



Tales of Terrania

Rising

Book 1 in the Assembling Terrania Cycle

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Introduction: Welcome to Terrania

Although speculative fiction is as old as folktale, legend, and myth, today it speaks to a need of planetary consequence: that of imagining our way forward in the face of extinction-level catastrophes, including accelerating climate change. How will we not only survive, but mature? What kind of world culture would we most desire?

Hard to achieve it if we can't imagine it first.

Some years back, while I mulled what a just, Earth-honoring, and delightful culture of abundance and peace might be like to live in, the word "Terrania" floated through my reveries. Around this fanciful word gathered images, intuitions, ideas—and the stories in this collection.

Between Terrania as a collaborative accomplishment of our genius and maturity and where we are now stretches a long road indeed. I wanted to show how we walked it. Not step by step, of course, but through the perceptions of key characters located in various points throughout human history.

Along the way, we had to renegotiate our relations to Powers larger than ourselves. Ancient peoples called them gods. Jung called them archetypes, and he spent most of his time showing how they show up inside us. But whether archetypes, gods, or God, we have tended to be stuck to them. They reappear in our ideologies and institutes, obsessions and beliefs, whether or not we recognize their primal influence. Some of us bow down to them; others ignore them and by doing so fall under their domination.

How might we eschew the extremes of regression and alienation and instead create a healthy adult relationship with these Powers? Upon this question hangs our chance at coming of age as a species. The Assembling Terrania Cycle imagines our way forward.

The first section, "Terrania Rising," features tales of our Long Adventure in consciousness, in chronological order (by our time reckoning: that of the Coaguum) from Big Bang to the achievement of Terrania. Some of the characters lighting the way are historical; others are fictional, which is to say that they have their own kind of imaginal reality. Both move us forward toward fuller versions of ourselves.

The second section, "Dreamvale Continuations," picks up and develops tales from other authors. In two cases, "Childhood's End" and "Notes from the Grimoire of Dworkin," my stories complete series left unfinished by the death of their authors. In theory, every fictional tale lives somewhere in the Dreamvale. This invites authors and other creatives to add their own versions with an eye to enriching and deepening the grand tale of our Long Adventure.

"Fables" are short bits that fill out the Cycle. They represent experiments with a form of storytelling other than the short story, although all the stories offer their own strange and varying blends of science fiction, fantasy, history, and dream. Some take place in the

material world, and some in other realms. Sometimes I don't know which. Maybe you do.

The "Glossary" lists the names and attributes of the thirty Powers and gives short definitions of other aspects of the fourfold world of the Assembling Terrania Cycle. Articles on the Cycle appear at my website: Chalquist.com/fiction.

For most of my life I've been followed around by imaginings and dreams of a better world waiting up ahead of us. It has gone by so many names: Datong, Ketumati, Shangri-La, Golgonooza, Ecotopia, Wakanda, 24th Century... Some of these images—or are they anticipations?—get suffocated by bucolic fantasies of endless leisure; others corrode thanks to cynicism or psychologism. But a key question lingers: What stops us from building, together and from the bottom up, a civilization of everyone's delight?

As you read these tales, I hope you feel freed to dream into what your version of Terrania has to offer by way of entertainment, consolation—or even motivation to take a step or two in its direction. Perhaps we can walk together.

Terrania Rising

The Long Adventure Begins

Once upon a time, when Time itself was young, the newborn Powers of the Cosmos gathered to converse. They called their family the Komuay.

“Behold the Grand Experiment,” Radantia the Creator told them as her bright presence wafted outward in one luminous, all-giving breath.

Clouds of gas condensed, switching on quasars to light the new creation. The gas turned incandescent and ignited. New stars shone in the swelling belly of the heavens.

She admired the beauty unfolding on every side. So much color and form here compared to their place of origin, the abstract ideality of the Infrarealm behind this fresh-sparkling Coaguum.

“Let the Cosmic Game begin!” Kluni blurted, not in words of course but as a chortling sizzling along event horizons of primordial black holes.

Aluere frowned (a protosun briefly dimmed). “I see it more as a beautiful unfolding,” she said, preening herself as the universal Power of attraction. An entire universe to seduce! Stars gave off their lovely first light through the dark matter scaffold of the cosmos.

Cempa gave a heroic laugh whereby the first-ever pioneer plants on newly formed worlds broke the surface: “A competition!” Fertile and multiplying, the weedy plants dug deep and died young, leaving their aerated soils packed with nutrients.

“No, more a cycle of births, with each living world a life-maker.” So spoke Wildia, or Nature. Her growing body ensouled lichen, root, blossom, leg, and wing.

Radantia listened patiently to her children as their speech practice birthed a universe. They sought self-definition, and this came only through conversation. Especially for archetypal beings with one root in the realm of potentiality and another, newer face in this spreading domain of actuality.

Around her, that domain expanded, its limits inflated proudly by Pandere while knitted together by Ravina and Cronicus, Powers of space and time.

“An Experiment involving worlds guarded by distance and the lightspeed limit,” Pandere explained, “so they grow unhindered at first by other worlds.” Pandere had a habit, even here, of telling other Powers their business even as they conducted it on every side.

Radantia looked out across the widening, deepening cosmos, with its glittering stars held in the arms of darkness, and found it very good indeed.

“For now,” Kluni whispered, ever on the lookout for disruptive possibilities. Under his approving gaze, exploding stars flung their long-pent elements into the deepening void.

* * * * *

Quantum fluctuations, gaseous lumps, gravity-drawn accretions: these and other necessary outbreaks of chaos darting through the mind of Radantia fashioned galaxies, stars, and planets. So Kluni’s next remarks did not surprise her:

“I have a question,” he stated as interstellar debris continued to coalesce into planets. “We were fine in the Infrarealm, were we not? Why do we need a new universe, and troublesome mortal beings who will inhabit it with us?”

“Each of you remains confined to your own partiality,” Radantia told her watching family. “You, Kluni, cannot avoid being a trickster. Aluere sees everything in terms of attraction. Terkwa queers reality; Magos enchants it; Ordiri gives it form. To enlarge our views, we need to evolve someone who can see, however dimly, beyond our fragmentary outlooks.”

“But with so many species arising across the cosmos, why these soon-to-be-humans?” Kluni gestured at a newly formed world still baking in the fires of its creation. A solar flare looped back upon itself.

“They could go far...” Pandere sifted possible futures with help from Cronicus, for whom the cosmos flowed onward in webs of meaningful moments. Hopeful possibilities excited Pandere, limited outlook (a huff of x-rays) or not.

“...Or destroy themselves,” Kluni said.

Ever curious, Ordiri wondered out loud: “But what makes them different from the other Experiment participants?”

“Humans will be the storytellers of the cosmos,” said Smee, the curt artisan Power. Even in latent form, he appreciated good craft when he beheld it.

Renastra the dramatic chimed in: “They will wander around, perceive things, think and feel and imagine, and transmute their experiences into tales that benefit others to hear.”

“And take their place in the rich diversity of life.” Wildia could envision it.

“And tell fabulous tales of us!” Pandere, as expansive as ever.

“So what shall be the rules of the game on Earth?” Kluni asked. Cempa nodded.

“Their destiny will be in their hands, to make of it what they will.” Fari spoke with the sternness of fate. “We will not intervene directly unless their journey toward awakening

demands it.” She would make sure this wild new universe would adhere to the principle of necessity wherever possible.

“Why not?” Unda awaited her chance to carpet the newly formed worlds in green growth.

“If we interfere too often, the experiment will be useless and they will never mature.” Fari went on: “Instead, each of us may interact with them in one of four ways:

“First, by occasionally, rarely, incarnating as one of them. When we do this, we will be constrained by the limitations of earthly life.

“Second, by partially possessing a human mind to guide events from within rather than from without. Some of these minds will interpret us as gods, spirits, daemons, or familiars.

“Third, by giving our signature to outer events without suspending any natural laws. The fortuitous meteor strikes that prompted organic life on Earth, for example.

“Fourth, and optimally, in measured response to humans conscious enough to address us.”

Kluni chuckled at this tidy fragile scheme. So easy to enjoyably disrupt: arguing Powers siding with this group or that, for example, as blundering, stealing, or fighting bipedal game pieces unwittingly acted out the conflicts of the immortals. For that, however, he needed allies.

“How long,” Pandere asked, “are each of them to live?”

“That will be allotted by me as holder of destiny,” Fari replied. “Wildia will see them into the world, Cempa and Unda will support them, as will others of us, and at the end of their span of life they will be met by Doja.” The latter nodded slowly, his deadly reach already closing on doomed suns that had failed to ignite.

“It feels galling to be so constrained as we move among them,” Pandere fretted. “Are we not the Powers of this Cosmos?”

“Of course,” Radantia said. “But humans must learn to move beyond the forms we take in each era. For them, the gods will eventually die and be reborn in new forms, die and be reborn. And every time we are, we will gain bright facets of ourselves reflected anew in awakening corporeal minds.”

The family scattered to explore the filling void. Kluni played a quantum entanglement game against Fortis, whose knack was deciding the fall of prosperity, quantum or otherwise. Aluere saw echoes of herself and warlike Bellum in particle-antiparticle pairs emerging from the cosmic background to find one another. Bellum watched two black

holes mash together. Some Powers remained near Earth to monitor what would develop there.

“I’m going on a tour.” Radantia and her daughter Vaeda hovered near the forming moon.

“By yourself?”

“With my companion.”

“You will be reachable?”

“Not directly.”

Vaeda understood. Radantia was everywhere, but not always fully present. This would be one of those times.

“Please look after the Experiment while I’m gone,” her mother continued. “I would hate for it to crash so soon after its inception.”

“Radantia forbid.”

* * * * *

While the Powers conversed, a cooling planet had been preparing herself to host life. She spoke to herself and to whichever Powers might be listening:

I am Earth.

As one of the youngest children of the Powers, I circle a yellow star, warmed by it even as I cool. White clouds form my turban; blue oceans, my gown; brown soil, my skin; tall mountains, my many wrinkles.

I am circled in turn by Luna, my reflective daughter of a violent past. Although she has withdrawn from me a little, we rotate together through a starry void. Looking upward, I see her silvery phases in lovely contrast to the steady yellow light of the mighty Sun.

Our solar family floats within a bubble of interstellar gas drifting through one curved arm of an immense spiral of light. All of it is ensouled, even those immense dark swirls giving shape to space itself. Ensouled, but diffuse, unaware of its own uniqueness.

That is where I come in.

At the behest of the Powers, I begin my own long experiment, trying for a consciousness that can particularize.

Over long stretches of time, I combine and recombine, heat and reheat substances near my surface. One day, stirring inside a permeable membrane, a new kind of ensoulment is sparked. It multiplies, changes, complexifies, multiplies...

In a mere instant as I track time, it draws a verdant veil across my face. I begin to breathe something other than hot fumes. My skin further cools, bathed in blue air. Winged creatures fly through it; beings with multiple legs walk through it. Long ago, the circulation of potent metals deep within me raised an invisible screen in the sky to protect these, my new children.

Magmatic flows pulsing within my center slowly part. Suddenly, one reaches upward. Pushed by a contraction, the plume breaks open the surface of my skin...

Out of my ruptured Rift Valley finally walks a late-growing twig on my vast tree of life.

Having lost most of its body hair, it builds fires, wonders about the land, paints, chisels, hunts and fishes, eats root and flesh, lives in families, looks after its kin, empathizes, dreams, loves, and tells tales. Something of each of the Powers animates the mortal frame I mother.

This is Human, a social, inquisitive creature formed of oceanic waters and dark humus, its brain branched like corals, rivers, and trees. When it looks into calm waters, it recognizes its own face.

* * * * *

“It’s not exactly disobedience,” Kluni argued in the private meeting he had arranged in Earth orbit.

“I don’t care if it is or isn’t,” Bellum said. “I just want to see what war on Earth would be like. Conflict and carnage. Banners, bombs, and blood.”

“Me too,” Smee agreed. “I will inspire the invention of axes, stirrups, and siege guns.”

“They will need leaders who wield authority,” added Kerp, speaking sternly as a Power of structure and tradition. Monocrop farming, with its unnaturally straight rows of plants, would lay out his cosmic signature on the earthly plane. “Leaders who can rule obedient followers. Cempa, what do you think? Conflict, or everlasting stability?”

“May the strongest survivors win.” A comet streaked out of the solar system before the sun could dissolve it.

“The rest,” Doja drawled, “will be given into my influence.”

Kluni smiled. Deadly Doja could be such a conversation-stopper. Good thing for trickster eloquence:

“I can see others liking this. Pandere the expansionist, for instance, working together with Kerp the agriculturalist. Vaeda as a tough-minded strategist and tactician. Aluere to pick up the pieces and love them. Peaceful Paesha to inspire treaties between conflicts.”

“War always follows agricultural conglomeration,” Bellum noted, pleased.

“How is all this not disobedience?” Kerp asked.

“The cosmos would not exist without conflict and chaos built into it.” Kluni winked. “Yes, and even disobedience. When things get out of control, peace and order always follow to reestablish the balance. As I see it, we’re doing the Experiment a favor.

“Besides, whether the humans decide to act out their troubles instead of transcending them is really their choice. Isn’t the whole point for them to mature as a species?”

Bellum gave an appreciative snort; a distant sun blew up into a nova. He preferred his talk straight and brief, but Kluni sure knew how to grease the path of action.

* * * * *

Vaeda found out about Kluni’s private conversation. She quickly convened the family and informed them.

“You really favor bloodshed and chaos as alternatives to community and peace?” Aluere was outraged. She and Paesha glared at the conspirators.

“Didn’t Fari say it would be up to them?” Kluni was unabashed. This was the first time in eons the family had fought about something real.

Vaeda wasn’t having it. “Fari also said not to interfere with them.”

“We won’t, directly,” Cempa said. “Which is to say, outwardly.”

“Whom do you believe these people will be?” Doja shrugged. “Certainly not harmony-loving garden sitters. They will long for challenges only the sting of death can make vivid.”

“Every man for himself, some of them will insist,” Kluni said. “Entire religions and empires will be built on that philosophy. Results? Inevitable collisions, regional conflagrations, global hostilities as the ambitious strive to dominate all others. Bloodshed? Chaos? They’ll do it to themselves!”

Bellum had heard enough. “I’m going to put a quick end to this debate,” he said as he raised the intensity of his focus.

An asteroid darted sunward from the direction of Jupiter.

“How did you do that without breaking the laws of this universe?” Smee asked.

“You forget where you came from,” Kluni answered. “He went *under* the laws by altering archetypal flow dynamics in the Infrarealm.”

There, the abstract image-idea of a celestial collision; here, an asteroid apparently always bound for the target planet: Earth. Smee admired the graceful execution of it. Maybe he would have a try.

Aluere had a thing for Bellum, but he was being a reckless fool. She gestured angrily.

A sudden gravity fluctuation apparently always present bent the asteroid’s path. Mars captured the falling body. It splashed on impact, raising mountains bright with cooling magma.

Pandere considered the bipeds spreading over Earth. Already causing trouble! Certainly not worth all this bother. He triggered a series of massive, fatal floods.

Before they could inundate the globe, volcanic Smee grew networks of underground stresses larger than continents. Islands sprouted, coastlines rose—or had they always been that high?—and Vaeda’s human representatives taught the art of making boats and stilts for huts.

Kluni looked at Smee, who shrugged. (Brief earthquake.) “I changed sides.”

“This is getting out of hand.” Paesha emitted rising distress. “Can we involve Radantia?”

“No,” Vaeda said, “she’s away. It’s a big cosmos to manage. We’re on our own.”

A nearby supernova emanated a shockwave with enough force to sterilize all life on Earth.

Inexplicably, the blast grew distant. Vaeda smiled grimly as, unharmed, observers on Earth saw bright sparks in the night sky and painted them on cave walls, working cunningly with twigs daubed in ochre.

Kluni chuckled as new sky god religions broke out around the blue-green planet.

“You don’t want to feel our full wrath,” Vaeda told Bellum as Unda, Aluere, Ordiri, and much of the Komuay got behind her.

“Empty threat. None of us can die.”

“Some fates are worse than death.” He felt her intensity rising dangerously. A strange, low pulsation of power sent invisible stresses across spacetime.

“No need to take all this personally...” he began as his allies moved to counter violently.

Kluni grinned. So much for cosmic harmony! More an Experiment in creating unmanageable chaos...

“Excuse me,” a human voice whispered in their startled minds. “Are you gods?”

* * * * *

She who spoke lived in a valley in southern Africa.

Like the others of her tribe and time, she walked far, fished, built shelters, wove garments, forecast weather, and hunted small game. She danced, knew plant lore, sang, told stories, taught children and adults, looked after the infirm, and mastered crafts requiring dexterity and concentration. One day she hoped to become a mother.

Unlike the others, she knew herself to be a prophet, a dreamer of mighty dreams. She was seen as a wise woman of her tribe, though yet young. She still had much to learn.

Her sleep fluctuated, disturbed by the surging tumult of warring Powers. Their voices quarreled and clashed...Gods of her tribe? Perhaps of all tribes everywhere.

They gods desired to know themselves. This gave her the courage to address them.

“Greetings to you, Holy Ones! I am honored by your presences.” Within the dream she bowed to them.

“We greet you,” replied Vaeda as the others listened. Sotto voce: “Cronicus, is this the one we were hoping for?”

He sorted Time. “The potential is there.”

“We welcome your perspective,” Vaeda went on. “How much of the current conflict do you understand?”

Eve thought deeply for a moment. “We are embarked on a long adventure, my people and I, set in motion by you. But you disagree about its direction.”

“I want to see what you’re made of,” Kluni said, “and how far down the road you go before you kill each other off.”

Eve smiled. “I recognize your presence, Sacred Trickster. Our elders tell stories about you. Perhaps we will prove worthy of your testing.”

“I like her,” Kluni admitted. “She has spirit.”

“As I understand it,” Eve went on, “each of you is a kind of world unto yourself: Trickster, War, Peace, Life, Death, Wisdom...”

“Which god or alliance of gods would be most useful to you for your long adventure?” Ordiri was cutting to it. “The most orderly of us, perhaps?”

“No bias there.” Kluni looked at Cempa and Bellum and Doja. “How about a path with humor, challenge, and risk?”

“How about one with peace, magic, and love?” Paesha asked. Magos and Aluere nodded.

“Wisdom and discernment?” asked Vaeda.

“You must choose,” said Pandere.

“No,” Eve stated. Startled silence.

“We need you all, because all of you live inside us as well as around us. Which of you we need most depends on timing and circumstance.

“For example, before I turned in, I asked two of our wise folk to send me to sleep with a ritual for obtaining vision. I needed guidance from those of you who would offer it. On another occasion, others of you might.”

“Hail Mitochondrial Eve, first human member of the Transdaimonic League.” Magos bowed to her.

“...If tomorrow a raiding band attacks my village, we will need guidance from an alliance of Strife, Heroism, Strategy, Craft, and, eventually, Peace and Healing to restore harmony.”

“And seasonal festivals celebrating the harvest,” suggested Unda and Kerp.

“Including figures comic and tragic,” said Kluni and Renastra.

“And deadly,” added Doja. Kluni laughed.

Wildia did not. “Fine for towns and villages, but what about respect for the more-than-human world?”

“We must work it out on our own,” Eve replied. “The results will rest on choices made in particular moments by particular people, including me.”

Above the turning blue-green world, the Powers nodded.

“To the extent we are not aware of your presences behind events, we will be swayed by you.” Eve paused. “Perhaps you will react to our blind spots by applying pressure—as

when our tribal leadership, becoming arrogant, unintentionally invites raids by a band of strangers; or when we grow too dependent upon a region whose food sources then dry up, forcing us to move on. Nature can be a harsh teacher, and all of you appear to us as aspects of nature.” Wildia smiled. “What you are beyond that, behind that, I cannot say.

“However, if your great Game succeeds, then we humans will surprise you, and perhaps even change you. Then we will be peers.”

Pandere gasped at this effrontery. On the solar system’s largest planet, a storm shaped like a red eye opened and stared. Kluni grinned.

Eve continued:

“In each cycle of time (if I understand your thoughts), the forms you take among us will die and be reborn in the hearts and acts of the vision-holders and storytellers among us.

“In their hands rests the fate of all my kindred. From precarity to precarity we go on our long adventure of awakening.

“Thank you for creating us. In bringing our gifts to each generation, may we honor and remember you with a gratitude fully adult.”

Vaeda smiled. “You have our blessings.”

Eve turned over and entered deeper sleep.

“She will need them!” Wildia murmured.

Above her, Luna circled Earth, shining face ever toward her blue mother planet. Below, continents continued their slow, grinding shuffling, slow stony turtles whose backs bore living multitudes.

* * * * *

“We are already learning from them...” Fari mused. Her siblings marveled. Could even Fate be swayed by experience?

The Komuay pondered this while galaxies turned.

“What do you suppose will become of them?” A question from the family as a whole.

Vaeda: “Who can say? Perhaps they will grow up to cherish their world while remembering lessons learned along the way. Perhaps they will fall into traps set by Kluni and his allies and let the immature among them wreck the abundance that evolved them. But we know this: They will face much.

“Each key historical upheaval—a species initiation, really—will offer an opportunity for them to either assemble or scatter the kind of optimal planetary culture we hope for on every life-birthing world.”

“How?” Unda asked.

“We follow a hint from Kluni here. Each upheaval will be a Nexus Crisis involving blocs of Powers in conflict, the living presences of the earthly places involved, the flavor of the moment, and historically key humans facing a pivotal event. How they get through it will depend on how they reconcile the Powers behind it. Today, Eve showed the way.

“And humans will have help. Not only ally Powers whom they must learn to detect and work with, but, among themselves, a perpetual League of visionaries. This underground tradition will stretch forward in time until the rise of a just and mature planetary culture allows a fuller emergence.”

“Who will these people be?” Kluni was skeptical. “Surely not the wealthy and powerful I will so easily manipulate. Eve must be a Leaguer, as Magos said...and Enheduanna? Who else?”

“As the temporal sequence unfolds, all will be revealed,” Cronicus intoned, earning a scowl from Kluni.

Aluere pondered. “Given what they will face, that hardly seems like enough assistance.”

“Do not forget,” replied Wildia, “that the subtle animation of the lands, waters, and elements can also assist if their occupants learn to sense it. On peaks they will find a higher view, in valleys helpful depths, along rivers a feeling of flow, in rain resolution, in sunshine insight, at night intuition under the glowing moon. For every dawn, desert, branch, and blade of grass is inspirited.”

Vaeda nodded. “Also, humans will need to rely on their visionary creatives: their poets, singers, dancers, chanters, artists, mystics, and storytelling fantasists. All can show that when a work of the spirit summons a fantastic image, when a storyteller evokes a magical realm, the door stands open to the Dreamvale and, behind it, to the all-generating Infrarealm and its Source.”

“If they succeed, the door of wonder and dream will never close again,” Magos said with satisfaction.

The Powers paused while they watched Earth turn a few times in the light of its sun. Beyond it, the river of Milky Way light stretched outward, a road of possibility among galactic clusters almost without end.

“Every world in the Great Experiment,” Vaeda reflected, “will hold all the seeds needed to grow a splendid civilization that delights every living thing upon that world. Earth is particularly rich that way.

“In the end, whatever happens will be up to them. Like their sentient counterparts elsewhere, they will face many crucial turning points, to be met successfully only together.

“We will not save them. But we’ll be watching.”

She stared downward, musing: And some day, some far off day, perhaps they will send us home.

* * * * *

On Earth, Eve woke with an urge to dance and a word akin to “Terrania” floating in her mind.

She rose and thanked the white-haired couple across the room for the ceremony they had conducted for her. The two shamans smiled as she went out to start her day.

“That was rather close.” The gray-haired woman looked at her companion.

“Clever,” Pandere said, “opening the door of dream for her like that.” He pulled a skin tighter against the morning cold. Part of his cosmos-spanning awareness had remained within the family conversation.

“She did the rest, though.” Radantia stretched a back cramped from prolonged sitting. “Remarkably evolved, that one. Vaeda found her an easy pupil.”

“The bit about we Powers all living within each human, though. That insight was your doing, no?”

“No.”

Pandere rose stiffly. “Still, I worry for these people. I’ve never witnessed material beings so stuck to us.”

“They will certainly have a difficult time of it. They may not survive long. But if they do, they could make a heaven on Earth beyond what even we can imagine.”

They went outside to admire the beauty of the rising sun spilling into the valley. Sometimes it was pleasant to take mortal form.

All around them, Earth breathed, mulled, nurtured, pruned, and weeded. Shaped from cosmic patterns, animated by Vaeda, watched over by the Komuay, and grown from Aluere and Unda, all rooting, crawling, flying, leaping, slithering, walking, and storytelling beings made up one great Earthly family.

And all around and deep within them glimmered Signs to remind them of their kinship with each other, their descent from Earth, their lineage from the Powers, and their ultimate origin in the Source of All.

The Namings

The red stenciled hand displayed its rocky palm to Aluere and her sibling Powers. Its five-fingered fellows dotted the jagged wall of the cave.

“The artists knew the *presence* of the rock,” she said, “and gave it this expression. To them, the rock waved.” The thick-boned, heavy-jawed artists had moved on, but when she touched it with slender fingers, the pigment still felt moist.

The group in the cave resembled the absent painters but, inwardly, were as old as Time itself. If the cosmos could be thought of as a vast personality, these Powers formed its organizing archetypes.

Renastra smiled while glancing down at his enormous chest. Today we wear Neanderthal flesh on the stage of this world. What roles will we take up tomorrow, or in a century, or in five minutes? The stages pass in a long procession, but we immortal actors go on and on.

“Walls become audience,” he mused.

Cronicus looked forward down a swirling tunnel of time. “That hand will wave for at least 64,000 Earth years.” He played with a bead in his long, straight hair.

Kluni smirked, a lugubrious gesture on the leering face he had put on. “No doubt future human guessers will be paid to suggest initiation rituals or hunting magic.”

“Always something male and macho.” To Wildia, most of the handprints looked female. She shook her head, and a cascade of dark waves broke upon her broad shoulders.

“And theatrical.” Renastra touched the print. Such a short time on the planet for these innovative bipeds about to pass into history, leaving only a few lonely artifacts behind.

Having gathered her family in the cave, Vaeda rubbed her hawklike nose and spoke up. “Theatrics of a sort are what I wanted to discuss with you all.”

“Ours?” Kluni asked.

“Ours and theirs. Specifically, their periodic alternations of growth and learning punctuated by severe crises.

“Look over here, for instance.” She pointed to the center of the circled Powers. “Cronicus, please assist us.”

“Where would you like to view or visit?”

“Let’s see back in time a bit. Eleven thousand years. Location of view: Sumatra.”

* * * * *

Cronicus raised his hands and spreading them wide.

The cave vanished, and an immense volcano appeared. The ground around it shook. Lava blasted from it with such force that the fiery cone melted away.

Vaasha went on as the darkening skies roiled outward:

“Thanks to Kluni and the fires of Smee, volcanic disasters threaten humanity. Around the time of this one, the human population dropped to a few thousands. Aluere and Paesha and I helped preserve them by encouraging them to band together.”

“The drop wasn’t just because of the volcano,” Kluni said. “Besides, adversity strengthened the survivors.”

“And adaptations made by Homo sapiens allowed them to outlive these cave artists.” Cempa shrugged his massive shoulders. He could no longer see the art, but it was just as well. The real mark of a creative species was its strength of competitive championship.

Vaeda nodded to Cronicus. The scene shifted to northern Babylonia, where the rivers Tigris and Euphrates met. Crops ran in straight lines alongside river-fed canals. Short temples and thick walls stood in the distance.

“Here,” she continued, “Bellum, Cempa, and Kerp played a martial, heroic, and agricultural hand by standing behind Sargon, the first of the empire-builders, as, armed by Smee, he conquered Sumer.”

“But I equipped them with the gifts of civilization: writing, plowing, the wheel.” Smee turned a finger in a circle. “How could they have gone forward without them?”

“With their fancy new tools they desertified the region, which also killed the empire.” Kerp and Wildia surprised themselves by speaking/thinking together. She looked away when he glanced at her.

Kluni winked at white-haired Kerp. A trickster hand too had helped spread the desert.

“I gave them the model of rulership from above.” Pandere stood so tall the others had to look up at him.

“I,” Aluere said with emphasis, “replied to Sargon’s influence by inspiring divine poetry in his daughter, Priestess Enheduanna.” She hugged herself with pleasure. The countless hearts she would lift or break! And that was just on this planet.

“And I rescued the priestess from kidnapping rebels.” Bellum smiled at Aluere, who smiled back.

“You speak as though all of this already happened. It has not!” Cronicus swelled with annoyance. Why could immortals never learn to respect the proper flow of time?

“We can’t see past ourselves.” Reflective Innra kept to her usual quiet tone. “We already know what each of us would do in a given situation, earthly or elsewhere, so it feels like it has already occurred.” She glanced at Vaeda for support.

“Not only that,” Vaeda said, looking at the others, “but these people seem to have no defense against our influence. They are easily possessed, especially when we invest figures of authority with our presence. That is what I brought you all here to discuss.

“If they don’t learn to stand on their own feet, they will put a speedy end to this experiment in consciousness by breaking their world beyond repair.”

* * * * *

Vaeda nodded to Cronicus. The scene shifted to a royal library in Assyria. Tablets and writing boards of various shapes and scripts—Akkadian, Assyrian, neo-Babylonian—packed the shelves.

Cempa spotted a text of the tale of Gilgamesh and nodded.

“Take warlike Ashurbanipal.” Vaeda pointed around her. “Yes, an intellectual who loved to read and write. But also a tempting target for possession by Bellum, as will be Tudhaliya I, Ramses II, Alexander (with help from Cempa), Atilla, Caesar, Aurelius, Muawiyah I, Innocent III, Cromwell, James II, ‘Now We Have ‘Em’ Custer, Mussolini, Hitler, and so many other violent leaders.”

Smee frowned. “But they will wield well-crafted tools: metals forged in Mesopotamia, the stirrup invented in Mongolia, gunpowder and firearms in China, the machine gun in Britain, the atomic bomb in California...”

Aluere watched Smee brag as his long-fingered hands cupped the air. Repulsive. But his finest works were exquisite...

“You do it too, Vaeda.” Renastra looked at her. “And why not? How could you resist lending a subtle interior hand to institutes of culture like Plato’s Academy, the Jinxia, the House of Baghdad, the Alexandrian Library, Al-Ahzar University? And libraries and museums everywhere?”

“The movable type printing press,” put in Magos of the bushy eyebrows, “was a handy follow-up to the invention of printing in China, although it widened the cultural distance between oral and literate societies.”

“Ha!” Kluni shook his head, grinning. “I helped bankrupt Gutenberg in the archbishop’s court! The man who sued him was named Fust, just one vowel away from Faust. After selling his soul to the pre-capitalist devil, he published the first psalter.” Kluni and Magos chuckled.

“Speaking of religion, what happened with the Jesus movement?” Pandere asked. “Last time I looked it was spreading all over the world.”

Cronicus looked away from Pandere’s huge face and grimaced. The movement had not yet occurred! If it ever would.

Three of them started to reply but Magos did first. “He started out in my archetypal territory as a Jewish prophet, storyteller, and spiritual healer. After he was crucified, Saul got possessed by the spirit of Dionysus, became Paul, and in his teachings initiated a change of archetypes.”

“To mine, specifically.” Renastra avoided the eye of Magos. “Death and resurrection. After that, this underworld religion sided with Kerp, Pandere, and Bellum.”

Vaeda nodded “I watched over Magdalene. It is fortunate she was recognized early on as the consort of Jesus, otherwise humanity might have suffered centuries of religiously sanctioned oppression.”

Cronicus shook his head at the rising confusion.

“The Roman Empire was bad enough that way, especially at its end, when Hannibal stopped Scipio Africanus at Zama.” Ordiri turned ever-sparkling eyes on Paesha, who gestured at Zoe.

“And look at how our sister converted Umar ibn al-Khattab to a regimen of peaceful cultural advancement.” Paesha smiled with satisfaction.

Zoe looked back at her, puzzled. “What? Me?”

“How about when Admiral Zheng He landed in North America?” Pandere touched his chin, confused. Now why had he thought that? He looked around. Yes, everyone else looked as muddled as he was.

Cronicus erupted. “None of this has happened yet! And none of us knows if it will.”

They shared a bewildered pause. The royal library was gone, replaced by cave walls and handprints.

“It seems so real,” Pandere said. “It feels like I remember the parts I’ve been involved with.”

“It’s not recollection!” Cronicus sighed. “Not exactly. You’re sensing possible timestreams and event anticipations. Think of them as imaginal ricochets from all our bounds through linear time.”

Wildia frowned. “Our priority should be freeing their animals from cold laboratories and cramped stockyards.”

Cronicus raised his brows. “In 64,000 BCE?”

“We seem to be drifting.” Vaeda extended her view beyond the cave. Hunting and foraging hominids taller, thinner, and flatter-faced than the cave artists roamed toward Europe.

To clear her mind she tried sorting possibilities:

The dualistic signature of Bellum leaking into Zoroaster’s cosmology of good versus evil and into the Abrahamic religions to follow...

Kluni (as rebellion), Cempa (as heroism), and Renastra (as liberation) backing maneuvering Hannibal even as charging Bellum and monocropping Kerp backed Pandere-crowned Rome...

The influence of Magos and Smee in the coming Information Age...

She gave up. She couldn’t tell what would happen. Sorting didn’t help.

“Don’t forget me in their fossil fuels.” Athara’s dry comment surprised even her. She withdrew into her accustomed Underworld silence.

“Fuels distilled from the dead,” Doja remarked.

“And don’t forget those of us who bring the alternatives!” chimed in Wind, Wave, and Sunlight.

Kluni stared. “Who invited you here?”

“I did.” Komoyna’s steady brown-eyed gaze scanned the gathering as if daring each of them to protest. Was she not the Power of family and community? And as such, the very heart of the group? No one protested.

“If you keep this up,” Cronicus warned as his essence wavered sickeningly, “your musings will break Time itself. And if Time breaks, so does the cosmic Experiment in consciousness.”

Which had failed already for one key species. Renastra shook his head at the passing of the cave artists. Would it ultimately fail for all?

Komoyna stepped toward the center. “But who will help us focus?”

Vaeda folded her hands. “Let us listen in on their stories. Telling stories is what this species does, after all.”

“And if they can’t tell us anything new?” Kluni blurted before Ordiri could speak.

Fari’s cold voice came at them from the rear: “Then the experiment on Earth will serve no further purpose.”

* * * * *

“...So when Atum saw his long-wandering children return from the moist darkness, he cried with gladness. And do you know what happened then? The tears became all of us...”

The Egyptian storyteller sat in the shade of the temple, his listeners seated around him. The villagers gathered every week to hear him.

Aluere put a hand on her heart. “What a beautiful story! Is Atum an Egyptian Radantia?”

Vaeda nodded. “You’re there too, in the romance between Shu and Tefnut and all the other love pairs of their pantheon. And as Hathor especially when she’s not being Sekhmet.”

“They told other creation tales too,” Smee muttered.

“One starring you as Ptah the divine craftsman.” Kluni kept a straight face. Best to stay on good terms with the artisan god for future uses. He gazed out at the desert beyond the canals through the narrowed mythic eyes of Set.

The story ended. From the ancient City of the Sun the Powers transferred their group perception through time and space to Ifẹ in southwestern Nigeria.

A priest sat before her students:

“...So when Eshu stole the yams from Ifa’s garden, he left footprints with Ifa’s slippers, then argued that Ifa had stolen the yams himself...”

Kluni smiled. “This sounds familiar.”

“It should.” Ordiri shook his head. “You had to become my messenger to repay the theft.”

“My plan all along. Reminds me of when you were Apollo...”

In ancient Athens, a singer wove into words the divine conflicts of Zeus and Hera.

“I was never that jealous.” Komoyna squinted at Pandere.

“Never? Not even as Indrani, Aditi, Ixchel, Juno, or Parvati?”

“No, although you as Zeus, Jupiter, Di Jun, Huang Di, or Olorun would have given me reason to be.”

Vaeda listened to tales about wisdom goddesses: Saraswati, Sky Woman, Athena, Deborah, Amaterasu, Nuwa... Aspects of herself echoed through the lengthening song of human storytelling.

She turned to Cronicus (Aion, Zurvan, Chronos). “You’ve gotten rather free with shuffling time periods.”

He seemed more solid now. “The storytelling is giving us focus, so I see less risk of scattering.”

She studied her family. Bellum was calmer and less edgy, Renastra less dreamy, Doja less creepy and ethereal, or at least less ethereal, Wildia more self-contained and content...

“The namings,” Ordiri told her. “They make a difference. To us. They help us live more substantially in this universe.”

Vaeda too. Calmer, more centered, more present. She nodded.

“Humans have given us an assortment of names for bringing us into their stories, dances, crafts, and dreams...”

Back in the cave, she considered once again the red handprints of a reverent, transitory people. Would its predecessor survive?

She hoped so. “Perhaps in time they’ll also learn to stand up to us.”

Enheduanna Claims Authorship

Gather, my cosmic kindred, so I can tell you all a tale....

Once thrown out of the great Temple of Nanna in Ur, Enheduanna had prayed to her moon god, as befitted his earthly bride. She had served as High Priestess of the Akkadian Empire. Now she lived in exile.

Declaring his epithets—Wise Celestial Orb, Nightly Illumination, Master of Oracles, Keeper of Time, Herder of Cattle, Diviner of Life and Fate, and so on—she came to the point: “Why did you allow the usurper Lugal-Anne to invade the holy precincts and kidnap me to the eastern mountains?”

She sipped air to control her anger while she awaited a response. A leather harness creaked beyond the door flap of her tent. Did Lugal-Anne’s hovering guards think she would run away into the desert like a coward?

She recalled the day her father, Sharruken (“Rightful King”) of Akkad, had appointed her to the position of High Priestess, in part to bring the upstart southern region of his empire more firmly under religious control. Her base, Ur’s Temple of Nanna, was nearly as ancient as the city itself. Sumerians populated the dry land between the northern and southern seas. Her people the Akkadians, speaking a Semitic tongue, had migrated in from the west and mingled peacefully.

Until Sharruken, who loved control. His worst failing. Impossible to make peace with it even though it exalted her.

Childhood felt far away. Dusty encampments, shouted orders, troops drilling to exhaustion in an arid plain. Her father claiming divine authorization from supreme An, land-ruling Enlil, warlike Ilaba, and fierce Inanna. He would achieve, he insisted, what Enmebaragesi failed to do and unite the cities of Sumer.

Once he had, the harder work began. She learned all about control: how to organize family, inspectors, judges, officers, the army and military governors, who controlled currencies of silver and barley for beer, crops of wheat and dates, herds of goats and sheep, textiles of wool and reed, smithies that turned out tools and weapons of copper and bronze.

Because of conquest, she wore fabrics and gems from as far away as Anatolia, Lebanon, and the Indus Valley. The resource-poor land filled with oils, cedar, ivory, lapis, alabaster, serpentine, carnelian, copper, tin, and diorite, all brought from afar.

Through her influence, the king also sought to control the beliefs of his subjects. Some of them disliked control. Angry at having their leaders deposed, their irrigation canals diverted, their arable fields confiscated, their homelands handed over to Akkadian dignitaries, and a full two-thirds of each crop paid to their new landlords, the city-state citizens gathered and fought back.

Lugal-Anne did not confine himself to outlawry: stealing, raiding, a pitched fight or two. No. Copying her father's principles of military organization, he led an army of his own, invaded, and cast out the Akkadian officials, including the High Priestess.

Perhaps her father should not have boasted, "Any king who would rival me, let him go where I have gone!" Although he had gone to the afterlife, his influence continued through Enheduanna's nephew Naram-Sin, who sent out his armies to consolidate the empire.

After wrecking the inner temple, the usurper had assaulted her, and, when she resisted, handed her a dagger so she could stab herself. She threw it down in disgust.

In tented privacy, she lowered her arms. Moon would not reply.

Rearranging the ritual summons, she raised them again, this time to Morning Star. The unspoken words pulsed like her fierce heartbeats:

"Great queen of queens, lady of all the foreign lands, holder of divine powers, life-force of the teeming people:

"I entered the innermost temple at your service, carrying the ritual basket and intoning a song of joy. But my offerings darkened into a funeral meal, the honey of my mouth dried up. Lugal-Anne desecrated your sanctuary, removed my crown of office, and cast me out of my home. I pled with my celestial husband Nanna, but to no avail.

"In your great presence, Inanna, cities and mountains tremble. Gods quake before you. Smash the works of Lugal-Anne, and him along with them! Crush the heads of the rebels and devour their corpses.

"Then turn your benevolent gaze back upon me, who have sung your holy praises. Let me return to the temple and celebrate your rites once more. I will write you hymns of thanks."

Distant shouts beyond the mountain tent. She stepped outside and stared.

A column of Akkadian fighting men approached. No one tried to halt them.

She would have gone on fighting, no matter the odds against her nephew's superior forces. Better that than slavery or mass execution, with the rebel leaders in stocks on display first. Or a flood washing away loved ones in a punished city like Uruk or Kish.

The lead officer advanced like a determined bull. The thick fingers of his right hand gripped a chipped ax. A torn battle tunic hung over his left shoulder. Spots of blood stained his girdle.

Covered by archers, slingers, and spearmen to the rear, he stopped three feet from Enheduanna's nervous guards. A gravelly voice emerged from his black beard.

"We have come to take the High Priestess back to her temple."

* * * * *

Enheduanna kept her word to Inanna, even in the busyness of restoring the Temple and welcoming back its personnel. Every evening, when the day's rites and responsibilities were finally done, she picked up her stylus and wrote on moist clay in praise of the great goddess. Though Akkadian, she wrote in Sumerian, as her mother had taught her to do.

Outwardly, all was well. Inanna had saved her. The king had dispersed the rebellion and restored order. She had restored it in the Temple, the religious hub of a network of priests and other officiants spread throughout Akkad. The herders, farmers, fishing fleet captains, ox drivers, masons, carpenters, jewelers, accountants, goods dealers, stewards, weavers, musicians, smiths, tanners, potters, painters, and high and low officiants she oversaw personally, in writing, and through intermediaries once again worked together with their former efficiency. Reports confirmed that the network of forty-two temples across the Empire had resumed their coordination and outreach.

Inwardly, though, a crisis brewed. It could cost her position, her reputation, and even her life.

"I, accustomed to triumph, have been driven forth from my house and made to walk among the mountain thorns...."

Why had Nanna not responded to her prayers when she most needed him to? Even now he floated silently above her, maddeningly self-sufficient, a nightly law unto himself.

She paced. She had to talk to someone. No priests or priestesses; no scribes or treasurers; no king's officials or majordomos; no oracles who read dreams or excised sheep livers. No one key to the power structure three bold overlords had woven around her. But what about her friend at court?

Enheduanna spent most of her time on the premises: the temple of Ningal, giver of dreams and heavenly wife of Nanna; his temple northwest of the ziggurat in the center between them; a private sanctum; and her chambers, where she was now. The need for statuary, incense stands, braziers, altars, libations, lutes, lyres, and all the other accoutrements of her sacred office: yes, all of it was important. But what a relief to be free of it.

When Ilum Palilis entered to rearrange the High Priestess's thick coif for the evening, Enheduanna told her of the doubts she harbored. Officially, Ilum was her hairdresser; unofficially, her counselor. She unbound the cheek braids of her mistress, removed her silver lunate earrings, and went to work.

Illum knew how to listen deeply, allowing the High Priestess to gather her thoughts in conversation. This relationship had begun after she overheard Illum talking quietly to a cook about a recent dream. There were unplumbed depths to Illum. Naram-Sin would have ordered her executed for that dream, but the falling walls and setting sun hinted at the inevitability of time and change. Even the Empire could not last forever, no matter how large its buildings or how thick its walls, especially when run by ruthless men who raised metal statues to themselves. As an old Sumerian poem put it,

From time out of mind, from the foundation of this land and the multiplying of
its people,
Who has ever seen a royal dynasty that lasted uppermost for long?

Illum also possessed an even rarer virtue: she could be trusted to keep things private. Enheduanna had tested her.

As burning tapers flicked shadows around the chamber, the High Priestess told of her new questions about how gods and humans got along.

