisis is averted. Then we become the Monads."

"Sounds like a no-brainer."

"But there's a catch," Jaz taps the outer edge of her hand along the opposite forearm, "we become the Monads, but it's same as it ever was. Same as it ever was."

"Wrong."

"Oh, we'll paint a new world, it'll look different, sure thing, but fundamentally nothing changes because the two aspects that cause all the problems—duality and the veils—remain."

"Are you implying that if we survive the crisis by living through it instead of taking the easy way, these aspects will disappear."

"Not disappear, but evolve. It's an evolution of all things. But if we skip the crisis, there is no evolution, just new sets, new games."

She continues, "Surviving the crisis frees us from our mental limitations, frees us from the corrupted 'either-or' logic of duality. Instead of another paradox, we'll inhabit a landscape built with the logic of 'maybe-maybe sometimes-no sometimes-yes sometimes—"

“Fuzzy logic.”

“Right, and the veils go. No more blindness. No more hidden lies and devious occult. Gods and man and Others living consciously of each other. Instead of war and devolution, a different kind of game prevails. A vast renaissance pervades.”

“What are the odds of us surviving the crisis?”

“Never know your odds.”

“And if we fail?”

Jaz removes her glasses and starts gnawing on the frame. “The Titans come, then the same exact Loop is experienced. All the same players, all the same games. I mean down to each footfall—”

“We don’t have it in us. My decision is to press the button.”

“That’s the choice of a weak man, not of a warrior.”

Low, effective blow.

“Eventually,” she says, “the new world we create will degrade into a similar crisis, and we’ll face the same fate we face now.”

“I can’t deal with going through middle school again.”

“And I can’t deal with being locked in The Other again. That’s the thing: a reset and the Others are in the same position we are now. A failure to resolve the crisis and we’re in the same position. Everything hinges on a harmonic resolution of the crisis NOW.”

“To save you, I have to choose against my species.”

“Resolution of the crisis benefits all.” Jaz takes a deep breath. “Or press the button and I disappear into the rabbit hole, never to cross paths with you again.”

I follow her up to the higher platform. We cautiously approach the button. “You know,” Jaz says, “the world we inhabit isn’t our first, and the Monad world won’t be our last. We’re traveling an evolutionary slinky. Each ring is evolutionary further along than the last. I’m talking about a cosmic slinky where every ring is closer to the goal of Holy Unity. A Holy Unity of All is All.”

“That is a very ambiguous statement.”

“Holiness is inherently ambiguous,” says Jaz, “but isn’t authentic without the long slog through the Game of Ages.”

“It’s a crooked game.”

“But it’s the only game in town, and we have to win to move to the next game.”

“Or press the button.”

“That’s rigging the Game,” says Jaz.

“Aren’t all crooked games rigged?”

Together we gaze out at earth. Revelations don’t come cheap.

“Dance with me,” I say and twirl Jaz away.

Jaz shimmies her way back. I hold her tight. Stare into her eyes.

“I’m waiting for you to tell me to forget everything you just said.”

“Forget doesn’t mean it’s not true, it just means to let go of it so new stuff can come in, and so you don’t turn it into dogma.”

I twirl her out again, reel her in. We move away from the button, towards the stairs. I twirl Jaz out, she snaps back into my arms.

“Forget everything I said,” she purrs.

I twirl her towards the button, then use the momentum to toss her off the platform. She tumbles down the stairs.

Just can’t handle middle school again. No way. I think everyone would applaud my choice if faced with another 3,000 lifetimes of puberty.

I press the button.

“What gave her away?” asks a suddenly manifested man who stands on a hovering disc. He wears a grey flannel suit without a tie. White shirt. Black wingtips. He speaks with a thick French accent.

“The real Jaz smells different.”

I press the button again.

“Ah, yes. Very astute of you.” The man looks at the button, then says, “Better try it again.”

I press. Nothing spectacular, least noticeable occurs.

“What did you think would happen?” he asks.

“Fireworks. Dimension shifts.”

“Sometimes the greatest changes are the subtlest.”

I tear at the rubber button, rip it out of its housing. Under the button is the empty space of the box housing. No wires. No transmission cables. Just air.

“And sometimes the subtlest changes are so subtle nothing happens at all,” he adds.

I toss the button, kick the pole. I attack it, loosen it, throw it off the platform. I crumble.

“And now for you a time of rest and reflection is due.” He motions for me to join him. “If you would please.”

The heights of confusion can lead to the heights of wisdom. I know less now than I have ever known. I am a clean slate. Maybe this is a good thing. The Jaz clone lays sprawled out on the lower platform. One of her arms is detached. She’s stuffed with hay. Nothing but a scarecrow.

I crawl onto the disc. The cool industrial moon interior fades to black. The disc moves through the darkness. Wind cuts between us. We slow to an easy glide, then stop. A half-moon-shaped formation manifests. Unseen spotlights dimly illuminate it. Twelve cloaked figures sit in judgment. My host bows and moves me in front of him. Another disc appears. Two hooded figures stand on it. One holds a black case. The other opens it, holds up a medallion attached to a black satin ribbon. The medallion is a platinum disc with a black-steel, five-pointed star embedded and extending beyond the platinum disc’s perimeter. Etched on the medallion face are two superimposed Vs, one upside down, one right side up. A statement written on the ribbon reads:

Reality Is What You Can Get Away With

The man nudges me. I bow and the medal is placed around my neck. My guide bows again and we take off. Ahead in the

darkness appears an oval opening. Through it I see colorful grandstands packed with millions of cheering ‘people.’”

We fly into a massive, side-lying cylindrical cave. Millions upon millions of lizard men, giant Bigfoot creatures, Elvin, gnomes, insectoids, greys, SpaceBro’s, humans, bipedal bears and horses and dogs and cat people and batmen clamor as we pass. Many wave red flags with copper Yin Yang symbols on them. Confetti rains. Streamers stream. Fireworks explode.

We pass by five miles of revelry before reaching less populated bleachers, then we pass empty ones. I’d hate to see the ticker-tape parade for a real hero.

We exit the cave and burst out into big sky. We fly over Hawaiian rain forests teeming with waterfalls and stretching in every direction as far as my eyes and mind can see/perceive. Crystal mountains rise in the distance. Three suns, one of which is purplish, light up the sky, which is streaked with half night sky, half day. Cities from the covers of fantasy paperbacks appear. Crystal towers reach for the suns. Pristine rivers flow. ‘People’ buzz about, powered by their own ability to fly. The disc flies over the crystal mountain range. A thousand miles away, down in a valley of wavering green grass lays a city. A perfectly square city. And I don’t mean in area only, I mean it is a cube. An industrial, bronze-tinted, antiseptically clean, 1950’s version of the future. We zip into the cube, fly down deserted avenues and reach a massive plaza in the cube’s middle. The plaza is beautified with hanging gardens suspended over a ramble of paths, waterfalls, hot springs. And in the middle of this perfect communal recreation zone is a bronze statue of me. It’s over a thousand feet tall. I’m eternally frozen with my left hand held out like Hamlet. In the hand is a giant round ruby that sends refracted red light throughout the city. The statue’s gaze looks above and beyond the out-stretched hand. My right hand points at my heart; fingers contorted into some Hindi hand signal. My hair is slicked. I wear a tight-fitting suit. My feet are bare.

The disc stops at the penthouse residence of the city’s tallest tower. The man steps off. I follow him through a patio garden to a viewing area looking head level with the statue.

“Where are the people?”

“You must invite, create, coax the people. It takes time, of course.”

“Why does it look like this?”

The man looks at me like I’ve got a raccoon for a head.

“You built it!” he says and hands me what looks and feels like a chocolate bar wrapped in gold foil.

“When you want to remember eat a square. Don’t eat more than three squares a day or you’ll OD.”

I grab him by the collar.

“This is bullshit.”

He pries my hands loose with his gaze.

“You’ve completed your mission, and now is the time to enjoy the fruits of your relative success.”

“No way. It can’t end like this.”

“Just relax, eat the chocolate. And if I were you, I’d conjure up a few lovely companions to keep you company until this place gets cooking.”

“I can’t stay here. No way.”

“Just think: a city where you designed every last inch, soon to be teaming with subjects all managed from your tower,” he spins around, arms out. “On the top floor is your study. There you will find everything needed to get this place cooking.” The man hops onto the disc. “I don’t come by this way often, but next time I do, I’m sure this place will be cooking.”

“You just used ‘cooking’ out of context three times.”

“Eat the chocolate, you’ll feel better. This is the end.”

“There is no end.”

The man frowns.

“There is no end,” I repeat.

“You’re right,” he says. “You are so right.”

The man drops a black sack over my head in one fluid and incredibly quick motion. I pull the sack off and am no longer in my city. I stand in a box with opaque membrane walls. I punch through the front membrane and birth myself onto a blanket fitted between people doing yoga. Thousands of them, hundreds

of thousands. They fill up almost every open space in this giant, shallow, flat-bottom bowl. The multitudes are doing the same asana: sitting-forward-bend. They all wear opaque yellow robes. Their ages vary. There are kids as young as five, but most seem to be middle-aged leaning to the elderly side. The populace has the racial make-up of a Manhattan subway car. Each person occupies an area of 10x5.

At the head of my little area there is a meditation pillow, a prayer book, and a folded yellow robe. In the middle of the bowl arena is an elevated area. It's far away, but I think there's a maharishi-type guy mediating in the middle of it. I sit and start stretching. Some of the people around me have content, but strained smiles on their faces. Others are locked in closed-eye internal battles, obvious by their contorted faces. A scant few are in total bliss. But they're all doing a very technical version of the forward bend. The bend is at the hips, not the back. It's a marvel of technique. All backs are board-straight. Some yogis are so flexible they're chests almost touch their knees—almost—no one is in a total bend.

I find it nearly impossible to bend more than two inches without curling my lower back. The blanket vibrates when I curl for more than three seconds. I straighten.

“AHHHH,” blares from unseen speakers.

The multitudes exhale similarly.

“HA!” they explode in millisecond spacings.

Then everyone lowers to his or her back into the best yoga position of all: the yogic corpse.

I turn to the guy on my left. His face is already turned to me.

“Ask babaji,” he says.

He adds, “I'm really deep here. Just go down there. Everyone does it.” The guy turns away and sinks into that deepness.

I stagger down the bowl. The gently sloping path is 60 yards wide and miles long. It is carpeted in the same, although in a different shade, seamless orange carpeting that covers the floor of the entire bowl. I reach babaji's platform—

“Why, why, why,” says babaji.

I fall and crawl to his pillow. He looks down, pets my head. His face has never seen a whisker, nor wrinkle deeper than smile creases. His eyes are blue. His luscious black curly hair brushes my face. The feeling starts in my heart, migrates to my mind on a trillion-year, split-second journey. Like a bubble from the depths it explodes through my face. Tears and drool flow. Clear mucus drains out my nose as I weep. I cry and laugh so hard that time starts skipping. I'm laughing time-echoes. Time travel by blabbering breakdown. Who would've thought?

I roll onto my back, stare through the open roof. It's nighttime now. Calming orange light glows from the bowl's overhang. The paths, all 50 of them that radiate away from babaji and run almost up to the bowls rim, are lit with floor lighting like you'd find on an airplane. There are no exits. Maybe no one ever wants to leave? Maybe you come and go in a membrane box?

"Why you?" says babaji. He is self-luminous as if a mini setting sun shines from over my shoulder. "I could answer, 'why not you?' but for some reason nobody likes it when I say that. So I will give it to you poetically and straight."

The midnight-purple sky is crowded with alien constellations, or maybe they're the same ones I know just from another angle, another fishbowl.

"Because you've stayed true to the inner you, and your way is good and fun, the way of the few."

I notice a comet traveling across the sky. The weird thing about comets, is that for something traveling, I don't know, 100,000 miles an hour, from the ground they sure don't seem to be moving faster than a painted flower.

"And the only advice I can give is: Follow that inner knowing. It has always served you, always will. And keep choosing the good, the fun."

There's a planet out there, a full-moon-sized planet with an orange ring around it.

"This passive yoga is not for everybody. Some, like you, prefer a yoga of inner searching outside."

Inner searching outside?

Babaji's hand withdraws from my head to meet the other in prayer. He smirks at me then says, "A yoga of more, instead of less." Suddenly I see him in a different light and he looks like a young woman. Babaji shuts 'hir' eyes and lets out a rolling OM that reverberates the entire bowl. The massive yoga class, now sitting in meditative lotus, comes in at different points in the scale and at higher and lower octaves than babaji's. The OMing sets the bowl off on a middle-C ring. I blink and the ashram fades as if retracting fog. I'm left sitting in a small cave with an iron gate doorway cut into the rock. I leave the cell and walk into a tight passage lit with dripping torches. I turn a corner and catch site of a robed figure running away from me. I break in pursuit and scramble around sharp turns, fall several times, face-plant in the sand. I turn a corner and see the robed person disappear through a door. I follow and burst into a massive cave.

By no means at this point in the show are massive, subterranean catacombs encrusted with precious stones anomalous, especially ones populated with giant gods. However, the nature of these hibernating/meditating creatures has raised my wonder bar. There are three of them, placed in a triangle facing each other. They sit on huge round pedestals, lotus style, pot-bellies proudly displayed. Androgynous chest are bare; massive hamhock arms are at rest; chunky four-fingered hands folded in their laps. Their heads are octopi; I mean they have octopuses for heads—eight arms, balloon head, haunting liquid black eyes half concealed by drooping eyelids.

These are the Cthulhu.

The Gods of Chaos.

The myth of the Cthulhu was injected into the human consciousness by H.P. Lovecraft, which really gets me wondering about the greatest writer since Shakespeare. In the middle of the Gods is a smoked-quartz crystal ball.

"They're avatars for the Architect," Jaz says as she appears from behind a pedestal. Her sheer robes flow and allow me titillating views of her belly, breasts, and thighs. I know it is the genuine article by her Goddess Perfume.

“They built our universe, but our universe is not what you think, not what you’ve been convinced it is. See, the universe, Creation as we know it, is packed into a single solar system, where 99.9999% of the mass is quantum and internal. And all of this is stuffed into a fishbowl with glass walls meant to look like a vast cosmos.”

“The Farm.”

“We’re not using metaphors anymore.”

“Fishbowl is not metaphor?”

“Not in the least. So there’s a micro version, the quantum, which is the vast majority, and a MACRO, which is the tangible stuff affected by the ‘natural forces’ like gravity and physics, but the MACRO is just a scant percent. The vast majority of Creation, the micro, is a lawless circus. Then within the MACRO and micro are MACRO/MICRO, micro/macro divisions.”

“Inside, outside.”

“Sort of. The Monads inhabit the MACRO, but they are the MICRO of the MACRO. We come from the micro, with your world being the macro, my world the micro of the micro.”

“Who inhabits the MACRO MACRO?”