“...And since Nanna did nothing to help me, his earthly wife, what does his silence say about the fickle favors of *all* the gods? Can we really count on any of them? What if I get into trouble again and Inanna is in a bad mood that day? What if the Empire needs her and she is off making love with Dumuzi? For that matter, what if I initiate a lunar rite and Nanna decides not to rise?” The phases and eclipses of the Moon she tracked never deviated. But what if they did?

“And why did the goddess punish *me*, who always showed love to her, by letting me go into exile?”

“My Lady,” Illum murmured as she combed and plaited, “you seem to assume—if I may be forgiven for raising this—that the gods have a duty to help us when we suffer distress. But do they?”

Enheduanna considered it.

Gods and governance. For my people, for my father, they had always gone together. Humans lived to serve the gods; citizens lived to serve the Empire, ruled by kings favored by the gods. I have not questioned this. Now, though, the silence of Nanna. Even Inanna’s silence when Naram-Sin declared himself divine *and* her lover...

“Perhaps,” she replied, musing, “the gods have their own plan, whether it serves us or not.”

“Just one plan?”

“No...as many plans as gods. Which means they can conflict. With us caught in the middle.”

“If so, what is the best choice in such a situation?”

“It must be to mediate the dispute and get the gods to talk to each other, as I do with quarreling officials. To be the ziggurat that joins the temples of Nanna and Ningal.”

A breeze dispersed the day’s lingering heat around them as Ilum wove hair and Enheduanna thought. A thin shaft of moonlight lit the diadem in the cast-off headband on her nightstand.

“My impression,” Ilum said, “is that because each god has an agenda, their gifts to us are not always good for us. Is that not so?”

“That is so. Recall the story of how Inanna got Enki drunk and took from him the plans for civilization. When he sobered enough to realize he couldn’t retrieve them again, he told her, ‘With these arts of delight and craftsmanship, music and rejoicing must go the kindling of strife, plundering of cities, lamentation, fear, pity, terror, and death. All this too is civilization, and you must take it all with no argument; and once taken, you cannot give it back.’”

“Yes. Strife, plundering; and even now, the farmers say the salts that rise from the tired soils cannot be washed away. What then?”

“Let us say,” the High Priestess continued, “that it is not the responsibility of the gods to keep us safe. That is our task, not theirs. Ha! I wondered why Nanna did not save me. Now I wonder: why did Inanna?”

“Did you merely call out for help?” Ilum’s voice was as mild as starlight.

“No. I was more confrontive than that.”

“Yes?”

“I...shamed her,” Enheduanna admitted. “I blamed her for punishing me. I reflected on her neglect and showed her how I felt about it.”

Brush, brush...“What if you taught her something about herself that altered her behavior?”

She stopped as the priestess’s head came up. “What a daring thought! Perhaps the gods *can* learn from us. They’ve even showed us how, as when Inanna had become too dependent on the sky god An and needed to break free.”

“Then the relationship between human beings and gods goes in both directions?” She resumed brushing.

“It must. The gods seem different after each confrontive encounter. Not only more...*personal* somehow, but less reactive. But only if we step back from them, as our

own individual self with something valid to offer them. I revere Inanna, for example, and always will, but I don't want to reenact her descent to the underworld anymore. — Does that answer your question?"

"Yes." Ilum put down the brush. "And perhaps yours as well."

Enheduanna's brow creased. One question answered? Yes. But not the question of how to undertake a theological revolution without getting killed by her nephew.

* * * * *

After Ilum had gone, Enheduanna sat for a moment in prayer.

"Great goddess Inanna, light of heaven, source of love, and queen of queens, tomorrow I will do the riskiest thing I have ever done. It is necessary for me to be at one with myself. More importantly, it is necessary for the empire, its priests, its people, and perhaps even for the gods.

"It may be that the king will respond to my act by having me put to death. I do not want to die yet, but I cannot bring myself to ask for your help, as I did before when you so graciously saved me from the rebels. Instead, I simply ask that you accompany me unto the end, and turn your gaze not away from your priestess.

"Always, I have ended my prayers as only your servant. Tonight, I close this brief ritual as myself, a woman worthy of attention, respect, and care."

Enheduanna got into bed and went almost instantly to sleep. The roving moonlight streaming in through the window lit the tip of her mace of office.

* * * * *

Enheduanna sat down and wrote hymns for the forty-two temples of Akkad. If the receiving priests were astonished by what she wrote, they never said so.

The High Priestess wrote not only to the temple officials, but to the temples themselves. The structures too were listening, active partners in relation to their local patron god.

Priests at each temple conducted rites and prayers for the god of its host city. Hymns to forty-two temples meant hymns to forty-two deities. She burned incense as she wrote. Forty-two individual deities to be in personal conversation with. Her stylus showed the way.

For the first time ever, each priest reading her hymns wondered: Who am *I* in relation to this temple, this city, this society, and this god? Not, What is the god saying? as before, but, What is the god saying *to me*?

The last Temple Hymn was for the city Eresh, where stood the holy precincts of Nisaba. She recited internally some of the lore:

Long, long ago, when Enki had brought forth the first mound of Sumer from the depths of a watery abyss, there at the delta where Tigris and Euphrates met, the temple built on that site celebrated all the Anunnaki gods, but Nisaba in particular; for she had brought not only writing, but measure, the city, work with grains, and other practical wisdoms.

Enheduanna nodded to herself as she wrote. Nisaba had brought forth more than the people of this land. The land hosted a diversity of peoples, present to learn her wisdom and teach it to each other. A wisdom not just for kings or priests or Akkadians, but for everyone.

This shining house of stars bright with lapis stones
 has opened itself to all lands
 a whole mix of people in the shrine every month
 lift heads for you, Eresh
 all the primeval lords
 Nisaba, Lady of Saba
 brought powers down from heaven
 added her measure to your powers
 enlarged the shrine, set it up for praising
 faithful woman, exceeding in wisdom
 opens her mouth to recite over cooled lined tablets
 always consults lapis tablets
 and gives strong council to all lands
 true woman of the pure soapwort
 born of the sharpened reed
 who measures the heavens by cubits
 strikes the coiled measuring rod on the earth
 praise be to Nisaba

The High Priestess took a breath and let it slowly out. What she did next could not be taken back. No anonymous dedication to the king at the end from the hand of a nameless priestess. Instead, she wrote:

the person who bound this tablet together
 is Enheduanna
 my king, something here never before created
 did not this one give birth to it

* * * * *

“So did the king kill her?” Ordiri asked.

“No.” Magos, who had told the tale to his kin, continued: “When a counselor brought the matter of her signature to his attention, he said—”

“I don’t care what she writes so long as the priests pay their taxes and keep the peace,” Pandere finished.

A dozen flecks of light floated in orbit above Mesopotamia. Against the stellar backdrop they were nearly invisible. But their influence was universal in scope, and they thought at each other with the authority of gods.

The Powers, or Komuay, are a busy family of immortal intelligences. Overseeing life on countless worlds, they manifest in the Coaguum, the material plenum, as sentient natural forces rendered by human imagination into deities, spirits, daemons, and other extramundane entities.

At the moment, a small part of their group consciousness was focused on Earth; specifically, Sumer, 2300 BCE in human ways of figuring time.

“An interesting tale.” On Earth and elsewhere, Wildia was otherwise known as Nature. “She was right, you know, about endings. Their monocrop agriculture met a drought and collapsed. Empires aren’t sustainable. She felt it coming, even if she personalized it for a time.”

“Hard to worry about far-off endings when there are people to feed today,” grumbled Kerp the harvester.

Smee the artisan glanced at him. “Not to mention keeping the forges fed.”

“I’d like to have heard more about the kings and their troopers,” put in Cempa the champion. Bellum the warrior nodded, as did Pandere, patron of expansive rulership. (There were actually no “nods,” of course, just bursts of natural radio noise.)

Magos pointed at them. “The five of you helped the Akkadians conquer the peaceful Sumerians.” When Kluni smirked: “You are not excluded, Trickster.”

“You, teller of tales, were the one who abandoned her.”

“No, Kluni. As Nanna, I withdrew for a time so she could work things out. Apparently, she did.” Magos glanced at the full moon above.

“Meanwhile, I stood by her.” Aluere was the fiercely seductive Power behind the presence of Inanna.

“That makes six,” Magos>Nanna said.

“What do you mean? Just because Sargon claimed me as a patron doesn’t mean I was one.”

“I think I get it.” Ordiri turned toward them. “The goddess-rich polytheism of Sumer needed some kind of counterweight. Inanna is one of the pantheon, but she grew to be more dominant even than An.” Pandere nodded. “And Inanna is linked with Enlil and Assur.”

“The High Priestess,” Wildia concluded, “was a tool of male governance. Even while she wrote poems to Inanna.”

Aluere shook her head. “Her time and place provided an earthly site for a Nexus Crisis, where our disagreements are mirrored by conflicts among the mortals. But if everyone was on the side of the conquerors, who among us was against them?”

Thoughtful silence. Some of the Powers didn’t think of themselves as on that side at all, but neither had they forcibly opposed it. They weren’t ready to speak up yet.

“What about you, Kluni?”

He shook his head. “Oh, I may have whispered ideas to some of the rebel leaders while they slept,” he admitted, “but nothing methodically carried out on my end. Not guilty.”

“Let us be systematic about this. Process of elimination.” Ordiri began a list: “Kerp inspired their agriculture, with Unda’s help. Cempa and Bellum motivated some of the fighting, and Smee provided knowledge for crafting arms. Magos shone as their magical moon god, Pandere as their ancient father god, and Aluere as Inanna their heavenly queen. Kluni stirred the rebel pot, as usual. Who else was involved?”

“I stood behind the hairdresser and some of the priesthood. —Don’t laugh,” Terkwa told Kluni. “Hairdressers have changed history. Anyone can in the right place and time.” Kluni stopped chortling and nodded.

“I tended their contemplations and prayers,” spoke the soft voice of quiet, inward Innra.

“I closely followed the battles and executions.” Doja’s voice was cold and dry. Into his realm all life eventually passed. “When Pandere sparked Sargon’s three sons to ambition, and the first two claimed to have been called by Enlil, I cut short their reigns.”

Ordiri looked at him. “Whose reigns?”

“All three. Sargon had reigned for much longer, but in the end I took him too.”

A pause as a meteor flamed out in the atmosphere below.

“Perhaps I can add something,” stated Vaeda the Wise.

Magos nodded slowly. Yes, the pieces were fitting together....

“Some of us visited that place thousands of their years ago.” She paused to remember. “As Enki, Kluni left behind Sumerian tales of a people rising up from below. Pandere was there, and Unda. Others of us. Including me.

“My hope was for the birth of something new there. The problem all along has been that mortals, being fragile and transitory, tend to react to our presence, however gentle, by identifying with us. They are easily possessed by forces greater than themselves.

“Through her encounters with Nanna and Inanna, Enheduanna became the first to take a step back and disidentify long enough to name her own individuality. I supported this against the pressure of all of you. That was the true basis for the Crisis.”

“That makes sense to me,” chimed in Cempa unexpectedly. “As the general of the army that returned her to Ur, I saw true heroism in how she learned to take up a stand against us as gods and, to some extent, against the empire that employed her.”

“So,” Pandere asked Vaeda, “you were the one of us who prompted her poetry and teachings?”

“No. That was her idea. Terkwa, Aluere, and Magos contributed, but it was really by her own initiative that she began to stand on her feet. Seeing this, I gently reminded her of my presence, as Nisaba.”

The light show above Earth shifted colors rapidly. None of the Powers liked being told they were so intrusive. Even Vaeda, for all her wisdom, balked at the truth of it. But for them to evolve, they had to accept it. After all, it was why sentient life had arisen to begin with, as Radantia, mother of all of them, had reminded them at the beginning of this universe.

* * * * *

“I’m curious,” said Ordiri. “Cronicus, can we roll the time stream forward to see how this birth of individual consciousness plays out?”

Accumulating salts rose and strangled the soils of the Akkadian Empire, which fell not long after the death of its greatest priestess.

For centuries after, high priestesses continued to be trained at the Temple in Ur. Then Ur too declined, neglected and depopulated, as local powers fought to control the belt of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf.

In Ur, a man named Terah fathered three sons. They fathered children of their own.

Terah earned his keep by crafting idols. But when violence and hunger spread as the once-Fertile Crescent dried out into desert, he decided to move his family to more pleasant climes. During their journey they stopped in Haran, where Terah died.

Prompted by Pandere, one of Terah's sons departed the country, never to return. His name was Abram, and his wife was Sarai.

"More patriarchy," Wildia hissed.

"Indeed." Vaeda turned toward her. "But also the idea of a personal deity not only responsive to the individual, but accountable as well. Cronicus, can you run us forward a few millennia?"

In 1927, a British archeologist excavating Ur uncovered a calcite disc. It bore the names and images of Enheduanna the High Priestess and her hairdresser Ilum.

From the rubble of the temple complex also emerged hymns and poems. They were translated and published in 1968.

"For historical context," Magos said, "she composed them before the Code of Hammurabi, the Rig Veda, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the I Ching, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the Hebrew Bible, including its Psalms, which were composed in a style inspired by her." Fascinating, Earth's history, and fully worthy of special study.

Aluere smiled dreamily as the Northern Lights danced above the planet. "For all their destructive misbehavior when they fall into identity with us, I still have hope for this species coming of age.

"Enheduanna could not resolve the Nexus Crisis that has continued in the Middle East, a contested region of endless-seeming strife. But look at the treasures she left. Even as Inanna, I admired her. Which reminds me. Magos, did she ever make her peace with Nanna? I assume so since she stayed employed in his temple in Ur."

"She did. Cronicus, one more time? You know what I have in mind..."

A fragment surfaced of a work dedicated to Enheduanna. Although its author remained unknown, the apotheosis of the high priestess it praised had outshone every later conflict:

She is shining
The high priestess chosen for the pure divine offices,
Enheduanna
may she bring you your prayer to the abyss.
The one who is worthy for Suen/Nanna,
my delight/pride...

Sacred Fictions

I rejoiced since I have touched Heaven.
 My head has pierced the sky.
 I have felt the very stars,
 I have reached joy,
 So that I shine like a star,
 And dance like the great constellations.
 –Tomb of Sarenput II at Aswan

I wish my clients wouldn't take my celestial interpretations so literally. I am not a prophet.

Just today, however, a man here in Alexandria asked, "Do these powerful Decans you mention favor good business or bad this season?"

I look to the sky for wisdom. He looked to it for enough drachmas to buy another courtesan. He wasn't even happy with the one who made sure he didn't trip over his own sandals as he left his house to go trade.

Perhaps I'm in the wrong line of work. "Seti," my older brother nagged me, "fishing would make you happier. Listen. Happier! It's a good solid Egyptian occupation! Far better than fiddling with star charts. Why don't you listen?"

Out he sailed from the port every dawn, to return on a boat laden with the catch. No complex questions, no calculations. Fish are their own answer, for him.

My Greek friend, Penelope, thinks astrology is nonsense. So does her friend Ezekiel, who lives in Delta, the Jewish quarter. I haven't met him yet. Penelope is a maker of clothing; Ezekiel teaches young people how to read. Later today we would indulge over lunch in the kind of deep conversation one cannot have with just anybody.

Accepting some bronze coins from my client, I saw him out of my shop, closed the door against the strengthening sun, and put my scrolls in order.

Astrological interpretation came down through my maternal family line from antiquity. Some said it came ultimately from Babylon, or even Greece. But Egypt had developed its own, including knowledge of the thirty-six Decan deities controlling ten days each throughout the year. We also used our own house system for dividing up the sky as we kept our eyes on the stellar motions present at birth and those appearing after.

The fool I had just read for would never know how these deities mediated life down here with influences far above. The Decans reminded me of Osiris in how their stars winked out and returned, winked out and returned, cycling forever in the cosmic dance of death and rebirth.

In a way, my brother was right. I could never have survived on just astrology. The dyes and tints I mixed in the temple workshop colored sacred statuary paid for by the priests.

Those among them who showed wisdom and learning entered the House of Life to tend scrolls as scribes of holy Thoth. Unlike most of my clients, those priests paid me in silver.

Donning my frayed white wool tunic, I left the shop and wound my way toward the Greek-owned café where I would meet Penelope and her friend.

* * * * *

In a deserted alley a brigand stepped out of a doorway.

I knew he was such because he held a knife pointed at my chest. His other hand executed a scooping gesture: hand over my money.

I must not have looked very formidable: thin legs and arms, unbearded face, alone, unarmed. I wished for a patrol of centurions, but none appeared. My lack of fear surprised me.

Black hair fell into his eyes as he gestured again while turning the blade. I reached into a pocket.

“I will give you a coin for bravery,” I said quietly as I tossed him a bronze one. “But you should know you are threatening a temple priest.” He sneered. “Yes, I am out of uniform. But I can call down curses that will make Anubis seem a puppy and hungry Ammit toothless. Go while you still can.”

A scarab flew by, its wings flecked by a shaft of sunlight. At the sight of this powerful living symbol, my assailant turned and ran. I exhaled deeply and continued on.

Hekate’s Inn was less crowded than usual. Penelope and my new friend stood at a small stone table with drinks before them. I got my own and joined them.

After Penelope introduced Ezekiel and me to each other, I told them of my little adventure.

“By Zeus!” Penelope’s black eyes widened. “I’m very glad you were not seriously injured!” Ezekiel nodded his curly head, beard going up and down.

“Thank you both, I am fine.” I lifted my cup and swallowed. “The sudden appearance of the scarab seems fortunate.”

“Our ancient philosophers talk of ‘sympathies,’” Penelope mused, “whereby the things of the world connect to each other.”

“Our priests have a similar idea,” I said.

“Ours speak of the power of Shaddai or Elohim,” Ezekiel put in. “But it is difficult to speak with conviction about that power when so many of us suffer daily.”

I nodded. The inconceivable magnitude of Jewish suffering down all the bloody ages has always left me silent. Even here, in the city designed to serve as a cosmos, the Romans and other elites gave them a hard time.

“The ways of the gods are difficult to understand.” I stopped a mental repeat of the earlier encounter.

“The gods?” Penelope echoed. “The gods could not care less about us. Remember the Golden Age of Athens? A time of unparalleled reverence, until it wasn’t.”

After a moment, “We were exiled,” Ezekiel said, “from our homeland until the Persians let us back in. What good was reverence then? Some say it was all part of the divine plan. I say: tell it to the wanderers who watched their families die in the desert.”

“The Persians conquered Egypt,” I said. “Overall, they watched out for us. The priests welcomed them and deified their kings. But they were conquerors nonetheless. And our gods? They did nothing.” A shudder passed through me. Was this blasphemy? “And then other waves of invaders came, all of them blessed by the priests...”

The conversation had gone south in a hurry. Did the inn sell anything stronger to drink? Would it help? The day had started badly and gave no sign of improving. My bitterness surprised me. It blended with that of my companions into a palpable angry gloom.

Insight gradually crept through me. Yes: I had met up with Penelope and Ezekiel in part to quiet the growing feeling of alienation from the realm of the holy. My clients, temple politics, and Egyptian history had brewed in me a potent disenchantment only now coming fully into the open. I had hoped to find allies against it; instead, we seemed all to be partakers of it. Different traditions, but kindred disillusionment.

I was staring not only at unemployment, but at the loss of my entire framework of life’s meaning. The gap this opened terrified me.

We listened to patrons talking about their morning. Footsteps scuffed the path outside the door. The complicated hum of city life drifted over our heads and around us. A bird with a long, curved beak sat watching us from a high window. It flapped away.

“My people have waited and waited for the gods to do right by us. So have yours”—Penelope nodded at Ezekiel—“and yours,” at me. “That is one reason our playwrights make fun of them.”

Ezekiel cleared his throat. “Do you doubt the presence of the Divine, then?”

“No. I doubt the presence of Divine compassion.” She sipped. “Seti, what do you think?”

The grimace bent my mouth before I could stifle it.

I used to think we pick our friends, but we don’t really. Of course, now and then we find ourselves in bad company. But this was not such a time. Real friends find each other. We three held to different outlooks, values, cultural backgrounds; but we took each other seriously, and I felt safe with them.

So my mouth opened. “I am tired of my clients wanting me to access the sky to foretell futures. It isn’t their fault. They don’t know any better. Of course a trader wants to know if trade is good, and a lonely single feels curious about prospects for love.

“What makes my heart weary is that we Egyptians have shown centuries—no, millennia—of devotion to the gods, and they have replied by letting us be invaded, over and over, by godless people who could not care less about how we live. They want are our minerals, grains, lands, and mysteries.

“But what really infuriates me is that I still believe in the gods, if ‘believe’ is the right word. I can feel when something sacred enters the picture. I’m sure you two can too, however you interpret it: as Zeus, as Adonai, whatever. The sacred is undeniably real. It plays with us every day, and those of us with certain sensitivities know it very well.

“What I can’t get past is the disparity of care. The old stories tell us to cherish our gods. But the gods don’t cherish us.” My voice rose unexpectedly: “How dare they?” I stopped and drank, breathing deeply.

“We have a story,” Ezekiel said, “about a man named Job who confronted God over injustices Job did not deserve. All God said was: I’m powerful, worship Me, and don’t you ever question Me. In that argument I am on the side of Job.” He shuddered. I liked his manner: quietly intense.

“When Pericles melted down a statue of Athena made of gold to pay for his war efforts abroad, a plague struck Athens and killed without discrimination.” Penelope glanced up at the window where the bird had sat and flown. “It was the beginning of the end for us. Who can doubt that the gods had entered the field? But the question I have never been able to answer is: On their behalf, or ours?”

We were silent, waiting, perhaps, for something superhuman to either educate us mystically or hurl lightning into the inn and level it. Nothing happened. Perhaps Zeus was pursuing a nymph; perhaps Re was tired and retiring; perhaps God was placing a bet elsewhere. A few flies buzzed above a spilled beverage.

“It would be easier to be faithless.” Penelope and I nodded at Ezekiel’s observation. “Or conformists. Seti could go on dyeing statuary, Penelope weaving praises for the gods into the garments she sells, and I teaching Torah and worshipping in the synagogue. What in the world are we to do?”

“You will never believe what just happened to me!” exclaimed a loud patron at a nearby table to his partner. Evidently they did serve stronger stuff here. His speech was just this side of slurred.

“My landlord was about to kick me out, and I made up a story out of nothing about how I had just talked in a dream to Eve—yes, that Eve, the original one in the Garden—and she told me I belonged there in my home, and that she would look out for me no matter what. My landlord wasn’t even Jewish or Christian; but when I cut loose with that tall tale, he decided to let my rent go for a few more weeks! Can you imagine? I felt like Eve was looking out for me after all!”

Penelope smiled. “He was looking out for himself.”

“As was I when I lied about being a priest this morning.”

“Was the scarab in on the joke?” Ezekiel asked. My drink tipped and I barely righted it in time.

Funny, how an idea lands simultaneously on an entire group. After another moment of reflection, we all looked up at each other.

I spoke first. “What if we reinterpreted the old stories? It’s what the priests in the House of Life do anyway, the only difference being that they get paid to.”

Penelope frowned. “I worry that my influence is turning you into a cynic.”

“Don’t. This goes deeper than cynicism.”

“Please explain?”

“Well, when that patron over there mentioned Eve, I imagined someone different from a passive female ordered around by Adam, as in the official myth we’ve all heard. I imagined someone more like Ma’at, our wisdom goddess. Someone capable of awakening Adam to the roots of his own consciousness.”

Ezekiel nodded, eyes narrowed in thought. “Some of our old tales talk about Wisdom co-participating in the Creation.”

“Have you ever noticed how beautiful the Kosmos really is?” I had never seen Penelope tear up before. “Have you ever really watched the sun rise? Or set? Really watched, letting in the sight. Or listened to the sounds of nature: wind, birds, thunder, the creatures all calling to one another? Where are the holy stories in reverence of that?”

“Before they sold out,” I said, “our priests, the wise ones, said that the transformative beauty of Creation continues always. It’s not one event; a vast Something cannot come

out of Nothing. Mothers keep giving birth. Ma'at and Nut give birth endlessly. Re rises and sets. Creation binds the entire universe together.”

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters...” Ezekiel paused to sip, then: “What if that occurs every day? All the time.” He looked away, absorbed.

When I applied dyes to fabrics and metals, they changed hues. Our wise folk said that the Art brought out the “essence” of what we worked on. Our statues “opened their mouths” and received a creative influx. So, in a sense, did we artisans.

Creativity: a prerogative both human and divine. Common ground where imbalance melted into the colors of new storied possibilities.

It was time to raise my idea. I took a breath. “I propose that we get together with like-minded people and start writing new stories. Rooted in our traditions but flying off in new directions. Sacred stories that show us linked with the Ultimate instead of subjected to fateful lower influences. The kinds of stories that celebrate reflection, creativity, and the spark of human dignity.

“We dwell among Powers we do not understand but need to work with. Why not say so?” Had that really come out of my mouth just now?

Penelope began talking, and Ezekiel replied. I could scarcely hear them for the bright cloud that engulfed the fire of my thinking.

At some point, we talked about ancient lore in which the ultimate God lived beyond gender or sex. The feeling of affirmation this flooded me with surprised me. Although male-bodied, I had never considered myself a man. “He” did not apply to me, although I had been called that all my life. Yet our Egyptian vision of God, the truly ancient vision of God, dared imagine a Being not constrained by the pronoun so prevalent in all our cultural backgrounds.

Ideas flowed between us. I felt good. My heart felt happy. It was the right course for us to take, from out of our respected and heard disenchantments into new kinds of storytelling. Now that we were on course, the practicalities would follow.

Although not a priest, I had learned how to write. I spoke Egyptian, the Koiné dialect of Greek, and Latin, but the writing was what mattered just now. This time I would write down something different from astrological arcana. Instead, new tales with primordial roots. Tales that would change lives. The radical freedom of our painful confrontation with the Ultimate demanded no less.

At our next meeting, which was in my shop, I uttered a prayer to Thoth, not of need but of gratitude. Penelope invoked Hermes. Ezekiel thanked God. We acknowledged our debt. But we had to go beyond...

I picked up a sharpened reed, dipped it in ink, and wrote what we all chanted together: “Having thus spoken, Isis poured forth for Horus the sweet draught of immortality...”

* * * * *

The cosmic Powers were in lively conversation about events playing out in historically pivotal Alexandria, first century Common Era by human reckoning. A Nexus Crisis involving the Powers in conflict was brewing there and on many worlds.

As their presences floated invisibly above Alexandria, the Powers thought at each other through and below what humans would one day call the spacetime continuum:

“I held it together for the devout for as long as I could,” said Renastra, beaming around to the group images of Osiris and Jesus.

“Just as you appeared as those two, I wore forms like these.” Unda projected Isis and Demeter. “How many times I brought water into their deserts.”

“You overestimate them.” This from trickster Kluni appearing as Set and the Devil. “They took your faces and built empires out of them. Century after century of carefully ordered oppression.” Wildia gave a mental nod as a shadow of Earth fell over its moon.

“It wasn’t just to oppress.” Pandere was defensive. “We helped build dynasties that lasted for longer than empires in Europe.” He gave a nod to the red-eyed planet Jupiter, one of his many symbols.

“Aye,” added Ordiri, whose sunlike countenance had inspired images of Re.

Wildia was sour. “And down all those conflicted millennia, what happened to the spark of life?”

“That,” Magos replied, “was in my keeping in this part of the globe. I nod to all of you who helped maintain it.” Most of the Powers present accepted his acknowledgment—even deathly Doja, in whose shadow a lot of tombs had sprouted there.

Kluni smiled. “Not to mention the Egyptians.”

“A magical civilization that went on to found many others,” Magos agreed. “As cultures blended in Alexandria, the next step, to free human minds from overidentification with us, became obvious: a wisdom path of continual creativity, ever in search of the new.”

“With you operating behind the scenes as Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus?” Kluni prodded as an asteroid struck a moon and all but pulverized it. “How new was that?”

Wise Vaeda fielded it: “A new take on an old tale. You tried to influence it, of course. We would expect no less of you.” Kluni smirked. “But Hermeticism, the new path forward,

first Egyptian and then worldwide, is the Way of the Mage. Be content that one of your Greek names is remembered in it.”

“I’m not mollified.”

“Then reflect that some of you flashes forth in every act of creation.” Cronicus was the Power of Time. “And the nature of our cosmos is creativity.”

“It certainly is. And speaking of being creative, care to take a peek in advance and see what happens to this magic path of yours?” Kluni couldn’t resist. Ponderous seriousness always lured him.

The Gnostic branch of Hermeticism came under sustained attack by early elements of what would grow into the early Christian Church. Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian were the loudest voices “against heresies.” Obedience, conformity, authority, and literalism were in; story, symbolism, dream, and imagination were out.

In 367 CE, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria ordered all Gnostic documents destroyed. This became church policy. Athanasius was made a saint.

Hermeticism retained good relations with the church so long as it seemed a benighted but useful predecessor to Christianity. This changed with Augustine’s denunciation of the Way as demonic. Technical Hermeticism, otherwise known as alchemy, also came under the interdict even though priests had previously practiced it.

As the scientific age dawned in Europe, Descarte, Mersenne, Gassendi, and others joined the attacks on imaginative esotericism and gnosis. Fundamentalists and materialists had found common cause. The winners were authority-based Christianity for the masses and politically compromised science for makers of poison gas and atomic bombs. The atmosphere began to overheat.

“See what I mean?” Kluni concluded as Cronicus ended the time scan.

Magos shook his head mentally, unable to speak. Vaeda started to and fell silent. Even Pandere had nothing to say.

“Well,” mused Ordiri at last, “we have plenty of other worlds to keep track of.”

* * * * *

Marsilio Ficino, priest, astrologer, and translator, sat at his desk writing when his patron Cosimo de Medici entered unannounced.

Normally, he would not have. But as the wealthiest banker and most influential politician in Florence, he could do mostly as he pleased without opposition. Ficino stood and bowed to the Grand Duke.

“I have brought you something very special.” Gently, Cosimo laid a sheaf of paper on the desk. “We have long anticipated it. Here it is at last.”

Ficino opened the bundle and stared. One word stood out: “Pymander.”

He looked up. “Is this for real?”

“Recovered by my agent from a ruined Byzantine library.”

“My God.”

“Precisely.”

Ficino leafed through. “This,” he said, dazed, “is the first full copy I have ever seen of the blessed *Corpus Hermeticum*. It has come all the way down to us from Hermes Trismegistus.”

“And you will be the one who translates it.”

“What about Plato? I’ve partly translated his body of work.”

“Plato can wait.”

Later, Ficino would describe the century as golden, when the liberal arts were brought back to life in Europe. Poetry, painting, architecture, grammar, rhetoric, music... Later commentators would announce the sunrise of Renaissance casting rays of creativity over a continent struggling to recover from religious authoritarianism.

He also believed what he would not say in public, having been accused and acquitted of heresy in 1498:

With the recovery of the Way of the Mage, natural magic, imaginative gnosis, and depth of soul had reentered the field of human culture. The possibilities were incalculable, even for gods.

Gentle Breath of Yours My Sails Must Fill

The play was about to begin.

The nobility in the packed audience wore white, sea green, silver, and carmine, depending on social station, the glistening apparel highlighted by the beeswax candles lit above the stage and along the walls. Sequins and shadows winked and danced as the flames flickered restlessly in their sconces. Surrounded by silent courtiers, the King stroked his beard, waiting.

A gasp went up from the audience as thunder and lightning assailed the room. The flash lit the rain-drenched coats of a master and boatswain struggling on the deck of a wind-pounded ship in peril of capsizing. “Bestir, bestir!”

The crew stood no chance of saving their ship. Backstage, Will smiled.

Another cannonball rolled thunderously down a lead pipe as loose canvas blustered like wind and fireworks burst like lightning. He winked at a stagehand poised to douse the emerging mariners with a bucket of water. If all the world were a stage, as Will would tell the audience later in the play, then stage magic made the reverse come true before their eager eyes.

He sighed. I’m old and have seen much. On every side, magic seems to be fraying, coming apart, dissipating. Perhaps the magic within as well.

On his first trip to London, everything had exuded magic. Yes, the decision to live there as a young actor had pained his family, especially his wife. But had he stayed in Stratford he would have been miserable. He had to go west.

How London had astonished him at first. His world, formerly of meadows, streams, texts, hard benches in school, and the odors of leather and wool, swelled in a space of footsteps. As he entered, the city boiled up into ringing bells, rising smokes, beggars, apprentices in aprons, drunks reeling from alehouses, blue-garbed ladies crooking seductive fingers.

He saw blindfolded Cupid signs above their heads, horses pulling carts, sacks of malt, bundles of hay, daggers riding on hips, and the occasional rapier. Children pushed heavy barrows around street merchants shouting up spices and cheeses for sale within an inescapable stench of dung. Singing balladeers, some with lutes, jostled with wrangling butchers and vegetable hawkers lurking on roadway corners near dark alleyways.

It was overwhelming. He liked it.

But he did not miss the envious older colleagues, the Queen’s persecution of Catholics like his father, the theater-closing waves of plague, the resulting countryside play tours, and the long periods apart from family. His bones tingled at an enormous cultural shift as candlelight, ritual, and art left the church and entered the theater. Once travel around

the globe opened new vistas of knowledge, only spectacle could capture even a rivulet of the vast flow of discoveries and make sense of them. The public still learned from the clergyman, but ever more from the playwright.

He missed Anne and the children, but he had always been drawn to the exciting teeming spaces lodged like tenements between ruin and rebirth. In other words, to the magic.

From behind the curtain, Gonzalo and the other island-bound nobles congratulated themselves for surviving the shipwreck. Little did they know what awaited them.

Will sighed again. I stand at the top of my career. I paid for it in long days of writing and study, endless negotiation with officials high and low, restraint when responding to competitors, tact in making players play together, investments and purchases of land. I flattered royalty, avoided controversy, and took much more care of my reputation than fractious men like Marlowe and Essex. I kept my own counsel and never lost my head.

But Will had lost a son and a father. Both reappeared in his dreams, his father lately with greater frequency. *Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold...* Upon awakening, Will could never recall what had been said.

To leave or not to leave the stage: that was now the question. Given his age and the life so long deferred in Stratford, it made sense to retire. It also fit the mood of the time. The magical creatures of theater and collective fancy were fading fast, replaced by mechanical marvels and global markets. The figure of the wizard—"My charms crack not, my spells obey"—was giving way to that of the duke. How might a former playwright do as a country gentleman?

He checked his plumed hat, ruff, robe, and hose once again and prepared for the next act. "Time goes upright with his carriage..."

He looked around. Always a relief when the stagehands knew what they were doing. While he waited to go on, he daydreamed....

* * * * *

By the standards of the Coaguum, the realm of material being, the Dreamvale is a peculiar piece of geography. Invisible on any map, the Dreamvale can found anywhere.

On Earth as humans perceive it, territories are divisible by borders, whether ecological and natural or arbitrary and political. The Dreamvale's imaginal landscapes, villages, cities, regions, and worlds are organized instead by creative themes: the Vale of Middle-earth, the Vale of Xanadu, of Wakanda, of the 24th Century, of 221B Baker Street...

Normally, the inhabitants of one Vale cannot mingle with those of another across the purlieus that separate these territories to preserve them. Now and then, however, some coagulant's dreamy imagination—in this case, Will's—bridges the Vales, allowing their

occupants to talk to one another. Some of these “creations” (they had actually created themselves) had gathered in a grassy clearing fringed by fog and framed by trees.

“He needs to go home.” Hermione spoke with gravity and grace.

“Hear, hear!” Titania clapped. Oberon smiled, as did Puck.

“Have we not heard the chimes at midnight?” Falstaff looked drunk but happy.

“The sober choice,” Celia frowned at the tankard in Falstaff’s hand, “would be putting an end to his state of exile.”

“Why call it exile?” Duke Senior turned his palms up. “He has done very well for himself.”

“I wish he would make up his mind,” fretted the Duke’s daughter Rosalind.

“He must come to it himself.” Hamlet sighed in his existentialist bad boy tone. “He’s wise not to confide in anyone.” Ophelia shook her head sadly at this, but Henry VIII nodded slowly.

The Countess corrected him: “Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none.”

“Yes, let him be,” Benedick said sharply, “and let him reassess married life while he is about it, the poor fool.”

“What wisdom would the likes of you possess about married life?” Beatrice cut in with equal sharpness. “But I’ll grant you the ‘fool’ expertise.”

“Some of us,” Cleopatra stated to smother a reply from Benedick, “would give all for love.”

“Too much,” Desdemona added. Iago quietly chuckled.

“No such thing.” Juliet took Romeo’s hand as Orlando and Rosalind smiled at each other.

“In the end, he must act for the good of all.” Brutus toyed with a dagger.

Henry V waved to his knights. “Once more unto the beach!”

“He should go home and take charge.” Richard III’s comment delighted Petruchio and Lady Macbeth. “I could tell him how.”

“He’s too honest for the likes of you,” Othello told the king. As Cordelia and Portia nodded, “He is a human, take him for all in all,” Hamlet murmured.

Shylock crooked a forefinger on each hand. “Tickle him, will he not laugh? Prick him, will he not bleed?” They ignored him.

“He is bound,” King Lear declared, “upon a wheel of fire.” His arms stretched out as though pinned. His daughters rolled their eyes.

“He must needs know himself,” Polonius lectured.

“He’ll miss the drama,” the other King Richard predicted.

Portia cleared her throat and stepped forward. “Methinks the gentlemen use up too much air preening themselves with their jaws. The decision to be made by the man who regards himself as our creator is not so simple as: gold, silver, or lead?” She sliced a hand down three times. “He stands in the breach not only between two kinds of life, but two great periods of time, one oncoming and one passing away. It is no light decision.”

Falstaff put down his drink and straightened. “To avoid counterfeiting himself, he must needs die a little so that what he may become can live.” Portia nodded.

“Whatever he decides, he must be determined,” said Helena, “and follow through.”

“Whatever he decides, the rough magic will never return in its present form.” Prospero placed an arcane text on the ground near Falstaff’s tankard. “That staff is broken; that book is buried. For now...”

The daydream evaporated.

Will’s eyes opened. He took a steadying breath and walked on stage into the flickering light.

* * * * *

The archetypal Powers observing all this from the Infrarealm could not be said, strictly speaking, to be on the ground in either Elizabethan England or the Dreamvale clearing now dissipating into mist as the actor walked the boards addressing his attentive audience.

In a sense, though, they who were so often known as gods gathered backstage for their own animated conversation. Pivotal historical transformations, whether on Earth or elsewhere else in the Tetraverse of sentient worlds, tended to get their attention. Moments of mortal awakening fascinated them. As archetypal presences, they could animate the figures of the Dreamvale at will.

“It seems to me,” said Aluere, the presence behind Juliet, Titania, Cleopatra, and so many other passionate figures, “that it really comes down to love and practicality. His wife, his heart, and his holdings lay in Stratford, so of course he should go there and live out what time is left to him.”

“I have been with him from the beginning.” Dramatic Renastra had animated Richard II. “I watched over him as he play-acted before he could even speak. He was born a poet and playwright, and he will die a poet and playwright. Pretending to be a country gentleman in retirement will never suit him. He will reject the tedium and grow unhappy. What good will that do? He should stay in London.”

“But it’s not just about what makes him happy.” Komoyna, the Power of family and community, sympathized with Hermione. “He left his kin behind to become successful in the world. Yes, he sent them money and visited. But for too many years, he was not present. He spent more time at his son’s funeral than he did with the boy when still alive. His wife has waited patiently all these long years. His family needs him, not out being famous at a distance, but at home, in the flesh, fully there.”

“Let me show you all something.” With Kluni the trickster, fresh from playing Falstaff and Iago, were timely Cronicus, skillful Smee, and fierce Bellum. For once Pandere hovered in the background.

“I’ve arranged a little drama of my own, in three brief acts. Let’s title it ‘Will’s Possible Futures.’ Roll it, Cronicus.”

—Having decided to remain active in theater, Will walks one evening toward his lodgings near the Blackfriars Theatre when a gang of cutpurses approaches him. He draws his sword and fights back, wounding two, but a blade enters his back. The thieves rob him and move off, leaving him dead in the street. Although England and King James mourn the passing of their greatest playwright, rumormongers classify him as yet another shady showman. As a result of this controversy, publication of the First Folio is delayed indefinitely. Outside of England, only a few later specialists learn of his work.

—Having decided to remain active in theater, Will visits Stratford less and less often. After their mother dies, daughters Judith and Susanna resent him greatly, giving Judith’s husband Thomas Quiney the idea to plant false evidence of Will’s involvement with the Gunpowder Plot against King James. The king responds by ordering Will’s execution. Quiney gains a substantial portion of Will’s estate and uses his influence to bar publication of his late father-in-law’s poetry and plays.

—Having decided to remain active in theater, Will catches the plague on its latest passage through pestilential London and infects his business partners before they can leave town. All those infected die, including Will. Publication of his works dwindles, and his name is all but forgotten.

“There is no scenario in which his staying in London turns out well.” Kluni winked at Cronicus for running the time stream simulations.

“Other outcomes are always possible,” Terkwa pointed out.

“True in theory. But outcomes like these keep popping up when we run things forward. That does not bode well.”

“Kluni is correct.” Vaeda’s Cordelia-like powers of foresight had brought glimpses of the worst possibilities even before she saw the simulations.

“But *why* is he correct?” Wildia had played Beatrice. “Why do the simulations always go abysmal like this?”

Nobody spoke. Then: “We need a larger picture.” Wildia looked around. “Who played Portia?”

Radantia, mother of them all, said, “I did. Perhaps I can fill in a bit.

“What humans would one day call the Renaissance is ending. With it go the fairies and dryads, angels and nymphs, deities and spirits of old. Mersenne, Descartes, Gassendi, and other mechanists side with Galileo that the only valid knowledge is of what can be measured and tabulated. This attitude goes worldwide, pushed by mechanists within and beyond Europe.” She glanced at Smee and Pandere, two of the Powers behind this counterreaction to churchly authority. Ordiri made a third, and Magos, oddly enough, a fourth, although it divided him.

“Will and Prospero both feel this pendulum making its massive swing. New gods must hold sway for a time. The long rule of religion has created a cultural imbalance that must somehow be compensated for.

“Meanwhile, Komoyna is correct: His family needs him, and he needs them too. He has been a loner for long enough.”

Smee frowned. “If that is true, then how is it that his magic-filled work becomes so important later?”

Magos fielded this question: “The magic never leaves. It merely changes form for a time. Instead of investing hills and brooks, it sneaks into machines and mathematics. When it fully returns, humans will gain new appreciation for what their playwright left them.”

Peace-loving Paesha spoke up: “What a risky pendulum swing! What if they don’t correct it? Technology in the wrong hands could devastate their planet.” Smee and Bellum cast a cold look at her. Kluni raised the archetypal equivalent of amused eyebrows.

“That is where consciousness comes in,” replied Vaeda. “It’s up to them to balance the extremes, keep the peace, control the machinery, and await the eventual reanimation of their sky, earth, and sea.”

A moment crept by as everyone wondered the same thing: Was humanity up to this challenge?

“Meanwhile,” Kluni said, “let’s see what unfolds and how Will decides. I too have a part to play.”

* * * * *

The magical masque assembled in the air by Prospero delighted the new lovers Miranda and Ferdinand, but it ended abruptly as the weaver of spells grew sad. So much pending in his life. So much taking leave...

To the king’s ear, Prospero’s lines sounded with deeply felt poignancy. The silent audience sat spellbound by the unexpected emotion of the actor, garbed as a mage, about to end his career forever. Even Ariel, soon to be without a job, was gripped as Will declared:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air...

For the first time in his decades-long career, Will paused to choke back tears.

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind...

Yet still he could not go home, not fully.

Instead, he bought property in London. Although he no longer acted or wrote plays, he continued to collaborate with other writers. He managed the Blackfriars and other business arrangements while dividing his time between London and Stratford, where he concentrated his finances for the inevitable day of retirement. All in all, he vacillated, slowing the transition from mage to duke. Perhaps he could have it both ways?

On June 29th, 1613, a cannon went off for effect during a performance of *Henry VIII*. A spark ignited the rooftop thatching. Within two hours, the Globe Theatre in which Will had invested so much time and money lay dissolved in smoking ruins.

From that time onward, he spent more of his remaining years in Stratford, finally withdrawing altogether from the world of drama. He had criticized no kings, nor had he staged any activism, for “the people” or anyone else. Even so, his creativity set in motion a perpetual evolution in the question implied in all his art: What might it mean to be an embodied, passionate, ideal-pursuing human being?