Jaz motions to the Cthulhu. “The gods, and right here is as ‘MACRO/MACRO’ as it gets.”

“So we’re all just bouncing around between glass walls.”

“The Creation we know is a looping nano-scale replica of a concept called ‘The Universe.’”

Jaz continues, “Picture a hollow donut with a hollow slinky running along the inside walls; that’s the Loop, and the fishbowl is traveling through the hollow slinky on a corkscrew rail. Now for the MACRO/MICRO, the realms of the gods and Monads, it’s an Experience Loop. Time doesn’t really play into it. But for the sake of semantics, an equinox of gods occurs every 23 million years. That’s how long it takes for one full slinky ring to be completed. Then new gods come in. New paradigms. It’s messy, real messy. Makes our little crisis look like blind T-ball.”

“And that’s where we’re at now. About to enter a new slinky ring.”

“About’ is relative. ‘About’ could be four days, could be 40 years.”

“Or 400.”

“No,” says Jaz, “it’s less than a hundred.”

“How long does it take to go through the donut?”

“Sixteen billion years. Now as for us, one corkscrew turn takes 26,500 years.”

“This isn’t the last baktun.”

“Hardly.”

“The Mayans are wrong.”

“Their only flaw was mistaking one slinky ring for the entire slinky.”

“But is there a 26,500 year corkscrew cycle ending on December 21st, 2012?”

“The modern calendar is an artificial idea put in place by Pope Gregory in 1456 to eliminate all the Pagan holy days. It cannot be used to precisely calculate the turns.”

“But The Day is inevitable, yes?”

“Until someone discovers why and what the fishbowl is, we keep corkscrewing through the slinky, through the donut; and we’ll keep running into crisis’s like The Day for eternity.”

“Creation exists for the sake of existence,” I say. “And it is what it is.”

“That’s not very original.”

“It’s whatever I say it is.”

“That’s delusional.”

“Isn’t this my tangent? Aren’t I The One?”

Jaz frowns and places a warm hand on my shoulder. “OK, you’re not gonna like this, but that whole ‘you’re the author, you’re the Hero’ idea was to boost your moral.”

“But if I believed it, that’s how it was.”

“Right. So it was important that you believed that everything was under control. A drop of doubt creates a tsunami of failure. Truth and what works are not exclusive.”

“I’m not The One.”

“If you were The One, these guys would awake and they’d tell us some very interesting things. But,” Jaz prances over to a bejeweled door hidden in the base of the crystal ball. “You’re still in contention to become the 74th monkey.”

I run my hands over the giant sapphires and emeralds. The doorknob is one giant diamond. It doesn’t budge. There’s a 10 number keypad on the frame.

“Go through this door and you go further. You exit the fishbowl, exit the slinky and donut,”

I peer into a diamond-shaped portal window in the door. The glass is frosted.

“So no one knows what the fishbowl is?”

“Well, we know it’s a fishbowl, but we don’t know *what* the fishbowl is. Or why it is.”

“Not even the gods?”

“They’re stuck in it too.”

“What’s your opinion?”

“These days I believe in the mythology that Creation, the fishbowl, is a prison cast out into the wilds, sealed up. Key thrown away. No guards. The inmates run the asylum.”

“That’s pretty nihilistic.”

“Hey, I didn’t invent the myth. It’s called the Spineman-Al-Shahari Complex, and when you study it, it’ll convert you too.”

“What about Game Theory?”

“Has its die-hard supporters, and hasn’t been disproved yet.”

“I see it as a Game. We’re trapped in a Game.”

“Philosophically speaking,” says Jaz, “I think we agreed to have it this way. Game, Prison, mental institute, whichever myth you choose, we agreed to it. Maybe helped build it.”

“Perhaps designed . . . what do we call this thing?”

“Fishbowl is slang. The right nomenclature is THIS.”

“Or the THING, WAY, THAT—”

“No, it’s called THIS.”

“OK, THIS is a virtual reality hologram,” I proclaim.

“That’s the most rudimentary, Level One theory. The whole ‘the universe is a hologram’ and all the accompanying ‘computing analogies,’ are so kindergarten and have been officially disproved for ages. Mythologies of a hologram universe are merely the first steps up the million-step pyramid. Like quantum mechanics is the gateway into the atomic mechanical operations of THIS—illusion, virtual reality, computer parables—are important stations of awareness, but only the beginning. But one computing term that does continue to pop up: Program.”

“Programs run the computer—”

“THIS is not a computer, so forget the computer terminology, you sound like a child. But there are programs. Take the Slipstream for instance.”

“Slipstream?”

“It’s a program tripped when someone commits themselves to the hidden, to the occult. But an actual Slipstream only opens every 60 years, every 500, every 2,000 years, every 26,500 years. If that didn’t cut down on the odds, one can only enter the Slipstream when there is a build up of critical mass. Then the magnitude of critical mass determines the velocity of travel.” Jaz laughs, the kind of laugh coaxed by ironic wonder. “And you were loaded.”

I stagger towards the crystal ball. Visions of the moment the Slipstream opened appear in the ball. There I am, standing in line at the Coffee Sack, rose held behind my back. A tiny silver bubble floats up my left nostril. I flinch, bat at my nose, but don’t pick. The store shutters.

“Right there, look, critical mass. The Slipstream opens,” she says. “Slipstream sloshes sideways.”

An earthquake rattles the Coffee Sack. Walls bow. The floor expands. My body looks like taffy. Things return to normal.

“What is the Slipstream?”

“You know it intimately.”

“The mechanics of it.”

“It’s a side-real hyperspace nanno-tube through the slinky,” says Jaz matter-of-factly.

“That tells me nothing.”

“That tells you everything.”

“So there are people slipping into the Slipstream all day and night, seven days a week, 365 days—”

“Hardly.”

“How often?”

“As I said, there are crossroads, or pivot points in the Loop that determine when the Slipstream opens. And it opens for five days every 60 years. Every 500. Every—”

“But it ends here.”

“There is no end.”

“I mean the Slipstream. It ends here.”

“The goal of the Slipstream is to send you to this chamber, and then for you to decide.”

“All that I saw, it was fake, illusion.”

“Illusion, non-illusion, happened, didn’t happen. These terms are irrelevant when describing the Slipstream.”

“I didn’t have to make it this far.”

“Your trip could’ve ended at a million stations. But only by making it here can you return to the point where you entered.” Jaz rubs her face, stares at the gods. “The odds against you making it this far were so massive.” Jaz kisses me.

“And now, my dear pixie, tell me who and what you are.”

Jaz steps away, paces, stops.

“I once stood where you stand. My soul woozy. Mind drowning in awe. And where I stand there was a guide.”

“You’re my guardian angle.”

“How poetic.”

“You guided me through the initiation. It’s all about love.” The words pour out of me. My heart overflows with calmness. Thoughts disappear, replaced with a steady knowing. I am the over-flowing Ace of Cups. “You do love me!”

Jaz cups my cheeks.

“Love allows me to forgive you for tossing me down those stairs, even if it wasn’t really me.” She kisses me like a Sicilian Godfather. “And love will allow you to forgive me.”

“For what?”

“For making the choice for you.”

“Choice?”

Jaz presses the pads of her middle and index fingers between my eyebrows. Calmness is replaced with panic as the scene undulates. Waves of reality flow and break. Jaz is the only unaffected object. Her eyes half-open. Her mouth muttering incomprehensible phrases. Together we spin and tumble at light speed back through my experience from a 3rd-person perspective. Her eyes open wide. Orange, galactic spirals appear in the void of her pupils.