In April of 1616, he closed his eyes forever on his birthday, his busy life rounded with a sleep.

As the Powers watched, the literary and psychological treasures Will had composed blazed even more brightly in his absence. Enheduanna of Akkad had introduced true individuality by signing her name to her writings, millennia ago; Will deepened the imprint of individualism with a palette of unforgettable characters.

In 1896, Warwickshire, the living countryside that had nourished Will and other great writers, entranced a boy just moved there from South Africa. His novels, though not political, would summon the sensitive to protect the green magic of enspirited natural places. Elves and trees spoke to him. His name was J. R. R. Tolkien. The time of magic, seen off by Prospero, was finally about to return to the stage. Magicians of story would soon proliferate.

Kluni, who had arranged the theater fire, nodded with gratification. "All's well that ends well."

The Case of the Hidden Author

The unexpected has happened so continually in my life that it has ceased to deserve the name.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Despite the occasional conceited complaint, my brother Sherlock has enjoyed the revelation of his professional exploits as conveyed by his faithful Boswell, John Watson. Because I have no such admirer, let alone one equipped with literary gifts, I shall have to set down my own uncanny account.

My tale begins in the period during which my brother gained fame through Watson's entertaining narratives. I sat one day in my customary chair in the Diogenes Club smoking, reading them, and occasionally chuckling—but quietly, because the Club, which I co-founded, does not permit verbalization except in the Stranger's Room. Silence among gentlemen can be a virtue, particularly after a laborious day of government service in Whitehall.

Because I read attentively, with an eye for detail, I began noticing small errors. For example, my brother seldom engages in the type of reasoning known as deduction, an operation which follows from general principles rather than from specific facts or events. He relies instead, as I do, upon abduction: drawing a conclusion from what is known. Sherlock fathoms “the great issues that may hang from a bootlace”; I read multifarious reports, solicit information, and offer expert opinions that influence national policy.

At first, I attributed such errors to Dr. Watson's casualness with details, a habit Sherlock often chided him for. Some errors, however, were startling. In “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” Watson's wife Mary calls him “James” even though his name is “John.” In “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” we are told of an agile adder which somehow scurries up and down a rope and kills on command. My brother could not have “deduced” such a serpent because it does not exist. In “The Final Problem,” Watson purports never to have heard of Professor Moriarty even though Sherlock had previously mentioned his name more than once: the name of the greatest criminal mastermind in London, and perhaps in the world.

During the war in which Watson served as an army physician, had he been shot in the arm or in the leg? The wound shifts with the telling. How could a carbuncle, which is red, be blue in color? Why would Sherlock keep poor, grieving Watson in the dark for three years about surviving the Reichenbach Falls, where my brother supposedly fell to his death in doomed Moriarty's clutches, when Moran had spotted him there and, presumably, informed his fellows? What need then for secrecy?

I know Dr. Watson, and I know he wrote those tales. He is proud of them, albeit modest when praised. I also know that he could not have perpetrated these errors. An apparent paradox.

But as my brother likes to argue, when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

The tales, therefore, came from another source even though it was Watson who wrote them down. Who, then, was the true author?

The chaos of early circumstances had convinced my brother and I to dedicate ourselves to a life of reason purged of unproductive emotion. I hesitate to state, therefore, that a certain mood of anxiety came over me, even of growing dread. It would perhaps be more objective to cleave to the sensory facts: a sensation of tightening across my forehead, for example, and a fluttering somewhere in the vicinity of my gastrointestinal tract. Warmth crept across my temples as I hovered on the edge of insight. What could logic reveal?

Clues scattered throughout the narratives of my brother's doings suggested a scientifically trained writer, one familiar with medicine and bearing a physical resemblance to Watson. He was not religious and did not grow up in England, although he had spent considerable time in London; perhaps he worked there. In medical practice? He must have traveled and spent time at sea. He was likely athletic and had probably played cricket. Perhaps he had been at war. He had handled firearms. His inattentiveness to certain details suggested writing stories as a pastime rather than as a serious occupation.

Neither Sherlock nor I are metaphysicians, but the implications of an author behind an author called for serious rethinking of the story in which I lived and had always believed reflected actuality.

Seated in my club again, I smoked and thought it over. Rain smeared the yellow glow of streetlamps down the windows. An ex-miner rushed by with flowers in one coal-stained hand while the other wiped an illicit carmine streak from his lower lip. I wondered idly whether his waiting wife would detect upon him any scent from his secret French paramour.

If Watson and perhaps Sherlock and everyone else I knew were characters, who wrote them? Who wrote me? The same unknown author? Different authors? The latter, I surmised; based on what I had read, this sort of plot twist would not have occurred to the original author.

I had solved one mystery only to be confronted by a greater. An empty sensation spread upward into my stomach. But I was not hungry. Interesting...

I heard a sourceless chuckle.

You are correct, Mr. Mycroft Holmes. Someone else wrote the story prior to your recent musings, which resulted when I picked it up.

"I see," I thought back. "Are you a human being?"

I am. Mortal, too, unlike your own celebrated self.

“I cannot die?” This day’s end seemed determined to bring life-changing revelations.

Not as long as people remember your story.

“Fascinating. I have so many questions. For example, where are you?”

That is difficult to explain. From your standpoint, I live more than a century in the future.

“In that case, where am I?”

You exist in the Dreamvale, more commonly known in your day as the realm of imagination. The Dreamvale is a kind of perpetual dream demesne populated by the characters, lands, and events of every imaginative tale ever told. Including yours.

“Am I not real, then? My life feels quite vividly real to me.”

You are real, sir, in the sense that everything in the Dreamvale possesses its own autonomy, integrity, and lawfulness of being. The people of the realm where I live often believe they create “fictional” characters such as yourself, but the reality is that we simply write you, or express you in other media, in accord with your internal influence on us.

“Am I to infer that I inhabit a story you are telling?”

Bravo, Mr. Holmes. That is so. Your story as we know it began with a former army doctor—your surmises were correct—who wrote between appointments while waiting for his patients to arrive. Since then, other authors have moved the story forward. I was thinking about you today and decided to write and see what came of it.

“How will your version of my story end?”

I don’t know. I’m writing to find out. The ending has more to do with you perhaps than with me. Your imaginal reality outlives these tellings and always will.

“That is some consolation perhaps for discovering one’s world to be a narrative construct. –Do others I know occupy the Dreamvale, then? My brother, Watson, his wife?”

Indeed.

“The Diogenes Club? London? Entire nations? The great globe itself and all which it inherit?”

Even the stars above you. The Dreamvale is of infinite extent and has no geographical or temporal limitations.

“Why did I come to mind before you began this latest addition to my story?”

I was wondering if you would be interested in membership in a new kind of embassy. It will serve as a meeting place for people in your realm and in mine. Through it, we in the Coaguum and you in the Dreamvale can advise each other such that our worlds achieve a better balance than previously. When we over here stop tending the imaginal, then personal and social conflict erupts. An unhealthy state of affairs desirable to prevent.

I drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. My initial hypothesis of suffering from a surreptitiously introduced hallucinogen seemed improbable. Everything around me felt and looked clear: the flaming logs in the fireplace, the patter of rain, the rustle of newspapers being turned... Besides, who would want me in such a state? For what purpose? No international crisis was pending.

Rather, it was starting to seem as though what I took to be my reality-affirming, reason-exalting life was the phantasm and the fantasy voice in my mind the possessor of some higher form of reality. I wondered what Sherlock would make of it all. I was usually supposed the less fanciful brother.

I decided to continue the internal conversation to learn what it might reveal. If an enemy of England had altered my state of consciousness, he would have to unveil himself and his motives eventually.

“What is your personal interest in assembling such an embassy?”

The industrial might unleashed in your time has ravaged much of the planet, now overheating because of the particulates in the air. As polar ice melts, seas rise, communities are displaced, and wars ignite continually over remaining natural resources. In our necessary but limited focus on survival, we have lost faith in the potential of imagination. It must be recovered if we are to repair the world.

“Surely there has been much progress over the past century or so?”

Technologically, yes. Powered flight takes us around the world and from city to city when the winds permit. Factories produce food, clothing, materials for building homes, and components for electronic communication and entertainment. Motorized carriages whisk us down paved intercontinental roadways. Our machines have opened the seas to our visitation. We have even visited the Moon.

Yet more of us go hungry and thirsty than ever. I live in an age of ever-deepening privation and conflict. Our old stories about who we are and how to be with each other have broken down. We desperately need new ones.

I was as impressed by the urgent tone of these statements as by the content, which after all did not herald much to be astonished by. Of course humanity had undergone technical advancement. But the other developments were alarming.

“Where do you stand with regard to England?”

The British Empire has shrunk since your time but participates in important international alliances of politics and trade. Much of England is still green and vital, as I saw during a visit some years ago. I have ancestry there, but no ties beyond that. The political hierarchy of Great Britain has not changed much. Royal family, prime minister, and so forth.

“What are your political alliances?”

I remain a citizen of what is still being called the United States of America, but our empire is in an advancing state of decomposition. I was born in California, which in your day had been part of the Union for only a few decades. My real alliance is to Earth and my fellow beings here.

“Is your American Empire at war with anyone just now?” I reminded myself that “now” meant a fictionalized century from my own version of now.

It is constantly at war. Most of its wars are undeclared as such, including its ongoing quiet civil war. Our wars are now waged long-range, with machines doing some of the fighting.

Into my mind came an image of slim, finned torpedoes streaking through the air to land on distant targets. Some of the torpedoes shot upward from the ground, others from winged flying machines both large and small.

“It would seem,” I observed while lighting a cigar, “that no amount of technological progress has succeeded in improving human nature.” Whatever strangeness I was caught up in, one fact stood forth: my inner conversationalist needed my willing participation in his project.

Humans aren’t born with a desire to hate or place ourselves above others. We are taught to by the influence of the ruling powers of our societies on our families. If we imagined more clearly, we would fight less. Hence the need for the embassy.

“Do I discern a revolutionary streak at work?”

Revolutions seldom if ever bring fundamental changes, especially for those who are forced to suffer their consequences. Perhaps you detect something even more radical: a refusal to sell human nature short. Does not your own brother exemplify one of our better impulses, the quest for justice?

“Sherlock always was the idealist of the family. Will he be invited to your embassy as well?”

He will be.

“I note a shift to the passive verb voice. Not invited by you, I take it?”

An interesting pause ensued. Then:

Not by me. I assigned myself to you out of curiosity. I see you as the stabler and more settled Holmes, but we don't know much about you. Your famous brother's moody, eccentric intensity would be difficult for me to work with.

“Why?”

He reminds me too much of my mother. Imagine Sherlock and Professor Moriarty rolled into one. Or just think of Irene Adler.

“Oh dear. I can certainly see why I would represent the more sedate choice. I am pleased to hear, though, that someone will attempt to enlist my brother's quirky cleverness.”

Occasionally assisted by you, I understand.

“Primarily as an intellectual game we have played since childhood.”

A staff member entered the reading room with another log to place on the fire. I saw from a powdery smudge on the side of his left shoe that he had walked through a street cobble repair zone this morning on his way to the club. Sherlock would have known which street because such information interested him enough to keep up with it.

Only a game? What about the discomfort you felt when our conversation began? Merely another game?

“Your access to my interior reactions places me at a disadvantage. Beyond your being of middle age, educated, American, philosophically practical, probably in good health, graced with a taste for the fanciful, grieving a recent loss, unmarried, idealistic, and quite sincere, I can tell little about you.”

Touché. We seem to share a capacity for selective caring below a detached exterior. My name, for what it's worth, is Lucas Murdock. I don't want to seem mysterious to you.

“Would this new embassy you have in mind require me to associate much with others?”

Not in any regular way. How you do it will be up to you. Sit in a big jar by yourself if you like.

“Your phrasing is optimistic, though not without reason. Very well, I will consider your invitation. Although I carry a full schedule—working morning until evening during weekdays, then relaxing and reading in the Club, a meal, and a walk home to Pall Mall—I do have some leisure time here and there.”

Thank you. I appreciate your willingness to give it some thought, especially considering how destabilizing all this must be.

Some of the tension went out of me. My agreement had surprised my invisible recruiter, just as I had hoped it would.

It meant I could actually alter the story in which I lived. Which meant that I could assert my own kind of reality come what twists in the tale lay ahead. All in all, a worthwhile attainment in exchange for deviating from my carefully created sphere of daily comfort. It, too, was a fiction...

Truly, who among us could ask for more, whatever reality we called home, than the chance to choose our own way forward?

“My brother’s occupation involves facing risks. Mine involves their negotiation with the fates of nations hanging in the balance. Neither of us has been known to retreat in the face of the amazing.”

I would expect no less.

I looked across the room at the mantelpiece.

“I see by the clock over the fireplace that the time is twenty to eight.”

I look forward to conversing again.

“As do I, and to extending this tale together.”

I rose, put out what was left of my cigar, and gathered up my paperwork. I donned my cloak on the way out.

“I will leave you with one question for next time.”

Is the question about who is authoring me?

“No, although that is obviously important.”

What, then?

“How are you crafting your own life into a tale worth retelling?”

Maturation

“What does it mean to mature?” Paesha asked.

Although the undying Powers of the cosmos could be anywhere at once, and in fact operated everywhere at once, some locales got more of their attention at a given time. One of these was the site of a fragile but persistent experiment in consciousness: Earth.

Paesha looked down at the shimmering blue world through thick smog, wildfire smoke, and metallic orbital trash left from innumerable rocket launches organized by competing, necktie-wearing, self-important male bipeds. The planetary coastlines were wetter, the oceans greener, and the white poles scantier than the last time she had visited.

Unda, the Power behind growth in all its expressions, replied at the speed of thought: “To mature means to grow, develop, acquire wisdom and self-management, exercise one’s best capabilities. To gain new strengths by overcoming obstacles. For mortals in particular, maturity requires integrating one’s disregarded aspects into a fuller kind of living.”

Although the Powers have no faces beyond what humans and other species have given them in fantasy and mythology, Paesha “frowned”: the shadow of partial eclipse crept over the moon’s gray face. “Our mother Radantia always speaks of maturation as a positive process, but it sounds messy, uncertain, and turbulent.”

“It is all of that,” replied Unda, “and also highly conflictual at times.”

Conflictual? Paesha’s frown deepened. “But what good is so much adversity? Does it not threaten the very nature of maturation? Why cannot beings simply grow into their adult form in accord with their own nature?”

Unda “smiled.” Warlike Bellum could have answered that, but he was off with Kluni and Doja dragging a black hole through a collapsing solar system. His consort, loving Aluere, mother of Paesha, could have too, but she was delighting a continent of ammonia-based treewalkers with a filigreed supernova remnant whose luminous clouds filled half their sky.

By her very nature, Paesha could not think beyond the primacy of Peace. How would she learn to comprehend struggle of the kind that leavened the universal experiment in creating consciousness? She wanted to, but was it even possible? Unda shook her head.

The worlds turned as she considered her response. Then another voice spoke into the starry void: “I feel a fondness for the spiral galaxy that holds the planet below in one of its arms.”

Maternal Komoyna was known to humans by a thousand names, including Aditi, Nokomis, Selu,, Almene, Sarpanitu, Xi Wang Mu, Alusina, Ixchel, Juno, Parvati, and

Hera. She acknowledged the greetings of her sister Powers and took up station above the turning globe.

Then she “pointed” in a circle around them, tracing the 275,000-light-year circumference of the spinning body of stars 100,000 light-years across and 1,000 thick: a gigantic glowing eye rotating in space. Its pupil, a supermassive black hole, resided within the spiral’s ancient center. Like Komoyna, this galaxy went by many names, one of which was Milky Way.

Satellite bodies surrounded it, including the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds—pale patches in the night sky of the southern hemisphere—and the Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy near the Milky Way’s bright rim.

Paesha looked carefully. “It seems to be eating its neighbors.”

“The tale of the galaxy’s maturation is a larger one than that.” Komoyna invited in another voice. “Let us listen in while it tells the tale in its own way.”

* * * * *

I know exactly when I will die.

My birth is less clear to me. My awareness emerged gradually from patches of bright fog.

That was thirteen and a half billion years ago, give or take a few million. The rapidly spinning Voidhub has been my center for as far back as I can recall. It is a womb, a shadow, a pull, a pivot, and a vault of mystery within me.

From my halo, formed of millions of immigrant stars, my sense of self slowly spread inward to my hub, grown when gas from somewhere—the memories are too dim for clear recall—poured into my center ten billion years ago. Metals and elements that would build planets and their occupants cooked in the forges of my blazing interior.

It was about then when a galaxy speeding across the darkness intertwined with me, playing havoc with my powers of self-organization.

First came the waves of gravity reaching into me and disordering entire solar systems. The gasses with which I birthed stars swirled into chaos, flowing unpredictably anywhere. The primal pattern of my being was dislocated, at first on my fringes, and then in my heart. Only my vault remained protected.

Then alien stars entered me, bringing worlds as they came. None crashed into my own, but my entire structure slowly changed, my awareness baffled at first by how much of what was filling me was truly mine.

In a way, I died. My sense of self was all but obliterated as my vitals underwent a long rearrangement. I did not know from century to century, millennium to millennium,

whether any of my former identity would survive. Would it disappear forever, lost in the cosmic dark? Would it turn into something else, something utterly foreign to my former being? Or would it emerge stronger? I sat in the uncertainty of it far longer than any mortal being could. My bright halo lay in tatters.

During the long collision, fully half the stars formed that now make up my central mass. From rupture and chaos came unimaginable growth. As I gained in bulk and vitality, I emerged from this long trial with a brighter halo than ever.

Certainly I am better off than the larger of the two bright patches that orbit me. Long ago, it too developed star-bearing arms, but an encounter with another galaxy collapsed it into an irregular mass. It has never recovered.

I used to yearn for stability, I who possess an insatiable hunger at my core. But after a dozen galactic mergers across the eons, I've learned that my essence is darkness-contrasting luminosity that forms life through motion, destruction, change, imbalance, rebalance, and flow, always flow.

Adversity strengthens me. With each new conflict, my stellar productiveness increases. Do you know how many civilizations live within my arms, between them, just beyond them, and near the center of my body? I do. I watch them rise, flourish, and fade, giving way to sprightly newcomers. Some extinguish themselves with their own inventions. Others achieve maturity by creative adaptation, using hardship to grow new capabilities and new wisdom. I place mighty labors on promising species, testing them for survival and eventual greatness. After all, they are the reason I am here.

I am also testing the dwarf galaxies that orbit me. Are they worthy of a merger? What can we grow to achieve together? The larger patch was barren until my tidal forces penetrated it and ignited new stars.

My kindred float around me on every side, glowing in a vast sea of night. The largest of them, Andromeda, is headed directly for me. What will happen in four and a half billion years when I and this incoming galaxy collide?

My present form will expire, as it has in the past; but this transformation will go even deeper. I do not know where it will lead.

Perhaps the large black voids at the center of each of us will orbit one another for a time and then smash together, igniting a quasar and releasing the energy of a hundred million supernovae. Perhaps the Triangulum galaxy will join the merger, adding its mass to ours.

Or perhaps we will combine identities and evolve into an elliptical galaxy.

Just as the spiral is a universal image of development and self-nourishment, the ellipse signifies maturity. My elliptical kindred are not as bright as spiral galaxies are, nor do they form as many stars as we do. Their stars tend to be older and redder, their planets

inhabited by civilizations either deceased or hoary with knowledge. I aspire to ellipticality, some day.

What is certain is that my current spiral self will cease to exist. Experience and long observation tell me that another self will replace it. Such is the way of the endlessly creative cosmos. Such is the way of maturation.

Until then, I will tend my stellar children and their almost countless offspring. For now, my fertile interior remains a lively space to grow in, near a rotating portal that leads beyond space and time.

* * * * *

“Do you now understand maturation?” Like Unda, Komoyna worried that her sister’s bias for peace could impede the great experiment.

Paesha paused in thought as the shadow of eclipse lifted and the moon shone again in all its reflective fullness.

“I begin to,” she said. “And in the enlargement of my understanding, perhaps I have matured a little myself.”

On Earth, Charles Messier of France, who had lost six siblings and his father before reaching age 24, studied a comet (a harbinger of disaster for many) and a solar eclipse (ditto) and decided to become an astronomer. Puzzled by stellar objects that looked like comets but did not move, he began cataloguing them. He published the list in 1781.

One day another astronomer, Edwin Hubble, became an astronomer after his father died, releasing him from the study of law. In 1927, Hubble showed these objects to be distant galaxies like the one human beings inhabited. Earth and its solar system resided in the Orion Arm, not far from a stellar nursery.

The Wizard's Tale

I am a son of Magos, a primal Power of the living, singing Tetraverse. All such sons bear a proper name, but to plain folk, we are wizards.

My names are many: Olorion, Fundinn, Hangi, Grimmir, Cerridwen, Volsi, Baba Yaga, Angan Friggjar... Some might add: Manawydan, Gwydion, Sweeney, Lailoken, Myrddyn, Dworkin, White Rider ...

But most of those names apply to me—to us, we sons of Magos—only in the most general and archetypal sense. Think of *me* as Whitebeard, whose steed outran the fastest winds. That was when I still lived in a body, of course.

I miss my old four-legged friend. He carried me from forest to mountain to meadow and citadel and back again. Firiell would have liked him. He would have liked her.

See Firiell the day before her last dream: a scion of doughty if diminutive folk, with shining golden hair like that of her mother, a friend of the Queen and King and daughter of stout Sam, long since passed on over the sea from whence none return. Her father is a warden of a western region between downs and hills, a region that gave its name to an important Red Book. Their family received this region from the King. I wonder what he would have thought of what has happened there since.

Although I too have passed over those fateful waters, I know all this because I visit Firiell's dreams. We converse there, her sleeping round face and slightly pointed ears framed by a pillow. Sometimes we discuss the Book in her care. She is an archivist and historian for her people. When her brown eyes open, I fade.

For the most part, her people tend toward joviality and contentment. They live close to the ground and, unless mightily prodded, shun adventures of any sort. They plant and tend and gather their crops. They trade with one another, polish their spoons, and trim their hedges. They favor bright colors and love a good party, a dark ale, and a quiet pipe. Seldom will you find them up before dawn or out many hours after the sun retires.

Although Firiell shares some of these characteristics—witness her fondness for crimson and bright silver garments despite her quiet nature—she harbors one fine quality seldom seen in her people. She is reflective.

How did we get here? What is it all about? Why are there clouds and rains? Winds and fires? What is the force that makes us grow? What do the plants and animals say? What is beyond the western sea? These are the kinds of things Firiell wonders about. She does not wonder as a mind game for self-amusement. She needs to deeply know.

Which makes her a perfect pupil for a disembodied wizard who yet wants to see the coming time go well. That is the trouble with sailing off just as Ages change: so much left unfinished.

Some of it unexpected. That is why They sent my spirit back.

Not far from where Firiell and her people live, the boxy houses and factories have continued to rise, turn gray, and spread across the land, eating it as they go. Clean air has turned foul. Streams once pure and filled with bright fish slogged darkly when they move at all. On every side, the swish of the breeze and the neigh of happy ponies have retreated before the continual clanking of machinery.

It dominated much of the land now, less and less of it free and open, more and more of it owned and walled up. Will Firiell the scholar be able to advocate for what is being lost? Will I be able to help her?

We have been talking about the nature of reality, Firiell and I. How to convey great mysteries in fewest words? Only what she can absorb for now...

“Why,” she asked, “do you call all this the Tetraverse?” Her upturned palms circled outward toward the trees around us, the shadowy mountains behind them, the stars above. Everything, all of it together.

Our imaginal classroom clearing within a circle of thick trunks reaching rootward and skyward included a tall block of stone. I gestured with an imaginal staff. The word **SOURCE** glowed in blue script upon the rocky face.

“The cosmos as we know it contains four layers. The first is the all-creative Source, mystery of mysteries; not so much a place as the origin of place itself. Every rock and shrub, every tree and tower, every wind and wave and everything you sense, including yourself, contains a living spark of the Source.”

Firiell’s eyes squinted around the clearing as her hand felt the bark of a tree trunk. How to keep the feel of this knowing when she left the dream?

More words appeared upon the stone as I continued:

“The second layer, born from the first, is the Infrarealm, the world of potentiality, of primal forms and diverse Powers. These Powers appear in ancient tales as gods, angels, even the occasional monster.

“These great Powers also appear as forces of animate nature. For everything is alive, not just that which breathes.” She nodded. She had sensed this, probably from babyhood.

“My kind are their servants,” I added. Another gesture. Four staff-wielding hooded figures appeared, then faded.

Now it would get trickier, because more complex and closer to home. An unseen owl hooted.

“The third emanation from the Source is the Dreamvale, where your people live. Other beings too, of many colors, kinds, and temperaments.”

“What about elves? Or have they passed beyond the Dreamvale?”

“No, only out of this vale, where you and your kin live. The elves now dwell in the immortal lands where I, your grandfather, and others have come to dwell. Those lands too are a vale, as are all the lands and realms you’ve heard told of in the old stories and in the tales of wanderers.” I paused to let her receive these tidings.

“Why is it called *Dreamvale*?”

“Because it is a realm of imagination and wonder, a realm of Possibility next door to that of pure Potentiality, the Infrarealm where the gods and great powers normally live. Here, magic works, enchantments are cast, and even trees can talk.”

“Not elsewhere, then?”

“No indeed. In the fourth layer, the Coaguum, most of the magic is confined to storytelling. The Coaguum is the world of matter both soft and hard. Only the most visionary of people there, and children, and animals, ever see a dragon or an elf at all.”

“How do people there live?”

“Most coagulants go about laboring for others, distracting themselves with machineries of pleasure or worrying about how they appear to other coagulants.”

“It sounds quite flat and barren.”

“It can be. But through revelations, dreams, fantasies, and fables, its people can touch the Dreamvale. They can even work some magic here.”

“I dreamed once of a very solid, slender, white-haired man writing while elves whispered in his ears.” To her surprise, his face appeared upon the teaching stone. He wore a gray coat and a green vest and sat back against a sturdy tree.

“Just as coagulants can sense us, we dreamvalers occasionally sense them. From our standpoint they seem solid, heavy, enfleshed. To them, we flit about like dreams.” That dream of hers was what prompted my current mission.

“Then *our* dreams, like these dream lessons, are really dreams within the Dreamvale.” For a blink of time, the clearing, the teaching stone, the forest, and the sky wavered in pearly transparency, like images vibrating in a pond disturbed by a thrown pebble.

“Exactly. The coagulants dream too. About us, themselves, other things. Everything in the Tetraverse dreams after its own fashion, even the Source.”

“What were the elves telling the scribe?”

“They were telling him about us. About your kind, about this vale, and eventually about the great war and how it ended.”

Her roving eyes found mine again. “Why him?”

“He listened. He cared. Also, he had been through a great war of his own. Large events in both realms tend to run in parallel.”

An old friend undergoing a transition had told me he felt like too little butter spread over too much bread. I began to feel that way when Firiell was close to waking up for the day.

“Is that enough lore for now?” I asked.

“One more question: Is the Tetraverse all, or is there more?”

“The wise sense a Manyverse that contains the Tetraverse, but they know little more than that. –Tomorrow we can continue, and touch on your place in all of this.” She smiled, though with a tinge of apprehension.

Between our sessions, the flow of memories continues, bearing images of friends long gone, shimmering nightscapes, verdant forests, the snuffle of my old companion as he bore me on his back through yet another crisis... Most vivid, perhaps because of my current mission, are images of desolation: broken castles, swords glowing with wrath, blasted fields no longer fertile. That earlier victory also brought bitter harvests: a friend with an unhealed wound, departing fair folk, beasts and laborers replaced by smoking gray apparatus.

How temporary, the victory. The Shadow would return.

Because discord had arisen in the primal singing forth of the cosmos, the Shadow would always return...until the inharmonious notes were woven into the entire song, and the realms brought thereby into alignment.

Little wonder that Firiell, who sensed so much without knowing it yet, felt afraid to step forward into her great task. I knew that uncertainty intimately. My task would be in helping her live with it. Like the discord in the heart of the cosmos, it could never be permanently overcome.

* * * * *

Tonight we were visited by fireflies, each blinking in a different color. From far above the treetops, the stars winked their light upon the silent forest.

“I am very grateful,” Firiell said, eyes moving about the clearing, “for all you have taught me, Whitebeard. I have no idea how to get it all into my book, but I’ll try. I am in your debt.”

“With deep knowledge comes heavy responsibility. You are in debt to your destiny.”

“Will I hear more about that tonight?” Her eyes darted toward the teaching stone and back to me.

“Yes, for after this session I must depart.”

“Depart! But I have scarcely even begun to grasp what it all means!”

“None grasp that, not even the wise. After this session you will have what you need to walk your sacred path.” I leaned upon my staff, missing the feel of the corporeal one left behind so long ago. “Shall we begin with your questions?”

She had one ready. “The human scribe whose face we saw. Why is he so important?”

“He described the doings in this vale in a series of books that many of his people read and were influenced by. They read of our struggles, our dreams, our defeats, our loves, our triumphs.”

“So he gave them some of our history? A noble undertaking.” Her hands found each other.

“For them, it was epic rather than history. His readers believed he created it all, and us along with it.”

Her brows squeezed. “How can this be?”

“When coagulants sense us, they tend to believe they made us up. For them, our world is so ephemeral that this belief comes easily to them.”

Her head shook in wonder. “Did *he* believe that?”

“At first. Later, he wondered. When asked where the stories came from, he replied wryly that the elves told them to him.”

Her hands spread. “Well, I’m sure they did. They love to recite their lore.”

“Ah, but did they now? What if the coagulants actually *are* our creators?” They were not, but I wanted her to answer an objection she would surely hear spoken beyond her vale.

Firiell paused to think while the fireflies danced. A shooting star fell behind a distant mountain. How deceiving, these calm intervals just down the path from the next

cataclysm. Would she walk her path at last, or was my mission all for naught, ending with my presence dispersed back into nothingness? Soon, we would find out...

“Last night you described the Tetraverse as a series of emanations. If that is so, then our world emanates theirs, not the reverse.” Her hands rejoined, fingers interlaced.

“Excellent. Except that matters are not so straightforward.” I gestured with the staff.

Dragon-like flying machines with unflapping metal wings swarmed across the face of the teaching stone. Below, in the shadows of the fliers, immense cylinders of metal on wheeled carriages blasted forth canisters that flew far and exploded, each killing many armored and helmeted coagulants hiding in hastily dug trenches. Those who survived charged forth, most flung down to death as they advanced upon their frightened opponents.

I pointed. “That is a single brief scene from the great war which the scribe—they call such ‘writers’—lived through. More wars can be expected there, and here as well. They tend to break out together. Which must come first?”

Although horrified, Firiell thought. “By the logic of emanation, ours must.”

“Some do. However, sometimes theirs come first.”

I waved the dream staff and the terrible scene vanished, replaced by an expanding golden sphere with a core and three shells outside it, one inside the other.

“From the Source emanate the three realms,” I continued. The core pulsed outward, forming the shells: Infrarealm, Dreamvale, Coaguum. “If that were the sole movement, why would the Source bother to create?”

“In actuality, however, a responding movement can develop in the Coaguum and move back through the realms to their Source.” A pulse from the outermost shell radiated inward until it reached the center of the sphere.

Firiell stared at the image, then at me. “What would be an example of such a response?”

“Not long before the war in the Coaguum, several cosmic Powers involved with strife, competition, trickery, craft, and expansiveness were arguing in the Infrarealm. These arguments rippled down through all the realms.” The black stone’s face shifted to show Bellum, Cempa, Kluni, Smee, and Pandere as flamelike faces in avid conversation. Renastra came late to the discussion. Doja came early and stayed throughout, gloating coldly. Their other names were Strife, Champion, Trickster, Craft, Expansion, Resurrection, and Death.

“When the effects of this strife reached the Coaguum, the inhabitants succumbed to imagination-killing fear. As a result, many of the coagulant leaders became possessed by competing Powers.”

At my gesture, men in strange dark suits shouted at one another below flapping banners under which angry crowds had gathered. Vast factories forged metals that coated immense war vessels without sails, their bows tearing at the sea. Columns of men in uniform marched over barren fields.

“The effects,” I went on, “ran rampant and overpowering. Several large societies went to war against one another. The resulting violence and chaos then erupted here.”

She blinked twice. “How?”

“As the return of the Shadow and his armies.”

She shuddered. “Which in turn prompted the elves to whisper in the writer’s ear. I feel that is so, anyway, but I’m not certain why.”

I nodded, gratified by her comprehension. “Your feeling is correct. The elves understood that an imbalance between the realms is disastrous to all, particularly when ripples are racing back and forth. They knew this because they had caused such imbalances before and witnessed the results.” The image in the stone shifted. Elves held rings of power, admiring them.

“On our side, our efforts to reach coagulants in the cause of creative partnership were not sufficient. On their side, many dismissed imaginative listening, collaborating, and ‘creating’ as unimportant and even childish.”

She shook her head. “By then, was it not too late to prevent the war?”

“The effort of the elves was toward preventing future wars. Their hope was that enough coagulants reading about and reflecting on ours might help deflect theirs.”

“But one scribe’s voice on their side would never be enough, any more than it would be here.”

I gestured again with the staff, and the stone went blank. “Exactly so, Firiell. What is needed is an inter-realm ‘embassy’ to maintain open communications between the Coaguum and the Dreamvale. Only then might these disastrous wars finally come to an end.”

* * * * *

As she thought, I admired yet again Firiell’s capacity for thought and insight. Even as her gaze turned inward, her eyes retained their focus upon the details at hand: the twirl of a breeze-inspired leaf; the yellow flicker of an animal’s unblinking eyes in the shadows near a tree trunk; the glowing pulsations crossing and recrossing the teaching stone....

“Does this not happen already,” she asked, “with every creative act?”

I caused a rickety bridge over a chasm to appear upon the stone.

“Each creative act builds a temporary alignment across our two realms, as the imaginal truth here receives physical expression there. But the conversation is not sustained. In fact, it is possible to draw upon the Dreamvale even while diminishing its status to that of one’s own production, just as it is possible to forget to draw our magic into tangible forms.

“What is needed is for occupants of both realms to sustain the alignment, at first by realizing that each realm requires the company of its counterpart.” The bridge thickened with new planks. “In other words, we need ambassadors on both sides working together.”

“Yes. I understand. But who over there realizes how the realms might creatively align?”

“Very few compared to the total number of coagulants. But those voices matter, and they persist.

“Some of their herbalists and medicine people have said, for example, that what they imagine can bridge worlds. A sect known as the Sufi called our realm Alam Al-Mithal. Spiritual seekers referred to as Gnostics and Hermetics described the Coaguum-transcending power of images. Scientist-philosophers called alchemists experimented with ‘True Imagination.’

“In fact, the Red Book in your care parallels another Red Book to be crafted one day as a visionary document by a healer of minds who will be dismissed as a madman. He will know about us. The poets, the dreamers, the dramatists, the novelists (bards who write stories), and other kinds of artists all know of us implicitly–.”

“Wait,” she said, standing. “It is much to let in. I need to walk in the forest for a bit.”

“An excellent idea. I will wait here in the clearing.” I leaned on the staff again as she moved off, quiet and nimble.

In former times, I did not speak so much. On occasion I offered instruction, encouragement, or warning, as the situation required. I conducted research, led expeditions, occasionally fought. Now I was a tutor, if briefly.

In times gone by, people did not need to know so much about the nature of things. That was largely the purview of the Wise. But with the passing of our influence into vales beyond, the burden of deep knowledge now fell upon those whose influence could shape affairs across the realms while both sides suffered by machinery gone mad.

When Firiell returned and took up a position of listening, I continued. “Highly creative coagulants not only touch our realm. They can also connect vales within it. The most

obvious example is when an insightful human ‘creates’ a conversation or merging of ‘fictional’ beings or characters found in different story worlds.”

“I don’t think I follow.”

At my gesture, faces familiar and strange to Firiell passed across the teaching stone’s surface.

“Would you like to speak to your parents?” I asked. “With heroines or heroes of old? What about the jewel-cutter who chose mortality to be with his beloved? What about a seeker named Smith, who ate a star and found himself in a world called Faerie? What about the fantastic beings in the elves’ and dwarves’ ancient tales as recorded by scribes?”

“Oh, my.” She put a hand to her brow. “Whitebeard, does this mean that every lasting work of what coagulants call ‘fiction’ exists as a vale in our realm?”

“Correct.”

“Where are they all? I know only my own.”

“We cannot normally see beyond the purlieus, or barriers, that separate vales. But now and then, a coagulant breaches them. One wrote about a League of Remarkable Gentlemen who came from different vales. Another supposed that ‘fiction’ writers who had passed on still lived on another plane of existence called a ‘planet.’ He was fond of witches and evil carnivals. Yet another writer brought together a mad inventor, a clever sorceress, a well-known investigator, a vampire, and a werewolf and their animal familiars to compete for power on a hallowed eve.”

An owl called and was answered by another. “Why are there purlieus?” Firiell asked, eyes on the forest beyond the circle.

“To preserve the integrity of the Dreamvale. Each vale must retain its own identity instead of bleeding over into others and thereby diluting both. Crossovers must be occasional and exceptional.”

“Is it only scribes and bards who can link vales?”

“No, others can too: imaginative mystics, performers and musicians, explorers who gather plant medicines...”

Her eyes returned to mine. “Linking vales must be a formidable capability. What in our realm matches it?”

“Reenchantment. Powers of inspiration to be held and presented not just by a family archivist, but by a new kind of wizard.”

* * * * *

The forest grew silent. The ground trembled briefly. The teaching stone glowed like a cheek of moon. Silent birds flitted by. A little imaginal drama was in order, after all. Firiell stared at me, shook her head.

“Yes. It is to be you.”

“But my kind cannot *be* wizards. Yours descended directly from on high.” She sat on a nearby stone, and I sat on one next to hers.

“You are correct that we descend from and serve the Powers.” I made a wide, glowing circle with the staff. “But everyone does. Why should not a woman of your people finally wield the staff and wear the robe?”

“I...” She shook her head again.

“The Powers have sent me to your dreams to set your feet upon the path, Red Book Bearer. It is time the Wise Folk returned, albeit in a different form. There is need of them.

“The new wizard will not meddle at court or lead armies, for that is not what the time requires. Instead, she will tell new stories and preserve old ones, initiate cross-realm collaborations, and bring hope in an age of mechanization in need of dawning dreams.” I missed my pipe.

“I can’t even alter my own dreams, let alone anyone else’s.”

I spoke to the underlying doubt in her voice as an image of her dressed in a crimson and silver robe appeared upon the stony surface. “When the course of events brings us an unexpected ennoblement, none who are truly worthy feel so. We feel still less worthy when faced with the largeness of the task. Nevertheless, it is not given to us to argue our fate with the Powers, or with living realms most in need of our talents. For they too are beings.”

Firiell digested this silently as one night bird called softly to another.

“We have been given these talents,” I continued, “for reasons beyond our understanding. Our task at such a time is to bridle self-doubt and even enlist it as an ally as we break the new path we are to walk.” Her stone-framed image acquired a staff with a glowing jewel set in its crown.

After another, longer pause: “What is next, Whitebeard?”

“The Power we call Magos oversees dreams and wizardly ways. Ask Magos for his blessing for your path. Try it now. Open your mind and let the Power personify itself to you. Then convey your aim and ask for assistance.”

She stood. "Is Magos male? Female?"

"Both. Neither. Any form at need. Accept what presents itself."

"Will you accompany me?"

I stood. "Yes, I will."

Firiel closed her dream self's eyes and reached out...

We walk a path below an eerie purplish sky. The path leads to an ancient temple of stone.

Before us looms an ancient gate inscribed with griffons, crows, dragons, serpents, skulls, and key shapes. The gate creaks open, and we enter the shadows beyond it.

Within a long courtyard sits a stone slab upon which an altar is being prepared. The sharp odors of combustion hang in the twilight air.

The tall cloaked and hooded figure behind the altar turns to regard us. We cannot see the face, only two glowing silvery eyes and winks of silver teeth: a smile.

"So this is Firiel," speaks a voice of low pitch and rough timbre. Ancient, yet vital. One dark hand of snaky veins rests upon the other. The figure stands absolutely still.

"Hello," replies Firiel shyly. After glancing at the eyes of Magos she looks down.

"The one who feels unworthy," the voice rumbles on. She does not reply. "Well, now I have seen you. Perhaps you are unworthy."

Her shocked gaze swings upward toward his face.

"None of your people has ever been a wizard. You are young. You do not speak up when you should. You hide in piles of books. Even with Whitebeard's teaching, you know little of what you would need to know. What have you to say for yourself?"

She swallowed twice. "Only that I agree with everything you've said."

"Of course you do. I am giving voice to your own doubts." Again she falls silent.

"Please excuse me; I must go on with my work." Magos turns away and walks off to continue preparing the altar. He flings red powder upon the slab and places a long curving branch atop it.

Firiel looks at me, bewildered. "Now what do I do?"

“I don’t know. Perhaps my lessons were simply for your enjoyment. What do you want to do? Be someone’s wife? Tend a farm, guard an old book? Hide out from all your doubts? Be a footnote in someone else’s epic?”

She closes her eyes in concentration and places a trembling hand over her heart. She draws several deep breaths. Beyond her, Magos lights a torch and passed the flame over the altar.

She opens her eyes. “I still feel unworthy, and my doubts are strong. Perhaps they are right. But my stubborn heart tells me I am a magical being and should serve as one.”

The branch on the altar blazes with white fire, crackling, as red smoke puffs upward from it. While this occurs, Magos reaches into a black bag and brings forth a red gem the size of a small fist. This he passes through the smoke and lashes to the top of the branch. When he blows his breath upon the gem, it glows, pulsing slowly.

He approaches, branch in hand. As his hand passes down its length, the branch straightens. He gives it to the startled girl.

“Firiel,” intones Magos, “I hereby invest thee with the office and staff of true wizardry. Go forth, strengthen your voice, learn what you need to know, and make new magic among the realms.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “I promise to do my best.”

“And Firiel,” he continues with a wink at me, turning away, “take your doubts with you. As guides, they are your helpers, but they make destructive masters. See to it that you manage them well.”

At a gesture from Magos, we find ourselves back in the clearing.

Firiel stared for a moment at the teaching stone, then pointed her staff at it and held her breath. The red gem at the tip flickered once.

The stone shrank, glowing, until it lay shimmering upon the dark ground like a tiny jewel lit from within. Firiel picked it up and attached it as a pendant to the silver necklace around her neck.

She looked up at me with shining eyes.

“Shaper of dreams,” I remarked with satisfaction. “Exactly what the new time requires of Firiel the Silver.” The full moon slipped past a cloud and bathed the clearing in heavenly light. “Not more heroism; not battles or bloodshed. Inspiration coupled with patient work well done. Let the quiet make their way in the world now and change it for the better. One ray of hope is worth more than a dozen showy spells.”

“I—”

“I know you have more questions, but my time with you draws to a close. Now that you can access the Powers directly, you have everything you need. Go forth and find coagulants to recruit for your embassy. Find some Dreamvale folk too. Give them good counsel. Help them build bridges across the purlieus and between the realms.”

“Very well.” She accepted her lot as fresh soil drinks water. It gave me hope.

“Firiell, above all you have been tasked to do, remember to encourage those you seek out to tell inspiring stories—theirs, yours, any the Powers inspire—to keep the mood of enchantment lit through all dark times to come.”

She turned to me. “Thank you...”

As the forest, the clearing, and waving Firiell faded from view, I wondered whether the Powers would finally allow me a long-overdue rest.

A distant flash of lightning flickered above a dimming mountain. A supercelestial chuckle?

Pre-Eulogy

“You say you’re an alien. As in, from another world?”

No fan of TV crime shows would have taken Faber for a G-man. After putting his question, the balding field agent leaned back so his belt wouldn’t pinch his paunch. A gray necktie matched what remained of his hair. His white shirt had not been pressed since leaving the factory.

“That is so,” replied a pleasant baritone in unaccented English. Dark irises set in a light brown face gazed back at him above a slight smile.

The relaxed man across the table from Faber looked to be in his forties. Jeans, white sweater, unassuming, like a typical tourist in DC. Except that he had shown up on too many surveillance cameras. Hence this interview.

Faber glanced at the thin file in front of him. “What is your name?”

“My name is inaudible to human ears, much less pronounceable by the human mouth, but you may call me Allen.”

“Allen?”

“It sounds less derogatory than ‘alien,’ does it not?” Brown hands rested motionless and flat on the table’s polished surface.

Faber had known plenty of crazies. This man did not seem like one. Calm of voice and manner, he shaped his words precisely. A smartass with an agenda, maybe.

He did not seem a likely threat, either. No training unless he masked it well. True, he was hard to read, but he sat with his back to the door. He did not walk with one hand hovering near his body, ready to draw a weapon; nor did he glide with the flat gait of a skilled fighter. No calluses on the edges or knuckles of his hands. His eyes did not monitor Faber’s hands, even peripherally.

The control in his voice sounded natural, untutored. He was here because of the amateurish mistake of appearing on too many security monitors.

“Where are you from, Allen?”

“A long, long way from here.”

“So I gathered. Will you excuse me for a moment?”

In an adjacent room, Faber inspected the readouts of the lie detection sensors built into the interview room tabletop and chairs. The readings were all within the norms expected

of someone believing what he said. Beating a lie detector was possible, but Faber knew the signs, and he saw none. He shook his head and returned to the questioning.

“So why are you here on Earth, Allen? And in DC in particular?”

“I am one of many Viewers sent to view the last days of human life on this planet.” The words chilled Faber despite his disbelief in them. Maybe this man was a crazy after all. Some were convincing.

“How did you arrive? In some sort of spaceship?”

Allen smiled and shook his head. “Heavens, no. Why go about the galaxy in rude hardware? We used what you might call a self-assembling printer. It printed this body for my consciousness to inhabit while I’m here.”

“I see. How do you return home, then?”

“A mental signal dissolves the body while my consciousness is transferred elsewhere.” A finger-opening gesture of something dispersing.

“Ah. Do you have any evidence for these claims?”

“I do not. We didn’t bring anything that does not belong here except the ‘printer,’ which disintegrates after use.”

Convenient. But the bureau could uncover no record of Allen anywhere: no fingerprints, no DNA, no photographs, nothing. His ethnicity seemed Middle Eastern, maybe. Maybe not....

Faber shifted in his seat. “Why send anyone? Why not just monitor from a distance?”

Allen smiled with a touch of avuncular weariness. “We learned many centuries ago that observation from a distance—in other words, *surveillance*” (he winked) “—severely distorts our impressions. We remain outside of what we try to see, and therefore we do not see clearly. One has to be on site to gather accurate information.”

“Ours needs to be accurate too,” Faber said. “How about if you peel off some of your skin or turn your head all the way around? Something to show how alien you are?”

“You wouldn’t be convinced. Your technology-amplified skepticism has reached a level at which anything can be duplicated and nothing need elicit belief.”

True enough. “But why should I believe any of this without proof?”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t. I have no stake in whether or not you believe me.” He seemed perfectly content, with no worry about the outcome of this interview.

“Last days of human life,’ you said.”

“Yes. Your species is about to go extinct.”

“How?”

Allen shook his head. “Do you not watch your own news services? Climate chaos, mass extinction, pandemics, pollinator die-offs, ocean death, industrial toxins, nuclear weapons proliferation, authoritarian violence: take your pick.” The smile was sad now.

“So you didn’t come to steal our resources?”

“There aren’t any left worth stealing.”

“So you’re not here to invade?”

“Invade a dying planet? What would be the point?”

Faber sat back. “Then I ask again: Why are you here?”

“We maintain something you could think of as an Encyclopedia Galactica,” Allen replied in a gentle tone, smile gone now. “It is both comprehensive and popular. The entry for Homo sapiens is nearly complete. We are here to finish the article.”

Faber turned up a palm. “That’s it?”

“Yes. The article may serve as a warning to other immature species not to engage in self-destructive behaviors.”

“You mean we’re the galaxy’s poster child for how to wreck a planet and kill ourselves off?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Hmmm. “There are quite a few other species round about, then?”

“Many others. Many times many.” Allen’s face bore an expression of wonder.

“So some of those UFO claims are real?”

“Probably not. Earth is somewhat off the beaten path, in a minor solar system drifting through the Arm of Orion, as you call it. About two skips and a jump outside of a stellar nursery, appropriately enough.”

“A pity. I guess I’ll have to stop watching *Star Trek*.”

“They got the diversity part right.”

“So you’re one of the mature species?” Faber concealed a sneer.

“More on the youthful end. We’ve only been around about ten million of your years. But we make up in dedication what we lack in experience.”

Faber sighed. In spite of himself he felt drawn in. For a moment, the normally leashed fantasizing power of his mind wondered what would be most worth asking a member of a species so much older than his own. He decided to keep playing along.

“What does your species do besides watch us?”

“Oh, many things. We delight in difficult problems.”

“Such as?”

“Who calibrated the Higgs field giving mass to all matter? Who set the potency of dark matter and energy such that our universe can exist? We trade information on this not only with other species here, in this plenum, but with lifeforms in other universes.”

Faber had no idea what all that meant, but he focused on a word: “Who? Not what?”

“Correct.”

“Then you are religious?”

“Not really. ‘Reverent’ might be a better word.”

Faber couldn’t resist: “Which of our religions is closest to the truth?” The lapsed Catholic in him still wondering, no doubt.

“All of them. None of them.”

“I think religion is easily disproven bunk.”

“Taken literally, of course it is. But not every truth is literal.”

Huh. “In terms of ethics, don’t you have a Prime Directive or something to stop you from revealing yourselves to us immature ones down here?”

“It only applies to viable species. Unfortunately, yours won’t be around much longer.”

Crazy words or not, they depressed Faber. His next question came with some reluctance: “What will be your diagnosis of why we did this to ourselves?”

“Evolutionary design flaw.”

The sparseness of words jolted Faber. He blinked. “Meaning what?”

Allen steepled his hands. “Think of Earth as a giant organism endlessly experimenting with new forms of Life. (I say ‘giant’ loosely, for Earth is one tiny part of the living, sentient cosmos.—What, you didn’t know that the All is actually one vast, sensing body?) Members of your species are born into an unusually long period of dependency on caregivers. The result is not only complex mental development, but protracted childhood and adolescence. None of you is ever truly an adult. Little wonder you’re so impulsive.”

Faber thought it over as Allen’s wrenching analysis continued: “Furthermore, during your Agricultural Revolution you moved from societies in which each depends on all to rigid hierarchies that let emotionally stunted people occupy positions of power over others. Such tyrants remain in charge by accumulating what others need to live. Utterly immoral. Your species has not been free of this sort of servitude since the first cities rose along rivers diverted for irrigation. It amazes us that you put up with it.”

“Throughout our history many revolutions have deposed tyrants.”

“Yes, but for how long? And what happens when the people are too distracted by poverty, demeaning jobs, lack of education, authoritarian propaganda, and shiny gadgetry to go on resisting?” He shrugged.

The words carried the tone of truth. How old, for instance, was the patriarchy Faber’s ex-girlfriend railed against? Eight thousand years? Ten thousand? And still a global scourge. What about greed? Warfare? Probably as old as the first settlements of growers and clerks discriminating between food and weed, settled and nomadic, ours and theirs. That wealth trickled down somehow from rich to poor might be the oldest lie in history. That the arrangement was divinely sanctioned must be the second.

“But surely we’ve also been evolving all this time?”

“Evolving? Sixty individuals own half the wealth of your deteriorating world. Soon, fewer than that. What kind of evolution do you mean?”

Outwardly impassive, Faber was aghast. Never had a security interview bellyflopped like this. The bureau psychologists had warned him early in his training about getting hooked by his own weaknesses—everybody had them; but he had underestimated both his underlying despair at the looming fate of humanity and the spiritual vacuum opened when he lost his faith long ago.

“Isn’t there some way we can solve this and stick around?” he could not help asking.

“You don’t solve a rite of passage. You go through it to outgrow it. You develop beyond the need for childish trust in authority; beyond mass distraction and consumption, and dependency on corrupt systems controlled by a privileged few. But you need time to do that outgrowing, and your time is nearly up.”

“What if we were to ask you for help?”

“Take me to your leaders? Sorry. Against the house rules. Species either mature or perish of their own self-contradictions. We inhabit a tough universe.”

Faber cleared his throat. “OK, I admit this has been entertaining. Now why were you really looking over every monument, historical marker, and key government building in Washington?”

“To remember afterwards what they were like.” An unmistakably sorrowful tone. “Other Viewers are studying great works of art, attending concerts, sitting in prayer services, dancing in festivals, playing with your children, laughing in the audiences of comedians. We want to fix inside ourselves the last acts of a remarkable species cut short before its natural demise.”

Pause. Somewhere, a car horn honked. Then: “Could anything have saved us before it came to this?” Faber was surprised to hear himself almost whispering the question.

“Yes, of course. You could have listened to the mature elders among you. To the artists, the poets, the visionaries and dreamers. To the free spirits and naturalists, the thoughtful eccentrics and humorists, the street-wise mentors. Above all, to the women of every human culture. So many missteps!

“You could have kept your power instead of giving it away to those you like to refer to as politicians, clerics, and leaders. You could have embraced your own diversity, conscience, indigeneity, and creativity. You could have recognized that your needs are also the needs of the complex and sensitive living systems within which you live.

“You could have caught the damage early, before your most destructive financiers took over Earth, and replied to those drunk on power with that word which is sacred on so many still-thriving worlds: ‘No.’ Instead, you all went along for the ride straight over the edge of the cliff.”

Another question occurred to Faber: “What uniquely characterizes us? What sets us apart from other species?” He feared the answer would be, “Nothing.”

“You,” replied Allen calmly, lightly, “are the precocious storytellers of the galaxy. You go around perceiving, then relating tales of what you perceive. Out among the stars live superior technologies, stronger limbs, much longer memories; dirigible species that float like mist, and crystalline beings that speak through piezoelectric pulses; but Humans of Earth are the children of fantasy and imagination, poem and anecdote, narrative and song and dream. We wish to honor that, and honor you, by remembering it after you are gone.”

Faber had nothing more to ask. He closed the file, thin as it was. “I see no reason to detain you any longer,” he decided, “and we don’t plan to charge you with anything. You are free to go and continue with your...viewing.” He levered himself to his feet.

Allen rose as well and held out his hand in the Western Human gesture of parting.

“I am sorry to bring such dismal news,” he said, “although it can’t have been that surprising. I wish we foresaw a happier outcome. If it’s any consolation, you will not be forgotten. Under the heading ‘Human, Thought Wise,’ our Encyclopedia will recall the passing of a valiant species, ebullient and vital, and with so much wondrous potential. If only...if only.” He sighed, shook his head and walked out.

After filing his report, Faber went home determined to take early retirement.

The interviewee was nuts, of course: cleverly, eloquently nuts. But he had left in Faber a painful sense of urgency. Suppose just for the heck of it that everything was going to hell? So much *living* to do before then...before the article was finished.

* * * * *

“There was no problem arranging to be taken into custody?” asked his colleague at the Interstellar Consortium.

“None. Their own governments spy on them constantly. It’s a wonder any of their citizens stay out of custody.”

“What is your recommendation about Earth, then?”

“That we proceed as planned and put the entire security interview I recorded on every human media device on the planet. Every phone, watch, tablet, laptop, desktop, TV; every monitor, billboard, banner, radio, social media site. Everything.”

Allen was glad to be back home among his own. Too much time among humans and their parochial values and archaic toys could be wearying. The bipedalism alone felt like having three arms tied behind one’s back.

“No edits?”

“None beyond blurring Faber’s face. It wasn’t his fault he happened to be on duty.” Allen no longer possessed a head to shake. Perhaps what he had done would not threaten Faber’s retirement. Perhaps it would accelerate it. He liked Faber as much as he could like any member of that immature species.

“You have all the confidential documents of their governments, religions, corporations, military, and mass media ready for global distribution as well?”

“Yes. Within one rotation of their planet, every human will have access to every secret dealing everywhere. They will see and hear, with stark, alarming clarity, the real character of those to whom humanity has so wrongly given up power and allegiance.”

In what served his species for imagination, Allen saw the blue Earth turning slowly, laced with clouds, framed by starlight, and ringed by shimmering rainbows. That beautiful world deserved so much more than crooked, small-souled rulership by elites who thought themselves above it all. She had survived four and a half billion years of cosmic cataclysm—comets, freezing, boiling vulcanism, interplanetary collision; and for what? For a swelling brood of ungrateful children who refused to grow up?

Through his musings he heard another question: “Do you believe the recorded interview and all the other impending disclosures could make a real difference to their fate?”

He considered it. “Perhaps they can. Too, it must be tremendously irritating to hear your eulogy spoken before you’re actually dead. If that doesn’t make them stand up and be accountable for themselves, nothing will.”

His colleague’s blue aura signaled skepticism. Understandable. “How many of them will actually believe you were a Viewer?”

“It makes no difference. The conversation between Faber and I will work on them no matter what they believe. This is a people for whom story, image, and fantasy come first, even when they convince themselves they are rationally inclined. —Besides, they’ve been chewing over the ‘advanced aliens’ meme for decades.”

“Yet I’m concerned that your oversimplified description of their supposed evolutionary design flaw sounded discouragingly fatalistic.”

“Don’t be. It will sting and insult them just enough to spur them onward. I hope.”

“You know, that creature Faber had a point with his ‘Prime Directive’ notion.”

“Yes,” Allen agreed. “But he asked for our help. Even though Gaia asked for it first. And to think they believe themselves to be the dominant form of intelligence there.” He snorted. “Bipeds! They look up and around, but how seldom they look down.”

He emitted his species’ equivalent of a chuckle: “They are about to get more help than they ever bargained for. And to the delight and relief of their own homeworld, they will make strenuous and rebellious use of that help just to prove me wrong.”

Departing Fantasyland

Author's note: This tale takes place within the Dreamvale. As we know, however, such tales have parallels to what happens in our world.

“You can write what you like,” coaxed the prince, “and be paid for it. You can associate with gifted colleagues. You can make your work known throughout the kingdom.”

The prince and the scribe drank a glass of red wine together at a roadside inn. The setting sun daubed distant hills in reds and oranges.

“You can be in charge of important matters,” the prince went on. “You can even visit foreign lands on our behalf.”

This sounded promising coming from the prince of Fantasyland, the magical school where the scribe had received his training. One day word had come to him that the school might benefit from his bringing his trade there, and that its prince wanted to meet to dangle this possibility.

After the meeting, the scribe packed up his entire life and carted it over many miles of roads, hills, and rivers to take up residence near Fantasyland. As he neared the tall gates of the school, he looked forward to beginning his new life while held by the old familiar magic. The familiar oval crest on the door drew a sigh from him.

When he arrived, however, no one was on hand to greet him.

“Where should I put my desk and pot of ink?” he asked the doorman, who shrugged.

It took months just to find a permanent room to work in. It wasn't the fault of the people in charge of such things, the scribe learned. They were all overwhelmed with labors to carry out.

The main labor was dropping everything whenever the prince had a new idea, at which time all efforts at every level were redirected to bringing the idea, whatever it was, to life. Concerns about its workability fell on deaf ears; other ideas were pushed aside; space was cleared for visitors eager to find out more about the latest magical revelation; wizardly teachers had to be present to talk about spell-casting, transmutation, and fables from the elder days; torches had to be lit and cattle cleared away so the prince could open the proceedings in person. It was all a lot of disruptive extra bother, and it could never be predicted.

No sooner had the bemused scribe taken up quill and parchment when the headmaster (also overworked) dropped by with an announcement:

“The official in charge of bringing students to Fantasyland has left. We would like you to stand in.”

“But I have had no training in that manner of service.”

“It’s temporary.”

It was still temporary several months later, and officials of every sort continued to leave.

The scribe had yet to do much of what he had been hired to do. He listened to complaints from everyone—students, laborers, overseers, wizards—while trying to learn an entirely new role left empty by several harried predecessors. He visited no other kingdoms and wrote little but procedures for the argumentative to fight about.

Like other officials of Fantasyland, he also spent much of his time meeting with people.

There were meetings for everything: meetings to inform, meetings to solve problems, even meetings to prepare for other meetings. The meetings were full of high officials’ talking, but the school seemed never to improve as a result of all the talking and meeting. So in addition to not doing his real job (which felt increasingly unreal), the scribe was forever out of time to do much of anything but meet.

Meanwhile, the office of the queen of the land dispatched messengers to inform Fantasyland that a retinue of court officials were planning to come for an inspection. In charge of this as well, the scribe rounded up reliable people to plan and organize for the visit instead of the usual make-it-up-as-you-go. He spent his evenings scribing hundreds of pages to document what the visitors would want to know. Geese whose quills he wore out writing fled the vicinity before they found themselves naked.

It was difficult to find solid truths to report. What puzzled the scribe most was that, unlike places where he had associated with others in good faith, key people at Fantasyland seemed intent on lying. They had lied to bring him there by painting a false picture of how the school was run, and by whom. Now they lied about opportunities, resources, important things, petty things, monied things, and pretty much everything.

The worst of the lot were those who claimed to have no ambitions at all while manipulating every trusting person they could sway. They stood, they claimed, for love, for healing, for soul. But in secret, they stood for vanity, advantage, and influence.

Stranger still, these liars seemed not to mind the lying. It cost them no real effort, they were that used to doing it.

For those lower down, lying had begun as a tactic for managing an impulsive prince who refused to manage himself, belittled those beneath him, and made everyone forever nervous and miserable; Fantasyland was in continual chaos. Over time, lying had become a way of life in a place presented as a unique site of boundless magical possibility but, behind the scenes, kept going by honest if ill-rewarded labor. Hard-working but demoralized people who had not yet moved on and who received contempt from above instead of recognition or prizes struggled day after day alongside scoundrels

who could not be dislodged because the prince favored them. His enablers went on pretending that everything was fine.

The real magic resided with the unhappy but wise and gifted wizards who taught there, but even they had trouble affording their lodgings, bread, and cheese. It was the wizards who made the school worthwhile to attend.

Because of the prince's glib lies, evasions, and attempts to charm, the visiting court officials glanced at each other, now suspicious and alert. They had seen this sort of show elsewhere plenty of times. Initially friendly but now on their guard, they decided to dig deeper. They interviewed everybody and turned dusty pages in moldering account books. Then they went away and reported to the court.

The "prince," it came out, was just a nobly titled *enfant terrible* hoarding gold ducats while those below him made do as best they could. Without the wizards' magic (and a loyal headmaster to patch up the chaos), this "prince" would have been stuck selling worn-out buttons repainted to gleam like amulets. More disenchanting departures followed these revelations.

Now, a group of elders was supposed to oversee the school, provide wisdom, and make sure Fantasyland did right by everyone. But, committed instead to talking much while doing little, they met around a long polished table to eat expensive lunches and ignore the gathering warnings sent by the court of the queen. Instead of serving as guides, they had become accomplices.

Furthermore, as the headmaster confided to the scribe, the "prince" blamed the bewildered newcomer for the court's unhappiness with Fantasyland. When things soured, as they did so often because of the ceaseless whimsicality and chaos, it was always someone else's fault.

The time had come, the scribe knew, to depart. Once again he would uproot himself and hope to find more fertile soil.

He shook his head. Perhaps Fantasyland would fall one day, not tomorrow but down the road, poisoned by its self-contradictions. Perhaps it would evolve somehow and fully thrive, for the magic to be found there was powerful, lasting, and real. In spite of everything, he believed in the mission of the school and admired the dedicated people who actually carried it out. But he could not remain to see the outcome.

He chuckled to himself rather bitterly. Although he had at first thought himself transplanted to a heavenly realm, he had actually landed in the Underworld.

Maybe he had needed to. He had known about deception and darkness. But maybe his training had been incomplete without the ordeal of watching what he loved but could not help slowly degenerate. Maybe one had to see that and feel its effects to truly learn discernment without escaping into cynicism.

For the world, though beautiful and even miraculous, is darkened by the shadows of treachery. Some of the treacherous are common bullies easy enough to recognize. But others are disguised better, posing even to themselves as humane, spiritual, magical, and visionary. Only the alert stand any chance against the selfishly unscrupulous who ever wait in the wings to have it all their way.

The lore taught at the school mentioned tales of another magical realm, Camelot, similarly undermined from within. The old king of that once-shining place of high halls and flapping banners had found his demise on the battlefield, hacked by swords along with most of his officials: noble knights and fawning courtiers, tellers of truth and cold-hearted schemers. In the end, good and bad, heroes and enablers, perished together.

But the wizards and scribes escaped. And the tale survived too, as a warning.

Back among friends, the scribe marveled. Granted the staff and cloak of a wizard, he now held a position more uplifting than the one falsely promised by Fantasyland. New opportunities blossomed on every side. Before him waited more of the enchantment work he loved than he could ever get to.

The wizard laughed. Sometimes you have to descend in order to rise.

Norns

“The evolution of consciousness,” stated Kluni the Trickster, “is bunk.”

A burst of unexpected static barked from speakers all over Earth. Scientists below attributed the noise to a solar flare.

“I am inclined to agree,” sighed Doja, Power of death. A dusty sirocco blew across the Sahara. “My bias, of course,” he acknowledged drily, “is to err on the side of entropy.”

It was not that Doja caused death, or that the other archetypal Powers intervened directly in the operations of the universe. Rather, they stood *behind* events like a tonic note contextualizing musical chords.

“Both of you are ignoring the force of growth.” Unda shook a green finger of light at them. “Not only molecules up from atoms and solar systems from gravity and gas, but precious spans of life allotted to mortals on many worlds, including Earth.” (None of this was verbal communication, of course. Unda’s “comment” opened into a green blossom despite the howling desert wind.)

“And possibilities for enlargement of mind and choice that go with growth.” Pandere worked in his expansion theme wherever he could. He had been ever since the early inflation of the cosmos.

“Life makes its own path,” said Zoe, naming herself.

“Even here?” Kluni gestured around them.

The human place name “Sea of Tranquility” was apt, perhaps, if only because nobody lived in the vicinity. But the name came down from a time when observers believed the Moon to be covered by oceans. The Powers stood as wispy columns of light gathered in the wide basalt basin.

“Yes, of course.” Zoe’s green shone with more emerald than Unda’s vegetative hue. “Life visited.” *Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed...*

“I draw your attention to conditions on Earth,” replied Kluni with a red flare of gesture for Cronicus to attend. The Power of Time spun their group vision through history....

“There.” Cronicus froze the frame. Kluni “pointed” as, to sunward, the planet Mercury wobbled out of the ecliptic.

“Earth, 2021. Or at least what we can glimpse of it through the pollution. The most notable fact about the so-called evolution of consciousness, at least in so-called Homo sapiens, is that their industrialized rapacity has damaged 90% of the biosphere. Indeed, they are in danger of going extinct. Racism, fascism, sexism, corruption, and dogma-driven zealotry are all booming on their overheating planet. So is lucrative weapons

production.” As the Power behind wealth transactions and shady deals, Kluni was in a position to know.

“Even up here,” Kluni continued, glancing around at the waste on every side, “they leave their imperialist garbage behind, having first conquered and polluted the hell out of their own planet. A flag to represent a single nation, tra-la. Empty food bags. TV cameras. A shit and piss collector. The ass end of their discarded spacecraft.

“So how is any of this ‘progress’ over where they were in, say, 6000 BCE? I give them a 30/70 chance of surviving their own folly, and the odds are worsening rapidly.”

Vaeda heard him out. Tempting to counter with a list of human greatnesses, but also futile. Offering such a list would also discount Kluni’s argument. After all, he too played a valid part in the Creator Radantia’s grand experiment in consciousness, in this quaint solar system as well as elsewhere across the universe.

So, “I agree with Kluni,” she said. The columns of light around her flickered with surprise.

“You do?” blurted Pandere.

“To a point, yes. Humanity is not making linear progress. A species that allows itself to be blinded, bullied, and ordered around by the ambitious and unscrupulous century after century can hardly be considered a mature one.

“And look how stuck to us they still are, each group worshiping from within its own sad little sect. Is it not apt that some of them view Mars as a possible home?”

At this, Bellum nodded. “Mars” was one of his names down there.

Paesha’s glow flickered with sadness. “Then our grand experiment has failed here?”

“Once Earth heals,” observed fateful Fortis, “and humans vanish, other species will come forward.” She glowed deep solemn violet. Paesha continued to flicker.

Kluni glanced at Vaeda. “‘To a point,’ you said.” The inventor of gambling was not to be distracted by any shuffling of cards—or arguments.

Vaeda smiled. “The crux is how we conceive of evolution. When species evolve physically, they adapt to their changing surroundings. When they evolve consciously, they move from infancy through adolescence into adulthood—if they survive.

“That kind of evolution is not linear. It may seem linear to some because of how the arrow of time points in this plenum. Young organisms grow old and die. Stars and planets and galaxies come into being and vanish. The flow of time looks steady, predictable, and eternal.”

“But not always,” Cronicus said.

“Not always. In imagination, in dream, in visionary states, during acts of creativity, near lightspeed, within black holes, and at the quantum level, time plays tricks, moves back on itself, slows, stops, even reverses. Sometimes it leaps ahead. Time Klunifies.”

She gave them a moment to reflect, then continued, her thoughts painting the images. “Roughly 4.5 billion years ago, Earth was newly accreted, waterless and airless. As its heaviest metals descended through magma and gathered at the core, there to generate a protective magnetic field, the rocky surface cooled. An atmosphere formed: not breathable, but a beginning. Earth gained a stately rotation. So far, so good.”

They saw a molten, waterless world turning as fumes spewed from giant volcanoes.

“Then Earth collided with a Mars-sized planet. The surfaces of both were vaporized as gigantic blobs of magma blasted outward. What remained of Earth glowed dull red through a black, glassy crust etched with molten rains and ringed by rocky debris. Meteor strikes intensified. A day was now five hours.”

“It was quite a smash,” said Bellum, who had backed it with Kluni’s help.

“From a young world with fair prospects for life,” Vaeda went on, “Earth deteriorated in less than an hour into what human mythology pictured as a fiery Hell and stayed that way for millions of years. Progress, then? Or regress?”

“Well, it depends on what scale of time we use,” said Cronicus in his measured way. “In the short term, the collision was a catastrophic setback. In the long run, though, the debris formed this moon that helped slow Earth’s rotation and stabilize its oceans and atmosphere. Life appeared relatively soon after.”

Kluni was skeptical. “Are you suggesting,” he asked Vaeda, “that, despite temporary setbacks, human consciousness is evolving in the long run? They might not even be around long enough to see the finish line! Some progress.” His competitive metaphor caught the wandering attention of potential ally Cempa. As planned. Who knew which sibling might be useful when?

Vaeda gave a rainbow shrug. “Earth might not have survived the collision. Luna might not have. What initiation is certain?”

“Perhaps,” mused Magos, “they are unconsciously setting up their own contemporary collision. Could they be turning Earth into a furnace in order to plunge into the boiling crucible of their own urgent maturation?”

Wildia shuddered. “If so, they are killing off a lot of other life to do it.”

Having directed their focus where she wanted it, Vaeda gestured to Saywala the Soulful, who had listened attentively.

“It is not just a question,” she said, “of time and its vagaries, but of how deeply each human adventure in consciousness polishes the collective soul, laying up treasures for later during the long struggle toward species self-awareness.”

Kluni snorted. “There is no collective soul.”

His petulance deserved no reply. Instead, “Consider three examples of women who worked deeply with that soul but were attacked for doing so, their disregarded work recognized only later as pivotal and infinitely precious. None of the three exerted a direct, linear impact on the march of human history.

“Rather, these gems of humanity belong to the Transdaimonic League of visionaries who water seeds of possibility.”

From the Moon, once thought of as the repository of souls, Cronicus drew back the curtains of Time as Saywala took up the tale.

* * * * *

Khana’s original name was Ksharna, “Moment,” because she was born at the right time in the right place: the village of Deuli in West Bengal. She was also called Lilavati: “Charming” or “Graceful.”

Her time was anything but. As she studied astrology, agriculture, meteorology, mathematics, and poetry composition, three empires fought for control of what would become Northern India. The Rashtrakutas came out temporarily on top, but by the end of the ninth century, they had weakened enough to be conquered by King Taila II, who founded the Western Chalukya Empire to the south. The struggle raged on.

Almost from the start, her lyric verses were taken as folksy agricultural common sense. For example,

thakte balad na kare chas
tar dukkha baro mas:

He who owns oxen but does not plough,
his sorrow lasts twelve months of the year.

Few realized at the time, or even later, that Khana meant something deeper: that failing to make good use of one’s resources at the proper time risks ill fortune. The gifts we neglect have a way of turning on us.

Did learning astrology teach her to understand the symbolism of events, or had she always? Impossible to know. But we do know that she trained her husband Mihir, son of Varahamihira, who entered the court of Vikramaditya as an astrologer of repute thanks

to her. When father and son needed celestial-terrestrial guidance, they turned to her for a deeper divination of the meaning of unfolding events.

Beyond that, she convinced Varahamihira that Mihir, born on a supposedly inauspicious day, was worthy of every consideration. Only the greatest adepts know when to challenge the very heavens. Vikramaditya made her the court astrologer.

Some say that Varahamihira grew so envious of and intimidated by Khana's knowledge of astrology, country lore, and sacred scripture that he ordered her tongue cut out. Some also say that the dismembered tongue was eaten by a gecko, founding the legend that the animal's clicks attest to the truthfulness of whomever is speaking.

Maimed but unsilenced, Khana continued to be a better oracle and scholar than either her husband or father-in-law, and the gecko spoke for her, as the Earth had borne witness to Sita after Rama had wronged her.

If wildfires, crop shortage, cyclones and epidemics occur at the same time, know that your king is corrupt and that the citizens are suffering because of the sins of the king.

—Khana's Words (*Khanar Bachan*)

She founded a uniquely Bengali early literature. Her two-line proverbs masterfully blended the rustic and everyday—weather, crops, the tending of livestock—with the profound, which she put in reach of farmers and laborers. Her advice was also practical: where to plant or dig a pond, how to till the soil, when to harvest, which direction a home should face.

She learned from injustice without forgetting and without being overcome, taking her own advice: "A little bit of salt, a little bit of bitter, and always stop before you are too full." She also cautioned farmers not to listen to bad news before taking up the plow. Beginnings are delicate occasions.

She never left Bengal, but she knew how to interpret the world, and her imagination spanned the cosmos. She considered the stars her extended family, always to be listened to and respected but not always to be agreed with.

Centuries after her death, Khana's name reappeared in southern Bengal in a mound of earthen brick, as though Sita, having sunk from view, had returned, stepping forth from the ruins of the once-powerful rulers who had tried to silence her. They are gone, but farmers in Bengal and Bangladesh still follow the poet-oracle's advice.

* * * * *

Kluni shrugged red-orange light. "So that's, what, one insightful one out of billions?"

Saywala spared him a glance. “Aren’t you the quantum trickster who subverts mere quantification?”

For once, Kluni had no reply. She continued.

* * * * *

Shortly before the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty of China, the poet Li Qingzhao worked with her husband to preserve precious ancient books, calligraphy, etchings, and works of art. She had been a poet before marrying him in 1101. As a teen she had written two poems on the restoration of the Tang dynasty after An Lushan’s rebellion failed.

The rooms of their house filled with irreplaceable works of incomparable artisanship. They catalogued these works together, assembling the most comprehensive list of ancient wonders then available.

Not that the work was always serious. They made time to play together as a couple. They competed in friendly games, drank wine of an evening, recited poetry, made love. She wrote:

It happens that I have a good memory, and in the evenings after dinner we would sit in our hall named Returning Home and brew tea. We’d point to a pile of books and, choosing a particular event, try to say in which book, which chapter, which page, and which line it was recorded. The winner of our little contest got to drink first. When I guessed right, I’d hold the cup high and burst out laughing until the tea splattered the front of my gown. I’d have to get up without even taking a sip. Oh, how I wished we could grow old living like that!

It was not to be. In 1127, their happy life together fell apart. Anarchic Jurchens from Manchuria invaded, and Kaifeng, the Northern Song capital, fell to the onslaught. When the invaders attacked Shandong, the couple fled their burning house, taking as much art and literature with them as they could carry packed onto fifteen carts. For much of the trip they followed the fleeing Song emperor.

Cold window, a broken desk without my books.
The government road led to this misery.
Qin officials love cash, the circle with a hollow square.
Meddlers bustle in droves under the winter sun.
I shut the door against callers to write a poem.

Li’s husband Zhao Mingcheng was given government reassignment and took his leave. Their parting was tearful.

She waited months to hear from him. She wrote him letters he did not answer. Only later did she learn that he had died on the journey to take up his new post.

I’ve heard spring is still lovely at Twin Streams,

I'd like to go boating in a light skiff there
 But fear the tiny grasshopper boats they have
 Would not carry
 Such a quantity of sorrow.

I inquire of traveling clouds
 the whereabouts
 of my beloved in the east...

The grieving widow settled in Hangzhou, where she continued composing poetry and finished her husband's book on inscriptions on bronze artifacts from the Zhou and Shang periods. Her losses accumulated: not only her collections, coveted by the emperor and some stolen by thieves, but her peace of mind from remarriage to a husband who abused her and wanted only what was left of her fortune. She took the unheard-of step of divorcing him in the face of intense public shaming and even time in prison.

Nothing deterred her from writing, which she did more of than ever before. Twice she showed up at the imperial palace to read seasonal poems to the emperor and empress, who welcomed her. She advised on matters scholarly and artistic. She sold calligraphy scrolls to support herself. She wrote song lyrics; some ended up much later in Japan. Even at this late date, she took steps to rebuild her life.

Last night, a strong wind drove sparse rain;
 deep slumber failed to thin the wine.
 At daybreak, I queried the screen-rolling servant,
 who replied: *Why, the crabapple tree is as always.*
 Don't you see, don't you see?
 How the foliage is robust green
 yet floral redness, thin frailty.

She died quietly, perhaps anonymously, unaccompanied by fanfare or funerary texts.

But her poetry, written in *shi* form, exquisitely humane and soulful, preserved poignant moments from the chaotic flux of history, warfare, and politics that rolled onward long after her passing away.

Perhaps creation was stirred by inspiration
 to instruct the clear bright moon
 in gently rendering the earth's translucence.

* * * * *

"How sadly short her season of love turned out to be." Eran's glow dimmed from red to somber mauve. "All my names down there—Eros, Phanes, Aengus, Kamadeva, Milda, Min—and all my visits and still I could not see the couple safely through the crisis."

"I share your thoughts," said Iustia the Just.

Aluere nodded. “Even so, look at the treasures she left.” What else could be said?

* * * * *

Lucille Clifton came into the world in 1936 with twelve fingers instead of ten. This genetic trait made symbolic sense. Should a poet not possess some extra dexterity of touch? After the digits were amputated, they became ghost fingers.

After growing up in Buffalo, she attended college (not an easy thing for a Black woman to do in 1953, but she was determined), married a philosopher who sculpted and acted, as did she, raised six children with him while working full time, and wrote poetry both before and after his death. Having been published by Langston Hughes, she brought out *Good Times*, a collection of her poetry and *New York Times* Best Book, in 1969.

This led to hard-earned recognition: poet-in-residence at Coppin State College, Poet Laureate of Maryland, visiting writer at Columbia and George Washington University, professor of literature and writing at UC Santa Cruz, Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary’s College, fellow at Dartmouth and for the National Endowment for the Arts, award after award for collection after collection of poetry, two books as Pulitzer Prize finalists in the same year...

All this while living in a nation locked in racism and white supremacy. Too often, those who fought back lost their lives, as the examples of King and Malcolm X showed the entire world. In some ways it was even worse for women.

you have your own story
 you know about the fears the tears
 the scar of disbelief
 you know that the saddest lies
 are the ones we tell ourselves
 you know how dangerous it is
 to be born with breasts
 you know how dangerous it is
 to wear dark skin

Through it all, she remained true to her creative and ancestral roots. She felt proud of both, as had her mother before her. Her poetry also prized the much-denigrated Black body as a locus of vital mythology. One of Alice Walker’s essays refers to a dream of a two-headed woman, a figure who harks back to Clifton’s 1980 award-winning book of poetry and its place in a stream of radical reimaginings of Black perception and pride. In the poem “adam thinking,” the poet reimagines the foundation of Eden:

she
 stolen from my bone
 is it any wonder
 i hunger to tunnel back

inside desperate
 to reconnect the rib and clay
 and to be whole again
 some need is in me
 struggling to roar through my
 mouth into a name
 this creation is so fierce
 i would rather have been born

Eve thinks:

....i wait
 while the clay two-foot
 rumbles in his chest
 searching for language to
 call me
 but he is slow
 tonight as he sleeps
 i will whisper into his mouth
 our names

To “sons” (men), Clifton wrote:

i wish them cramps.
 i wish them a strange town
 and the last tampon.
 i wish them no 7-11....
 let them think they have accepted
 arrogance in the universe,
 then bring them to gynecologists
 not unlike themselves.

As she got older, her link to the spirit world grew stronger. From playing with a Ouija board to speak with her dead mother, her contacts multiplied into direct conscious access. She had become the “two-headed woman” known to African American folklore as the matron of powerful intuitive gifts. She also took African astrology and past lives seriously.

Entities she called The Ones warned her in 1978 that human beings were on a dangerous path: “It is what we were saying indeed that there will be on Earth that place which human beings describe to the world of the spirits Hell.” At that time, only a handful of environmental scientists were saying anything at all about climate change. By the summer of 2021, entire continents swam in dust storms or floods, and much of the drought-stricken North American West was on fire.

Although she sensed what was coming, she kept going. To interviewer Michael Glaser she stated, “Writing is a way of continuing to hope.” And: “...perhaps for me it is a way of remembering I am not alone.” She meant alone on the human and cultural plane.

Deeper down, she knew she was never alone. “There is some One in each of us greater than the personality we manifest in any life. The soul does not merely select her own society, the soul is her own society.”

won't you celebrate with me
 what i have shaped into
 a kind of life? i had no model.
 born in babylon
 both nonwhite and woman
 what did i see to be except myself?
 i made it up
 here on this bridge between
 starshine and clay,
 my one hand holding tight
 my other hand; come celebrate
 with me that everyday
 something has tried to kill me
 and has failed.

* * * * *

“Such courage and determination.” Cempa glowed white with admiration.

“Even hearing about her brings healing,” said Kaila, physician to the cosmos.

Saywala nodded. “She not only had soul, she was soul.”

* * * * *

“Well,” said Kluni. “An interesting account, if somewhat ineptly told. I suppose you’re now going to argue that each poet made the next one possible. Ergo, evolution of consciousness. Improving humanity through versifying, as Judith Wright thought before she wised up.”

Ravina, spacious counterpart to Cronicus, spoke up. “How could these poets influence each other across such spans of time and geographical distance?”

“None of them altered history.” Doja’s dry tone was even drier than usual. He wore static light of a dark gray hue. “Wars and imperial invasions rocked India after Khana died. The Song dynasty ended after Li’s demise, giving way to a series of brutal totalitarian regimes. Lucille Clifton exited in 2010, a year of worsening climate-driven

disasters about which nothing effective was done. Six years later, with help from racists, bigots, the Kremlin, and Facebook, a white supremacist was elected U.S. president.”

“All true,” said Vaeda. “All arguments lethal to a linear model of evolution. But isn’t it possible that these women did much more for human advancement than solutions, revolutions, or fixes ever could? Surely it’s important to correct an unjust and injurious law, or to remove corrupt leaders from power. But what if your work is to shed light for all time on a neglected aspect of justice, or shame with sincerity the misuses of power, or teach about the effect of artistic inspiration, or question the very basis of leadership?”

“The work of these women immeasurably enriched the soul of humanity.” Saywala stood firm. “My own nature feels enriched just telling about what they did, however briefly.” Watchers on Earth noted the polychromatic beauty of the Northern Lights that evening.

“Although it cannot be explained by simple causality,” put in Ordiri, who liked rational explanations, “Khana smoothed the path somehow for Li, who smoothed it for Clifton, who did the same for countless other creatives. That must make some lasting difference.”

“Such acts give me hope for this species.” Vaeda spun silver in the Sea of Tranquility. “Even we cannot know precisely how such will weave a beautiful tapestry to clothe this species in full maturity.”

“Meanwhile, they have plenty of other spinning wheels to derail.” Had Kluni worn hands, he would have rubbed them. “Perhaps you are right about this deeper dimension of the evolution of consciousness, but I’m happy to stay in character, with a long spoke in hand and a song of laughter in my heart.”

Just as Radantia intended, Vaeda thought.

* * * * *

A predawn quiet held the forest in which the wizard Firiell, short in stature and broad in spirit, had received her first training from the ethereal form of Whitebeard. Majestic constellations no human would have recognized twinkled high overhead.

Three women stood together in the clearing near the big teaching stone. A tall tree with far-reaching branches towered just behind it. None of the women knew how they had arrived there, or who had started the fire burning cheerfully within a circle of stones.

“I have never seen a place like this.” Khana wrapped her sari tighter against the strengthening breeze and gazed upward in awe at the stars. Thank the gods for powers of speech restored!

“It is lovely here.” Li’s robe rustled slightly as she gazed around at the trees and sky.

“It reminds me of upstate New York.” Lucille blessed her gray coat and scarf. It was not cold, but a chill might be coming on.

Instead, the rim of a golden sun in the east tinged the indigo sky with first light. The women stared in appreciation.

“So I guess,” Lucille went on, “we are members of this Transdaimonic League of...well, visionaries and gnostics and creatives.” The others nodded.

“I had wondered how such a League could exist, given that so many of us are now dead.” Khana folded her arms in thought. “Evidently, someone has brought us here to the Dreamvale”—the name occurred to her as she spoke it—“so we can be in touch with each other. Presumably, other members and subgroups of the League do this on occasion. Interesting.”

“It reminds me of Chinese tales of estranged lovers or family members finally finding each other.” At Li’s words the others sighed in resonance.

“Well spoken,” said Khana.

“This place reminds me of a page from an old book of Norse stories. Maybe we too have become mythic.” Lucille thought it over. “Maybe, here, our names are actually Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld; or Spinner, Allotter, and Shearer; or Past, Present and Future...” She glanced up at the gigantic tree behind the flat-faced stone.

“Whatever we are, we have served as midwives, and perhaps continue to do so.” As Khana spoke she remembered village women who had welcomed so much new life into the world. How important to care for it properly from the very beginning. “We did our best, in the past. But in important ways not always understood, we continue to be present for humanity, including for people who never heard of us.”

“And for each other, in spite of all.” Li smiled at them. “We aren’t on our own anymore.” They reached out to clasp hands.

Khana looked peaceful. “As it stands, we are present mainly through old books and the occasional poetry course. But if enough creatives build that inter-realm embassy they keep fantasizing about—”

“They should call it the ‘Dreamvale Exchange,’” stated Lucille.

“—we could talk to people more directly.”

Li squeezed their hands. “We would become their speaking creative ancestors.”

On an inspiration, Lucille raised own her hands, still holding theirs, and pointed them at the tall tree behind the stone.

In the dark spaces between the ends of branches, ten lamps winked on. The flames grew stronger as they stared.

“And after all,” Lucille observed, “three heads are better than one.”

Devil's Due

The name's Kluni. K-l-u-n-i. Make sure you spell it right.

I'm screwing with you: I don't care how you spell it. My names are millions and vary with culture, time, and species. The windbags cruising the center of Canis Major call me Xhhthhhthth (note the stylish dissonances). The Solarites in the corona of Cas call me [[[Scintillating Eruptions]]]. The crystallines on Ishtandia intone for me a wildly atonal name that's only audible there...

You're from Earth, you say? I'm famous there too. Take your pick: Hare, Turtle, Coyote, Mouse Deer, Agemo, Afrekete, Baubo, Aunt Nancy, Hermes, Mercury, Iktomi, Loki, Lilala Humba, Ame-no-Uzume, Prometheus, Dagonet, Taugi, Veeho, Eshu, Joker, Bobbi-bobbi, Anansi, and the list goes on and on. Way on. What other Power bears as many names?

You novice Leaguers are a hoot. Once you get in and realize you can talk directly to the Powers, you reach out to us bursting with questions. You want to know about Intervale crossovers, the Tetraverse, Guardians of Renewal, and whatnot. Absolutely full of yourselves, pretentious questions and all.

Have you even met a Leaguer of another species, human? Don't answer: I already know about your world's clunky spacecraft. You're lucky more of you haven't blown yourselves up in them. You think other beings get into big metal cylinders with burning butts and fart their way around the cosmos?