Jaz’s voice appears in my head.

Let go.

Let go.

...

...

...

...

...

.

23

I stand on a freshly paved, single-lane blacktop road. The sky is bluebird and cloudless without a sun. Towering cornfields bracket the road. A warm breeze sways them. Ahead the road meets another to form a crossroad like an X. Behind me the road disappears into the horizon. I listen to the breeze, hoping for some guidance, a hint, anything. All I get is brain air.

For the first time I am truly alone. Alone in my mind. In my heart. No coaxing by sentient or demonic beings. No signs. My intuition is silent.

Robert Johnson, the godfather of the Blues, met the devil at his crossroads down near Natchez, Miss, and brought Blues to earth—rock & roll being the son of this meeting; funk being the mutant-grandchild.

Left.

Right.

Forward.

The spiral goes on.

The traveler travels.

I'd pay half a lifetime to feel the slightest tug on my heart, the pulling of a single chest hair, a whisper, "Go this way."

But there is nothing, well, except for calmness—a balance that is alien. Not alien because it is 'alien,' but because I've never felt so at ease. Sadly, it is alien for a human to feel such balance, and this could be the biggest crime of all.

Is peace so much to ask for?

Why must tranquility be the scarcest commodity?

Where is it written that man must be in a perpetual state of *dis-ease*?

Is it Law?

I think it comes down to one thing, and I can't comprehend why this is coming up now.

It's all about money, aka 'Bio-Survival Tickets.'

Money is linked to the 1st Circuit Bio-Survival. It has replaced the Tribe as the core essence of the human experience.

A human, especially those of the Western, capitalist persuasion, find themselves locked in a birth-to-death struggle to obtain as many 'tickets' as possible.

But it's misguided and ignorant to think money is just about greed and Capitalism.

Money is a core need.

Money has nothing to do with 'stuff,' comfort, consumerism, status.

Humans crave \$\$ like a baby craves its mother's breast, which is also 1st Circuit Bio-Survival, it's why roundness is so universally admired. (Say nothing about the world-wide obsession with breasts. Some also see curious correlations between humanity's breast-roundness-love and the shapes of UFOs . . .) Neither am I blaming money lust on the banks, and the oft-cited 'international cabal of bad guys.'

It's been proven that monetary abundance gets boring (after all, life is a game), but it's no longer about currency and economies. People were trading seashells and bartering long before the Federal Reserve and option-ARM mortgages. It's about the mutation of the human tribe structure. About the corruption of priorities.

The Tribe once kept everything in order. Get out of line and you risked expulsion from the Tribe. This was equal to death.

In the modern world, there being no Tribe, the threat of not having money keeps people in line. The threat of being kicked out of Civilization by not working, by failing to 'make a living,' thus becoming indigent, homeless, which to many is analogous to death, has replaced Tribe expulsion.

So we hustle.

And hustle.

Everything is hustling.

Not for 'stuff,' but for tribal security.

My personal victory over the fear of losing my tribe status didn't start with this journey, it began three years ago, or in my newly acquired jargon: 3-CW (three years before CrazyWorld. Right now being CW-?)

Three years ago I was pulled under in the great sucking economic riptide. A victim of lose-lending who failed to hedge when the global financial denizens, in panic to phantom inflation, suddenly raised interest rates to 17%.

The world economy hit a wall. It looked like the Great Depression, only with 21st century flash and better media coverage. But it only lasted a year because almost to the day of the 'Crash of 09,' a South Korean doctor of economics led a team that discovered (invented?) the Young/Kobish New Economic Paradigm Index, or the 'NEPi.'

The NEPi mathematically proved that all currency, whether dinnars, drachmas, euros, dollars, yen, were all part of a worldwide monetary system, thus there was truly only one currency with different definitions. It was like having a hundred definitions for the word 'Go.'

The NEPi proved that one currency could not logically or scientifically be separate from another. It also proved that inflation was created by the policies meant to slay it. Inflation—a false creation. Theoretically nothing should cost more year-to-year, because, theoretically, there was no limit to inflation, and all economic structures have a limit. The time had come to sack the 200-year-old way of monetary separation. Almost over night a world currency was established that would be regulated by a board of nations.

The new lending and savings rate on this world currency, called The Xet (most people still call it by their country's old currency name. Headshrinkers think it will take a generation for all the old currency names to go extinct) was generous and

pro liquid. The universal symbol for this currency is an X with an extra, larger slash on the lower right part of the X.

But this new currency paradigm didn't help me. I was nearly broke and feeling very unstable. All I had left was \$6,235 in an annuity, the remainder of an inheritance that once topped \$1.3 million.

Then the late Sam Stackpode, the money guru, came into my life.

Sam's basic spiel:

Money is energy. It can be attracted. It can be repelled. There's enough of it for everyone. Scarcity is an illusion. Don't take money so seriously or it will gladly rule you.

But his most controversial, and most important rule: Money must flow.

If you hoard money, it will find a way to flow—leak away from you like an oil spill. Instead, one must use money to fuel their Life Engine.

Spend, spend, spend, was his manifesto. Drain your bank account and believe that it will fill up again.

Of course there were plenty of people who followed his directions and didn't experience the re-fill. But it worked for me because I believed and followed the program to a T.

I spent my last cash on a 5-Star vacation to Hawaii. I literally spent every penny. When I got home (to the house I shared with nine people) a fire had destroyed it. The mandatory renters insurance that the landlord insisted upon, paid me a \$65,000 settlement for heirloom stuff that had no street value, or I would've sold it. Money came my way from every direction. I opened the store. I didn't become a millionaire again, but the life-long battle over scarcity, the fear and wondering if there will be enough in two, three years down the road, ended.

Yet even that secure, equalized existence of those days is magnitudes less than this current peace.

As the warm blacktop gently toasts my soles, I realize that life and money are practically the same. It's all about Flow. Keep flowing. Never stagnate. Life will always get better and more exciting when it's allowed to flow.

And what limits flow?

Fear.

Overcome fear, not concur.

Transmute fear.

Turn fear into an ally.

Few people are born with unshakable courage. It must be cultivated. Courage is based on experienced triumph and trust of probability outcome. If life has always been sweet and just, it will probably continue to be, so keep going. Don't worry that it's going to get bad. Just keep going, and before you know it, life is still cheeky and beautiful two decades later.

So forward I choose. But it's not a 'choice.' It's just an action. Just going to keep walking forward.

The wind blows. The corn ripples. Other than these constants there is no indication that this is the right action.

After a hundred yards down the road, the air blows harder and I hear a voice on the wind—it's Jaz's 'LET GO' mantra. It's digitized, London Trance style. The serene scene melts. The walls of green corn melt into brown pools. From the pools rise randomly angled mirrors. The blue sky drips down into the horizon, leaving a low ceiling of angled mirrors. I look down and I stand on mirrors. Every angle of myself looks back.

Let Go

LET GO.

For the first time in my life the clench, that perpetual ego clench, eases. Incredibly, I've achieved a much deeper and total relief than the balance of moments before. It's like a desperate demonic baboon, that's been preventing serenity, stealing my dreams, corrupting my evolution—a rabid, inner baboon wrapped around my heart, squeezing from the inside—has let go.

"Let go," I say.

The mirrors shatter. My awareness plummets away from my body.

Let go.

Let go . . .

Stop falling.

My body catches up and I re-enter it.

A scene starts to form, like reverse melting. Reversed melting crayons. A trillion pixels. Blinking pixels.

.
.

.

I stand again at the bejeweled door, alone except for The Cthulhu.

A yellow Post-It note is pasted to the archaic keypad. The note says:

Kingdom Now

Holy Tao

A number opens

This door

How?

I grab the knob. Repeatedly slam myself against the door.

So fleeting is my divine serenity.

My frustration is rooted in the never-ending nature of this madness, not in failure to know the riddle. For I know the riddle. The number is simply the first ten integers in the Fibonacci sequence.

How do I know this? Because it's the way I want it to be.

1123581321. ($0+1=1$, $1+1=2$, $1+2=3$, $2+3=5$, $3+5=8$, $5+8=13$, $8+13=21$. . .)

I punch the number into the keypad. Through a little slot pops a tightly-rolled piece of paper. I can hardly get my fingers to untie the little red bow holding the roll in place. In tiny, barley-readable font is this question:

Who is the one who makes the green grass
grow?

I swallow the paper in a rage. My legs take me on a psychotic circular pacing. Violent death threats are hurled at the universe, at God, at the Cthulhu. I throw a stone at the closest god. The rock thuds against its brown rubbery skin.

Zen Koans, like this green grass bullshit and ‘what is the sound of one hand clapping,’ can’t be answered. They’re meant to send the mind mice on a Chinese fire drill. But maybe a question that has no answer has every answer. It’s like the two negatives make a positive phenomenon. The purpose of a Koan is to show that there is no definitive, no end, no solution, to prove that there is ‘no nothing everything.’ A Koan is a urobus. One can spend a lifetime trying to answer a Koan when there is no answer and every answer is correct. Yet within the Koan is a wormhole opened only when the subtlest wisdom is fit into the machinery of the question. Every syllable must be correct or the wormhole will not open.

“Green grass I am.”

The knob turns. I push the door open and walk through.

I exit from the base of a huge cylindrical aquarium and stand in the center of a pristine, rectangular hall. The round aquarium disappears into the ceiling and is over 200 feet in circumference. It’s teeming with brilliant fish and corals, rays, eels, sharks. The water is Caribbean-blue. Ten-foot square marble slabs make up the checkered floor of the hall. The walls are painted red, are blank, and ornately decorated with gold-painted trimmings. I could be in Versailles. The ceiling, a few hundred feet above, is a glass and metal atrium. Beyond the windowpanes is starry darkness.

Unlike all the places I’ve been, this place feels more than just ‘scenery.’ There’s substance to it. Substance beyond my mind, not just here because I’m here. Quantumly speaking this place is ‘real.’

“There you are,” says a voice coming from over my shoulder. A barefoot boy, maybe nine years old; a handsome, perfect blend

of all the races with a blondish afro, dressed in a white shirt and pants moves to the glass. He points to a coral habitat. "See that bubble? That's your system."

I press my face against. On a coral spire teeming with sea life is a bubble protected by pink and orange anemones. In the bubble, although distorted by the thick glass, appears a transparent donut with a solar system spinning along an interior rail—the slinky.

"More parlor tricks?"

"Oh, no. That is your system." He points to another protected bubble. "And there's another. And another. Another. We even have 2,000 more buildings in this complex alone, and each houses a tank."

"This is real."

"Everything is real."

"I know, but I'm Beyond."

The boy snaps his fingers. The hall becomes semi-transparent. We grow to thousands of feet tall. A network of illuminated, rectangular buildings spread out beneath our feet. Distant mountains ring this dark, yet electrical landscape. Just beyond the mountain range, in the darkness, I make out a huge figure much taller than the mountains, which are minimum 14-teeners. The figure is feminine. Her belly pregnant. Galaxies swirl over the surface of her dark green skin. Her hair is long, dreaded—looks like the roots of a tree. Her eyes are huge and slanted, black and shimmering like oil. She winks. A maha-level of clarity and grace floods my body. The Queen has personally acknowledged my soul. Gaia turns her back and we shrink back into the building.

"OK, just as we anticipated, our Divine Mother has approved your status. Might we now proceed to your habitat?" The boy starts walking. I balk.

"Is there a problem?" he asks.

"I won't insult the truth of this place by seeking an angle of falseness, and it is divine and all, but I want to go back."

The boy puts his hand on my shoulder, and with the most sincere face says, "No you don't."

“I do.”

“Why?”

For some reason his question makes me sit. The floor is gloriously cool and clean. I lay on my back and gaze at the ceiling.

“If it is a matter of excitement, I assure you, few things are more exhilarating than the work and play you will experience here. If it is a matter of evolutionary distress, meaning you perceive this place as the ‘end of the road,’ I assure you again, there is no end. Every moment is more than the next, forever. In addition, there is no evil here. You will find no hypocrisy. No misery. No pain. But we aren’t stale and static. You will face trials and tribulations of the most intense kind.” The boy sits. “And if it is companionship you wonder about, there are numerous lovely girls and boys with whom you will find much in common with.”

Why?

Why return to a fallen world? Why return to that fragile meat-puppet body? It’s not about Jaz. Not about the familiar.

“Here, your magick is real. And as for the realms you tend, you will be able to enter them at will.”

Why?

Why go back to a world ruled by the Closeted Demonic Pirate Cabal (CD/PC), a syndicate of pedophiles and murderous bastards?

Why back to a world perpetually teetering on the edge of madness?

“You will experience levels of ecstasy you cannot imagine.”

Why go back to a world where the second you stop hustling, whether it be for material gain or spiritual gain, you die?

“And so close are you to our Divine Mother. Her radiance and love will keep your cup eternally overflowing.”

Why? The answer has been here all along. Has been with me my whole life. Yet it’s less an answer and more a state of being, a state of awareness, a way of life. It has everything to do with fear. I believe in my heart of hearts that the secret,

archaically/alchemically deep meaning and reason for existence is the transmutation of fear, or in plain English: Life is about overcoming fear. The scariest is where the most potential lies—and nothing is scarier than a lifetime. Just by living, by making it through a lifetime, fear is transmuted. Like an oil spill in the ocean, fear must be eradicated, each fear molecule must be eaten, and each person eats a molecule, and some eat many. Checking-out, leaving the battlefield, is an honest choice, but a copout for me. Those ‘alive,’ in the ‘flesh,’ are the brave, the few. No reward is greater than living. Living takes courage. Souls swarming in these ultimate realms have it easy, so easy, but with this easiness comes weakness. The greatest power and potential flows in the indefinite, but to obtain this power, to surf this potential, a soul must face the Great Unknown of Life. The soul must overcome epic fear. A soul must live in the real Abyss. The Abyss of a lifetime. The only true Abyss.

To become a God, one must first live. One must equalize the light and dark. Must assimilate the Shadow. One must survive the Abyss.

“Eternal life. Eternal adventure and—”

“I’m not done living,” I whisper.

“Excuse me?”

“I want to go back because I want to live.”

The boy’s eyebrows dance in confusion. “This is living.”

“But it’s not the Abyss.”

He sighs. “That it is not.”

“What next?” I sit up.

“Re-entry is not a mechanical process; and it is two-fold. It is a matter of Will and a matter of the Winged Serpent. Once you commit to this process there is no going back. And you will regret it, for if you fail on the Tree, you are obliterated.”

“Tree?”

“You must hang from the Tree Of Life until the Serpent comes for you. If it comes for you.”

“Like Odin.”

“Who?”

“Nothing.”