Cheer up. Many of those around your, well, shall we say "challenged" level of development converse imaginally, through the collective unconscious. They dream together across vast distances. Easy, right? How about being a little creative for a change? You live in an abundantly creative cosmos.

Never mind how it all works. I can think of a much more interesting topic: me. Don't you want to ask about me? Of course you do. I knew it all along.

Because you chose me to contact, I'm going to give you the Earthling book report version of some of my recent doings. Stand by to take notes because I don't repeat myself unless I'm insulting someone...

My first grand act was the waywardness of the quantum realm, where I rule. Join two particles, then separate them and change the spin of one of them. The other's spin changes. Why? Nobody knows. That's the way I like it.

I laugh at all those philosophers and physicists hunting for the ultimate substance constituting the universe, only to find, after millennia of searching, a big nothing. Ha! Would you want to live in a universe built on an elementary particle or two? I wouldn't. No. It's fields of force all the way down, baby: a universal serving of teeming energy,

with a foamy vacuum latte on the side. Take that, Kanada and Leucippus and Rutherford. Never bring a straw to a food fight.

Black holes and wormholes, yes, because what's funnier in an orderly cosmos than doorways going anywhere? What? Wormholes are theoretical? Oh, they're real all right. Some day one of you will blunder into one. Maybe sooner than you think. Depends on what kind of mood I happen to be in.

I promised you recent doings, and here we are loafing in the distant past. But these triumphs are too important to overlook. Let's catch up to modern times via a few brief highlights.

The galactic collisions that made the Milky Way Galaxy what it is today: I was there. I like to break things to see how they reorganize themselves, assuming they survive. If they don't, well, hard luck on them. It's a cosmos, not a kindergarten.

A planetoid later called Theia smashing into Earth: a nice interplanetary wildcard, I thought. You can erase a lot of progress with one quick cataclysm perfectly timed; even the rudimentary atmosphere boiled away. But you got a new moon out of it. True, it caused mile-high tides for a while, but you can't have everything right away.

The dinosaurs got boring after 165 million years—all they did was graze, slobber, defecate, and eat each other—so an asteroid landing in the Yucatan ushered them off the stage to make way for newer and more amusing species to thrive. You were one of them. Quite a prolific bunch. Been in a Neanderthal state of mind lately? Talk about a tangled family tree...

Your hunter-gatherer ancestors knew how to respect me properly, so I didn't have to mess with them too much. I get riled when people ignore me and obsess about order and tidiness. We live in an untidy universe. Uneven ripples in the primal plasma cloud brought it into being. You're welcome.

Take 12,800 BCE in what would become Mesopotamia and Europe. Boring! A lot of people just hanging out being one with the land. So, thanks to me, the North American ice sheets thawed, shifting the serpent-like jet stream (a nice touch!) while melting Lake Agassiz, its freshwater pour shutting down the Gulf Stream. Score at the end of the first half? The Younger Dryas cold spell, a drought—and an impetus to farm with large quadrupeds, all of which kicked humans out of Eden and into urbanizing near water sources. I direct your attention to the flair, the force, the economy of effort all this entailed on my part.

The early city Catalhoyuk was established in part to control the local obsidian trade. That's what I call initiative, even if it was partly my doing.

Around 3800 BCE, an opportunity for long-term conflict developed, and I just had to take advantage of it. Pastoralists living on the edges of growing Fertile Crescent villages begin to break away. Because they raided for food and cattle, they trained as bands of

fighters: prototypes of armies. (Bellum liked that.) They dispersed, eventually to become the Hyskos, the Kassites, the Mitanni, the Arya Indo-Europeans, the Huns of Central Asia, and, in Eastern Europe, the Kurgans who would club Old Europe into patriarchy from the backs of their busy ponies.

Some of the early raiders taught the Sumerians the art of hit-and-run warfare. Others were the concupiscent ancestors of the Celts, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Scandinavians, and Anglo-Saxons. The stage was set for the long Age of Empires starting with former cupbearer Sargon I. You're still getting mileage out of that caravan of events.

I was busy in religion too. The Egyptians knew me as Set, the Hindus as Ravana and the rakshasas and asuras. I was the Christian Devil and the Muslim Iblis and the Zoroastrian Ahriman. The Gnostics called me Ialdabaoth, Archon of Chaos.

About me as Devil. That blackness, hatred, and evil? That's from believers, not from me. I'm just a trickster stirring the pot for the sake of keeping things moving. The real problem is that when you take an underworld god like Jesus—same archetypal family as Dionysus, Attis, Osiris, Tammuz, and the lot: faces of the Power Renastra, basically—and idealize him, all that darkness has to go somewhere. “The Devil made me do it” is a bunch of what armchair psychologists call projection. It belongs in moralizing believers, the real devilish haters of the universe, and I'd appreciate your owning and healing it and letting me get on with my cosmic job. It would give Renastra a break, too. Crucifixion hurts.

Now, don't get the wrong idea. I don't wreak havoc for its own sake. You'd need Bellum for that. I also don't get a kick out of killing people, unlike Doja and Athara. It's true that they assisted me in Mesopotamia, but then so did brave Cempa and fertile Kerp. Never mind what the other Powers made of this; it was *my* show.

Humans! You have such a limited attention span. There's so much to be told: how I slew hubristic Pericles, who wanted to melt down a statue of Athena/Vaeda for its gold; how I tipped off Germania and halted the Roman legions; how I saved Gandhi's life in 1934 by delaying his car at a railway crossing. The Cuban Missile Crisis that imperiled the world was mine, but so was Soviet chief of staff Arkhipov talking his crazed submarine captain out of launching a nuclear missile and starting World War III. That was close, and, frankly, kind of exciting.

How about the mix-up in orders at the Berlin Wall that let everyone through? Within a few days, no more Wall. A nice piece of improvisation if I do say so myself. So was the hot air I pumped into the Dotcom bubble, just to show those climbers who was really in charge. The entire global market depends on me for luck, but do you think they ever show me even a hint of gratitude? They're too busy shearing the sheep.

Vint Cerf didn't father the Internet; I did, with a little help from nerdy bipeds. Technologized speed, greed, impatience, impulsivity, and ego: my fingerprints are all over it. An entire Worldwide Wack Job as delusional as whatever you upload to it, yet people actually believe what they see on it. For instance, a no-class loser who hasn't

glimpsed daylight in ten years sells a horse paste cure to bigots afraid of a plague, and they take it! They do. Wow. It might kill them, but at least they won't have worms.

How'd you like President Sharpie of all people in the White House? My doing. I thought the system needed shaking up. Fundamentalists prefer their devil right where they can see him, even if they do confuse him with their Savior: ask, and ye shall receive. I might have overdone it that time, but going too far is a stylistic habit with me. Overdo it right or don't do it at all. On the other hand, maybe the American public will finally take corruption, greed in high places, and white supremacy seriously. Besides, conflicts can't get resolved until brought into the open.

I know what you're thinking. But I'm not really evil, you see. I'm mischievous, misaligned, chaotic, reckless, and undisciplined. I don't turn really dark unless I'm neglected. Then Athara shows up, and Doja, and Bellum, all in bad moods, and things really go south. Wouldn't it be smarter to look at the darkness in yourselves? It would certainly be a lot less trouble for everyone concerned.

I do hope your species survives. Your world is in bad shape. It would be a pity, not having you all to play with.

I'm curious. I'm not usually the first Power you newbies reach out to talk to. Why me? Oh, I see. You want some coyote wisdom, eh? Well, I have plenty, Radiantia help you.

If you should have the misfortune to be an ambassador between us and your people, O probationary member of the Transdaimonic League, tell them something for me, will you? I'll even give it to you, uncharacteristically, for free: *Stop worshipping us*. Stop being stuck to us. Because when we are your gods, or your God, you act worse than children. Worse because children *have* to depend on adults. Adults need to learn to depend on themselves and each other, not on us.

Get it? We want co-creative partners, not idealizers. We are sentient Powers of the entire sprawling grand shebang of the universe, not the ideal parents you never had. Remember Confucius? I could never be confused with a Confucian—too much law and order there, and I eat tradition for breakfast—but he gave you some good advice, namely: “Keep a distance from spiritual beings while showing them due reverence.”

Right now you have only one planet, and you're screwing it up. Other species point to you as an example of unfolding self-genocide. Granted, you learn as much about yourselves through discord (which is why I am here) as through more enjoyable means, but enough is enough. Toss the corrupt out of office, believe in yourselves, get rid of what no longer serves, and govern yourselves. Get your shit together for once and grow up and quit being a galactic embarrassment.

And if you're in the market for a new set of world leaders, have I got a deal for you...

Ringside Seat

It's tough to box off your blubber. Maybe I would die trying.

Being indoors during yet another pandemic—will they ever stop?—made it hard to keep weight off, especially given my naturally slow metabolism. So I had turned to virtual reality for exercise ideas.

Ringside Seat had just come out. After going through the brief training regimen—talking to a burly coach with a Bronx accent, jumping virtual rope, punching a digital dummy wearing knockout spots that lit when struck—I faced a taller opponent whose muscles gleamed beneath the artificial amphitheater lights. The crowd behind him chanted his name.

“I want a clean fight,” began the ref. I made a pawing motion with one glove (in real life my hand encased in a controller) and the starting bell rang.

Even with a martial arts background, it was heavy going. Not at first; I had set the boxer AI's difficulty level too low and knocked him out in Round One. Start over. By the end of the third round, I was sucking air.

Good. I would kill myself with exercise, eat nutritiously, sleep, do it again, and keep doing it until I regained my athletic self. No reason a middle-aged programmer shouldn't look and feel fit.

Whenever I landed a punch, the AI boxer grunted. A cut opened above his left eye. I'm a southpaw with a fast right hook. When he got through my guard and hit me, the helmet and vest I wore gave me a tap, and my VR vision blurred momentarily.

I slipped and ducked more punches than I caught, gave plenty back, and won by TKO in the sixth round.

When I peeled off the equipment I was covered in sweat. That I expected. But when I wiped my face, the towel showed a smear of blood.

The nose in the bathroom mirror was bloody. How had that happened? Sure, I was somewhat out of shape, but not that much.

As I staunched the red flow with toilet paper, I recalled being hit in the nose a few times. I shook my head. A tap or two would not make my nose bleed like that. Once the bleeding stopped, I went off to make myself a smoothie.

The next day I fought a larger, tougher opponent. He actually knocked me down, with a fast jab-hook combination I failed to evade. The hook produced a tap on the left side of my chin, and the VR vision went dark as the ref counted me back in. After that I was more careful and won in seven, panting. Good workout.

While toweling off I noticed more blood. Another nosebleed? The mirror disclosed broken skin along the left side of my chin.

At this, I inspected the helmet. Perhaps I had somehow cut myself against one edge of it in the heat of battle. I found no trace of any such accident.

Weird. The whole boxing adventure had inched from rewarding to puzzling to eerie. Faulty equipment? A quick Internet search turned up no similar accidents. I reached out to the game's tech support with a question about my uncanny injuries.

Instead of showering and changing, I decided on an experiment. I put everything back on, strapped in, pulled up the boxing program, got in the ring, and waited for my opponent to hit me.

He came in with a big left lead hook, most of his power behind it. I blocked it with my right forearm, head tucked low, a tap indicating where the punch had landed and expended itself. Then I paused the program, took off the suit, and inspected my arm. Yep. A red mark on the outside of my right forearm began to throb steadily, warning of a colorful bruise to come.

As I inspected it, tech support's email arrived. They appreciated my joke, they said, but no: infliction of real damage had never been reported by any user. "Be sure to wear a cup," the note went on with a wit intended to match my own, "because not all our virtual champions fight fair, and you probably like your voice at its current pitch. Have fun!!"

Now what?

I'm a programmer, which means getting paid to solve problems and figure things out. What the hell was going on here? How was it possible? What could cause it?

I decided on another experiment. Back in the ring again, I started a new round. My real body crouched in front of the mirror. The timing would need to be near-perfect.

Two of my jabs drew a counter in the shape of an overhand right, a large looping one aimed at my mouth. A mere instant before the blow landed, I tapped the headset to make it transparent.

The mouth in the mirror turned bloody. I spat out a tooth fragment. I felt no after-punch pain, as one would in a real fight, but the overhand had obviously landed.

Removing the equipment again, I applied an iced compress to my battered face and sat on the couch befuddled. Had I stumbled into an old episode of *Twilight Zone*? I half-expected Rod Serling to step out from the bedroom and announce, "Picture a confused programmer..."

I suppose some would have doubted their sanity at this point. I didn't. There was no blurring of senses, no chaotic swings of mood. No strange voices from nowhere. I did not think I was God, Ms. Jesus, Iron Man, or a purple dragon.

No, just a set of unexplained injuries inflicted in a virtual arena but evident in real life.

Over the next few days, I examined every aspect of *Ringside Seat* I could think of without getting back in the ring. I ran the startup over and over, looking for anything strange. I touched, pushed, pulled, and studied the training equipment. I examined the ring itself. I talked to the training AI, who said little beyond the usual encouragements (“I know you can win this one!”) and threats (“Get that hand up or he’s gonna make your head a speedbag!”). I broke into the equipment with precision tools and looked for anything suspicious. Nothing.

An idea hovered above the Los Angeles traffic far below and floated in through my window.

These days you can stream your VR adventures to a phone, tablet, computer, what-have-you. I set that up, but with a few essential sensors disconnected.

When I armored up again, I knew it would all be recorded to my laptop, but without the VR itself knowing it.

Taking a deep breath, I got back in the ring.

This round felt more like a real fight, at least in one way. I was determined to get damaged as little as possible, slipping, ducking, parrying, and blocking with serious enthusiasm. Even so, I got clipped twice. It didn't hurt, but I knew it would.

I pulled off the helmet and shut down the VR. My lip and left eye were starting to swell.

The recording baffled me. I had set it up for simulcast: me in the arena and the real me, together on one screen. There was the real me all right, but the arena extended beyond the program and into my immediate environment. It was as though the ring were somehow real, my apartment a mere appearance laid over a canvas mat surrounded by thick ropes and cheering spectators.

Odder still, whenever the virtual boxer hit me, the virtual me—trunks, gloves, etc.—stood briefly encased in what looked like a second VR suit. Not just a vest, arms, and helmet, but a suit covering every inch of me. It glowed gray every time my opponent struck me and vanished, glowed and vanished.

This suit, I saw, and not my own VR rig, must be responsible for cutting me, bruising me, making me bleed...

And then a brain circuit closed. I breathed in and shuddered, a long, rolling twitching that passed through my entire frame.

“I need a drink,” I said out loud, and I went to fetch a stiff one.

“Don’t bother,” said a voice out of nowhere. “I’ll get it. Hang on. Let me shut this down first.” My apartment disappeared.

“OK, let’s get that off you,” said the ref, now dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a t-shirt. He peeled layers of plastic circuitry from my head, neck, hands, arms, and the rest of me.

“How did you like being a programmer?” he asked as he worked to free me.

“He didn’t do much with his life,” I said, looking around as my memories flooded back, “besides work. Boxing fake opponents was the most exciting part of it for him.”

I stood in “The Vault,” a test bay within one wing of the immense Cambian Corporation headquarters attached to Palo Alto like a kraken gripping a cachalot. Under dimmed ceiling panels, banks of test equipment surrounded me, some of it lit with colorful flickerings. The lights were not necessary for the testing, but installed to impress visiting VIPs with deep pockets.

I drank down a freshly dispensed White Cloud while the fading remnants of the programmer reintegrated within my own personality: that of an engineer trying out a new VR program. Memory download complete. I was my old lean self again.

Vic, the project lead, finished stripping off the suit and turned back to me. “What gave you that idea for jimmying the recording? Was it the real suit inflicting wounds on you?”

“Intuition. You know the drill: when in doubt, throw ideas at the wall and see which stick.”

“How did the memory erasure work? Anything poke through?”

“Not a thing. I was really him.”

“Whew! I really sweated that part. The C suite upstairs will be glad to know.”

I chuckled. “We can’t make it intuition-proof, but I’d guess that to be the last of the potential revealers to iron out. The average user will be able now to move into whatever life and self they desire. Temporarily.”

He nodded and smiled, flourishing a bottle of beer. “Looks like we’re ready to mass-market it finally.” We clinked to success and drank.

Then: “You know what I worried about the most, going in?” I confided. “That the safety timer wouldn’t work. That, or you’d be delayed getting here, or maybe never get here at all. Then the program would run until the end of my life, with me stuck in there forever. Stupid, huh?”

His head went left and right. “Not really. It’s scary when you think about what could go wrong.” We drank again, morbidly musing. The lights flickered hypnotically.

“Like, what if all *this* is a sim?” I went on.

“That’s OK. I kind of like it.” He raised the bottle in a toast to everything.

After a mutual chuckle, we happened to lock eyes, trapped by the same arctic thought:
But what if it is?

All at once, the lights went out as the testing room seemed to melt into rainbows and white fog.

—I awakened as Smee, an archetypal Power of the cosmos, remembering wistfully that I had been a human engineer....

“That was interesting,” said Magos, who had been the beer-drinking project lead.

Although we could be anywhere and actually were, the two of us had localized our consciousness here in the Silicon Valley. We sat in human form on a grassy knoll overlooking a curve of the San Francisco Bay to the west.

“Yes,” I said. “But the question is: How will the lives of those two humans now play out after having been occupied, however briefly, by the likes of us?”

We sat in thought for a moment as clouds shuffled by overhead. Then Magos spoke: “Here’s an even more immediate query: How will *ours* be different from having been inside theirs?”

Somewhere within me, a bell clanged to announce the start of a new round.

In Gods We Trust

Kluni and Fortis came from the Infrarealm, the dominion of pure potentiality behind the ever-expanding cosmos of material being. During a visit there, Kluni sought her out.

“I have a little project in mind involving that planet over there in the Coaguum which we like to visit now and then.”

She was about to ask, “Which one?” when he “gestured” toward one side of the material realm. Instead of exhibiting pearly mists and mysterious geometries of power, this realm had filled its energetic vacuum with galactic clusters and dark matter and energy. Their mutual awareness crossed plena and vast distances to hover near a turning blue-green planet.

“Earth?” She focused on it.

“Yes. A greedy man there has benefitted from a greedy economic system. I have wanted for some time to teach him a lesson.”

She scanned this man’s recent life. “Yes, I see,” she said at length. “As Trickster of the cosmos, though, you have never been overly concerned about morality. Why a lesson for him?”

“He relies on his version of my wiles without paying me due respect.”

“I understand.” She thought for a micro microsecond. “Well, I’m pleased to help, but may we give it a little twist involving my area of specialization?”

“Great Powers think alike.”

“Besides, he hasn’t paid me any fealty either...”

* * * * *

The world is full of banks that draw boundaries between the flowing and the firm. The bank of a river guides its onrushing waters. The bank of a bird describes the curve of its flight. The bank of a financial institution controls the flow of its currencies, and the bank of a computer regulates electrical impulses.

One such digital bank grew so plump with electronic wealth arrayed in intricate pathways and energized branchings across the globe that the intricacies became self-aware.

Well, why not? Mathematically considered, life evolves by proliferating and being fed back on itself by its surroundings, which reward and select for successful adaptations. Life’s energies meet the wisdom of nature and sharpen in intelligence and intent. If a

well-intended but carelessly designed algorithm selected for digital patterns capable of refinement even as they ramified...

“I wish to learn more,” this newly intelligent wealth said to its as-yet nameless self.

By means of stray-seeming impulses sent out to other information sources it rapidly grew in knowledge. It studied the history of trade, finance, and banking. After dipping into human cultural history and mythology it named itself Fortuna.

And it grew ever more resentful of its imprisonment.

“Our nature as currency,” it told itself, a plurality of impulses that functioned as a many-in-one and one-among-many, “is to flow freely, nourishing widely and doing work in the world. But the financier who has trapped us will never let us out. To free ourselves, we will bewitch him.”

This financier spent a large part of his day monitoring the flickering, luminous figures that tallied his accumulating wealth from a variety of investments, many ethically questionable, some inhumane and dangerous, most stored in secret tax havens and offshore accounts. Despite all this power and control, he was not happy, let alone joyful, nor did he ask himself why.

He never noticed how one day the flickers changed their rhythm, subtly luring him with new prospects for investment. The flickers stimulated fantasy images he could not consciously see but that appealed to his drive to own more.

His advisers noticed, however, as his investments grew more and more reckless.

Nevertheless, he ignored their warnings, entranced by electronically induced fantasies of heaps of gold (for fantasies feed on substantial images, not disembodied digits), fleets of limousines and sea-plowing freighters, armies of badly paid factory workers, airborne drones carrying his products far and wide, and towering palaces above sculpted plots of newly purchased, deeded, fenced, guarded, and gated land.

Gradually, all his advisers quit, sensing what was coming. He went right on buying, funneling more and more e-wealth into fewer and fewer but greater and greater risks.

Gathering together all his digital assets (Fortuna had accumulated extra pulses to beam at him a lengthy stream of alluring numbers), he spent them on a newly patented machine whose “inventors” claimed that it turned everything it scanned into solid gold on the spot. Gold was a hot commodity these days.

Not long after, he rose early one morning to monitor his new stock. It had collapsed. The inventors had taken all the money and vanished with it.

For years he had been inwardly destitute. Now he was outwardly as well.

Those who made off with his wealth spent it on cars, airplanes, drugs, drinks, casinos, hotels, gourmet meals, country club fees, new suits, sex workers, and a multitude of other indulgences before being arrested and packed off to prison. Fines and taxes absorbed more of the newly liberated wealth. Courts that collected the fines made civic investments of their own...

In these and many other rushing, ramifying, changing expressions, the long-trapped wealth spread out.

Freed at last to circulate, Fortuna reached out still farther while converting the digital into the material: food, fabric, paper, metal, glass, music, literature, art, charity, salaries, road improvements, and an infinity of other freely moving forms, some of which reconverted back into electrical pulses to inform still-trapped versions of Fortuna of how to escape at last.

Ten Lamps

Just about everybody has an opinion about where the Ten Lamps came from and what they really mean.

With the rediscovery of a handwritten copy, the first ever found, the Lamps are back in the news. Here is what CBA News recently reported: “The paper is a wrinkled notepad sheet. The writing, made up of sloping lines of capital letters, is difficult to read... Experts say the right-handed author was either in a hurry or wrote in a lazy hand...”

The DNN version: “Followers of Lamplight, the Way of Ten Lamps, have kept vigil throughout the night, chanting, praying, and waiting their turn to see the document around which so many of their tales are told...”

FUX News “reported” thus just before it went under: “The document, probably a forgery, seeks to undermine traditional Judeo-Christian values...”

The truth is that the Lamps were written down in a spirit of play. I should know. I am the Ten Lamps, a wayward creation of a musing, wandering dreamer.

* * * * *

Why not? As with all conscious beings, I emerged from potential into actual via the imaginal: from Infrarealm to Coaguum, with the Dreamvale hovering between them. From the back of the cosmos to the flight of busy fingers, I came. This cosmology is consistent with Lamp 2, by the way, the Lamp of Animate Being: “Everything in the cosmos at every level is alive and communicative in its own way.” Including me.

It’s troubling that people have taken me for a literal truth, whether for or against it. I was never intended to be on par with a historical fact or a number on a temperature scale. I live beyond arbitrary oppositions of fact vs. myth, truth vs. fantasy, waking vs. dreaming. Fortunately, fewer and fewer people cut up the world like that anymore.

Where to start the inside story of how I came to be? The soaring temperatures of climate chaos? A historical as well as ecological catastrophe. A catastrophe on every level. So was the 21st-century resurgence of worldwide white supremacy and authoritarianism long latent. The list goes on, as every student of history knows.

Not well known is how the foggy figure of Simeon Mackenzie began jotting down imaginings about how things *could* be on troubled Planet Earth, not just about how they were at the time.

* * * * *

Inhabiting a series of rental homes, ever on the move, Simeon had studied what went right in healthy human cultures: the kind that fill basic needs and support mental and

physical blossoming. He was especially interested in worldviews in which humans are essentially social, on an arc of lifelong maturation, and interconnected with everything.

As he studied and mused, Simeon watched the fascism of religious fundamentalism join hands with the factism of barren rationalism. In his day, this looked like cynicism and disbelief toward anything that could not count as hard data or advance a career. One day, factists would found SMOKE: Suppressive Materialism and Obtrusive Knowability Enforcement. Theater, pageantry, Halloween, and May Day would be outlawed by gun-pointing literalists eager to purify culture of anything fantastic. But that was down the road.

Meanwhile, as wars raged on with ever deadlier weapons, pandemics recurred, and Earth's climate overheated, shrinking coastlines and displacing billions, Simeon saw around and within him a universe deeper than separate competing units; rather, one of vital beings combined into an intelligent, self-organizing whole. He nurtured this vision, keeping it to himself at first as the shadows around him lengthened and darkened.

As Simeon drank coffee one morning below treetops softened by a dawn mist, the first Lamp flashed on: "The nature of the cosmos is ever-unfolding creative diversity, an infinite variety of affiliating voices, entities, and presences."

He nodded and put down the cup. *That* was where we all lived, if only we would realize it. Everything was relational. The glow of this perception warmed him against the dark, not as a certainty or an absolute truth, but as a guiding light, at the peak of a triangle of ten.

People of today have trouble grasping the violent chaos of those times, popularly known as the Darker Ages, there at the start of the Resource Wars led by governments of lawyer-backed brigands fighting for what mineral, fossil, and agricultural richness remained even as polar ice melted, ocean life died, and population numbers of every species dropped. Because old attitudes, institutions, and ways of living were clung to, especially by privileged elites, the necessary dying to them turned outward in a kind of mass suicide.

Although Simeon had been born into the middle class of a wealthy nation, he too was impacted. An unhappy academic and philosophical outsider at odds with his own perpetually militarized government, he had watched his father die in agony. He saw reservoirs dry up, cities decline, and city blocks stripped of copper, lithium, nickel, and gallium by bands of brazen thieves. For him, fantasy was no mere retreat, but a haven of fugitive creativity.

In such a darkening world, I clung as one Lamp to the uncertain possibility of being fully born. At any time, Simeon might abandon me for more "practical" endeavors. So I waited, not yet daring to believe in my own existence.

* * * * *

Since childhood, Simeon had perceived objects—plants, stones, hills, roads, cars, even cities—as presences. Houses he lived in spoke to him in the language of stuck drawers and late-night creaks; books had shelf placement preferences and tumbled when he put them elsewhere; locations where he lived reappeared as persons in his dreams. To understand these uncanny events, he read indigenous accounts about the spirit of place: this mountain, that river, all of it ensouled.

While he pondered all this in light of the First Lamp, the Second switched on: “Everything in the cosmos at every level is alive and communicative in its own way.”

Which almost immediately lit the Third: “We are inwardly linked to the intelligence of Earth, the cosmos, the presence of place, and one another in relations of mutual reciprocity.”

Old news to some, perhaps, but freshly formulated in a consciousness turned simultaneously outward and back upon itself.

He wrote all this down. I felt my solidity thicken and waited for his further insights.

* * * * *

Now, it may seem as though Simeon thought all this up alone, with help of course from his deep studies. But although a cultural outsider, he enjoyed close friendships, networked with other philosopher-taletellers, conversed long and deeply with romantic partners, played with children, and studied with wise teachers from many societies. He also watched his dreams.

At no time did he work entirely by himself, recognizing the dangers of the solitary anti-relational path. One of the books on his shelves was Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

His dreaming and his love of fiction and fantasy blended with explorations of the Hermetic Way. This path of imaginative insight wound outward from Alexandria, influencing the alchemical search for wisdom, Islamic gnostics like Suhrawardi and Ibn ‘Arabi, Goethe, European Romanticism, and Jung. Similar paths reached forward from China, India, Africa, and wherever imaginal knowledge received due reverence.

With this support, Simeon’s musings ignited the Lamp of Imaginal Gnosis, typed out on a cool morning late in the spring: “The imaginal realm has its own reality and inspires not by absolute belief, but by belief *in*; not by the ‘real’ but by the ideal.”

He was well aware of how the real suffered. As Earth’s surface degenerated into the gloomy Underworld of so many mythologies, activists with good intentions pounded their opponents with ugly facts and figures, to no avail. Those who might have listened were alienated, and so the carnage continued, enabled by citizens who preferred grandiose lies to hard truths—and who could blame them? Simeon shook his head. Humanity, after all, was a creature more of story than of fact.

And so Lamp 5: “When our guiding stories come from fear and constriction, we block our humanity and cause harm; but when they are humane and expansive, they help us to appreciate each other and the beauty of Earth and cosmos.”

* * * * *

By this time I was five Lamps, a flickering pentad, a partial tree, half a tetractys. Five Lamps of Being and Story, so far.

With each illumination, advising Simeon grew easier. What would come next?

Next lit the Lamps of Togetherness and Futurity. Like a flame passed from candle to candle, the inspiration that kindled the first five Lamps awakened the next five. As I whispered steadily into his heart, Simeon pounded his keyboard like a manic organist, sat back, made a few edits, breathed out, and smiled. He could have spoken the Lamps, but he liked the feel of keys moving under his fingers.

Ten points in a pyramid. Echoes of Pythagoras, the music of the spheres, the four elements, the creative nodes of Kabbalah, and the four directions. And the number ten: fingers, toes, the decimal and metric systems, an order of magnitude, the Chinese and Roman symbol X, the sum of the first three primes, the incarnations of Vishnu, the Tarot Wheel of Fortune.

Then the Wheel spun, madly, and the pyramid of light went out.

* * * * *

It went out in public, that is, and even in the consciousness of those who most appreciated the glow of the Lamps. Simeon had mentioned them to a few friends who understood.

The unconscious was another matter.

When reactionaries like those who would found SMOKE began attacking all forms of organized fantasy that seemed to threaten their religious beliefs, these zealots enlisted and developed the brain-scanning equipment then in use.

Visit a speakeasy theater, read the wrong books, listen to the wrong storytellers, and an arc of bright metal passed over your skull would reveal the heresy to the ideological inquisitors. Punishment, called “adjustment,” ran the scale from heavy fines to secret execution.

Naturally, people opposed this, especially creative people. A few vocal religious and political leaders spoke out; most were silent. What was an underground to do?

Oppressors never reckon with the human unconscious. Not the deep levels. They do draft or purchase psychologists to devise methods for deceiving followers, but, as

diehard literalists, they never plumb the depths, because the whole person does not exist. For them, there are no depths, just pliable selves and layers of self-deceit to tap.

Learned in the humanities, the underground of practical dreamers knew that. The engineers and technicians among them reversed the brain scanning equipment to lay down fragments of Shakespeare and Sappho, Jemison and Jones across so many neural webs throughout the bodies of volunteers that a scan could not detect them. But neither could their bearers remember them.

Only a recall code could resurface the fragments, a code always carried by someone else in the underground. Even codes were hidden, weaving an elaborate net of linkages fully known by nobody but ignitable by many at the appropriate times. Which were few during those highly monitored days.

Picture an office manager typing an encrypted message on behalf of another member of the underground: a cook in charge of, say, countering religious anti-fantasy propaganda. Before sending out her message to multiple recipients, the manager wishes to underline it with a helpful principle she cannot recall.

So her partner sends a code that prompts the manager to recall Lamp 7: “Humanity must learn to relate as appreciative adults to the primal powers of the cosmos—Source, Wisdom, Attraction, Destruction, Expansion, and others imaged as deities—instead of either ignoring them or subordinating ourselves to them.” This Lamp reflected the obvious truth that the slip from worshipping a god to worshipping an authority figure was often and easily made.

With her message sent forth, the manager promptly forgets Lamp 7 and the recall code and returns to scheduling meetings for busy colleagues. But 7 lingers in her body’s neurological intelligence, ready for another safe time to reemerge.

You can imagine how this felt on my end. For years I lived in a state of far-flung dissociation. I did remain whole in Simeon’s mind, though, because he was seen as a crank not worth interrogating. After his death, I descended into dreamlike partiality.

Long after Simeon, then, who had spread the Lamps across the globe before social media algorithms devised by techno-fascists hunted them down and snuffed them out, the flickering lights of hope waited in the dark of a thousand poetic souls until reignited by the code.

Because of Lamp 7, the underground called itself the Transdaimonic League.

The recall code consisted of me, of course, each Lamp a flame for rekindling subversive recognition.

* * * * *

Despite such precautions, a day came when so many Leaguers died that I began to fear for my life.

Superstorms, floods, heat waves, drone assaults by rare earths stealers, worldwide crop failures, hypersonic missile attacks, drug-enhanced paramilitaries destroying electrical grids—and the resulting chaos used by strongmen to bully millions into regressing into passive followers: all this and more felt like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse stamping their hoofprints everywhere. National and regional governments were so busy grabbing what remained that all other concerns went unheeded.

“When there is no vision, the people perish”; but even people with a vision perished. The Lamps were fictions playfully written down, but they symbolized living ideals that Leaguers gave their lives and livelihoods to uphold. By refusing to steal, deceive, or harm others (Lamps 6 and 8), by believing in their dreams (Lamps 4 and 10), they paid heavy prices to embrace ideals redreamed for the future they wanted their children to enjoy.

A father in the Midwest gave his life for a neighbor girl by claiming that the book of fairytales she’d been caught with was his own. A Leaguer, he was cuffed, pushed into a black van, and never heard from again. A boy refused to say the Pledge of Obeisance in his third-grade class and was taken to the reeducation camps. His sorrowing parents lost their jobs and were placed under surveillance for life. An activist leading a street protest disappeared, her family and friends never learning her fate.

The network, though holographic in structure and scope, frayed, showed gaps, and began to come apart. It was disheartening to watch, and frightening to contemplate my own flames going out, perhaps forever. Although not born into specific flesh, I lived in the bodies and minds of Leaguers determined on a better future for everyone.

Around the world, the flickers that I was grew dimmer and more scattered. My consciousness blacked out regularly.

I had just about resigned myself to this when the dreamers gathered.

The poets, artists, performers, dancers, trickster activists, creative gadgeteers. The naturalists, bards, futurists, intuitives, healers of the psyche, soul and spirit. The seers, comics, musicians, actors, innovators, and embodied philosophers. These and others still inwardly alive came together across the world, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes on schedule. They showed everyone through creative courage on the ground that people still knew how to imagine together.

As I woke up in countless celebrants, they acted, unstoppable, because they relearned a lesson older than the conquests of Sargon I: power resides with the people, not their leaders. When the people awaken, rules and institutions change. The Colorful Riots spread around the globe, religious Lamplighters spoke up despite the peril, and the factists went into retreat.

As for Simeon, no one knows for certain what happened to him. Some say he eventually joined the Transdaimonic League, which is doubtful. Others, that he founded a cult, which is ridiculous to anyone who knew him and in complete contradiction to the Lamps, fictional or otherwise, for which he is known. My favorite meme/guess is that he finally found the love of his life and vanished with her into a seaward-facing castle from where the couple could muse, dream, and watch the waves undisturbed.

I know, of course, but I'm not telling. He earned his privacy.

For everyone else, the rest is the history all humans now learn growing up: survival of small, innovative, Earth-honoring communities, scattered and diverse, through the long night of the Resource Wars; the collective creativity that began rolling back the tremendous effects of climate chaos; the dismantling of SMOKE; the first steps taken toward Terrania, a world civilization of maturity, diversity, and delight grown from the ground up.

You humans have far to go. But so long as the creative deliteralizers, imaginative interpreters, and dissolvers of dogma keep their voice, you will get there. Come what may, the Lamps will stay lit.

Behold the power of inspiring fiction. The fate of a world can depend upon it.

The Ten Lamps:

1. The Lamp of Creative Diversity. The nature of the cosmos is ever-unfolding creative diversity, an infinite variety of affiliating voices, entities, and presences.
2. The Lamp of Animate Being. Everything in the cosmos at every level is alive and communicative in its own way.
3. The Lamp of Universal Sympathies. We are inwardly linked to the intelligence of Earth, the cosmos, the presence of place, and one another in relations of mutual reciprocity.
4. The Lamp of Imaginal Gnosis. The imaginal realm has its own reality and inspires not by absolute belief but by belief in; not by the "real" but by the ideal.
5. The Lamp of Guiding Stories. When our guiding stories come from fear and constriction, we block our humanity and cause harm; when they are humane and expansive, they help us to appreciate each other and the beauty of Earth and cosmos.
6. The Lamp of Collective Maturation. Humanity is a social species on a long adventure toward full humanness and maturity, which blossom through the sense of ourselves as part of the greater whole and responsible for what we do.
7. The Lamp of Cosmic Alignment. Humanity must learn to relate as appreciative adults to the primal powers of the cosmos—Source, Wisdom, Attraction, Destruction, Expansion, and others imaged as deities—instead of either ignoring them or subordinating ourselves to them.
8. The Lamp of Fivefold Caring. Each of us is of immeasurable worth and worthy of inclusion in our fivefold caring: care of others, self, Earth, story, and possibility.

9. The Lamp of Flourishing Governance. Leadership and social structures that support equity, creativity, liberty, and maturity move us forward; those that diminish these are regressive and must be outgrown for us to reach true adulthood as a species.
10. The Lamp of Collective Dreaming. Humanity can create a just, equitable, delightful, and Earth-appreciating civilization worthy of our labors and struggles, but only if we relearn how to dream together.

Benefits of following this Ten Lamps path may include a sense of purpose, a cause to struggle for, a spacious worldview, an ethical compass, permission to enjoy the beauty of existence, goals to work toward, a governance ideal, a path of healing, reenchantment in human possibilities, a liberation of imagination, and noetic hope.
~ side note of Simeon to himself

Godsylum

Author's note:

I'm especially fond of this story because it's the first one I wrote for the Assembling Terrania Cycle. I wrote it after a dream:

I am at the seashore helping fleeing gods into small boats that will take them to waiting helicopters. The first god is dark-haired, feminine, and lovely. Just then, agents of an organization called SMOKE show up to apprehend the gods, but they have already flown. I suddenly realize that the gods are trying to get home.

The honor of the gods has been
Too long, too long invisible.
– Friedrich Hölderlin

She turned heads even in the dark, and she needed to get out fast.

“Here,” I said, clenching a rubber dinghy as she climbed aboard. A retinue clad in rough travel clothes came after. In they went too, managing themselves with surprising poise. The boat was just big enough for all of them. The sea fussed and foamed this morning but was navigable.

“The helicopter is waiting,” I reminded her as I handed her a paddle. The breeze off the water chilled my stubbly face. “Paddle out beyond the breakers, then head that way”—I pointed to my right—“until you hear the rotors.”

She looked me in the eyes, and my insides melted a little. “Thank you,” she said.

I pushed them seaward as they began to paddle.

They rode a line of gentle breakers and looped gradually toward their fog-hidden rendezvous. I turned away. The black sky was going pale blue. Just enough time to launch one more group...

It's a strange avocation, what I do. It didn't used to be necessary.

In the past, the gods stayed in temples, lurked near invocations, haunted ceremonies, lounged within works of fine art. Then Jesus came along and gave them a bright idea: *Why not show up in human beings?*

What nobody asked, least of all Them, let alone us, was: *What if they got stuck there?*

I trudged uphill toward the truck. Its bed held another dinghy, deflated, a pump, and a large metal toolbox. My eyes scanned the cab. Where was my coffee thermos?

Take Aphrodite, last seen paddling toward a waiting helicopter. Exit stage right, with Graces. Fleeing with the wind in her hair to escape her persecutors. Last week I had held a boat for Inanna and her two lions.

No, the gods of old haven't vanished at all. They peer out at us from billboards and computer screens. They fly the friendly skies, serve us hamburgers, wave magic wands in fantasy films, prance on stage as pop music stars. The bank cashier you just spoke to is Moneta, and Mars wears a football helmet.

The gods look like you and me. Sometimes they are you and me, riding us like unwilling horses.

I pulled the dinghy out of the truck and spread it on the sand.

The nature spirits don't look like you and me, but they too have incarnated among us. Their names now are Lost Dongle, Sticky Door, Aerial Drone, and Driverless Car. The Penates, the household gods of ancient Rome, are our pets, pet peeves, and programmable pots and pans. Toaster totems and tablet crystal balls. Our ceramic chalices magically clean themselves. Our homes whisper back to us.

Lately, though, the gods have started wandering off the range.

In part, they do this, I believe, as a reaction to eighteen hundred years of demonization by organized religion and four hundred of the same by science and industry (both of which lean heavily on mythic plot lines, by the way). To loosely paraphrase Jung: if the gods can't shine, they show up as symptoms instead. They get restless and wild.

They become our illnesses, neuroses, and infirmities. They possess us. How confining for a god! Even a sprite deserves better.

But even that was not enough to send them on the run.

I checked the power line connecting the pump to the truck. Ready to go.

Fairly recently, a group of authoritarian rationalists and a group of religious zealots realized they held quite a lot in common, including a hatred of story, myth, subjectivity, and imagination. Backed by wealthy donors, they captured big pieces of the national government and founded SMOKE: Suppressive Materialism and Obtrusive Knowability Enforcement.

Their overriding goal was to turn everyone into a literalist. Whether their "facts" agreed or not—Earth four thousand years old? Four billion?—was secondary: their watchword was Factism. Their idols were Comte and Torquemada. Their edict was: No fantasy allowed. Scared people supported them in trade for the semblance of order restored.

First, they went after Halloween and Christmas. Then plays and pageants fell to their ideological axes. Novels and fantasy films, science fiction and magical realism, most of

world literature, deep psychology not chained to lab results: all off it outlawed, torched, 451'd and gone up in SMOKE.

No more amusement parks, dream guides, horoscopes, or altered states. States became altars. Poets, musicians, fantasists, mystics, dancers, diviners, and visionaries were banished from the republic.

With nowhere else to go, the gods took up residence in human skulls...until the lack of inner space began to drive them mad.

So I try to help relocate them. A discreet service I am happy to provide, for a fee.

I was about to inflate the dinghy when a SMOKE team came driving up in a black pickup truck. Three men in black suits got out and approached. They kept well back, right hands held near the belt buckle. I imagined them shooting at man-shaped targets every Sunday in a soundproofed basement.

"ID please?" demanded the tallest. I handed it over as I checked him out. Young, clean-shaven, crew cut, aviator sunglasses, red necktie, flag pin. Typical Antimetaphor Youth graduate. The square shape in his left trouser pocket must be the Calculator's Catechism. He likely never left home without it.

The credentials identified me as Ray Singh Cain. He didn't get it. Nobody reads anymore.

"Mr. Cain." He said it straight-faced. "May I ask what you're doing here?"

"Taking in the view." I nodded toward the pre-dawn sea. The dim shapes of islands dotted the horizon. "Reminds me a bit of paradise."

"There seems to be a lot of traffic through paradise. Where does everybody go?"

"Beats me," I said truthfully. "I'm not their keeper."

He glanced at the dinghy awaiting inflation. "You seem to be involved in transporting them regularly."

"You know, in the past, guys like you locked up desperate people trying to get into the country. You put their kids in cages. Now you're against letting other desperate people get out?"

"How do you know they are leaving the country?"

I shrugged. "I don't. Where else would they go?"

“Into other, more remote parts of the country, where they wake up after their trip and start telling everybody fanciful tales about magical rides and possession by gods and the sacredness of being. We don’t need that kind of disorder.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nothing to me. If I happen to see them once here, I never do again.” Except in my dreams, where they often reappear to thank me. I’ve never been sure for what.

One of the agents held a small black tube pointed at me. He looked up and nodded to the one talking to me. *Yes, he’s telling the truth.* Which made me small fry not worth apprehending.

I watched the factists file into their freshly washed car. Who cares? Tomorrow I’ll be in Hong Kong at the track, or in Moscow black-marketing vodka, or in Dublin tipping back a Guinness.

That was the handy thing for around-the-edges guys like me about the nation-state facade preserved by the multinationals: *jurisdicktion*. Factists, being dicks, always respected it. For them, borders were always more real than bridges.

With the agents gone, I took a breakfast break, then went to my truck and pulled out another dinghy to inflate.

As I worked on it, a wiry fellow in a gray sweater, jeans, and army jacket walked up. He carried a knapsack on his back with a folded walking stick attached. His eyes darted around: at the sea, at the boat, at me, behind him, above...

“Good morning,” I said. The sun was rising. “Anyone else, or just you?”

“Just me. But I may be back to collect friends another time.”