Odin, The All Father from Norse Myth, hung upside down from the World Tree so that he might gain insight into his destiny. I think a raven pecked out one of his eyes. Now as for this Winged Serpent, only one name comes to mind. Quetzalcoatl, the secret name of the brilliant plumed kundalini dragon that lives coiled and asleep in the ethereal sacrum of the human and animal body. When awoken, he fires up the spinal cord and into the penal gland. He sees the world through your eyes. And he speaks. Smart, cunning, full of puns and witty wisdom, Quetzalcoatl’s arrival signals that a new stage of evolution has begun. (I once spent a few hours while on mushroom medicine talking to an internal dragon who refused to tell me its name. What made this experience more intense was the live Phish Opus being performed in front of 30,000 screaming people. Our conversation was fluid, funny, and full of banter. The Serpent told me that the music, dancing, and medicine coaxed it out. It said, “You’re what you’ve been waiting for.” I mutated that night. But it wasn’t until two years later that His name was revealed to me . . .)

I don’t know how hanging upside down from a tree will coax this hesitant dragon from his den. And suddenly my whole model: “life is about overcoming fear,” seems as if it were merely a concept I *wished* I believed in.

“So what will it be?” asks the boy.

Maybe it’s less about overcoming fear, and more about this dubious, system-wide feeling that I cannot stop. To stop, even in this divine place, is to fail. To fail myself, fail humanity, to fail God. I am not ready to rest. For me rest equals failure. It equals death.

I am not ready to die.

This monkey’s mission is not over.

Go far, said Ming.

“The Tree.”

“But your world is on the brink of madness.”

“Birth looks like madness, but it is birth.”

“And the caterpillar cannot conceive of what it will be.” He kneels, places his hands in prayer. Mumbles a psalm, then praises the ceiling.

“Close your eyes. Close them very tight,” he instructs me and places his palms on my temples. His hands are baby soft, caring on their own accord.

I fight to open my eyes. They seem glued shut.

“I’m scared.”

“So am I,” he says.

“Any parting wisdom?”

“To survive and thrive in the Abyss one must pray, think positively, and be cautious.” His hands slowly withdraw from my head.

A slight breeze brushes my face. Ozone from a fresh shower permeates my sinuses. I pry my eyelids open. I kneel before a massive and ancient oak tree. Her branches reach out 200 feet in every direction. Her trunk is ten feet in diameter. Her leaves are thin, providing little shade from the brutal sun. The tree is knoll-top and over looks endless fields of swaying khaki grass. The sky is sunless, ochre, and full of turmoil. Hanging from countless branches are thick ropes with nooses on the end. Under the tree are piles of ash.

I never figured that I’d have to hang myself.

Maybe I don’t have to hang. Maybe if I just sit here, pray under this tree like Siddhartha did while waiting to become the Buddha. Maybe He showed us another way. I mean, to the Nordics everything is violence, so of course Odin suffered. But the boy made it clear that I must hang.

I must hang.

I’ve come so far. I trust.

I must hang.

I easily climb up a low-hanging branch and scoot out on the limb. Several frayed and ancient-looking ropes dangle. Does it matter what height I choose to hang from? I sense it does and climb mid way up the tree. The view is better, and the breeze stiffer. I don’t feel so bad about hanging upside down.

What really gets me is the uncertain nature of the Serpent. Will hanging automatically make Him come? Do I coax Him out with a trumpet? Last time we met, it took a legendary jam of electronic funk/trance, four hours of dancing, four grams of mushrooms to get him out. I've read that supposedly after 40 days of constant Yoga, or 18 hours of tantric sex, he appears. Neither of which are an option.

Is there a chance that He will not show up no matter what I do, even if I hang here for a year?

I really don't know, but this is my desire: The unknowing of the Abyss. Life is an unknown path that must be traveled. True courage is defined as being scared, but going anyway. And it may not be so bad. I have the tendency to see things in a negative light. I could hang for five minutes and it be over. My intuition tells me it will be something in between and I will be rescued a good measure before I'm overcome with terror.

I pull up the rope and fasten the noose around my right ankle. (Is it worse to hang by one ankle or both?) Below is another branch that I can use to alleviate the pressure. I take several deep breaths. Exhale loudly, forcefully through my mouth like the yogis. I think a prayer to Gaia. Voice a prayer to this tree.

I SHOUT A PRAYER TO GOD FOR STRENGTH!

. . . after five minutes so much blood has rushed to my head that I'm sure it will explode long before I'm saved. The problem is, Odin was God, and I mean the Big #1. I, on the other hand, am merely, potentially, the 74th monkey . . .

. . . I am so close to success that I can taste it if I stick out my tongue. But it is these last inches that are more treacherous than the countless miles. How can the finish line be so close, and so far at the same time . . .

. . . a giant crow circles the tree and lands on a nearby branch. It cackles an interesting song, not beautiful like a songbird, but not ugly either. It hops down to a branch that brings it face to face with me. I will not hesitate to break this bird's neck if it tries anything funny. Instead of attacking, it rests indifferently. Preens. Cackles. Hops along the branch and flutters when a gust

comes. To some the crow is a sign of evil. To the First Nations people, the crow was/is a symbol of intelligence, craft, the dark in the light—for crows thrive in the light of day. It also never takes life, which makes it an enlightened animal.

Darker ochre clouds roll in. It starts to rain. Drops so big you could dodge them. The storm passes. Time does not exist here. The crow remains. Have I been here my whole life? Has this journey been an interlude while I hang?

All that I've seen, experienced, is like a pea compared to this mountain of sacrifice. The past is a ghost. I see a mirage of myself hanging. It's an absurd vision. Somehow canned and disingenuous. Certainly senseless. And it is only now, wanting to end this chicanery that I realize I cannot rescue myself. I can grab the rope, but some quarky physics thing prevents me from gaining the momentum needed to pull myself up to the branch. I think the rope is too short. I am stuck—

"If they don't come through, they get left behind. It is the true Rapture," says the crow.

At this point in the story a talking crow is par for the course. Actually, pretty tame to be honest.

"Eternal dissolution is real for them," it says.

"That's ancient history."

"It is your duty to help."

"From what I've seen they'll do just fine."

"Vast realms and countless souls will be lost."

"I'm not buyin' it."

"I'm not selling."

"The invasion is old news."

The crow eyes me in silence.

"What can I do?"

The crow emits three loud clicks and takes to the wing.

"What can I do!" It feels like the skin on my forehead is going to split, start leaking blood any minute.

"Ride the snake."

I spin around and come face to face with Jaz. She dangles from one leg like I. Her eyes are closed. Arms hang. She is naked.

“Ride the ancient snake,” she mumbles.

“Good advice, Ms. Morrison.”

“Sixteen billion years.”

“What?”

“Brewing in you.”

I grab Jaz. My hands recoil upon touching her impossibly hot skin.

Her eyes pop open. They are glazed and all white.

“Now is the time!” she screams and flails. “Sixteen billion years and it’s now! Ride. Ride. RIDE! Call Him. RIDE! NOW!” Jaz burst into flames. Instead of pain, she is in ecstasy. Sensual, clam ecstasy. Before my eyes, the love of my life, of all lifetimes, turns to ash, becomes nothing more than a pile under The World Tree.

My sacrum pops and all I see is red. Hot-buttered goodness washes my body in orgasmic waves. An electrical rainbow weaves its way down my spine. My throat pops. A torrent of brilliant colors fills my mind, my vision. It feels like the crown of my head has just split open. The sky turns rainbow-pretty. Each blade of grass shimmers. Orange fire encircles my eye sockets. The Plummed Serpent cruises my brain. I catch snap-shots of him. He looks like the chess-playing dragon I met in another scene. His iridescent, feathered green wings glitter and flow like silk.

“This is it,” I say.

“It’s always it.”

“It’s always been you.”

“You’ve always been me.”

“What can I do?”

“The gods must become you by you becoming them, not by them becoming you.”

“Then what?”

“Live.”

“Is it time?”

“The time it is always.”

“Take me home.”

“Help the gnomes.”

“How?”

“Now.”

The serpent whips up a firestorm in my head. My mind ignites. A conflagration consumes my body. I burn from the inside out.

“Oh no!”

“Let go.”

Consumed by the fire . . .

L

E

T

G

O

O

O

G

T

E

L

. . . I fall through the branches, smacking them, breaking thin ones, my spine adjusts after impacting a thick tree arm. I hit the ground and roll down the knoll, ending up a hundred yards from the tree. The horizon is a wall of clouds, from ground to stratosphere an undulating storm, a million shades of grey moving towards me. The ground shakes. A distant hill turns dark as a wave—a herd of something, something grey and smoky ten million strong—appears from the storm. The spilling-wave herd pattern morphs into a snake pattern, comes at me full speed. The snake stretches for miles. The storm wall rumbles in behind the herd.

“Surf a wave, ride a snake.”

The ‘snakehead’ appears over the nearest ridge. A wall of galloping phantom buffalo appear. I jerk towards the Tree; an inner hand snaps me back to face the herd.

“The reason for so many is that so many create a reason.”

“So many what?” I pant, reluctantly steadfast in the face of such power.

“So many people and plants and animals and amoebas and . . . and—”

I get it. It flashes through my cortex. Every blade of grass helps create a footprint of Being. Each footprint, each frontier, makes up a piece of the puzzle. Each thing—living, non-living, ghostly or solid—is a bubble creating the reason.

WE CREATE CREATION BY BEING CREATION!

That’s why there are so many things. More things, more Creation—

The herd closes to a thousand yards. They’ll be upon me in seconds. The ground shakes so much it tosses me around. A fierce wind blows. Thousands of phantom eyes, liquid steel eyes, approach. The herd splits, flows around me. Uncountable phantom hooves trample the grass, thumping the greatest symphony.

“What the thing does with its footprint is up to the thing,” shouts the voice in my head.

“Avenging archangel, all-loving bodhisattva.”

“Sometimes both, and everything in between.”

“What should I be?”

“Righteousness and love pay better than judgment and vengeance, always, always.”

“But righteous vengeance is necessary.”

“So is righteous forgiveness.”

—and the thing uploads its footprint, it’s experience puzzle piece into . . . into . . . God. God, the eternal everywhere conscious web. We feed God. We feed God experience. A blade of grass feeds God the sensation of green goodness, the taste of wind, sunshine flavors . . . a human feeds God the drama of life in the Abyss.

“Run with the buffalo run, buffalo run.”

And I run. I dance. I motor over endless hills, one with the herd, intermittently grabbing massive phantom hides, holding on for a ride, skipping along at 800 miles an hour. A black

hole opens in the sky, drops to the ground, the herd pulls away, leaving me to either run around the hole, or dive into it. One final decision where decisions don't matter. But the Fool doesn't care. Every breath, every step is a leap into the unknown. Now and always. Perpetual becoming. Every moment a new universe springs into being. I run towards the hole because it's what I'm doing. I dive in because it's what I've done. The Fool leaves in his wake countless experiences, cast of like snakeskin.

The Fool lets it all go because he knows that what lies ahead is more. More goodness and love, more trials, more pain, more . . . more LIFE.

The Fool keeps going because life keeps getting better no matter how good or bad it is.

The Fool also, not always, but sometimes, regrets with all his heart that he is what he is, but he'd have it no other way.

*4th Dimension
(Hyperspace)*

24

“Let go . . . it’s just a cup of coffee,” pleads James, the Coffee Sack barista. “It’s not decaff. Let me get you a new one.”

He pries my fingers loose.

And the Fool asks: Is this scene the genuine article? Is it really when and where it appears to be: Coffee Sack, T-minus six days and counting? But even a false Coffee Sack would be real—*really a false Coffee Sack*—because everything is real, even the fake things—THEY’RE REALLY FAKE! Or has the Fool come full circle? Can that happen? Can the Fool stretch so far and deeply sideways that when he snaps back, he comes to the point where he began with nothing changed? But this Fool doesn’t really care ‘bout all that, what matters is that thankfully, oh so thankfully, the walls aren’t melting, the floor is stable, and everyone is human. Absent are tormenting gods and occult manifolds. Everything may be ‘normal,’ but the Fool is different. It’s more than the obvious mutation the Fool’s experience has caused. It’s hard to pin down exactly; maybe it’s a shadowy wholeness. The Fool feels like he’s occupying this spacesuit with another. The Fool feels taller, expanded. He could split this building in half with a word. Spread love with a gesture—

Jaz appears through the swinging doors. She waves. There is no trainee in tow.

Full-circle-same doesn’t exist.

Always more.

Different more no matter if it’s the same circle same.

James hands me a new cup. Somehow I make it to the fixings-counter without falling over or dropping my coffee. Jaz appears, silently manifesting behind me, and starts refilling thermoses.

My arm holding the rose swings forward autonomously. It holds not a yellow rose, but a red rose. My other hand reaches into my jacket, produces a small envelope. I hand them to her. She beams. The radiance I fell in love with amps up to an all time high.

The past is a ghost.

Forget everything I said.

“I’m all packed and I get off at five,” Jaz says. “Be at your store at five-ten. You and me on the road by five-twenty. Mountains. Desert. I hear its wild.”

A neurotic impulse wells up, surprises me like an assassin in the night. The Fool always brings himself with him. I pull her in close. “Are you crazy? Did you forget what’s gonna happen out there? Cuz I know—”

Jaz places her index finger to my lips.

“No, you know what is NOT going to happen.” She hits me with a wet kiss on the side of my mouth.

I drop the coffee. I catch it with my shoe tip, kick it back up into my hand. Just a millimeter has spilled.

“Come again?”

“No one can know the future,” Jaz holds my face. “It’s the Law. You changed things because you saw.”

“But the Others are coming—”

“Have you ever considered the possibility that we are the Others. Considered that we are the Mythical?” She runs a hand through her wild mane. I catch sight of an ear. It’s pointy, not ‘oh my god, there’s an elf in the house’ pointy, but curious enough. Very curious.

“And maybe we’re the Monads too,” I add.

Jaz fires two invisible six-shooters at me.

“Is it right to assume that I am the 74th monkey.”

Jaz scratches under her arms and makes a cute little monkey sound. “You experienced what you experienced so that it won’t, can’t happen like that.”

“But cataclysmic restructuring will happen,” I say. “It’s the Law of the Loop. And, you know, the moth can’t appear without killing the caterpillar.”

“Yeah, but metamorphism and annihilation are different. You experienced both roads: annihilation and mutation. We cannot let annihilation happen. But the paradox is: annihilation must be experienced so that annihilation won’t be experienced.”

A yuppie couple with a stroller more complex than an Apache attack chopper hears our conversation as they prep their coffee. The woman is terrified, but the man is intrigued. Jaz curtsies and pulls me into the bathroom.

Jaz says, “The Slipstream program sends us through a funhouse—”

“Madhouse.”

“Right, madhouse. So we’re sent through to vent. To relive the pressure of annihilation so that THIS, whatever THIS is, can continue. At the end of my Slipstream, instead of Titans cleaning the slate, unsympathetic alien farmers used earth to sow crops. They saw living things as pests. Then they burned the planet, like idiot farmers do in the Amazon.”