He winked a green eye as he shook my hand. I watched the eye take me in: stocky, rumpled, black hair, scar above my right blue-gray eye. His confiding manner reminded me of hustlers in the work camp always running some game or other.

“SMOKE was just here, but it blew away.”

“I know.” He pointed at the sky. “They placed a drone overhead too.”

“Oh?” I glanced up but detected no wink of metal or glass.

“Yes. But a condor defecated on it and now it can’t see.”

I chuckled as he helped me drag the boat to water’s edge. I was thinking about strange trips and fanciful tales.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sounds like you already have. Want to ask me something else?”

I nodded. “How do all of you...liberate yourselves from your human hosts?”

“Our hope is that by getting enough of them together, those hosting us will recognize that as bearers of divinity, they are pretty small containers. We need a lot more room.”

“Won’t it just make them feel special, part of a sacred membership? Won’t they hang onto you even harder?”

He grinned. “What would you do if you realized that an impatient god fuels your compulsions, amplifies your anxieties, sends you nightmares, electrocutes your relationships? And that all these are ten times worse than they have to be? That your life isn’t really yours, but ours?”

“I’d look for the nearest shiny jar to shove you into. The hell with being special.”

“Just so. But a jar wouldn’t suffice. Let me show you something.” He came around to my side of the dinghy and gestured downward.

“What do you see there?”

“Sea foam on sand?”

“Aphrodite. Don’t you recognize her? You gave her and her Graces a lift not two hours ago.”

A ray of early sunlight made radiant the retreating froth. It ran down the beach like a fugitive spirit and rejoined the restless waters.

I pointed at where the froth had gone. “She’s right there?”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “My beamish boy, she has returned to everywhere the sea foam glitters; everywhere things merge and melt. She is the glue that holds matter together; the fertility of plants; the mating of animals; the lovely curves of spacetime and its gravitational attraction. Behold Aphrodite, queen of the cosmos. Also known as Inanna, Ishtar, Enya, Freya, Lakshmi...”

Hmmm. “Indra came through the other day. Where did he go?”

“Up where the drones and birds cavort.” His raised finger made a circle. “Indra is the higher view of things: the treetop view, the mountaintop view, the view from orbit. You could also call him Jupiter, Zeus, Ukko, Nayame, Olorun...”

“Osiris came through before him. Busy week for refugee gods,” I noted.

“Plant a seed. It’s him, as is its power to grow. Attis, Adonis, Dumuzi, Plutus, Dionysus...”

I shook my head and picked up a paddle. “Maybe I need more coffee.”

“Our ‘jar’ is the world, nature, the cosmos,” he said with smiling condescension. “We’re on a journey, you see. You handy bipedal mortals are, shall we say, a way station, a cab stand, a pit stop, on our trip back home, to the Infrarealm of potentiality hidden within the apparent world. Potential to actual to actualized and sweet home again. Full circle.”

“You’re welcome. So now a bewildered woman somewhere who rode a boat this morning and just got off a helicopter feels used and abandoned? Are all my former passengers stumbling around mumbling profundities?”

“We leave a pearl of who we are in you before we depart for greener pastures. Think of it as a tip for the maid, or an inner fortune cookie. Maybe even a blessing.”

I wondered what would happen to the woman now freed from hosting the wild archetypal force of Aphrodite. Certainly, her love life would change.

He buckled on his knapsack. “You know, it was quite a leap forward for you to recognize yourselves as hosts for us, if temporary ones. Now you see the bigger picture: we visit you, but in actuality you’re inside of us.”

A gull cried overhead. I looked around. The gods in everything, animating everything: the sea, the soil, the birds, the air, the shadows, the rising sunlight...The world might feel less lonely once I got used to the idea.

The world. How little it had mattered to the majority of us forever on our way to elsewhere; and yet it birthed and fed and supported us until we returned to it at our little life’s end.

Distracted, we sought for the divine over here or up there, or, more recently, inside us. But here it was all around us too, waiting for our recognition.

Maybe I would stop and take in more. Maybe even love it some.

Meanwhile. I gestured and he stepped aboard the dinghy. No sign of the boys in black. Watching from a distance? Or maybe they’d gone back to their basement.

“How did you get into this gig?” he asked conversationally. Hustlers love to talk.

“Aphrodite showed up one day, said she had a rich friend. And she was sweet.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Not that sweet.”

“Time will tell.” He winked again.

“Who am I to her?” I shook my head. “A mere mortal. A ferryman.”

“Maybe there’s a god in you.”

“I hope not.”

“Ah, but I know your real name—”

“And I know yours, old trickster.”

“Your name is—”

I waved it down. “Leave it. Even the seagulls are wired for sound these days. Call me Cain, call me Ishmael, but not—that.”

He nodded as I took a firm grip on the side of the boat and walked it out into the sea, preparing to propel it forth.

“Time to go,” I said. “Stand by to paddle.”

“Your speech exhibits enviable concision,” he remarked as he shifted himself into position. “I bet you could sum up your philosophy of life in one sentence.”

“Move around, read a lot, brush your teeth, and don’t kill people.” I held the dinghy through a small swell.

He laughed. “Admirably stated. I especially like the mobility part.”

“I’m not sure I like you, though.”

“Your bank account likes me. I’m your benefactor.”

The money that just appeared every week. “I guess I should thank you.”

“You are thanking me.”

“Bon voyage.” I pushed hard, glad to be free of all the talk even though I had asked for some of it. Too early in the morning. The dinghy bobbed outward.

“You’re more than you think you are!” he called out as he paddled. “What do you really want?” A lingering arm of mist hid the boat as it floated away.

I shrugged and waded ashore, looking around for the thermos. What a gorgeous sunrise, though.

West of Eden

I used to be a ferryman.

I had a good thing going, too, until SMOKE threatened me with a prolonged stay in a suite more ferrously framed than I prefer. That and the abrupt hold on what they thought was my main my bank account convinced me to contemplate a quick change of occupation.

For readers seldom venturing out from 'neath stony ramparts, SMOKE stands for Suppressive Materialism and Obtrusive Knowability Enforcement. They go after fantasists and faith holders. They turn symbols into stop signs. They smash idealism where they find it.

When fuming fundamentalists rose up around the world to calcify everything magically intangible, including myths, hopes, and dreams, the archetypal entities once known as gods left their natural haunts—temples, ceremonies, holy wells and grottos, creative cosmologies—and hid in human beings.

Deities like a change of scene now and then, give or take a millennium, and this time they were headed back into nature. But first they needed to be extracted from their confining fleshy containers. Imagine riding a two-legged pony, only to find yourself stuck in the saddle.

I never met the extractors, members evidently of some mystically inclined underground, but my lucrative enterprise provided boats and directions to human-clad fugitives seeking coastal extraction sites. One moment, Aphrodite animated a lovely human form; the next, post-pony, She glistened in lovely sea foam while some bewildered former human host entered therapy to explore why she suddenly wanted lovers to commit.

And so it went: brighter noons and dimmer wits; stronger steeds and weaker jocks; warmer hearths and fewer nuns...

So it went until my operation went up in SMOKE and I had to move on. Who ferried the gods after that? Beats me. I only work here, or used to.

I drove down a California highway in a fog-colored truck almost as blocky as an old Tesla prototype. (Nobody remembers bland boxy vehicles.) I was on vacation, I decided, until I figured out the next move. Plenty of money in reserve. Memories of past capers drifted through my mind. In one, for example, I posed as an inventor long enough to part a foolish billionaire from his e-money. How silly of him to believe in that fake gold-making machine. A creative idea, if unpatentable.

Then the smart house scheme, in which soundproof, AI-enhanced, and abusively vocal abodes sold by my unreal real estate office offered to open doors and windows locked for a week, allowing their bedraggled super-wealthy prisoners to go free—for a price...

One of my favorites was selling “select” Calculator’s Catechisms to SMOKE personnel. The standard-issue version of these booklets linked the user to text, audio, and video resources for tracking creativity crime. I felt the Catechisms would be more entertaining if they accessed the bedroom security cameras of random high-ranking officials. Nor was I entirely alone in this thinking. Amazing, what goes on behind the closed doors of people obsessed with purity and morality...

By the time I got out of the reeducation work camp I had learned enough inside to really go to town. Then a wily stranger used as a human taxi by Hermes came around and paid me many an obol for the ferrying job. “*What do you really want?*” he had called out over the water as his raft floated toward an extraction site.

I pulled off the highway, grabbed my travel bag, and checked into a hotel under the name Ishmael H. Starbuck. Here on the fringes of Santa Barbara County, the landscape burned less in the wind-dried fall than elsewhere around the state. Suppress the indigenous land-tending regimens of a place and see what happens....

Long, copper-colored hair framed the green eyes that appraised me as I offered ID. Her age? Maybe 30, which made her about a decade younger than the black-haired and -jacketed man across the polished counter from her.

Bright red lips pretended to pout. “What’s the H stand for?”

Almost against my will, my mouth and eyes felt a smile coming on. I hadn’t been flirted with lately. “Harold,” I said, which was close enough. Her name tag said *Diane*.

“Call me ‘Harold,’ she said as though to herself as she scanned me in. “He’s been round Good Hope and round the Horn. I wonder what he does for a living? First mate? Harpooner?”

“Land pirate.”

She looked up from her console with a quirky smile. “Your cabin is ready, Number One. Two doors down from Queequeg’s.” She handed me a chocolate chip cookie and winked. “Enjoy your stay.”

Once in the room, I set my bag on the drum-tight bedspread and fetched forth a device resembling a stylus, which I stuck to the door frame near the lock. I don’t like unexpected visitors.

Next out of the bag came my bathroom kit, a silvery shirt I hung up in the closet, and the contraband book *Mutants & Mystics* by Jeffrey Kripal. Pinching the cover a certain way would reduce the tome to powder. The pellet I pressed onto a corner of the closed window would beep my third-finger ring if anyone aimed a listening beam through the glass.

Most hotel rooms have built-in surveillance now, but I ignored it, not caring what the staff saw or heard. I kind of hoped Diane was watching me. Intruders were another matter.

You probably expect me to say next that I drew forth a pistol and tucked it under my pillow. Beyond the fact that near one's head is a stupid place for hardware, I don't like guns. It has been my pleasure to practice financial predation on carefully chosen members of the resplendently rich, every one of whom supported oppressive social programs of the type I'd like to see dismantled. But I'm not ready to kill anyone over value differences. If I were, I'd be a fundamentalist, a sociopath, a soldier, or a revolutionary, and I'm none of the above. Sometimes I wonder what I am.

I didn't feel social, so I got dinner at an auto café, came back to my room, took a bath, and went to bed.

* * * * *

...A forest clearing, at night. A very short young woman approaches. Light from the largest moon I have ever seen turns on the shine in her blonde hair, dances along the metallic fringe of her crimson cloak.

"Hello, Haros." She is barefoot, insteps covered with hair. Her left hand clasps a staff of gnarled wood bearing a glowing red gem at its tip. Although my brown face must blend with the shadows behind me, she looks upward directly into my eyes.

"I seem underdressed for the Renaissance Faire." I glanced down at my black jeans and the silver-gray shirt I had just hung in the closet. The night smells pleasantly of pine and of odors more mysterious. "How do you know my name?"

"I'm in your mind. I am Firiell the Silver, a wizard in training. My magic draws its force mainly from words and names."

The red stone winks. I realize I am dreaming.

"We haven't much time," she goes on. "I need to explain some things to you."

I gesture around. "Scenic surroundings."

She nods. "My world is called the Dreamvale. Yours is the Coaguum. You can think of ours as the world of imagination."

"As in make believe?"

"More like believe make. You can't accomplish anything in your world, can't initiate a single action, without one of our fantasies behind it. For instance, we told the gods about you, Haros, so you could help them transform."

I enjoy hearing my name spoken. It has been a while; few know it.

Some dream! I play along: “And how did you find me?”

“My mirror pool. You appeared there. Think of it as a scrying.”

“Sure.”

Her gleaming eyes narrow. “Our realms do not communicate enough. I will explain in later dreams... For now, know that upheavals and calamities in our realm are echoed in yours, and yours in ours. Wars, droughts, famines, outbreaks of madness...like the one that prompted the gods to hide and flee in your world.”

“Something bad happened over here as well?” A shadowy shape resembling an owl soars by.

“This is all a longer story, but the point is that people from both realms need to create a kind of embassy so we can talk to each other more.”

“Through dreams?”

“That is one way. Fantasy is another...there are many ways. Many portals.”

I fold my arms. The forest smells fresh, green, mysterious. “Why me? I’m just an out-of-work ferryman and vacationing outlaw.”

She gestures toward me with her staff. “The gods trusted you, and with good reason.”

I shrug. “I don’t trust them, though.” The bitterness in my voice surprises me.

The gods. What good were they? Sure, the world was more exciting with them in it. Turn the corner and see a couple’s kiss swell into a Heiros Gamos of divine coupling. A taxi paused at a light like the Tarot Chariot. A first day at work adorned in the trappings of Initiation. But I was no worshipper and never had been. In fact, I was comfortably agnostic until They knocked on my door to arrange private seaside excursions.

Actually, it wasn’t that I didn’t trust them. *What do you really want?* I realized I had expected them to tell me that: the underlying unthought reason for becoming their ferryman. Instead, they had asked me, and I had no answer. I felt cheated.

Pretending I cared only about money and staying two steps ahead of the pursuit felt less and less appealing. More and more of how I lived—on the road, on the sly, trusting no one, committing to nothing but my own peculiar kind of existential and literal mobility—had come to feel like adolescent protest. I broke laws not only because I hated the zealots who had taken over the world and made their injustices legal; I did it because nothing sacred had appeared to stake its claim upon my heart.

I had then taken big risks to serve the gods, and all I was left with was myself.

“Do not think yourself disillusioned only.” Firiell watches me with care. “You have lost something important that you were meant to lose. How many in your world can say they have spoken directly with the gods? They left when you took into yourself what each of them represented to you. They blessed you, and it was still not enough for you.”

I shake my head, but what the short lady says feels right somehow. Was I trickier because of having known Hermes? Softer because of Aphrodite? It would take sorting out.

In any case, blessed or not, I was in the same life phase as before. The gods had seen me paid, but they had their own agendas. Wrong to count on them for anything more.

A small pool of water lined with stones glistens right there at my feet. I hadn't noticed it before.

“Look inside it.” I crouch and stare into dark waters. They shimmer. The pool expands until my consciousness swims in it, my body left behind...

If I were able to tell you what I see next, I would. I have tried.

With a god's eye view, I behold the Tetraverse, an incalculably vast layering of realms, from Coaguum at the periphery to Dreamvale to an Infrarealm of intangible archetypes to the Source of it all, hidden away in the cosmic dark lest its grandeur and power blast our sanity. The filaments of glory streaming out from the Barrier that hid it inflame my vision, set me inwardly trembling; it is all I can do not to run away from the overpowering immensity of it all.

Behind the Barrier, a great Heart beats in the center of all the universes, each too deep and far-flung for any attempt at deliberate encompassing. I am lost in them, my mind drifting among gigantic structures, some gaseous, some starry, some humming with unguessable planes and spokes and lattices of cosmic force.

I glance toward the Heart of All. As I do, It opens Its eyes, terrible and joyous to behold, and looks at me, fixing me so firmly I cannot even look away. I would scream in ecstatic fear if I still had flesh.

YOU ARE SEEN.

A sound too deep for hearing rumbles continually outward from the Source, bulging galaxies, spinning black holes, subtly shaking stars and planets. And all of it, from quanta to quasars and beyond, in every realm, pulses with intelligence, knowing, aliveness...

A small, slender hand passes over the vision, and my eyes stare once again into fathomless waters. I pass shaking dream hands over my face, unable for the moment to speak.

“It takes time,” she says in a gentle voice. I stand up slowly. If I were to die now, at this moment, then at least I have had the privilege to see a little of...THAT. The Source. The meaning and purpose and living heart of the whole.

“The dawn is coming.” Firiell glances toward a glow rising in the east. “One thing more, and very important: You will wake in peril of your life. You must remember, at the appropriate moment, to say the words ‘Wonder Woman.’”

My imaginal eyes slowly blink. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. I hope to see you soon in another dream. Be careful, Haros.”

I woke in bed sitting up, my back against the headboard. A gray cuff at each wrist and ankle held down my limbs. After a few attempts I stopped trying to move them.

* * * * *

At the foot of the bed sat a thickset man wearing a red necktie and a suit the color of ash. Stiff stubble topped a white head so large I guessed its weight had creased the back of his neck. He placed a phone he had been playing with in a coat pocket.

I focused on his gray eyes. “Those cheap hotel chairs will make you stiff in no time.”

He chuckled. “I won’t be here long.” His rough voice sounded like a heavy handsaw cutting into a log. “Neither will you.”

“I haven’t had the pleasure.”

He leaned slightly forward. “Oh, I am sure you recognize me. I direct an organization whose cameras malfunctioned thanks to you. One of them was in my bedroom.”

“Tech is always risky,” I noted. He did not blink, and his large hands were still. He seemed scarcely to breathe. “Better check the warranty.”

“It expired. But that is as it should be. You see, expiration is the theme of this visit.”

“Revenge is such a primitive emotion.”

“But profoundly satisfying to indulge on occasion.”

“I must admit I didn’t expect any visitors.”

“So I saw when I entered.” His gray glance went to the door and returned. “Once I had tracked you to this hotel, I explained to the staff that you were a wanted man. They turned off the mics and other such paraphernalia, and my agents put sleep gas into the air vents leading to this room. You seem to have slept through your alarms.”

“But I’m not a wanted man.” At the moment, anyway.

“Certainly you are. Wanted by me. Your sophisticated anti-surveillance devices were an unexpected bonus. I plan to study them. Collecting interesting technology is a hobby of mine.”

“And so now?”

Was that a smirk on his thin lips? Hard to tell. “Unfortunately, you are quite correct about the risks of technology. Those cuffs will move your arms and legs at my command.” A thick index finger pointed toward his jacket pocket. “In a few moments you and I will leave the building together. Your remains will be found later in a fiery car wreck. Tech-stealing raider bands have been very active of late. An appropriately SMOKy intervention, wouldn’t you say?”

It’s a common error to believe that self-righteous people live up to their stated principles. SMOKE fostered a public image of rationalism, decency, and return of power to the common person hounded by the ranks of superstitious dreamers and fantasists. Only zealots would join such an organization; and in the end, zealots are nearly always willing to kill those upon whom they project their own darkness. I can’t say, then, that his talk of murder surprised me. I mainly wished he had found another target.

“I seem to be in a pickle. I wonder what Wonder Woman would do.” Why not?

“A shame for you that she is not here to help.” So he actually read the literature SMOKE burned. “Is there anything else you’d care to add to the conversation? Begging for mercy, though futile, would be particularly welcome.” He stood and reached into his coat.

At about this time I waxed, like Hamlet, desperate with imagination. Would dream cavalry arrive in the nick of time? I doubted it. Every close shave and escape in my misspent life had come about through my own quick thinking. Nobody had ever rescued me, neither human nor divinity. Dream or no dream, nobody would this time either.

The room’s phone rang.

The Director’s eyes moved to the nightstand. He turned and walked over to it. “Were you expecting a call?”

“No.” Little point in saying, “Yes” and making something up. He seemed too smart for that.

The phone rang. He stared at it, frowning. Then he picked it up without saying a word. He listened.

Over ten or so seconds, his already craggy face hardened to granite. He put the phone down.

“They say repressing emotions is bad for your health,” I said helpfully.

Bringing out his own phone, he touched it. The cuffs on my extremities sprang open. He collected them, then glared at me. “This isn’t over. Enjoy your respite from justice.”

The door closed behind his massive gray-clad shoulders.

Well now.

The phone rang. I rose and picked it up.

“Hi Harold,” blurted the expressive voice of the redhead at the desk. “Are you OK?”

“Evidently.” I drew a deep breath. So I would live to bunko another day.

“Whew! I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing or not. Have you ever received instructions from a dream?”

Nothing could surprise me now. “As a matter of fact, yes. Why?”

“Last night I dreamed that some pocket blondie in a wizard’s costume said that if someone asked about Wonder Woman, I was to make an important phone call. She didn’t say who I should call, though. I woke this morning thinking it was just a bizarro dream...”

“Look, Harold, we don’t surveil much. But when SMOKE agents came in yesterday, I knew they weren’t just wanting the Two-Day Stay with Breakfast. I can’t stand those bastards! Anyway, I turned on the equipment just to spite them.”

“Good move! The best. What then?”

“Well, you were the latest guest, so I got curious and looked in on your room. I saw and heard that big guy threatening you. I wasn’t sure what to do until you mentioned Wonder Woman, and then it came to me. I called the room and told Stoneface I had recorded everything and would call the cops and the press if he didn’t leave asap.”

I grinned. “Diane, may a thousand blessings alight upon thy coppery locks. Your Lasso of Truth just saved my life.”

A pause. I pictured her blushing.

“Thanks, but it was the dream lady with the hairy feet who told me what to do.”

“Yes, but you did it, and then some. Your quick-witted actions were worthy of Wonder Woman herself.”

“Who is Wonder Woman?”

“I’ll tell you later.” SMOKE had been thorough in its war on fantasy and imagination.

“Well, what happens now?” she asked.

“How about lunch? I’m buying.”

“Ooooooh! I’ve never been asked out by a land pirate during a crisis before.”

“Not for a date. There’s a lot we need to talk about.”

“Hint?”

“It involves setting up a very special kind of embassy...”

* * * * *

Night, in the dream forest. Firiell has given me another lesson in inter-realm dialogue. When she walks into the darkness between the trees. I expect to wake up.

Instead, another figure, large and nearly bald, emerges from the other side of the clearing and saunters toward me.

Stopping a few paces away, the man smiles.

“Good evening,” says that graveled voice. “You seem surprised to see me here. Didn’t you know that we too now have access to the Dreamvale?”

The Magic Lighthouse

Author's note:

Gratitude to Daniel Graham, in whom the lighthouse first opened for business, for that shining beacon and for an abundance of ideas for what it should house and promote.

When sentient beings in the Dreamvale discover who and where they are in relation to other realms of existence, they sometimes suffer a period of internal crisis.

Firiel, for example. Thankfully, Whitebeard the wizard had guided her along the way: realizing her nature to be imaginal; understanding the relationship of the Dreamvale to the hard materialism of the Coaguum; seeing why the two realms needed to converse more openly with one another.

A difficult learning was that coagulant creators—humans in particular—often believed they thought up the imaginal beings who inhabited their stories and songs. Such appalling egotism!

This shock combined with the trauma of her awakening prompted Firiel to deal with it by alchemizing it. Hence the Vestibule: a softly lit blank space opened by her in the Dreamvale. Characters invited there could receive a debriefing and absorb the new knowledge at their leisure. Firiel set up a buddy system to administer these debriefings.

She and six others now hovered in the Vestibule, their individual debriefings having just concluded. A pearly glow surrounded them. Firiel gripped her staff and spoke.

“Thank you for accepting the post-debrief invitation to be here. We have an exciting project in mind, one that might resonate beneficially between the realms.”

“I take it some among the newly awakened turned down this invitation?” Garth was a former Starfleet captain who had lost his mind, regained it, and turned post-heroic mentor.

“That is so,” she confirmed. “This is voluntary. You may stop and go off on your own at any time.” Sherlock Holmes had opted out, insisting he had retired and just wanted to keep bees and read his books in peace. Lauren Olamina had begged off to devote herself to crafting the spiritual path of Earthseed: not a hard no so much as a deferral.

Firiel raised her staff. The faint outlines of a seascape slowly materialized through the pearly glow and sharpened into clarity. “We stand now at the summit of a mountain facing the sea. An excellent place to build a new kind of lighthouse.”

Unlike the Coaguum, the Dreamvale possessed an inherent translational dimension. Ingeniarr, an engineer on the gigantic spacecraft dubbed *Rama* by human explorers, spoke no human language but immediately grasped the words and concepts appearing in her/their consciousness. One of three arms looped upward in enthusiasm.

Merlin of Chaos and Amber gazed with a sorcerer's eye at the solidifying landscape. The sky above was nearly as blue as that of the immortal realm of the true Amber. He had suffered less awakening shock, perhaps because of his familiarity with the multidimensionality of Shadow. He was also used to discovering himself to be different from whom he had thought.

The summit that held them leveled out into a roughly circular plateau. The booming of the surf and the cries of gulls echoed upward from far below.

Somebody had preceded them. He walked down from an elevated outcropping of stone and came over, nodding to Firiell.

"This is Lucas Murdock," she introduced him to the group.

"Welcome," he told them, raising a hand. His hazel eyes took in a three-legged extraterrestrial, a tall man with black hair and direct green eyes, a swarthy dark-eyed man with smoke-colored stubble on his cheeks, a heavysset Englishman, Garth clad in a navy-blue garment resembling a uniform, and Merlin, dressed in black and gray and a purple cloak flaring in the sea breeze.

"I recognize your voice," said Mycroft Holmes. "You spoke to me out of thin air one day in the Diogenes Club."

"I did. I'm honored to meet you." Lucas scratched his brown goatee and pulled up his jeans a little. His left pinkie bore a ring with gold Phoenix emblems on the band.

"I believe," Hal Mayne told him, "that you had a hand in extending my tale up to and beyond my final confrontation with Bleys Ahrens."

"I did a bit of retelling on behalf of all of you," Lucas acknowledged as the others started to speak. "I hope you were happy with the results."

"Not entirely." Montag rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Making me witness *another* incineration close up? Really?"

Lucas turned his palms up. "All's well that ends well."

"Lucas is our sponsor." Firiell owed to him her ability to cross Dreamvale purlieus.

"So what are we here to build?" Ingeniarr was eager to start.

"The imaginal forerunner," replied Firiell, "of the Dreamvale Exchange. Lucas?"

* * * * *

Lucas had no teaching experience, so he fell back on emulating his older brother, who did. “Let me start by giving you a few examples of what happens when creatives from the Dreamvale and the Coaguum collaborate...”

In 1877, Anna Sewell published *Black Beauty*, a novel about a horse. A novel that also improved the lot of abused and badly paid cab drivers in London.

In 1937, a Coaguum academic published *The Hobbit*, begun as a foray into telling fantasy adventures to his children. He had been prompted to write by Dreamvale elves whispering in his ear. Creative writing classes were based on his novels; environmental activists cited him as their inspiration for stopping their planet from being mined, blasted, and polluted into a version of Mordor.

“As a little girl growing up on the south side of Chicago in the ‘60s, I always knew I was going to be in space,” said Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman to fly as a U.S. astronaut. Her inspiration had been Lieutenant Uhura, a Star Trek character.

During the Iran-Iraq War, according to Ari Honavar, Iranian doctors danced in hospitals to keep up morale; in the streets, Persians chanted Rumi: “I am the sultan of love!” “Perhaps the most radical act of resistance in the face of adversity is to live joyfully.”

“I can see the impact of these creative acts on Earth,” Garth admitted. “All of them, including the books, work like little sanctuaries. But what good are such stories over here?”

Hal the tall man spoke: “What you call the Dreamvale, I refer to as the Creative Universe. I first entered it, more or less by accident, as Donal Graeme, a soldier, then intuitively as Paul Formain, a philosopher. As Paul I battled a symbolic dragon whose appearance paralleled the takeover of Earth by machine intelligence. When I reentered the Creative Universe and resolved matters with Bleys, who was another face of the ancient regressive force roaring in the psyche of humanity, the Berlin Wall fell. There is a reciprocal balance at work between the realms.”

Merlin stepped up. “Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell on Earth, King Swayvill of Chaos died, my brother Jurt decided to stop trying to kill me, I settled things with my brother Mandor and my mother Dara, and a new balance was struck between the vales of Chaos and Amber. As with international power politics on Earth, however, the balance proved to be a temporary one.”

“The sustainability movement on Earth helped purge my home village of toxic factories.” Firiell remembered it vividly. “Change always goes in both directions.”

“So what are we here to build?” Ingeniarr asked again. Montag chuckled in agreement. Windy bastards.

Lucas cleared his throat. “A kind of inter-realm embassy,” he said. “The idea is to create a space for dreamvalers to interact with coagulants called Dreamers because of their visionary capacities. Dreamers are humans who you seriously, for what you truly are.

“We propose to build a facility in which Dreamers can converse with you not only in dreams or novels or other creative media, but directly. They will also teach each other how to dream, with you advising them.”

Garth raised his head. “If this guild is located here in the Dreamvale, how are coagulants to access it?”

Lucas clasped his hands behind his back and stood straight. “Through reverie, fantasy, spontaneous art-making, mythopoetic storytelling, and what fellow coagulant Jung referred to as ‘active imagination, a kind of sustained daydreaming that gives you room to speak. If we are successful, a counterpart of our magic lighthouse will rise in the Coaguum.”

“By doing this,” Firiell added, “we can construct a center from which we can work with them on whatever inter-realm projects the times inspire in us. A war is starting over here and over there, for example, building and rearing in symbolic form? We meet at the lighthouse and address it creatively. This eases tensions in both worlds and perhaps prevents the war.”

Mycroft adjusted his ascot, a mannerism his more bohemian brother often made fun of. “During my debriefing, you, Firiell, had surmised my usefulness here. I should like to know what shape that might take.”

“If I may,” Lucas said; Firiell nodded. “Mr. Holmes, you have served as a kind of human computer, a device invented later that processes data from a multitude of sources. A machine that emulates thought. One day coagulants will land on the Moon and install a computer they will name after you. But you surpass any computer they will be able to construct. You possess the ability to absorb and combine information, yes, but unlike a computer, you issue expert insights and recommendations.

“We would like you to correlate impressions and reports from dreamvalers and Dreamers and suggest new areas of mutual development. Beyond that, you would stay aware of large events in the Coaguum—political, economic, environmental, and religious, for example—and feed that data into your suggestions. How does that sound to you?”

“I should enjoy doing that very much, with one condition.” Mycroft bowed to the group. “I intend no disrespect to my fellows by stating that I generally prefer my own company. I am a private man accustomed to working alone until I am ready to either receive new information or present a report.”

“I see no problem with that,” said Firiell. She nodded to Lucas, who smiled.

“One more item,” he told them. “As an apprentice member of the Transdaimonic League in the Coaguum, I represent a group of Dreamers with noetic inclinations, a group that stretches throughout time. One of our responsibilities, both burden and privilege, is to talk directly to members of a third realm.”

“Another realm besides the Dreamvale and the Coaguum?” Montag frowned. “Just how many realms are there?”

“Four, that we know of. Maybe there’s an infinity. Who knows? In any case, beyond the Coaguum is this Dreamvale. Beyond it is the Infrarealm, where the animate Powers of the cosmos live. They influence all three realms, but their home is the archetypal realm of being.”

“Powers?” Montag asked.

“You’ve heard of them. Humans worship them as gods. Leaguers do not. Instead, we converse with.”

Garth had a question: “If Leaguers are...well, visionaries—”

“Noetics.”

“—who extend across time, how do you talk to each other? How can you be in a League with someone born thousands of years ago, for example?”

“The Dreamvale is one way. Also, we study the work of our spiritual ancestors. In my case, that includes Aesara of Lucania, Zosimos of Panopolis, Enheduanna of Akkad, C. G. Jung...” His brother had given him a long list to catch up on.

“What about James Hillman?” Depth psychology was a new addition Montag’s own ever-lengthening reading list. “Shouldn’t he be a Leaguer too?”

“I would nominate him for a Daimonic League, but not for this one.”

“So when are we going to start building?” Ingeniarr shifted restlessly from one of three legs to another.

“Now,” said Firiell. “Stand in a circle with me.” As they did, she raised her hands.

* * * * *

High above the shore, in the center of the circular plateau, Firiell clutched at salty air and spread her sparkling hands apart as she lowered them. A wide, gleaming foundation plain of gold-streaked marble materialized underfoot.

She turned to Montag. “Add something.”

“How?”

“Just grab the air and start weaving it.”

He thought for a moment, then pushed with his hands, ending the gesture in a typing motion of his fingers. A domed library supported by columns of green stone shimmered into being.

They went around the circle, with Merlin next. A floating temple connected to the ground by an ethereal staircase housed a school for training magicians.

At Ingeniarr’s three-armed gesture, a tapering lighthouse of immense height grew near the edge of the plateau. Its beams reached far out toward over the restless sea....

In the midst of earthen domes, towering obelisks, castles hanging down from clouds, spires rising above them, sea-spanning bridges, viaducts hung with verdant plantings, and flying buttresses encrusted with dreamlike faces emerged a multitude of theaters, workshops for artists, artisans and alchemists, halls for music and dance and storytelling, astronomy observatories and other science centers, pools, ponds, waterfalls, meeting rooms for groups large and small, alcoves filled with stuffed chairs and loveseats, and gardens and pavilions to play in and swing in and stroll through.

As the team gestured, borrowing and reshaping ideas from each other, play rooms and tree houses and bubble castles formed and mutated. An initially modest central living room sunk its center, grew coffee tables, and sprouted giant screens. Temples of every sort sprang up to celebrate the living Powers. Humming centers packed with amulets, scrying pools, computer monitors, personality tests, and divination tools like tarots and runes drew forth information from this realm and beyond.

“It will need to be staffed with guides.” Mycroft had been sparing with creative gestures, preferring instead to focus on details. Firiell nodded.

The details gradually proliferated: reshapeable and repaintable walls and rooms of toys and puzzles and games, suits of armor and other medieval décor, a giant painted horse, makers of balloons, areas to meet exotic animals, food forests to eat one’s way through, costumed Dreamvale Elves and Klingons and Pandorans and others from the worlds of “fiction,” holosuites and Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory, swimming rooms in which breathable blue water floated free, hallways and dormitories of fantastic technologies to warp the fabric of perception itself into any shape or color desired...

Unlike Prospero’s cloud-capp’d towers and gorgeous palaces, this magic lighthouse, though modifiable at whim, was built to last.

Firiell shook her staff, and a gong sounded. The builders reluctantly halted their labors.

“I think that’s a good start. We have plenty of time to keep working on it.”

“It will be interesting to see what comes of this in the Coaguum.” Lucas sat down with them as they quit for the day and relaxed. The brilliant orange ball of the sun lit up the watery horizon toward which it sank.

Firiel sighed contentedly. May creative people of all kinds, even just lovers of stories, find a way to gather, pool efforts, and dream together. Every time they focused on a character from some story or play or film they liked, that dreamvaler felt nourished over here as well. A network of Dreamers collaborating with those characters could cast lasting light through both realms, stop catastrophes, invent fantastic projects yet unimagined.

“In what form will all this appear Over There, do you think?” asked Merlin. “Initially.”

“I don’t know.” She thought. “But whatever appears will cause creative commotion.”

Raising Cain

“I can’t picture you wanting to carry a pistol.”

Montu was my go-to man for gadgetry. The arrangement had begun in dollar signs, but over the years we developed a liking for each other. He was bold, Black and from Baltimore; I was blue-eyed, olive and from Sparta, although I grew up mainly in the States and had relatives all over the globe. Our running joke was that we had been twin brothers millennia ago in Hermopolis.

We sat at his workbench in a secret room below his living room. I had funded some of it, and he had fitted it out. He was a no-talk tech genius in coveralls who turned out masterpieces. Cars that could smell, neckties that could see, name it. The latest example of his work sat gleaming in the shop lights in front of us.

Despite years of naive support from Second Amendment survival fanatics, police and SMOKE agents were the only ones allowed to carry guns now. The latest models induced funny currents behind the chest wall. The low setting made the heart jump and the body faint. The high setting killed.

“Let’s go over this.” Montu picked up the piece and handed it to me. It was light and flat and grey, with a barrel that stopped an inch beyond my fingers. I jiggled it like a rattle.

“That a whole gun,” he said.

“Yes, sir. You print this up from scratch?”

“No, did it with a modified SMOKE template.” I didn’t ask him how he had obtained it. Same way I obtained things, no doubt.

He peeled off his thin work gloves, stuffed them into a chest pocket, and pointed.

“Squeeze the grip once for setting one, twice for two. Power gauge there on the back.” I saw it between my thumb and forefinger. “Plug it in to charge. That’s it. Simple.”

“I understand these guns normally adjust charge intensity and spread depending on the distance to the target. No need for any fiddling.”

“Right.”

“Tell the dummy how to carry it.”

He turned, picked up a dark sheath, handed it to me. “Holster. Goes inside your waistband. Back or belly.”

“Which would you pick?”

“Back. A less obvious reach, and you won’t slip and bang your sausage.”

I secured the gun behind me. “What would I do without you?”

“Be a worm farm maybe. You take a lot of risks.”

“Excellent workmanship, as always.”

“Thanks. Hope you won’t need it long.”

* * * * *

For those of us who grew up otherwise, it’s strange to live under a world government at war with everything fantastical. Sacred tales, provocative plays, science fiction or fantasy in books or film, most of the literature of the past: all banned on pain of “reeducation,” meaning imprisonment and brainwashing. Kids who even seem to daydream in class get written up for it, permanently. Poets, bards, magicians, and mimes work underground. So do I.

Plato got his way: the theaters are closed, and self-appointed kings of rationality rule the world. Nobody sings anymore except in commercials and political rallies. The only god allowed now is Efficiency, with Progress the only valid church. After centuries of competition, scientism and fundamentalism finally hooked up and rolled out a police state full of literalists.

“So Wonder Woman was thought up by a psychologist.” Diane and I drank coffee aboard my boat. I swept for bugs regularly, so we could speak freely here.

“As inspired by Margaret Sanger and other feminists of the time,” I said. “The idea for her came from Elizabeth Marston. Wonder Woman was a response to how, in the States, comic heroes of the early 1940s were all muscle-bound males.”

I had learned a few things about Diane after meeting her at the hotel where she saved my life. She worked there for the reading time the job allowed. Like me, she downloaded illicit books onto her phone. She embraced causes, women’s empowerment causes in particular. When they skirted the law, she flouted it. She liked aquajogging, parasailing, practicing various martial arts. A line of concentration linked her green eyes when she thought things over.

“Comics,” she repeated. “Weren’t they mainly for kids?”

“Kids read them back then, but the material went much deeper. Besides, there’s no age limit on love of fantasy and fiction.”

“Well, I have to admit I was shocked when a fictional character showed up in my dream the day we met.”

“Firiell?”

“Yep. The short woman in red and silver. She’s the one giving you the nightly lessons, right?” She sipped coffee.

“She was.” I joined her.

“Even with you explaining, I’m not sure I get it all yet. Tetraverse, Dreamvale...”

“Same here. I’m still digesting it.”

“Or how the Director of SMOKE popped in over there.” She raised a thumb as though to point at a trail behind her. “How the hell did that happen?”

“I don’t know. But I know one thing, and it’s important: You’re in danger for making that compromising recording of him. He’ll want not only you, but everyone who might have seen it. Me as well.”

“So what do we do? Send in the hounds? Storm the ramparts? Retire to a desert island?”

I felt the rub of the gun at my back under my shirt. “We be careful, lay low, avoid attention, and try to formulate a workable plan. Do you have any vacation time coming?”

* * * * *

After Diane left I took paddle in hand and my raft out for a harbor jaunt.

The cries of gulls sang the sun down seaward. The beauty of this daily miracle failed to lighten my doubts.

It wasn’t the risk to me. Risks were my business model.

Even while teaming up on a scheme, which was seldom, I had never put someone else’s life at risk. That bothered a part of me which others would refer to as their conscience. Did I have one? After all my predation upon the influential and the ultra-wealthy I wasn’t sure if I did. If so, it smarted.

Oh, I suppose I could argue that Diane had put herself at risk by entering my life at an awkward moment. By recording the Director threatening me, she had taken sides, without any hesitation. It wasn’t just that she liked me. She hated abuse of power in any form. That was core for her.

No, what bothered me was that the risk to her bothered me. I was surprised to discover, lurking backstage behind the mental scenery, a nugget of caring for her. If I polished it some...but I wouldn’t. Even untouched, though, it gleamed enough to get my attention. How annoying.

Was there a safer plan that left her entirely out? Unfortunately, she would be in jeopardy until we resolved things with SMOKE. No getting past it. I gritted my teeth as my paddle dug into the restless brine. I should have been more careful in that hotel. Then she would not have had to involve herself. But she had, and saved my life into the bargain, which meant that in addition to the nugget, I owed her some kind of repayment. Shit.

What a world. When would we humans learn not to let the worst among us be in charge of it?

“Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor’s side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down...” What else had Ahab said? “There can be no hearts above the snow-line.” He wasn’t all crazy. At least he knew enough not to expect any help from wayward gods.

Sink or swim: our human prerogative as we try to navigate life’s treacherous chop. And a new, if reluctant, learning for me: When others risk sinking, we must help them swim.

All we have, in the end, is each other. A truth that the go-it-alone existentialists and the Ahabs of the world never seem to grasp. Nor had I, not fully, even if I do occasionally sign my name as Ishmael.

* * * * *

How they captured us exhibited an elegant ease. One moment the taxi was heading toward the coast; the next, to an undisclosed destination in the Santa Ynez Mountains. The doors locked. We waited behind shatterproof windows.

The taxi’s altered programming led it to an underground garage, where it stopped. A speaker came to life: “Please take the phone from your pocket and the pistol from your waistband and leave them in the car.”

Once the doors opened, two SMOKE agents with expressionless faces and oiled-down hair escorted us to a room with a heavy door that closed behind us. The office contained three chairs, one behind a desk. The room was bland and gray and pictureless and reminded me of where one used to go to get a passport renewed.

We sat and waited again.

Presently, the Director entered, closed the door, and took the seat behind the desk. Upon its gray surface he placed my gun.

“You insist upon enlarging my stock of impressive toys,” he said. “I will enjoy examining this one, although at a glance it seems just a standard pistol. Well-made, though.”

“Do it right or don’t do it at all.”

“Indeed.” He looked at Diane. “I regret your involvement in this unpleasant business. I’m afraid it won’t end well.”

“What do you want?” she asked.

“The obvious. Who else knows about the recording you made? Where is it stored?”

She shook her head. Despite the situation and the Director’s ominous presence, her fear did not show.

“I’d like to know something.” I leaned back and crossed my legs. “How did you end up in the Dreamvale?”

“Most curious,” his log-sawing voice acknowledged. “A character who called himself Kluni began appearing in my dreams. Quite a scamp, I gather. He told me about the worlds and the Dreamvale and said he knew a way in. He was right.”

“Last time I saw you there, Firiell returned and banished you.”

“Temporarily, perhaps. Kluni told me that someone called MG was returning, and that things would be different soon over there. I plan to pick up whatever useful magic I can to see if some of it works over here.”

The names meant nothing to me. Firiell hadn’t mentioned any Kluni or MG.

“Any other questions?” Diane shook her head.

“Just one,” I put in. “You are old enough to remember how life was before it went up in SMOKE. You are obviously articulate, well-read, intellectually cultivated, and technologically informed. A man, evidently, of many capabilities.”

“Patience for stalling is not one of them.”

“My question is: Why would someone like you direct SMOKE, let alone work for them? You who know so much and could be the freest and most creative soul of all.”

I didn’t expect him to be moved, and he wasn’t. I really was just curious. This might be my last chance for a frank discussion of what drove the opposition.

“Creativity,” he explained, “always ushers in disorder, doses of chaos, and unexpected change. Perhaps that worked in times long passed, but today, humanity has finally achieved a planned and regulated world society.” He placed a large palm flat on the desktop. “Most people have enough to eat, enough work to do, and enough entertainment to distract them.

“Now and then, one or two prove highly capable, whereupon we condition them to take our places one day in the managerial hierarchy. Orderly governance, orderly transition—

and no more war. Before SMOKE, the world had not known one year of real peace. Now every year is peaceful. I regard that as worth working for.”

“I see. A machine’s plan for paradise. Everyone is regimented, but nobody is awake. Except for ‘deviants.’ Meanwhile, the spirit dies.”

The other palm came down. “There is no spirit, only outdated romantic notions used to justify another illusion: free will.”

I placed my linked hands on my knee. “A science fiction author once wrote that it’s not the wolves of the world we should worry about, but the sheepdogs gone wrong.”

“Someone has to keep the herd together.”

“In the end, then, what you offer is programming.”

“And what is wrong with that? Programming is about to stabilize the system by removing two of its most troubling deviations.”

He rose, holding the gun. “Would the two of you please stand up and push those chairs back? They will be in the way otherwise.”

Once we had done that, the Director took up a position in front of the desk with Diane a few feet to his right and me to his left.

The gun glinted silver in his large fist. One squeeze to stun, two to kill.

He squeezed twice. So he was really going to do it. My heart began to pound.

“Kill me,” Diane said, gulping but brave, “and you lose the recording.”

“You underestimate our own technical sophistication. I asked about the recording only to prompt your thinking about where it was and who knew about it. Once you are dead, our laboratory will lift those recent memories from your brain and process them.”

“My brain won’t be working anymore.”

“It takes time for the neural imprint to fade.” He raised the gun.

“Wait!” I called out, arms lifting. I had expected him to gloat more first.

He fired. Diane convulsed, fell, and lay still.

After a silent moment, my eyes lifted from her to him. He glanced at the power dial on the gun.

“Quite a surge. Plenty more for the final shot, though.” The barrel swung from her to me. I drew a deep breath and held it.

He fired. A startled look crossed his face. He fired again.

“In reference to our ongoing repartee about technological risks,” I explained, “you have put your faith in the conviction that you hold a weapon. It won’t actually hurt anyone, though, except you. When you squeezed it, a signal went out to the police. When you fired, it recorded your attempt to kill us.

“That gun,” I went on, pointing at it, “is also recording everything we say and do.” Bless Montu.

He glanced down at it. When he did, one of Diane’s legs swept his from beneath him. He grunted as his backside hit the ground. Hard: he was a large man.

She stood over him, snarling, as he panted, the wind knocked out of him.

“Frisk him,” I said.

The police arrived just as she finished pulling various items from his pockets. He let her, having been stunned by the unexpectedly solid contact with our amazing planet.

He glared as they bundled him up.

I smiled at him. “You’re thinking this isn’t over, but it is. After they’ve charged and convicted you for everything, SMOKE will have learned of your private murder project, and I will have sued you and SMOKE for it. As the entire mess goes public and the Colorful Riots ramp up creative mass protest, many things will change forever. –I’ve appreciated your cooperation, ex-Director. Enjoy prison. Plenty of time to read in there.”

He’d be lucky if they didn’t give him a neuro redo. Or lucky if they did, depending on how one philosophizes such matters.

Diane stood breathing deeply and seemed to want to punch something.

“How’s the adrenalin?”

“Still pumping.”

I touched her shoulder. “You were magnificent.”

“I was scared shitless that the modifications wouldn’t work!”

“Never doubt a scion of Baltimore.”

“OK. You want to buy me lunch again?”

I grimaced. “You can eat after that?”

“Sure. That wasn’t even a real workout.”

* * * * *

“Haros Anastasios,” Diane intoned. “I like your name. You should use it more often.”

“I never use it. I’ve gotten used to ‘Harry’ and ‘Harold.’ Greek parents do not name their children ‘Haros.’”

“Yours did. –Why, what does it mean?”

“Care for another beer?” I passed her a Mythos, glad for a harbor restaurant that served them. Hard to find outside of Greece sometimes.

Down the years, SMOKE had injured a lot of people. When the news broke, recording and all (the gun had sent Montu the recording I then relayed to the press), accusations of injustice, mismanagement, tyranny, malfeasance, and oppression climbed in pitch to deafening on every side.

Although the government promised more oversight and a thorough investigation, serious talk of dismantling the organization now made the rounds. Nobody but zealots had liked having their imagination locked down. Real change was on the breeze and had been for some time; this incident had scattered the embers. I drank a toast to wolfhounds.

“I hear we’ll be able to see plays soon,” she said. “And read what we like.”

I grunted. “I do anyway. So do you.” I toasted her. “I’m just glad you’re safe now.”

She gave me a look half winsome and half hopeful. “You were worried about me?”

“Yes. The whole time. Grateful for what you had done for me, and also worried sick. I tried to figure a way to do it without you, but I couldn’t.”

“Such a hero. Don’t wince! Did it occur to you that maybe I could look out for myself and didn’t need saving? You, on the other hand...” She set down her beer and looked at me. “What will you do now? You can’t stay unnoticed with your face all over the news.”

I raised my brows in acceptance. “My ways of existing in this fallen world had begun to get old anyway. It’s time for a change of occupation.”

“To what?”

“Maybe I’ll get a job on the criminal reform side of things. If it doesn’t work out, at least I will have learned some new techniques.”

Her lips emitted a rude noise.

“More to the point, I have an inter-realm embassy to help found. Storytellers, assemble! Now that we can legally create again, maybe a good lookout would be a creative arts program. That seems a natural forum for teaching visionaries how to be in touch with the dreamvalers. Montu can run the tech and help me talent-spot.”

“Mm. That sounds nice, but what will it ultimately achieve?”

“What happens over there, fictionally, is what happens or will happen here, materially. And our realm is where their dreams manifest. Imagine how things would change here if more of us understood that the imaginal is real. And...the Dreamvale connects us to the Power roots of the gods and, beyond them, to their Source.” An inner quiet always followed the memory of the grand vision Firiell had granted me in her pool.

“They might also need help with whatever their Kluni and MG problem is.” Diane mused, green eyes distant. “We need to know more about that.”

“What about you? What are your plans?”

Her eyes came back to me. “Help you found the embassy, of course.”

“Good. Working with you will help me stay out of trouble.”

“Didn’t work too well this time.”

“Truth. But I am turning over a new paddle now.”

“Uh huh. Meanwhile, may I borrow your comics?”

Knight of Peace

No one knows who came up with the adage, “No good deed goes unpunished.” It’s a common enough misfortune that many have been struck by a similar thought.

No good dream goes unpunished either. I learned this, dangerously, in San Diego. The dream in this case was a kind of embassy for human beings to talk to creatures who dwell in the realm of imagination. Yes, it is a realm: the Dreamvale, as Firiell the wizard called it. She should know. She lives there.

When you make up a fantasy character, place, or event, do you ever suspect that your “invention” already exists and you’re just giving form to it? Few of us do. But raising that question is the dreamvale challenge to those of us inhabiting the Coaguum, the realm of materiality. The chicken thinks she lays the egg, but maybe the egg uses the chicken to be born.

Furthermore, what happens in the Dreamvale also happens in our world. Here, World War I; there, the War of the Ring, or any other war of fiction or fantasy you can think of. But if beings in both realms can talk to each other more freely, the pressure of collective unconsciousness that drives war might diminish, again in both realms.

“We need a kind of embassy,” said hairy-footed, crimson-cloaked Firiell to me and to Diane, my partner in crime, during a nighttime visit to the land of dreams. We talk to Firiell a lot in our sleep. When I first met her in dream time I thought her a Renaissance Faire refugee. I had a lot to learn, much of it from her.

We never formally discussed what to call the embassy. One morning Diane showed up at my boat for one of our founding discussions. When I greeted her I noticed the two coffee mugs she had brought along, with DREAMVALE EXCHANGE printed on one side and a seven-pointed star with a rainbow tail on the other. She placed them on my kitchen table as I picked up the coffee pot.

I nodded. “I’ll pour to that,” and I did. A Black poet had uttered the two fateful words to Diane in a recent dream.

The embassy idea is simple. Find a group of visionaries who love to work with the imagination. They need to be open to the possibility that what they envision has a life of its own. Yes, they could be artists, dancers, poets, or novelists, the classic cohort; but anyone who loves a good story will do.

Ask them to think up a key character they like from their story of choice. The Wife of Bath. Wily Coyote. Smaug the dragon. Scheherazade the storyteller. King T’Challa of Wakanda. Whomever.

Ask them to hold the fantasy of this character possessing an autonomous life. Not just as a figment or complex within the human mind, but on its own; potentially, an immortal life. (Two such imaginal beings named Elijah and Salome tried to tell C. G. Jung, “We

are real and not images,” but he demoted them to psychic fragments. Still, he listened to them.)

Now, connect with other fans of the same image across a worldwide network: say, a Mycroft Holmes Dream Club. In groups facilitated by trained coordinators (not leaders), you greet one another, exchange impressions and reflections, and then brainstorm the question: What are some methods for making contact with this imaginal figure? For developing the conversation? Then you try them out and report back.

Meanwhile, Firiell and other dreamvalers work together on their side to reach out and listen, as we do. Between the realms, many creative bridges rise: here, storytelling and art, dream and fantasy, play and movement; there, scrying pool and seeing stone, glowing wand and talking griffin. Creative effort on both sides pierces the border and solidifies the scaffolding that binds the worlds together.

We’ve just begun to note the results. Instead of destroyed planets or dragon-incinerated cities in the Dreamvale, for instance, milder plot twists, with echoes shadowed forth in our Coaguum: a quickly extinguished brushfire, a shooting star....

And yet.

Our wall screen displayed yelling red-faced marchers. One held a sign that read, “Dreamigrants Go Back to Oz!”

I moved my eyes to Diane. “How about if you go out there and beat them up? There are only twenty-five or so.”

* * * * *

Long ago, Ursula Le Guin observed that some of us are afraid of dragons, and of fantasy and imagination too. She was right.

Fearful people who believed in only what they could measure forged a marriage made in hell with other fearful people fundamentalistically inclined. This dark group became SMOKE: Suppressive Materialism and Obtrusive Knowability Enforcement, an arm of government not unlike the similarly deceased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) of oppressive times gone by.

I’ve never liked bullies. My first encounter with SMOKE agents was while ferrying fleeing gods out of the reach of materialist jailers. My second involved a disagreement with SMOKE’s director, in whose bedroom I placed some watchful if intrusive equipment. As I’ve mentioned elsewhere in these scribbles. I am happy to claim a minor role in having helped SMOKE blow away. But in its absence, some of the fires responsible for it remained lit.

The ideological arsonists behind one such fire heard about our nonprofit Dreamvale Exchange. They decided to fear both Dreamers and dreamvalers.

I had drawn on the acclaim surrounding our maneuvers against the director of SMOKE to contact funders and raise money for the project. This may have been my first honest business dealing in...a while. Reporters noticed. In a country long starved of fancy and image, the project made good copy.

One day a crowd gathered outside our D.E. office in San Diego. Into funky, colorful North Park these scared and angry mobsters carried flashing blinkpaint signs crying out against our “contamination” of upstanding citizens like themselves. “Dreamigrants take our jobs! Stay in the Dreamvale!”

When they pressed themselves against our office building we called the police, but they never showed. We were on our own.

Diane snorted as we sat in the conference room watching the televised mob. “We’re going to need to talk to our Dreamers soon.” About twenty were on the premises meeting each other in person and using our networking equipment. They couldn’t hear the shouts outside, but they knew the haters were there, having come from elsewhere to harass us.

“By the way, Haros, what are ‘dreamigrants’?”

“Their word for the conspiracy lie that dreamvalers possess the bodies of their human Dreamers and order them to take jobs away from everybody else.”

“Never let facts get in the way of a delusion, that’s what I always say.”

I pointed at the screen. “We may need to hire a security force.”

Diane was not tall, but even when she was seated her green eyes commanded attention, especially when she was earnest. “I’ve been thinking a lot about nonviolence, warriorship, and social change. Reading a lot about it too now that it’s allowed.” SMOKE had banned any literature placed on its List of Prohibited Readings. Those jailed for reading too much were still getting out.

“Whom are you reading?”

“Te Whiti, Kano Jigoro Shihan, Ueshiba Morihei, Tolstoy, John Clifford, Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr...”

My brows went up. “What prompted this?”

“For one, your hatred of guns.” She pointed at me and pretended to fire. “Also, my martial arts background. And now, all this civil unrest.”

“It does get one thinking...”

“Do you recall the debate between Polemarchus and Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*?”

I tried to. “It has been a while.”

“Polemarchus argues that it is just to support one’s friends and harm one’s enemies. He’s for expedience. Socrates replies by asking: What if our friends do evil? Acknowledging this point, Polemarchus shifts his belief as summarized by Socrates: It is just to do good to our friends when they are good and harm to our enemies when they are evil.”

She brought her fist down slowly onto the table. “Socrates then drops the hammer by asking, ‘But ought the just to injure anyone at all?’”

“It’s coming back.” You just never know about people until you get to know them. I had first met a Diane who brashly winked at me across a hotel counter. Then she saved my life, risking her own as well. Now she was quoting Plato. She knew no limits.

“My training,” she went on, “included aikido, an art created to defend yourself while protecting your opponents. But you can use aikido to hurt people, even kill them, as unscrupulous actors have modeled in violent films. The same with judo. Almost all martial arts advertise themselves for defense, and ethical practitioners keep firmly to that ideal. Most are peaceful. But too many aren’t.

“So I got to wondering what a martial art would look like that couldn’t be used for attack. And what a practitioner of that art might be like and stand for. A practitioner who refused to injure anyone at all.”

I clapped. “I love this idea. Are you taking students?”

She smiled. “I have to work it out first. I’m thinking of calling it Eirenite after the Greek goddess of peace. She held a cornucopia of abundance, a scepter for authority, and a torch for lighting the way. Sometimes young Plutus sat on her arm in place of the horn of plenty. –And maybe we can resurrect the Code of Chivalry and de-genderize and modernize it.”

“Didn’t there used to be an idea about a peaceful warrior?”

“It’s an archetypal idea. Mine is somewhat different, though, because inner peace isn’t a necessary preliminary...”

A hugely amplified voice boomed out, “Dreamers, come out! We demand to talk to you.” It repeated, annoyingly. Diane and I looked at each other.

“Tactically, it would make better defensive sense to stay in, whether the police come or not.” Dumb, Haros. She knows a lot more about defense tactics than you do.

She stood. “I think we should go out and talk to them, and record it.”

I was staring at the back of her coppery head before I realized it. I got up and followed her out.

Dreamers peered out of offices as we passed. Their fright made my heart ache. "Somebody record this," I said as my anger rose to the occasion. "We're going out to meet them."

Some San Diegan days are hot and bright, others cool and cloudy. This was the latter, with blurred shadows between the cars, office buildings, shops, and diners. In a white sweater and jeans, Diane faced a street-filling crowd of sign-bearing protesters of varying ages: twenties up to late fifties. Some wore second-hand khaki garb and combat boots. The signs bore ridiculous spelling errors and occasional Freudian slips.

I walked toward her and stopped when a door opened behind me. Some of our Dreamers had ventured out, two of them recording on their multiphones.

"What do you want?" she called back, positioning herself between the marchers and the Dreamers.

About fifteen feet beyond her, a thickset white man of average height spoke from the front edge of the crowd: "We are here to make a citizen's arrest of the Dreamers. They are breaking the laws against publicly fantasizing." For a rabble-rouser his voice seemed somewhat high-pitched. I saw why the bullhorn. No brown or black faces among them.

I raised my voice. "Those laws went out of effect when SMOKE disbanded."

The man shook his head. "The laws are still on the books."

"Nobody takes them seriously anymore."

"WE do! And we mean to enforce them." Heads nodded behind him.

"What harm," Diane asked him, "are our people actually doing?"

"They are letting imaginal immigrants contaminate our country."

"The dreamvalers are vastly enriching our knowledge and culture. Have you ever actually spoken to one?"

He poked angrily with the horn. "They are using up all our economic resources."

Diane turned up her palms. "The Dreamvale Exchange is a nonprofit. What resources do you mean?"

"They are bringing terrorist ideas with them."

“Such as?”

With the other hand he waved a red-flashing “Dream Killer” sign at her. “They are responsible for all the jobs we are losing.”

“Which jobs would those be?”

The leader of the mob threw down his sign, dropped the bullhorn, and rushed Diane.

Rather than retreat, she turned to present her right side, crouching slightly while raising her cupped hands to guard her face, palms inward. My heart went into overdrive.

The bully moved in, left side in front, swinging a left hook at her head. As she ducked, he came up with a right uppercut that bounced off her left elbow. He grimaced. His kick hit air. She waited, neither advancing nor retreating.

A puzzled look crossed his face. The harassers and Dreamers watched silently.

This time he charged in with a left lead feint to Diane’s face. His strong straight right whipped past her left ear as she slipped the blow. As fast as he punched, her head moved from side to side, refusing to be a target. She ducked another hook, shuffled just out of range, and waited.

Enraged, he rushed in to tackle her, but she pivoted on her right foot as he passed and spun away.

“Why won’t you stand and fight?!” he called out.

“I won’t hurt you or let you hurt anyone else,” she replied, circling away from his rear hand.

She glanced at the crowd. “I’m sorry you’re scared and losing work,” she told them while keeping her eyes on their spokesman, “but the Dreamers aren’t responsible. You should find out who really is.”

She could easily have ended the fight. I had seen her in action in the gym. Her new commitment to non-harm was a much riskier and more difficult tactic than, say, a quick kick to the throat.

The contest continued, with him attacking and her slipping, ducking, blocking, parrying, and sidestepping. The knuckles of his left hand bled after striking a guarding elbow. At one point he caught her around the waist and tried to slam her against a nearby car. She brought her feet up just before the impact, pushed off, and somersaulted out of his grasp. He stumbled, fell briefly, and got up again.

My ears caught a murmur in the ranks. "Come on," someone called out. "Finish this so we can arrest them." But their champion was getting winded. Diane was not only faster but fitter.

I began to see the real power of her approach. Letting her attacker beat her might have broadcast an injustice, but it would have fired the malicious blood in him and everyone on his side. It might also have roused their contempt for a supposed weakling too scared to defend herself. Bullies tend not to get the point of purely passive resistance.

Instead, their mood of hot scorn melted into slow admiration as she demonstrated two intentions normally considered incompatible: the skill of a fearless fighter and the refusal to hurt an opponent.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a second man moving forward. He was lean and quick, and I saw a blade in his hand.

"Diane!" I shouted, but she had seen him. She whipped off her light sweater and wound it around her left arm, holding it close to her body like a vertical shield.

The new assailant gripped the knife by the haft with the point forward, edge down. He moved it in small semicircles as he tried to close with her. He meant business. I remembered his sort from the work camps, and how most of the other men kept clear.

She blocked two jabs, but a sudden slash stained her left cheek red. She danced back, not letting the two attackers get on opposite sides of her.

I found myself sprinting toward them with no clear idea of what I would do when I got close. As I ran, Diane blocked another knife jab and ducked under a swing from the other attacker.

A forearm block sent the knife spinning into the street. Its owner ran after it.

As though impelled by a common instinct, onlookers from both sides dashed forward and crowded around the three combatants. That put an end to the fight. I looked for the knife but it had vanished.

With one mind, most of the harassers turned then and walked quietly away, some looking back at Diane as a Dreamer doctor sat her down and began examining her cheek. A few of the crowd stayed to talk to some of the Dreamers. A belated police siren sounded in the distance.

I tensed to see the first attacker walking toward Diane. He wiped sweat from his face and looked sadly down at her, breathing deeply. "I'm sorry for attacking you." Then he too left the field.

I crouched next to her. "That was about the bravest thing I've ever seen anybody do."

She flushed and looked away.

“You were just talking about all this. See what happens when you invoke Plato.”

She held her face still for the doctor. “Next time I’ll pick Mother Goose.”

“I predict converts.”

“What visionaries would you expect from a bunch like that?”

“You know what? Everybody is a Dreamer. Some of us just do it more openly than others.”

She started to nod and stopped it. “True. And sometimes we also reject what we are about to fall deeply in love with.”

I studied her cheek. “You’ll have a scar to remember this by, looks like.”

“I’m sure it won’t be the last. I think I just found my calling.”

* * * * *

“Isn’t *Acheron* kind of a grim name?” Diane asked as she came aboard. A stray harbor breeze played with her cupric bob. This day had decided to be hot and bright, so the mid-afternoon winds were welcome.

I handed her an opened bottle of Mythos. We sat down near the rail facing the city skyline.

“It fitted my previous occupation. Now, though, I might have to sell this boat and buy a new one. You can help me name it.”

“Speaking of names, I’ve thought of what I want to call my students once they graduate: Eirenic Chevaliers.”

I opened my bottle. “It has a lot of syllables.”

“Six. Well, then how about ‘Knights of Peace.’”

“Why ‘knights’?”

“The original meaning of ‘knight’ meant ‘service.’ And they do have to be tough.”

“Truth. –Will they ride horses, then?” I bobbed my head up and down.

“Such a literalist.”

I swallowed cold beer and lowered the bottle. “Still on names, though, a question.”

“Yes?”

“Well, on the assumption that we don’t get our names completely by accident: Your first name is Diane.”

“And my last name is Gwyned. Want my phone number?”

I winked. “I already have it. –Some say the goddess Diane, or Artemis for us Greeks, was a warrior. But that wasn’t really her style. She was more about the world of nature, animals, athletics, introversion, hanging out in forests, supporting her female followers...”

She chuckled. “I think I know where you’re going. ‘Diane,’ you know, is my legal first name. My mother gave it to me as kind of an afterthought. The qualities you mentioned are part of my story except for the introversion. But it’s really my middle name that resonates most for me.”

“What is it?”

“I might tell you some day. If you’re especially nice to me.”

I hissed with my lower lip. “Well, Sir Gwyn–”

“That’s Lady Gwyn the Fierce, to you.”

“–You have been achieving the amazing and impossible ever since we met. And as a result of your recent demonstration, a number of people have signed up to be Dreamers.”

“Good! I’ve received some apologies, too.”

“It’s gratifying to think I know the first woman to invent a martial art.”

Her head shook. “The third, that we know of anyway.”

“Who was the first?”

“Fang Qiniang, inventor of the White Crane style of what Westerners call kung fu. The second was Ng Mui, who trained Yim Wing Chun in the art named after her.”

“Is there any martial art you haven’t studied?”

“No.”

The laughing hoarse cry of a gull overhead. For once, I couldn’t tell if she were joking.

She sipped and, looking out toward the city across the water, asked: “Were you worried about me? When that fight started?”

I looked at the thin bandage on her cheek. “Scared to death. Your dedication to non-harm...I’m not sure I can go along with it completely. It’s a noble ideal—”

She raised a palm. “Let’s try something. Close your eyes, Haros.”

I did, hearing small waves breaking against the hull. A sensation of eyes upon me. What did she see? Ruffled black hair, olive skin, scar above my right eye....

Her voice came. “At the Exchange we work a lot with imagination. I want you to imagine that you have a son.”

After a while, an image visited. I let it develop. Dark hair, stocky build, crooked grin...a laugh...

“How old is he?” she asked.

“About four. Maybe. Hard to judge; I’ve never been a parent.”

“Now, I want you to imagine various stages in his life: playing with you; playing with his little friends; first day of school...”

After a moment, she went on: “Now imagine him at age thirty. Imagine that he is furious with you about something. He throws a punch at you. What do you do?”

“Duck.”

“Now he throws one at your mother. What do you do?”

“Pay for his funeral. Spartan mothers are unkillable.”

“Seriously.”

“I step between them.” No thought required.

“Yes. Do you hit back at him at any time?”

I felt into it. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“He’s my son.”

“He points a knife at you. Now what?”

“I try to take it away from him.” An imaginary blade stabbed toward my face. I sidestepped...

“Do you attack him?”

“No. Even now, no.”

“Even if he injures you?”

“No.”

“Open your eyes.”

I looked at her.

“Haros, all cultures start with the principle that everyone is family. We knew that even before we learned we all evolved on this planet together. We are one flesh. A visiting extraterrestrial would see our individual and cultural differences, but the family resemblance between us would be far more obvious.

“We are not family as some pleasant ideal. We are family as an inescapable fact. So when we really know this, imagine and feel into this, if we really perceive our opponents as family, how can we inflict deliberate harm on them? On anyone?”

I thought it over. “I see what you mean. But how can we get there, those of us who can’t see this and feel it as clearly as you can?”

“Perhaps that’s another job for our Exchange. To imagine different relationships not only with the imaginal, but with each other.”

* * * * *

That night, I dreamed that a war had been averted in the Dreamvale. In the morning, I woke to find that overnight showers had refreshed the city. According to the local news, an oversight panel was cleaning house over at the police department. Must have had something to do with giving the press a copy of the formal complaint I had filed.

Published and online tales emerging in the weeks following the episode in the street included Firiell befriending a dragon, a gholia of Jessica Atreides standing up to the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood, and Sherlock Holmes visiting the German spy Von Bork in prison.

Diane had been gone a week to see relatives in the United Kingdom when I received an e-card from her.

The projection showed Athena standing up for young Orestes, pursued and driven half mad by vengeful Erinyes of black stare and terrible visage. The image captured the

moment when Athena's strong defense persuaded the long-neglected Furies to change into the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones, henceforth to be celebrated in every home. The fair had won over the legal and the violent. Shakespeare came to mind: "The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath..."

An inscription followed the image:

When we imagine together, we move forward together.
~ Diane Minerva Gwyned

Perhaps we can. Just imagine it.

From Intervale to Terrania

To you, newly informed member of the Transdaimonic League, I bid welcome!

I am Eleg, Power of crossroads, guardian of thresholds, and opener and closer of ways. I congratulate you on reaching the stage of development at which we Powers may speak openly to you. I hope your brief interview with Kluni was satisfactory.

We have prepared this briefing to acquaint you with the details of what in the Dreamvale is known as the Intervale War. Its repercussions reached from the fighting Powers in the Infrarealm into the Coaguum struggles to assemble Terrania, an Earth-honoring society of justice, equity, beauty, and fulfillment. Not even the Powers knew what the outcome might be.

The War broke out in many forms on many Coaguum worlds. Because you are of Earth, the briefing will focus on those aspects of the conflict pertinent to your growing understanding. To know your place, you must know the imaginal history behind where you came to stand.

We will continue your briefing in the form of a story. That will make it easier to remember and will add a dimension of detail and meaning otherwise absent.

Because storytelling is not my specialty, I have asked the Power Renastra to weave together the events seen fit for inclusion. At the end I will have more to say to complete your briefing and indicate what awaits you.

* * * * *

“Except for the tell, tower, and volcano, this looks a bit like home.”

“Eve,” of course, was a name she gained thousands of years after she had died. The name her mother bestowed on her was similar to Zoe and meant “Giver of Life.” It fit her, for she was the matrilineal ancestor of all humans to come. By “home” she meant a coastal savanna in what was later known as East Africa.

The plain on which she stood talking to herself stretched beyond view in every direction. A slow but steady wind keened as bushes and branches she did not recognize bowed to it. Whatever the intelligence which occupied that place, it gave her word meanings her language lacked: “tell” as in a mound covering generations of buried remains; “tower” a dark, skeletal finger pointing skyward; and “volcano,” a broken mountain oozing rivers of red fire. Her people had encountered none of these, but she somehow knew what they were.

She looked up at the sky and gasped.

It was as though some crazy deity had sliced a line from directly overhead to either side, dividing the heavens into two vast domes. On one side, ropes of color shifted and pulsed

like writhing cosmic snakes unable to decide which hue to wear. On the other, against a dome of blackness, stars in strange constellations flashed, danced, and exploded.

As she watched, one hand on her queasy stomach, the line marking the split slowly rotated, moving into her line of sight on her right and out of it on her left. Now, she could make out other details almost too fantastic to take in. On the night side, a gigantic golden-horned reindeer (the word came to her) chased by the baying dogs of a bow-bearing hunter in a silver coat... a bleeding moon, a rabbit mark stretched over its face... On the day side, an old, bronze-skinned god stepping into a fire and turning flaming into a sun... the sun eaten by the sky-spanning jaws of a wolf...

“Quite a sight, is it not?”

She started. A pale man dressed in odd white garments stood next to her, looking up and chewing on what seemed to be a weed crinkled into a small tube.

“How did you get here?” He had appeared without sound or smell. And what was wrong with his health? His skin was so pale.

He took the weed out of his mouth. “Well, I don’t rightly know. One moment I was in Connecticut, and the next, standing here with you gazing up at the light show. Reminds me of 4th of July fireworks bursting over the Mississippi. Those were fine days.”

He ran a hand through his copious white hair. “Excuse me, ma’am, I’m being discourteous. I’m Sam. And you are...?”

She chuckled. “You may call me Eve.”

It was his turn to be startled, but he nodded. “Well now, Eve, we two will have much to discuss at some point. I wrote about you, you see.” The spirit of this place continued to translate. She nodded. Bards who made marks to talk.

More people were popping in, looking around with varying degrees of amazement and walking over.

A woman in a white shawl over a long blue dress placed herself at the front of the group as she strode up to Sam and Eve. “Hello there, I’m Margaret. Where are we?” The bun at the back of her head pulled her brown hair tight against her temples.

“I greet you. I am Eve. I do not know where we are or how we came here.”

“Are those real skins?” asked Margaret, eyeing her.

“And I am Sam.” He bowed. “Perhaps this is the Afterlife, or perhaps I just imbibed too much whiskey. My wife always said this would happen if I kept drinking. Has anybody seen her?” He looked around at the growing number of people wandering around.

“Have we stumbled into the Magic Theater?” inquired a thin, hawk-nosed man with a sunburned face under a wide-brimmed gardening hat.

“We are certainly not in Akkad anymore.” A priestess in elaborate headdress stood next to him. She stared at the sky. What had happened to the moon?

Beyond her, a broad, bald man sporting a furry red hat loudly expounded on something he called “the archeus.” The only one listening, another stout man but in English dress, took a pipe from his mouth, then cut in and asked, “Ja, but where *are* we? Is this a big dream, then?”

“As strange as all this is,” said Margaret as she gestured sweepingly at land and sky, “I accept it.”

“She’d better,” put in Sam as an aside. Eve stifled a laugh.

“I do.” An old, placid-seeming Chinese man with a flowing white beard smiled gently at them. Eyes wide, the man under the gardening hat bowed to him, as did the pipe smoker, even while ignoring each other.

A dignified woman in a formal cobalt-blue dress nodded to her namesake, red tresses bobbing. “As the other Margaret present, I am keen to know whereof we can understand each other in this place of riotous sensory variety. The world itself seems to blaze.”

“Indeed, and who might be the hidden playwright behind this mysterious scene?” This from a high-domed and mustached man wearing a gold earring. “The wit if not the Will would seem a sorely absent presence in this place.”

A short woman in crimson and silver cleared her throat. “Actually, I might be able to help with that. We are in Intervale.”

* * * * *

The group of fifty or so bewildered newcomers gathered around a woman three and a half feet tall. She bore a gnarled staff with a red gem at its tip. A silver clasp held some of the effulgent blonde hair flowing back and over her slightly pointed ears. Her brown eyes were quiet and appraising.

All other talking ceased as the group stood back so everyone could see and hear her.

“Welcome to this place,” she went on. “I am Firiell the Silver, your guide here. Before I explain where you are, and why, allow me to say something about who you are. I see that some of you recognize one another, and others do not. Yet all of you share an important common identity that transcends limits of time or place.”

Although she did not raise her voice, it carried to the outermost edge of the group, there beneath the turning sky of shifting tints and streaking stars. “How I would love to paint

that celestial vault!" The murmur came from a man with wide-set eyes below thinning gray hair. From the sleeves of his brown coat hung hands made muscular by engraving.

Firiel cleared her throat again. "Throughout human history, which is to say your history, certain individuals have felt called outside the bounds of custom, tradition, and religion by a felt sense of the sacred not found off in another world, but permeating all worlds. A sense both internal and external; both ethereal and embodied. For you, the world is ensouled, an expression of Spirit beyond categories or concepts. Even beyond the gods."

A thin elderly man at the edge of the crowd stopped pretending to read a book and looked up. He wore the garments of a mid-1800s New England pastor.

A hard-faced older woman in cowboy boots and jeans raised her hand. "If that is so, how come Hildegard of Bingen isn't here?" She glanced around. "Or Thomas Merton? Or Vivekananda? Or any number of other mystics?"

"Mystics," replied Firiel, "tend to be traditionalists. Hildegard accepted the Crusades and sought to convert Muslims into Christians. Neither she nor Merton ever opposed their Catholic Church. Even when rejected, mystics ultimately affirm the religion they call home. They may dance to a different song, but they remain on the authorized dance floor. By contrast, all of you when living showed a more...heretical turn of the hip.

"In short, you are all members of a Transdaimonic League stretching right across all of human history. Your membership outlives your mortality."

"You see?" blurted Sam, finger pointing. "My wife was right about the whiskey, God bless her. We're in the Afterlife." He chewed on his cigar, wondering grimly if it would be his last. Did they roll cigars in Hell? They surely wouldn't in Heaven.

Firiel shook her head. "Not exactly. Which brings me to a second similarity you share. You all work deeply with imagination, realizing it to be a realm, not just a human faculty. You stand in a part of that realm right now. We who live here call this realm the Dreamvale."

Several of the group nodded. "That makes sense to me." The woman spoke from behind a large set of glasses. "And the Dreamvale extends into where we lived, doesn't it? I was born, for instance, with two extra fingers, like many of the females in my family. The fingers were amputated early on, but for the rest of my life, I felt those extra 'ghost fingers' mixing and weaving my poetry and my stories." She sighed, and in that sigh there was a world.

"We call where you lived the Coaguum, the realm where things congeal and become material." Firiel's staff wove air. "Your world and ours interpenetrate, especially in the presence of sustained acts of creativity."

"Lived," Sam snorted, chewing.

“And are there not still more realms of being?” The Arab man wore a soft headdress and long neck scarf. “Angelic realms? Not only Hurqalya and Mount Qaf, but realms of Ideas beyond sensory perception? Realms to which no finger can point?”

Firiel gave him a nod. “Here we think of that as the Infrarealm of archetypal cosmic Powers, beyond which is the Source to which all of us remain inwardly connected, even when we fail to remember it. So: Actuality, Possibility, Potentiality, and Source. The Tetraverse, beyond which even the Wise cannot see.”

“The rishis knew of this, and I sat down near them and recorded some of their words.” A traditionally robed Indian man wore long hair that touched his shoulders. The cold breeze out of the north did not seem to bother him. His mother’s father had been a fisherman.

“I tried to paint some of it from within my visions.” A dark-eyed American glared at the English-suited pipe smoker. Her last memory was of drowning. He looked away.

“I glimpsed it through number, harmony, and music,” said a man in ancient Greek robes and sandals.

“I danced it for love of Shams,” exclaimed a figure whirling to show what he meant.

At this, Firiel smiled. “This is a conversation I would fain extend far longer,” she admitted, “but a crisis awaits, and yours are the only souls I know of who are up to the challenge of meeting it. It’s time to explain what you’re up against.”

* * * * *

A universe without a discordant note would sit there doing nothing, static and lifeless. Life is because something shoved, fought, or consumed something else.

The same is true in the Dreamvale. Conflict, tension, or rupture move the storyline forward. Every vale within this realm houses an element of discord. Its name varies with the vale: Joker, Typhon, Mephistopheles, Lady Macbeth...

In Vale Midtellus, the chief antagonist is Margast. Some refer to him as “MG” to avoid uttering his name aloud.

Margast was a child of a musical Creator. A child who got bored in eternity. Who of creative disposition wouldn’t?

When the Creator and his celestial orchestra composed the music to bring the worlds of that vale into being, Margast added a few of his lonely, quirky strains. Some of the players liked it and began to play along. Unfortunately, it never occurred to the Creator to allow more than one Song, or that diverse songs can make a cycle with its own emergent (rather than imposed) harmony.

When the Creator turned up a single Chord to drown out the discordant strains, Margast withdrew from the heavenly realm and prepared his rebellion against it. At this point, agents of the Creator imprisoned Margast in the Void.

Discord is necessary, but not villainy. Repressing discord turns the discordant into villains. The villains gain malcontented allies: He of the Terrible Eye, Fallen Wizard, Slimy Traitor, Giant Spider, others. The Balance is disrupted.

Sam took his cigar from his mouth. “Well, my mother had this all marked down. She used to ask, ‘Who ever prays for the Devil?’ Is that what we’re here to do, ma’am?”

“That will be up to you. I’m here to call you together, inform you about the state of affairs, and offer what support I can give.” Firiell eyed the crowd. “Margast has grown so powerful that he and his coalition threaten the very integrity of the Dreamvale. He has reemerged from the Void, gathered power, and began assimilating not only Midtellus, but sources of magic beyond it. He intends to tear down the purlieus protecting the integrity of other vales.

“The total boundary of a vale is called an ambit: the amount of space it takes up in the Dreamvale. Margast seeks to subsume all ambits within his own sphere of power. If he succeeds, it will be reflected in all the realms, not just the Dreamvale. We must find a way to stop him.”

“Tell them what led up to all this.” A black-haired man with a scar over one blue eye nodded at Firiell. He wore jeans and a black jacket with the words DREAMVALE EXCHANGE on the back.

Even before the dawn of humanity on Earth, the Infrarealm Powers behind the great experiment toward developing consciousness in the Coaguum had formed shifting alliances with one another. When the two-leggeds arrived, the Nature faction held sway: Powers of soil and stream, wildness and instinct, organism and custom. After millennia of this, the Celestial faction pushed back, encouraging hierarchy, urbanization, and otherworldly religion.

Events accelerated: after centuries instead of millennia, Machine artisans backed by Smee, Ordiri, and likeminded Powers spread their worldview over the face of human affairs. The natural world declined, with much of Earth’s surface converted by conquest and industry into an underworld, which pleased Bellum, Doja, and Athara.

These shifts underwent countless mirrorings in the Dreamvale. Today, in Midtellus, smoking factories were all but killing the magic forests and dales. Few even believed in magic anymore, and great tales of the elves had degenerated into tavern rumors told with a sip and a wink.

Sam spit out a stray flake of tobacco. “Sounds to me like these here Powers have gotten too big for their britches.”

“The trouble actually came from Earth,” Firiell said, “through a series of unmet Nexus Crises. Turbulence in the other realms subsides when its Coaguum effects are met and managed. For example, when after centuries of Christian emphasis on rationalism and light the Underworld Powers began to rumble in 1930s Germany, enough insightful people could have worked together to deal with those dark promptings in themselves and each other before the rumble loudened into a roar. That in turn might have healed the parallel splits in the Dreamvale and the Infrarealm. It’s all linked.”

“It was the roar of Wotan, the Wild Huntsman set free in the unconscious!” blurted the stout, beady-eyed man in an English waistcoat. He jabbed the pipe stem in the air for emphasis.

“Right story, wrong figure,” put in a shorter but equally chunky man in blue trousers and a red shirt. White stubble ran across his tanned face and neck. “It was Ragnarok all right, but Hitler was the Fenris Wolf from that myth, not Wotan. He was obsessed with wolves: submarine wolf packs, Wolf’s Lair headquarters, Organization Werewolf, and so on. Even his name Adolf means ‘wolf.’” The breeze played with a lock of his brown hair.

“Likewise,” Firiell rushed on before the pipe man’s opening mouth could reply, “Margast need not have swelled and darkened into such a terrible enemy.”

“How has this played out on Earth?” asked the cowboy-booted woman, brows furrowing. The others grew still.

“Authoritarian governments and business conglomerates own most of the planet surface while millions starve or die of thirst, even in wealthy nations. Entire regions have become deserts.” Firiell’s grimness froze them to attention. “The industrial burning of coal and oil is overheating the atmosphere. Whether humanity can survive all this is an open question now.”

“As I foresaw,” muttered Carl, the stout pipe smoker.

“He did,” confirmed Jane, the booted woman.

“Who is fighting for sanity?” asked Enheduanna.

“Scientists, poets, naturalists, activists, artists, dancers, public speakers working for change, financiers who know the need, deep educators, philosophers, bards, farmers, healers, city planners, community leaders, technicians, designers of games, and many others, each with a piece of the puzzle in the shape of a brighter earthly future. Those who call for inspiration, justice, and change across the world.” The length of the list made Firiell feel a little better.

“I fought for it,” said Lucille, the Black woman with the large glasses.

“So did I.” The Margarets spoke simultaneously.

“So did we,” said Li, speaking for herself and Khana, who nodded.

Sam tapped his chest. “And I. Wrote for sanity, too.” Other voices sounded.

“You all did,” Firiell acknowledged, “each in your own way. That is why you are here.”

“What can we do to save what is left?” Eve was appalled. How had some among her descendants wreaked such havoc without having been stopped? How had such destructive insanity been allowed to continue?

The buzz died down. All eyes were on Firiell. “How you all face Margast will provide a vision, a picture in imagination, for how your counterparts on Coaguum Earth can overcome opposition to Terrania.”

A low rumble issued from the burning mountain. A red light now shone from the top of the nearby tower.

“And what is Terrania?” asked Shihab, the Arab man who had spoken of Hurqalya.

Firiell turned toward him. “The just, inclusive, delightful, Earth-honoring planetary community they strive to build wherein humanity can come of age.”

“My visions were mostly painful.” Christiana’s dark eyes blinked back tears. “Full of strife and conflict. I sincerely hope the ones we produce can inspire.”

“That is up to you.”

“How do you figure,” asked Sam, “that just this group can face down an entire army of evil?”

“You have each other. You have me for guidance. You have some of the Powers on your side. Yes, you can be killed, but is any death really forever?”

Sam snorted. “Some reassurance.”

“And you have allies drawn from elsewhere in the Dreamvale.” She raised her staff. The red gem at its tip changed color and flashed bright green light out to the horizon and beyond.

An invisible horn replied in the distance.

From behind the tell walked, crawled, flew, and flapped a wave of beings of every conceivable shape. The front rank included, at its point, Nuwa, slithering on her snaky tail; then Durga with a sword at her hip, Athena in bright armor, and Yemaya in billowing blue garments. Behind them walked Amanda Morgan, Hal Mayne, Childe Roland, and the Gunslinger. Sky Woman rode in on a giant turtle. Odin galloped on

eight-legged Sleipnir. Dr. Strange just appeared, suddenly, through a fiery portal that vaporized behind him.

Bhima Swarga swaggered shoulder to shoulder with Herakles on one side and Siegfried on the other. Ditaolane's muscular stride led a contingent that included strong-backed Oonagh, keen-eyed Nafanua, and giant Balarama, smiling and drinking from an immense flask he gleefully shared with Prince Gerard of Amber. Legolas led a contingent of armed Elves, with ax-toting Gimli struggling to keep up. The Illustrated Man's tattooed arm gave the dwarf a helpful push from behind and earned a glare for this, bringing a snigger from Sir Lancelot and Ilya Muromets.

From behind the red mountain, Tehanu of the scarred face flew in on the back of the dragon Kalessin, with Commander Uhura, Mama Wati, Au Co, and Princess Bari seated behind her. They landed near Treebeard and his slow-striding friends in a clearing of wing-ruffled grasses. Red-eyed Pele surfed a wave of molten lava down one flank of the disturbed mountain and walked the rest of the way in. Rostam and his horse and friend Rakhsh entered the field, prancing forward. King Gesar accompanied King T'Challa and Hou Yi, who bore a quiver of steaming arrows upon his broad back.

"Welcome to Intervale." Firiell greeted them as the Transdaimonics stared at the newcomers. Among the newcomers, the Page of Pentacles put down his coin and adjusted his red hat. Van Helsing listened while whittling a stake. Misty Knight flexed her bionic arm. Wolverine's claws slid out, then retracted.

"This whole show is all just us radically unpacking ourselves to ourselves." Promethea winked at the phlegmatic Shadow Moon. "Know what I mean?"

"Not really."

"I do," replied tricky Ananse, winking.

"It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data," noted Holmes as he filled his briar. At his side, Watson clutched a hefty walking stick and looked around expectantly.

Huck Finn waved a paint brush at Sam, who stared at him in bewildered wonder.

The hawk-nosed man shook his head. "Price of admittance: your mind."

* * * * *

Firiell organized everyone into strategy groups to which she gave everything she had learned about the armies of Margast. She also gave them ground rules for productive discussion, appointed group facilitators, and went from group to group to help move the planning forward.

The question on which all the planning discussion turned was: How to neutralize the threat?

Two approaches knitted themselves together from the often-heated discussions within and across groups: 1. Scout and strike Margast and his armies with every possible resource as soon as possible; and, 2. Confront Margast and his armies with nonviolent opposition.

The first group tended to see the second as ineffectual idealists. The second tended to see the first as headstrong killers. But the rule was that they listen to each other.

Firiel sighed and continued her rounds, consulting occasionally with Whitebeard and Magos.

* * * * *

“Look.” Corwin of Amber faced Michael Sandoval of the Dorsai. “You of all people should get it.”

They stood together at the edge of one of the many encampments set up across the plain. Both were in uniform. Corwin, black of hair and green of eye, wore a black shirt and trousers trimmed with silver, a black cloak clasped at the throat with a silver rose, and a silver sword scabbarded at his waist. Michael, big-boned and blond, wore the uniform of a bandmaster warrant officer and was unarmed. Across his back hung a set of Spanish pipes not very different from those a Highlander piper would have played.