“So it’s either we marry the Other willingly, consciously, or we’re forced into a marriage.”

“Yes, and the state of the people before the marriage is what determines how it goes down. That’s why we’re working so hard right now.”

“No matter what though, as the French say, it’s still going to be a ‘Le Shit Circus.’”

Jaz laughs and playfully kisses me.

“I know what THIS is,” I say.

Someone knocks on the door.

“Knowing what THIS is doesn’t mean you know *why* THIS is.”

“I know that too.”

“Maybe there’s nothing to know,” says Jaz.

A woman’s voice seeps through the door, claiming it’s an emergency.

“No, I ‘know,’ but I don’t know what to ‘believe.’”

“Believe what you know.”

“I know a lot of things, doesn’t make them true.”

“Doesn’t make them false.”

“What is the final word on THIS?”

“Fire is real. Cars kill. Gravity still applies.”

“Other than that,” I say, “reality is what you can get away with.”

“Did you make that up?”

“No, but it’s a long story.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“You know, I almost didn’t come back.”

Now the woman at the door is banging.

“All the monkeys come back.”

“Nobody stays?”

“I think the funhouse, rollercoaster metaphor is fitting now,” she says and reaches for the door. “Dangerous. Terrifying. Controlled. Always ends up where it begins.”

“I hate metaphor.”

Jaz smirks, a mischievous fiery smirk with a wormhole of possibilities hiding behind the gap in her teeth. She opens the door. A large woman pushes past us and hardly waits for us to vacate before assuming the position.

“So, Jaz, when will we know what kind of marriage it is?”

“The Day will pass and things will look, feel the same; as I said, could be years before it gets really funky. But when it does start, the hundred monkeys must unify and show people the way, because when people start seeing that they are, and have always been the Other, it’s gonna be a rough ride. But if people can commune with the Other, commune with their Shadow, the harmonious marriage happens. If they deny it, freak out, the Shadow invades, manifests outside of the people, and we take the destructive path. But it comes down to each person.”

“But how do we commune the world?”

“It’s not the world that communes, it’s *us* that communes. Communed perceptions. Communed priorities. Communed

ideas, dreams, passions. We commune when new information patterns flow into our world. The monkey's job is to open up the torrent. 'Cuz a trickle won't do it."

"Not everyone wants to know what we know."

"It's already in their dreams. In their movies and games. The ground is fertile to expose the masses to the mythic world hiding in themselves before it jumps out, showing up in their bedrooms insane and pissed off."

"CrazyWorld."

"Always has been, always will."

"So is it true?"

"True what?"

"Are you the most dangerous woman in the universe?"

"Hmmm, I'll have to get back to you on that one." Jaz squeezes me, skips away, and re-mans her barista station.

Five-ten, she signals with her hands.

"Don't I get a some kind of ceremony, a certificate, a plaque?"

Jaz tosses me a biscotti.

"I guess a tickertape parade is out of the question."

She tosses me another and shoos me out.

The sun has never felt so good. People hustle. Commerce pumps. I've never been so glad to see voracious consumerism. Never been so glad to see THIS 'same as it ever was.'

But my dearest mantra is fading. Things change. Consciousness mutates. A person today knows a tome more than DaVinci. A modern seeker finds more than Buddha. Any artist worth her sand can recreate a perfect Picasso or O'Keeffe. Einstein had some great ideas, but some of today's minds eclipse his. Attitudes evolve. Things get better and worse concurrently. The Internet, no matter if 75% of its revenue has always been gambling and porn, is proof of a World Mind starting to fire. And maybe that's what THIS is at a deep, nearly inconceivable level: Our world is a newly pathed neuron in God's Mind/Universal Mind/Gaian Cortex. We're about to come 'on-line.' History has been the story of apes turning on the synapse. We're so deeply integrated into the project that we can't see it this way, but

each one of us is a cosmic DNA code engineer. All the drama is background noise of our real mission: Turn on, process, and interact with other neurons. We've moved beyond the first phase, the turn on, now it gets really crazy-great. The changes are encoded in our DNA, from the genome of a single man, to the entire solar system and back down into the great and massive Other living in us, it's all happening just as it's supposed to, structured and massive, thick with intensity, but not fixed, never fixed because of adaptation and mutation. Nothing is 'wrong,' nothing needs to be fixed, but from our tiny, micro perspective it seems that everything is broken and wrong. From our view, history looks like a repeat, but we're spiraling out, expanding towards the Singularity. The first loop of the slinky started out as a tiny thing with a 1mm circumference; but our current ring has a million mile circumference! Widening reality vortices. More. So much more. And then more after that. More forever. Hyperspace awaits. Wormhole connections to other neurons. The Great Firing Mind pulsing with energy and information and experience. Uploaded, downloaded, backloaded. Expanding, expanding . . . until it ends and God takes a big sleep for near eternity . . . then God reincarnates and the circus comes back into town . . .

I don't know, sounds good and big. Encompassing. Unprejudiced. Better than some of the haggis I've been fed.

I enter my store.

"How'd it go?" asks Nish.

I find my way behind the counter.

"We're leaving tonight."

"That's awesome. So we'll meet you guys out there tomorrow."

An envelope sits on the counter. I inspect it.

Nish says, "Some guy, tall, lots of tats and piercings dropped that off. Dude even had a bone through his septum. Smelled like hash."

On the envelope is a hand-drawn clock face with both hands at 12 o'clock and five blue apples.

“What does Noon Blue Apples mean?” Nish asks.

“Maybe it’s Midnight Blue Apples?”

“It makes no sense either way.”

And he is so right.

I open the envelope and dump a pair of dice into my palm. They’re grey/silver hematite. Heavy. The dots are sparkly red.

“Sweet dice,” says Nish.

A mini label stuck to one of the die reads:

Hematite keeps the goblins at bay

On the face of the folded card accompanying the dice, embossed in psychedelic dayglow bubble letters it reads:

Patches R tattoos for clothes

Inside, in ancient typewriter font:

Pipstickle’ mip’stick
The future ain’t what it used to be
Simple’slip’smick
The future used to be what it is

Hipple’ip’spunk
If you knew everything
Ipp’s ta’pipple
Nothing would be new

The door swings open. A short kid in a hoodie enters. The kid browses the store. He brings an action figure to the counter, a hawk-headed figure named Ra Ha Khuti from the ‘Gods of The Nile’ collection. He pulls out a wad of crumpled bills. They’re dollars, which are useless relics. He keeps his chin down, hiding his face.

“It’s on the house,” I tell him.

The kid nods without looking up and scurries out.

“Hey, the kid forgot this.” Nish holds up a *He-Man* thermos.

Nish moves in slow motion. I’m a spectator to my reaction. He twists the cap. Each revolution sends thunderous shockwaves through my store and soul. I propel myself over the counter and smash into Nish. The thermos goes flying, hits the floor. The cap falls off. Liquid spills onto the rug.

Nish picks himself up, rubs his shoulder, rolls his neck.

“What’s a matter with you?”

I dip a finger into the puddle. Orange juice tainted with cheap vodka.

“I thought I knew what was going to happen.”

“Nobody knows what’s going to happen.”

The words echo around my headspace.

Nobody knows.

Nobody knows.

But we can know what is not going to happen, and sometimes that knowledge is as good as knowing what will.

**This page is for version tracking purposes only.
This is not part of the book and will be deleted
when the book goes into Author Copy Stage.**

Designed by :

Corrections Done by :

QA Done by :

Date :