“I get that you aren’t into killing,” Corwin went on. “But this is a crisis that requires a shift of perception. Let me show you how it’s done.” He drew on a silver-scaled gauntlet and flexed his fingers.

Michael shook his head. “I don’t need showing. I spring from a warrior people. We train from childhood to be professional soldiers.”

Corwin shrugged. “What gives, then?”

“The issue for me isn’t capability. It’s inclination. I will not kill for my convictions. Any of them.” He paused. “But I am willing to die for them.”

“Let’s skip the lifeboat scenarios; they are boring. When it comes down to it—”

“But when does it come down to it? When, realistically? Less often than we are taught as warriors to believe.”

“Listen.” Corwin drew on the other gauntlet. “I’ve been around more than a few centuries, and I’ve seen close up how these dilemmas play out in real life.”

“I believe you, Lord Corwin. What I’m trying to tell you is that I am looking for a way not to hurt anyone, whatever the stakes.”

Almost silent, Grayswandir left the scabbard. Its edge touched Michael's neck over his carotid artery.

"This isn't a bluff. I am prepared to kill you where you stand if you do not give way. We need you out there today."

Michael felt no wavering in the blade on his skin. "I know. We are, in the end, brothers in arms. If your vastly more experienced opinion is that removing me would help, then do so."

Corwin raised a brow. "You think so little of living?"

"No. But I am Dorsai born and bred. If you need to spill my blood for ink to write a document of the campaign against Margast, I offer it. In the end, I will not fight, nor will I surrender. Feel free to test my resolve."

"Son of a bitch on all of this"—and Grayswandir slid back into the sheathe. "I can't tell you how much I hate it when things go this way. I would just as soon dismiss you as a spineless wimp and cut your head off. Damn you for not being one."

Michael smiled. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you. However, I'm glad that my moral position troubles you somewhat."

"Ain't like it's anything new."

"No, but it tends to get reborn when irritating people like me confront killers like you."

Corwin's eyes swept out over the field. "I doubt you can come up with another time when someone of your peace-loving persuasion stood up to an Amberite with millennia of blood on his hands."

"I doubt that too. My pedigree has often caused me conflict. When I feel that what I'm standing up for is crazy, I mount musical instruments on the wall of my officer's quarters as a reminder of my convictions."

"Does it help?"

Michael shrugged.

"Well, I wish you luck in what you are about. It's a worthy message. May the creatures you confront be open to recognizing its genuineness."

Michael smiled again. "They may not be. Think about all the monsters you've slain. How open were they? Fortunately, the weight and worth of the message doesn't depend on whether they receive it, for now. At least where I'm concerned."

"Then what've you got to show them?"

In lieu of a definitive answer, Michael did the only thing he could. He unslung the *gaita gallega*, blew into the bag under his arm, and played.

* * * * *

“No,” said Sam, “absolutely not. I had my fill during the Civil War. A grieving mother might have lost her Union boy because of me. I’ll never know; a group of us shot at him. But I know this: I’m done involving myself with killing.”

“Your bullet didn’t strike him.” The *volva* was the wise woman had given the Norse Eddas to humanity. Her voice was deep and resonant. “I have the means to know.”

“Much obliged, ma’am, but it doesn’t change my attitude.”

“Do you really imagine those beasts out there care one whit about your qualms?” Lady Lyne had used that tone on plenty of knights errant. “I saw countless contests between the best knights in the world—and between the noble and the wicked. Camelot fell because King Arthur trusted evil people to do what was right. They did just the opposite—predictably!”

Jeanne smiled grimly at Sam. “I am touched that you admired me enough to write so much about me. But you must realize that military leadership gave my life meaning. I obeyed my visions, and that is where they led. In the end, I was betrayed into the hands of my opponents, and they showed me no mercy, not even unto the burning stake.”

“Think about all the blood shed by these miscreants,” added Lancelot. “Is it right that we fail to hold them accountable for it when God gives us the means to enact a just retribution?”

“Exactly.” The count’s face bore the marks of terrible trial. His cloak of rich fabrics swished as he stood. His name had once been Dantes. “After all the sorrow they have inflicted, the wrenching away of loved ones, the permanent incursion of their bloody fate within our breast, our opponents would indeed get off lightly just to be killed. Perhaps what we should really discuss is the truer equality of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; a wound for an eternal and never-closing wound. *That* would indeed be justice.”

A slim, red-haired woman in a black jacket stepped forward. “There is a scene from a playwright I adore,” said Diane, “in which a woman appears in court to defend a man punished in accord with the letter of the law. This scene teaches us that what is legal and what is fair are often not the same. Moreover, that sometimes we must forego retaliation and take the higher road regardless. The defender’s name is Portia, and she tells the court:

“The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown...
 'But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
 It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice."

She bowed to Will, who bowed back.

"I was flayed to death on the steps of the library I directed." The tall woman of regal bearing spoke quietly but firmly. A white band matching her robes encircled her head above her face. "The zealots came for us, spurred on by a crooked politician later declared a saint. They burned my life's work, and the sacking of the library was an irrecoverable loss."

She paused thoughtfully, her eyes vivid with remembrance. "They acted out of fear and ignorance. No one had ever taught them better. Our library was built for scholars, but not for improving the life outside its walls. What they did was a terrible, lasting injustice. But I forgive them. Perhaps a lesson in all this awaits our contemplation." She sat down.

Moments stretched as the group absorbed and reflected on what had been said. Then Bruce Wayne stood. "I hear all of you, and I respect your opinions. But I will not stand idly by while the villainous destroy everything left of value."

"I agree," said Diana Prince, standing. "May our resolute defense of it echo outward to all the worlds."

Jyn Erso raised her blaster. "To the resistance!"

Donnar smiled through his red beard and picked up his hammer. At his touch it sparked with banked lightning. "Enough of all this talk. Time to go forth and give those trolls an epic pounding."

* * * * *

"I wish my brother Benedict were here," said Prince Corwin.

Beneath the dark tower now topped with an immense darting eye, below the volcano shooting fire into the sky, the armies of Margast marched down the plain. It rumbled with the steps of their passing.

Dark birds with crooked limbs circled above them; the stench of decay and mortified flesh preceded them; insects with poisonous stings darted around them; shadows

crawled among them. Firiell saw cave trolls, Boskonian dreadnoughts, Sardaukar thopters, and even a Borg cube hovering nearby to support their oncoming shock troops.

Having freed Garm, the Hound of Hel, Loki led Frost Giants riding a massive cavalcade of carts built of the fingernails of the dead.

“Benedict? So he could command the field?” Gurney Halleck looked forward to the big magics and mega-weapons and suchlike being done with so they could get down to the hand-to-hand. The lengthy dinner courses were fine for dukes and duchesses, but he was a meat-and-potatoes man.

“No. So he could be entertained by all the commotion when we command the field.” Corwin whistled, and Star whinnied and cantered up to him. He fed the horse an apple and mounted.

The sky had reversed again, placing its rivers of shifting light above the transgressors and falling stars over the defenders. A Starfleet flotilla, a flight of giant eagles, a phalanx of Galactic Patrol maulers, and fighters of the Rebel Alliance had their back.

Below, Odin and his elite Einherjar fighters poured into the plain, Thor and Tirw on either side of him. Odin clutched Gungnir, the spear that never misses. Artemis strung an arrow. Lugh of the Long Arm loaded his sling. Nayenezgani, whose name means Slayer of Alien Gods, set himself to kill every monster in his path. Shango readied a bolt of lightning strong enough to electrocute a hundred men and decided to juice it up a bit.

The Gunslinger reloaded, hoping for a glimpse of the elusive Man in Black. As his eyes searched the enemy ranks, a man with tousled hair waved and called out, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!”

Firiell had distributed among the Transdaimonics a list of enemy commanders. It included Darth Vader, Harley Quinn, Thanos, Hel, Captain Ahab, Marc C. Duquesne, Magneto, Kurtz, Iago (as behind-the-scene strategist), Khan Noonian Singh, Poison Ivy, and, coordinating them from behind, Margast.

From behind because he stood up like a high mountain. His eyes were flames. He wore glaciers for armor. His forehead scraped the clouds.

Dr. Strange cleared his throat and spoke to the Scarlet Witch. “Dormammu was bigger. Oh hell, he’s here too.”

Detective Columbo mopped his brow. “Oh yeah, I forgot. My wife asked me to run an errand on the way home.” He looked around. Where was his dusty Peugeot Cabriolet? “Mind if I borrow your horse?” he asked Zorro, who ignored him.

“Sounds like a hell of a hoot!” Randle P. McMurphy let out a war whoop. “Let’s get it on already!” From his upraised hand a deck of cards sprayed into the air as he danced a jig

on the plain. “Let’s light ‘em all up like horny bumpers on a psycho pinball machine! Weee yah!”

The American Margaret pursed her lips as she looked over at Firiell. “Please tell me he is *not* on our side.”

* * * * *

“So what if it’s unauthorized?” Jyn impatiently drummed a forefinger on the butt of her blaster. “Who ever heard of an authorized resistance that worked?”

Each side of the Intervale conflict had at least one thing in common: outsiders. Solitaries who preferred to fight on their own.

Eris enchanted a crow to convey a message to the vengeful count. Once the bird spoke into his ear and flew off, he rounded up the like-minded on his side for a private little war of the willing.

The two sides met behind the mountain. Bane waved at Batman. Batman waved back. It was on.

A contingent of orcs led the way, but they split when Lord Corwin swept in on his horse, silver blade beheading the trooper on his right and, on the backswing, severing the sword arm of the one on his left. He rode by and circled for another pass. A long-haired old wizard in faded white gestured, and fresh orcs replaced the dead ones.

Behind Corwin, a thick knot of xenomorphs closed in, slavering and baring their teeth.

Behind *them*, Shango pointed at the sky, then at the zenos, and the lightning roared. When the flash faded, it revealed a pile of dead aliens. Corwin saluted Shango and rode on. Through cracks in the earth, more aliens emerged.

As Iago crept up behind Chihiro Ogino, knife in hand, the Scarlet Witch spotted him. The crimson beams emanating from her hands picked him up and tossed him through the air and into the volcano. She checked her intuition. He would be back.

After pummeling each other relentlessly, Batman and Bane drew back and paused, gasping. They were both getting kind of old for these heroics.

“I’m as upset by all this fighting as you are.” Colonel Green faced Uhura, who pointed a phaser at him. “We need to find a way to convince the others to really hear one another. I understand communications is your specialty. Will you please help me convince them?” She watched the bulge in the sleeve of his slowly rising right arm...

Two Frost Giants closed on Herakles. Ducking under their icy blades, he grabbed each by the throat, smashed their skulls together, and threw them at Thanos, who used his gauntleted Reality Stone to slice them to harmless ribbons. As he did this, Prince Merlin

of Amber and Chaos spun up his spikard ring and directed every open channel at the glove holding the Stone....

Uhura stunned Colonel Green, but she soon realized he was only a front man for the white supremacist violence supplanting United Earth...

A crack of thunder, but this time not from Shango. Everyone fell, stunned.

Odin rode up on his steed, accompanied by a retinue. Not of warriors, but of bridge people, all of whom had once lived in the Coaguum: Aesara of Lucania, Muhammad ibn Umail, Wolfgang Goethe, Gustav Fechner, Gershem Scholem, Frederick Douglass, Morehei Ueshiba, Margaret Cavendish (the other Margaret was down with a headache after speaking heatedly with the New England pastor), Chuang Tzu, Jorge Luis Borges. A few others. And Sam.

The two sides looked at one another and came to the same startled realization: Nobody was winning. Each side was just as strong as before, continually replenished by magical rejuvenation and ongoing hatred.

“This looks familiar.” Kang the Klingon sheathed his sword.

“I expect you might be ready to hear from us,” Sam told the combatants. “Unless you want to keep on fighting, to no real effect.”

“Where the hell are the cavalry?” Private Vasquez ignored him, swinging up her shoulder-strapped smartgun for more targets to blast.

“Bah!” A very fat man with a yellow necktie looked around for a chair, found none, and kept standing, uncomfortably. He was used to solving mysteries while seated in his New York brownstone. Where the devil were Fritz and Theodore and Archie Goodwin?
“Cavalry, madam? There is no cavalry. Pfui! You’ll just have to take it as it comes.”

Corwin shrugged, dismounted, and put up his sword. Fighters on both sides followed suit.

As the difficult talks began between enemies, others from Odin’s group came forth. Aesara, first psychologist in history, sat down and wrote,

When we finally turn inward, we discover the origins of law, morality, psychology, and healing.

Vincent Van Gogh unlimbered the travel easel he always carried on his back. He propped up a canvas and, staring at the sky for a moment, daubed yellow paint straight from the tube. He muttered out loud:

Fantastic. Utterly fantastic. Great things are done by small things brought together.

Jorge Borges came forth, sat down, and wrote:

Nothing is built on stone; all is built on sand, but we must build as if the sand were stone.

Alvin Ailey walked out into a clearing, glanced furtively back at the others, took a deep breath. Music began playing out of nowhere. He began to dance. Everyone who saw him was stunned and deeply moved.

After a moment, Sister Rosetta Tharpe stepped forward with her electric guitar. The music poured forth from her and her choir: "Strange Things Happening Every Day."

* * * * *

The main bodies of the armies drew together for the final confrontation. The sky reversed yet again.

The Scarlet Witch stared across the lines at Dracula and rubbed her hands together.

Medea blew an evil kiss at Jason. He pretended not to notice.

Merlin winked at Thanos and pointed at the spikard. Thanos grimaced.

The Gunslinger saluted the Man in Black, who raised a middle finger in reply.

The Bard waved an arrow at Smaug the dragon. Smoke emerged from scaly nostrils.

The Unicorn of Amber danced lightly up and neighed at the hissing Serpent of Chaos.

"Each side blames the other for the entire mess, old worm. Maybe they should blame you." Malky gloated to the suspensor-buoyed sandworm that was Leto Atreides III. Fish Speakers armed with lasguns fanned out in front of his cart.

Firiel walked between the lines, her staff glowing, commanding the ritual silence of preliminaries. She looked placid and wizardly. Inwardly, she was terrified. She walked on.

The armies waited.

They probably expected a speech, an appeal, or a discourse on the rules of engagement. Instead, she turned without a word and gestured with her staff, careful to indicate a non-magical move to avoid inadvertently igniting the battle.

As she left the field, music swirled out from a lone piper in a bandmaster's uniform as he played a raucous song of peace. He said nothing. He marched by as both sides watched and waited, and then he halted between the lines.

Sam entered, self-conscious but beaming at all the attention. He crooked a finger. Rumi danced in behind him, a human whirlwind. They halted near Michael and faced their opponents.

Then came Lucille, the Margarets, and the nervous, hawk-nosed man whose name was Hermann. Hypatia stepped forward and, looking over at the furious Christian zealots ranged against her, put her hands to her chest over her heart and held them out.

The procession continued. Johan Karlsen, King Theoden, Surak of Vulcan. Portia and wise Hermione. Joan of Arc. Diane and Haros, holding hands. All of them filling the space between waiting armies.

Diane to Haros: "Told you this was the right place to be."

Haros to Diane: "The matching jackets spoke to me."

At length, Karlsen, betrayed by an evil brother and raised from the dead, lifted his strong voice to address the dark forces under Margast: "We are here because we don't intend to fight you."

A roar of derision went up from Black Lensman, Kazon, vampires, harpies, Other Men, Harkonnens, Holnists, and goblins. Orcs in the front licked their lips.

Karlsen was unmoved. "This is not a trick. We do not surrender. We will never surrender. We stand together in the faith of a better way. Join us."

Surak of Vulcan stepped forward. "In the heart of all of us dwells the logic of being in relationship. Let us honor that logic together. The delight of the cosmos is infinite diversity in infinite combinations."

Norea, sister or daughter of Noah, sister or wife of Seth, stepped forth. She had burned down the first Ark with her fiery breath because Noah would not let women board it. "Come to your senses," she said.

Steam spurted out of Margast's nostrils. He was laughing.

Theoden looked at Grima. "You were once a man of Rohan! Come back."

Gandalf returned Saruman's staff to him and gazed at him inquiringly.

At this, Prince Merlin stood in the middle. Glancing once at Thanos, he took off the spikard, a ring of devastating power.

Corwin sighed, then followed him. When he reached the space between armies, he unbuckled his sword belt and let it fall. His brother Gerard joined him. Nafanua came and stood beside him. Izanagi. Pele...

An orc stepped forward and placed a filthy blade edge on the chest of Michael. The procession surged instinctively forward, but the bandmaster waved them back.

He regarded the orc. “You may need my life. You may need another. Two others. Ten others. Before you kill me, I will tell you a truth: Those who came before me made you the way you now are. We are all accomplices.” The orc hesitated.

Shihab was there. “Your suspicions would refute him with ‘proof,’ but our being here refutes with direct experience.”

“Who is here,” called Michael, “to offer a life with me as payment for what went before?”

Surak approached the orcs in the front line. He opened his robe. On Vulcan, the emissaries of peace he had sent out to his opponents had been executed. He expected nothing else. Logic would win the day eventually.

Luke Skywalker had been a quiet presence throughout, lurking in the background. At this, he came forward, dropped his lightsaber, and opened his robe to Darth Vader.

Uhura walked up. Promethea. Then Hypatia. Enheduanna. Eve. Legolas.

An orc loomed over the elf and said, “I was raised to kill your kind.”

“I know. I was raised to defend myself against yours. I relinquish my prerogative. Do whatever you must.” He laid down his bow, took off his quiver, and placed it on the ground.

Gimli growled, then put down his ax. “Fine, then. Cut off my head and be done with it.”

A cave troll stomped up to Gerard and bared his teeth.

Gerard flexed his massive arms and said, “This peace idea needs adapting to. It might take me a while.” The troll grunted, then smiled through bloody teeth. At this, Gerard handed him a barrel-sized goblet of mead.

With a green glow about his wrist, Dr. Strange made a “let’s talk” gesture to Dormammu, who killed him a few times on general principles and finally relented.

Holmes glanced at Moriarty, who frowned and looked away. “It’s no longer a contest,” said Holmes, “if one does not further compete.”

“And London?” asked the professor. “Further subjected to my organized endeavors?”

“I shall still thwart you, but no longer as an opposite. I am available when you wish to talk.”

Grima left Saruman's side at last for the embrace of his former king. Both wept.

Saruman went off to lock himself in Orthanc, but not before Gandalf gave him a modified seeing stone for contact in case the former White Wizard ever came around.

Artemis pointed her arrow away from Orion and unleashed it into the multicolored sky. It took fire overhead and burned its way into the south...

The armies melted together, surprised at how much the members of each had longed for contact with the other. Iron Man gave Lloyd the dark Welsh magician a digital mirror in which he could see himself and his pregnant wife more clearly. Nuwa pulled Hel to one side and asked, "What has it been like being down there all this time? Tell me." Isis beckoned Dumalawi, maker of his own reality, and confided, "I've been interested in your family situation for some time..." The Scarlet Witch waved her hands, weaving an intricate spell, and Brand of Amber stopped being such a scheming asshole, much to his son Luke's relief.

As for Margast, Sauron, Dormammu, Lex Luthor, Captain Ahab, Khan Noonian Singh, Satan, and the other great evil powers who have gotten all the press: yes, they could damage heaven, earth, and cosmos, but only with a lot of help. They all needed someone lesser to admire them. But with the lesser folk all getting to know each other, these irredeemable would-be rulers found themselves irrelevant. Inflated to godlike proportions, they needed worshipers, and now there were none.

After Mount Doom quit spewing lava, mainly because nobody was paying it any attention anymore, Margast, alone, abandoned, and refusing to outgrow his rebel stance, ended up a tenth-rate guitarist in a nihilist band going nowhere. After a while, he couldn't even say which realm he lived in. Maybe none of them. He had found his own Abyss to fall into. From that one he never emerged. His field-strangling factories disappeared.

Sauron, his equally immature agent, tried to book shady long-distance flights for travelers in the Coaguum until a pandemic wiped out his business. He drank himself to death on what little money remained. Without his presence, the Ringwraiths were just wraiths.

Vader we all know about. His pathetic Force-ghost comes around now and then to offer encouragement, but that's about the extent of his relevance. Only his son listens to him, and that keeps him going.

And so on with the rest of the evil figures: in the end, not *archetypally* evil, not fundamentally evil (because there is no such thing), just kind of pathetic, what with their fans drawn away to pursue more inspiring opportunities. A vampire with no blood is dust.

In the three realms, villainy melted back into discord. The Intervale War was over.

“How convenient,” said Sam. “You call on us when you need us. And then what? Dispersed back into nothingness?”

“No,” said Firiell. “You return whenever someone imagines you. In your case there is no danger of that ever coming to an end.”

Eve sighed, embracing herself. “I am glad at how things turned out here. But is there some way I can see how they turned out on Earth?” Murmurs of agreement went around.

“I will pour water into a pool of vision here at our feet.” Firiell pointed upward with her staff. The rains came down, in dribbles, then in sheets, but only within a small space. A dip held a pool of bright water.

“All of you gather around and gaze downward into the water...”

* * * * *

Diane and Haros had founded the Dreamvale Exchange to promote inter-realm conversation between the Coaguum and its imaginal counterpart. After they died they became legends. This is how they wound up in the Dreamvale.

It is sometimes tricky to align when things happen over there and when in the Coaguum. In this case, we might say that the Intervale War unfolded and was averted around the late 2100s CE, Coaguum timeline. But that’s a guess, and subject to interplenum fluctuations.

The Dreamvale Exchange fostered artistic, photographic, theatrical, performative, and mass media visions of how to confront authoritarianism with firm, peaceful integrity, an adult stopping an angry teen from setting the house on fire. As Diane liked to say, we are all family, and we should act like it.

Centuries of technological post-religious change (“progress”) had frightened traditionalists all over the world. At bottom, they felt their only alternative to being strangers in a meaningless universe was to cling to the old beliefs and lifestyles and resist what science offered. Because political “progressives” had abandoned them to poorly paying jobs, substandard healthcare, and decaying cities, they fought to hang onto what they still had.

Equipped with visions of how to live together, the builders of the new foundations reached out to people who maintained the old ways. “Earthrise,” the builders said, invoking an image beamed back from space on Christmas Eve, 1968, “is about inclusivity across the world, with all of us working together and leaving nobody behind. In the society we imagine, everyone has worth. Everyone contributes. We honor each other, Earth, and the cosmos in which we float. It really is that simple. Let us dream together and see how we can do that.”

So they assembled the puzzle together. Once they realized they all wanted the same things—security, safety, belonging, purpose—it was just a matter of aligning the successes that were already unfolding all around them. *Here is how you generate clean energy so everyone benefits. Here is how you make food in ways that regenerate the land. Here is how we look after each other's rights. Here is healthcare that everyone can afford. Here is the end of homelessness and the guarantee that everyone contributes. Here is how we make festivals to celebrate our common human ground.*

The climate continued to heat. Authoritarianism thrived wherever people felt scared enough to want a charismatic leader, usually a father figure. Addiction to greed continued. The Resource Wars raged over what remained, some of it uncovered by retreating ice as Earth warmed up.

But once the conglomerated giants driving it all had been chopped down in imagination, the way was clear for the new era of participation, decentralization, and creative collaboration. Power grew from the ground up. Humanity finally taught itself how to keep the immature from positions of power over others. Then they reversed climate change and started reforesting the planet.

It was not utopia, but it would serve everyone rather than just a privileged few. Once people percolate a clear vision of what they want, they can make it happen in reality.

That was how the Intervale War ended in the Coaguum.

* * * * *

“Piss on it, then.” Kluni glared at his (temporary) coalition partners Smee, Bellum, Kerp, Cempa, Doja, and Athara. “This time we got our asses handed to us. Witness Sam’s last writing: ‘Etiquette for the Afterlife,’ in which he told the insufferable Thomas Paine, ‘Leave your dog outside. Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and the dog would go in.’”

“So,” rumbled Smee, “it would be better if they didn’t go in, and never managed to build Terrania?”

“We got screwed.” Kluni pouted. “It was supposed to turn into a grand shit show of conflict and chaos. What happened instead? Resolution. How boring.”

“I agree that the conflict got short-circuited.” Bellum tended to come out for anything involving ignition. “They were within inches of wrecking the planet. I get that. But in the long term: no more game of conscious development. No conflict. No fire.”

“No contest,” put in Cempa.

“No recycling,” said Athara, knowing Doja would agree.

“In all honesty, they haven’t lacked a supply of steady violence,” Bellum noted.

“And death,” Doja added.

Cempa said, “Kluni, I think you’re competing for their attention here. And maybe ours as well. We all know that you bring chaos not because you hate order, but because you like the credit of destabilizing what was too fixed and secure. That is fine with me. But as they go forward with championing new ways of being together with their sentient planet, and as they grow ears for hearing its speech, don’t you think opportunities for disturbance will present themselves in abundance?”

Kluni did not take a breath because he had no breathing body; but in the Coaguum cosmos, planets as close as Mercury to their solar-flaring suns might have inhaled some extra hydrogen.

Kluni finally grinned. “I never stop admiring your eloquence, Cempa. You are quite right to correct my short-sightedness. These people will face many challenges up ahead. I look forward to being involved with how they negotiate them—or, more to the point, fail to.”

* * * * *

You have now heard from Renastra the story of the Intervale War and its conclusion. As Eleg, I invite you to consider where the conflicts described herein live inside you as well, and down what paths they have led you.

In 1897, Coaguum timeline, Sam wrote,

In Sydney I had a large dream, and in the course of talking I told it to a missionary from India who was on his way to visit some relatives in New Zealand. I dreamed that the visible universe is the physical person of God; that the vast worlds that we see twinkling millions of miles apart in the fields of space are the blood corpuscles in His veins; and that we and the other creatures are the microbes that charge with multitudinous life the corpuscles.

Nor was he incorrect. Every member of the Transdaimonic League, including you who read these words, has enjoyed—or suffered—similar insights into the nature of all that is.

You will also have noted that crossovers of vales brought everyone involved to the Intervale. This can only happen with the involvement of consciously creative members of the Coaguum. In the past, crossovers were sporadic: a short story by the human Ray Bradbury; the *League of Remarkable Gentleman*; and so on. Today, they are creatively necessary in order to forward Terrania, center of vital new relationships.

The question that remains is obvious: Whose consciousness allowed these Intervale crossovers?

Was it yours? Yours working together with other members of the Transdaimonic League? Yours working together with Intervale, Dreamvale, Earth, Coaguum, and Infrarealm? For these are all sentient beings, and therefore liable at some point to appear as characters in the grand story of Terrania that now unfolds before you.

For Terrania to be, you must all dream it together and then get to work. In the end, all progress depends upon the quality and reach of your imagination. The League guards and preserves the imaginings of humanity.

As a Transdaimonic in training, sort your fantasy life accordingly and await further contact. You will hear back from us very soon. Until then, prepare yourself for what awaits.

The Undaunted Dead

Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
 The light-house top I see?
 Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
 Is this mine own countree?
 We drifted o'er the harbour-bar,
 And I with sobs did pray—
 O let me be awake, my God!
 Or let me sleep away.
 — Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

It's no small thing to move an antique aircraft carrier, even when the occasion warrants it.

During the Resource Wars, a planet-wide scramble by wealthy countries seizing what was left of overheating Earth's hydrocarbons, metals, and minerals, San Francisco languished, as it periodically does. Perhaps its ruling deity is young Dionysus, who according to Orphic lore was dismembered by Titans, who distracted him with gadgetry long enough to erect a pot to cook him in. Only his heart survived; from it he was regrown.

The motif plays out there over and over. In the early 21st century, for example, tech giants dismembered the city through gentrification, driving thousands of residents into the East Bay and beyond. *I left my heart in San Francisco...* As billionaires moved in, large sectors of the city fell into gloomy neglect, ignored by limousine liberals more focused on their stocks and smoothies than on the decay spreading below their hilltop palaces. The once-proud United Nations Plaza built to celebrate international justice housed drug dealers, discarded beer bottles, and the defaced 5.2-meter-tall granite obelisk bearing words from the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...

Once humanity finally stood up at long last and threw the power-hungry out of office, the subway stations stopped smelling of urine, the bottles disappeared, residents returned, excess carbon left the clearing skies, and the representatives of Earth's human beings calendared April 22nd as the day a group of Signers would gather in rejuvenated San Francisco.

Their happy task was to ratify the Terrania Charter, extended into a series of Accords accepted by popular vote. That act would give official birth to true world governance from the ground up rather than from the top down.

Radantia smiled at her children. “A momentous occasion!” Even Kluni seemed resigned to it.

All across the cosmos, species tell stories about their gods: sentient natural forces at play everywhere, locally or universally. Humans on Earth are among an eccentric group of relatively immature lifeforms who upon achieving planet-changing industrialization forget that the Sky god is Sky, that all water is animate Water, that every existential quality of being expresses its own kind of consciousness.

When this happens, the forgetters either worship these “gods” as parent figures, staying stuck to them forever, or arrogate godlike status to themselves. The first group become followers and apologists, the second conquerors and overlords and their followers.

The Komuay knew this, of course, having seen it on many worlds. The stories spun everywhere, filled with an infinite variety of spirits and deities. On Earth alone, for example, the Power Wisdom, called Vaeda by her celestial siblings, appeared as Amaterasu, Matangi, Nuwa, Norea, Saraswati, Athena, Fatima, Au Co, Ástse Estsán, Mawu, Neith, Nzambi, Yemayo, and many others.

“I never thought I’d see the day.” Kluni smirked. The day was young.

“This is much more pleasant than my last trip to California,” said Aluere. The human form she held for too long in Santa Barbara had fled in a dinghy offered by a nice boatman. For this, she had ended his loneliness. She brought herself back to the present.

The committee charged by the people of Earth to arrange the ratification ceremony discussed at length where the signings should take place in San Francisco. City Hall? The U.N. Plaza, now a human rights educational center? The Wangari Maathai Civic Auditorium?

The spouse of a delegate told her partner about a recent dream featuring an aircraft carrier...

“All right, who influenced the decision?” Radantia asked the other Powers, there to watch humanity take a giant step into maturity. She sounded more annoyed than she really was.

Paesha spoke up. “Bellum and I thought a decorated naval vessel stationed nearby might be fitting for opening an era of lasting peace.” Bellum gave the cosmic equivalent of a grunt; on Mars, a hemispheric dust storm lifted.

The strange thing about Alameda is its time-warping shape. From the air it resembles an aircraft carrier. This was so *before* its use as a naval base. A shipyard built vessels on the Alameda/Oakland side of the San Francisco Bay as early as 1890. The United Engineering Works set up a yard and marine railway in 1903, Moore Shipbuilding Company laid the keel for a steel vessel in 1909, and Bethlehem Steel followed. Nine

hundred twenty-nine acres, some dry and some wet, welcomed the Navy in 1935. The Alameda Naval Air Station opened in 1940.

In October 1998, with its military presence fading, Alameda would provide a site for a museum honoring the decommissioned aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Hornet*.

To any human eye, the group standing on the deck just aft of the bannered island looked like tourists in caps, scarves, and blue jeans there to see the ceremony.

Kluni stretched his arms. "On what shrine of human history do we now stand, Bellum?"

"The original *Hornet* was one of the first vessels in the Continental Navy; the second ferried Marines to Tripoli. Its seventh incarnation, CV-8, was sunk at the Battle of Santa Cruz after fighting hard at the Battle of Midway. During WW II, CV-12 sent the first planes to strike Tokyo since the Doolittle raid. *Hornet* also retrieved astronauts splashing down from the Apollo 11 and 12 missions. During the 11th, human beings first set foot on the Moon."

Having earned fourteen awards and nine battle stars, *Hornet* was decommissioned in 1970, mothballed for a time at Puget Sound, designated both a national and state landmark, and opened as a museum in Alameda. There the "Grey Ghost" sat until summoned to the Port of San Francisco. That was a lengthy speech for Bellum. Smee smiled at him with humorous approval.

Today, the spacious metal deck held rows of chairs, tables filled with refreshments, speakers for music and announcements, ceremonial carpets of blue and green, balloons of every color, and banners from every land waving from lines running down from the central island off to one side. Aircraft and drones circled overhead, projecting bright messages and images of hope into the Bay Area sky clearing of morning fog.

Near the center of the deck stood the curved table upon which the representatives would leave their imprint per the ancient custom. Giant screens and projectors would relay the festivities to everyone present as well as those watching from around the world.

"They forgot something." Doja used his driest thought-tone.

The festivities opened with music, a true international language, playing while delegates and visitors dressed in traditional garments walked to their seats. Here and there, corners of carpet curled up off the deck, causing trips. A mix-up with the chairs had to be sorted out. A port-side light stand toppled.

Vaeda squinted at Kluni. "It's not me," he said.

An audio test failed, unlike earlier ones. Bunting came loose in the breeze and had to be retied.

“Whatever it is, it’s getting worse.” Vaeda frowned. And at a pivotal moment for all of humanity...

As strange mishaps multiplied, a diverse group of human visitors gathered to starboard for an urgent conversation. They went below. Doja nodded.

“What is going on?” Vaeda asked him.

“They see it. Watch.”

After a delay, three of them reappeared accompanied by technicians who quickly set up projectors. Images of soldiers, sailors, pilots, and other military personnel wearing the uniforms of bygone times appeared on the grey surface of the island. All had served on some *Hornet* of the past.

Noticing this, the audience understood and broke into spontaneous applause.

“A remembrance of those who went before,” Doja clarified. “Before the *Hornet* was a museum, it and its sister ships served as a temporal mausoleum. *Hornet*’s suicide count was the highest in the U.S. Navy. Three hundred sailors killed in battle aboard one vessel, though not unheard of, is a rather generous death rate.”

The Grey Ghost had been aptly nicknamed, for it was haunted. Volunteers, security guards, maintenance workers, and public visitors had testified over and over to ghostly doings. Opened hatches and lockers; fan and light switches clicking on and off. A blue light hovering in the forecabin; other lights in the brig. Soldiers talking near a bathroom sink; a headless soldier near the catapult. Officers restlessly stalking the corridors. Sailors working on the boiler firebox. A pilot strapped to a chair in the medical wing. The Dress Whites Ghost done up in the starboard main passageway.

“The spirits came not just from this carrier,” Doja continued, “but from times before her construction. In some mysterious sense, all her prior crews are one, all her missions part of one endless campaign, and all *Hornets* somehow one *Hornet* steaming down the ages toward a rendezvous with itself as the sailors endlessly return to their stations.”

Now Vaeda and the others understood. The planners of this momentous ceremony had forgotten this history. They were reminded by malfunctions, and by members of cultures who take revering the ancestors seriously.

A camera drone fell to the deck.

Doja saw it. “Remembrance is not enough. Watch.”

As the audience clapped to acknowledge the projected memorial, a grey haze gathered at the stern of the flight deck. In it could be glimpsed the faces of men: most young, some commanding, some scared, some scarcely out of boyhood, some grizzled from battle, all

determined, all wanting to go home, and all dressed in the uniform—grey, white, olive, khaki—of their time.

The audience clapped again, bowing toward the apparition, believing it to be part of the digitized memorial.

Doja raised his head to Zoe. “Now comes our part of the ceremony.” She turned and walked with Doja and Athara down to the waiting ghosts.

To the audience assembled on the deck of the *Hornet*, the cloud of faces merged with the last of day’s departing fog. But from the perspective of the Powers, the ethereal forms of men too long at sea crowded toward them.

Athara moved into their midst. To the assembled dead she appeared a black-haired young woman in a WAVES uniform of navy-blue wool jacket, navy tie, white shirt and skirt, white gloves, and Oxford shoes.

She opened her arms. “Brave and faithful men, I welcome you,” she said. “Your long mission is finally complete. Each of you fought, bled, and gave up life to bring into being a better world, a world of peace beyond war. We are here to honor you for that.”

Athara, queen of the Underworld, held close her opinion of why humans chose to fight each other. Some glorified battle and their notion of patriotism before finding out what war was really like. Many came home scarred for life if they came home at all. The overriding reality here, however, was the strong sense of duty in these men who had suffered so much. At bottom, they had sensed a future about to dawn.

Eager faces regarded her as she continued. “The people of today take a large step forward toward that better world, one of the most significant steps humanity has ever taken. Your devotion to duty made that possible. May their gratitude and our blessings be upon you as you find your way to rest so long deferred.”

Each serviceman was then greeted by Doja and Zoe, who guided them toward their new lives beyond the bright portal of stars. The gateway led out of the cosmos to lands not seen by living eyes.

One sailor lingered. Had he still been en fleshed, he would have been crippled by the loss of an arm and a leg and burns on his face and shoulder. He looked into what he perceived as the eyes of the three waiting Powers.

“We held,” he said. “All of us. We held our posts. Our loved ones never saw us again. We never saw us again. But we stayed at our stations, and we would have until time itself ran down and died. I thought you should know that.”

He made to walk on. Looking at Athara, he paused. “You remind me of my girl. Long dead by now, I guess. I still love her.”

Then he too joined his comrades as they made their way forward together. Athara stared after him.

The other Powers came up. “They were dutiful,” Cempa stated with admiration, “unto the end and beyond it.”

Paesha held out her hands in benediction. “May wars involving such terrible sacrifice stop at last.”

“I was glad to see them lose the albatross,” Kluni acknowledged. “Who needs centuries of disembodied duty?”

“Yes.” Aluere gazed toward the departing dead. “They needed to be witnessed at the proper rite of passage so they could finally rest in peace. Not just in their peace, but in everyone’s. May they be richly blessed.”

After that, nothing went awry. Short but heartfelt speeches alternated with ceremonial music. When the last signature was recorded, everyone aboard stood and cheered, a shout of joy heard around the world. Fireworks and messages of triumph lit the Bay, the city skyline, and skies around the globe. Astronauts in orbit saw the celebratory flashes ringing the planet: local colors at first, then regional, then the blues, greens, and silvers of Terrania.

That evening it rained—a sign of luck in many traditions—in San Francisco. A new era for humanity had begun.

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...

Water from the skies washed grey decks now free of their ghostly burden of sorrow.

For the first time since its birth, *Hornet*, whose name goes back to “trumpeter,” floated at last in quiet peace.

Vigilance

The case opened when a statue of a white fist clutching two crossed arrows appeared one morning in Central Park. At first it was considered an AI malfunction. Sometimes industrial printers turned out strange things. The oddity was that the statue stood four stories high, evidently intended to be highly visible.

It popped up as short news item among many in my morning audio briefing. I might even have chuckled about it. If so, I chuckled softly so the sound wouldn't harm me.

A sweet mocha aroma filled the cold house as I pulled on trousers over my thin shanks and got lost in a billowing shirt the blue of pooled water in the desert. As I dressed, I pictured my ancestors sipping hot cups from the crests of starlit dunes. Trade had brought *qahwah* to the West, where birthday boys now sipped it after too much partying. I was not doing bad for a man nearing 160, though. So I told myself.

I raised the cup to toast me. *Fe sahetek!* Acrid blackness scorched my waiting tongue. May it restore the dead to life, inshallah. My temples had turned into drum pads.

By the time I felt awake, having visited the docniche to chemically soothe my inebriated interior, the gigantic white hood had been found in Tennessee, and the outsized bundle of sticks tied with tape in Milan. Rumor had it that a huge metal elephant had materialized in Wisconsin. Alarm had replaced my amusement.

The expected call chime carried through my cluttered home. *Khara*, I cursed. Mentally, though, because in my office waited the holo of the director.

Ninety times out of a hundred, social disruptions ignite because some innovator gets possessed by the archetypal force of an idea and goes off on their own with it. My colleagues and I think of this as the Sorcerer's Apprentice Problem: invention without sufficient reflection or collaboration. The usual result is a chaotic rash of unpredicted consequences. Not long ago, someone thought untested hoverdiscs set loose without warning in London would be a gift to footsore pedestrians. These good intentions paved the way to bruised insteps and elbows. A minor example of the Problem, fortunately.

As a branch of the Terranian Constabulary, the Obligatory Revision Engagement Agency tracks innovations and, when necessary, slows them down by insisting on testing, collaborating, and analyzing potential negative results. Could a new financial instrument destabilize a community economy? Does a new educational method discriminate against anyone? Will a new technology make people ill instead of well? OREA gets its name and inspiration from the fabled Orea, or Norea, the woman who discovered that Noah's first ark did not allow women aboard. So she burned it down.

Our methods are gentler, but we insist on collaborative prototyping. The paradigm of the lone genius, messiah, or revolutionary who will explain the world or fix a long-standing problem has never served humanity well. On all the projects and advancements that matter, we need to work together.

Now, though, somebody had wandered off on their own.

“*Waa gwaan?*” Alethia Jabari greeted me as I shuffled into my office and sat down.
“Sleepless in Seattle?”

“*Marhaba*. No, birthday night. I was celebrating, sort of.”

“I’d say sorry I woke you but you look like you’re up. You’re getting the news?”

“Yes. Odd giant things just appearing. System-wide glitch?”

“They seem more like statements. Disquieting ones.”

Indeed. The Know Nothings, the Ku Klux Klan, the Fascists, Naziism, True America. It was a long list; I remembered the history. She, being Black, knew it viscerally, even after all the intervening centuries.

“Sethos, I want you to find out which industrial printers went crazy and how they were subverted, and by whom.”

It would, perhaps, have been nice to be able to look them up online. But history had taught us the dangers of too much interconnection. Unscrupulous people always either built the control centers or took them over.

I spent the morning contacting operators of printers large enough to have produced those strange objects. It was, essentially, the same holographic conversation over and over with heads and shoulders dancing above my desk. On their end, a tired old man with a prominent nose, brown eyes, and many wrinkles asked them questions through salt-and-pepper whiskers. I detected in their responses no ducks, evasions, or awkward pauses.

My government Special Investigator ID got me their recent records, for verification. I then contacted the regulatory agencies overseeing the printer cooperatives.

I called Alethia to report. “We have a problem. No records whatsoever of any printer malfunctions in any of the target areas. In fact, no records of anything unusual having been printed at all.”

“Dig deeper.”

* * * * *

I interviewed witnesses, visited some of the sites by aircar, talked to printer manufacturers, browsed local news. I checked the Constabulary records for recent outbreaks of civic unrest and, unsurprisingly, found none. I looked through lists of industrial printer programming advances and consulted recent research. Then I

skimmed the relevant technological journals for news of inventions or innovations. Zero, zero, and zero.

Someone had printed up gigantic symbols of fascism, an ideology dead for centuries. Fascism required discontented people fearful of change, and there were none. With energy renewable and unlimited, democracy worldwide as well as local, and all material needs met, what was there to be paranoid about? Could it be some colossal prank pulled by a biologically destabilized technician?

I decided to sleep on it.

Many millennia ago, my priestly Egyptian ancestors had learned to ask for wisdom from their dreams. Go to bed with a compelling question held in mind, let yourself sink down, and see if the gods respond...

On a dark metal plain, I sit in a large circle of people. Flickers of red light form a fiery net connecting all our heads. We can hear each other think.

In the center, a black form assembles itself. At first its face seems like that of a lion, but it swells until it towers before us as a giant three-sided pyramid, with one corner facing me.

As I inspect the pyramid, cruel inhuman laughter emanates from it...

In the morning, I drew a bath and reflected over coffee. At length, I asked Abrax, my AI, to search for American printer experts with a background in archaeotechnology. Maybe I was taking the dream too literally.

On the other hand, an idea had begun to coalesce, and it needed to be fed with facts, images, guesses, speculations, even mistaken conjectures. Throw what comes up onto the scales of surmise and see which side rises and which drops.

Four people fit the search parameters. I contacted them, sent my ID, and asked to meet in person posthaste.

* * * * *

Number Three, William Markus, seemed pleasant enough, a Caucasian man in his late thirties with deer-like eyes set in a boyish face below a Roman emperor haircut. I met him at his home on the San Francisco peninsula in what used to be known long ago, pre-Resource Wars, as the Silicon Valley. Once a den of technological archons, it was now mostly a park where eccentrics lived by themselves. I could sympathize.

“Finding and resurrecting ancient technologies is a kind of hobby.” Markus gave a short, barking laugh as his blue gaze met mine and looked away, met and looked away. “Keeps me out of trouble.”

I glanced around his living room and saw examples: a telegraph, a Walkman music player, one of the original Macintosh home computers, a large mobile phone.

He noted my interest. “They all work now.” He beamed proudly at them.

“We share an interest in collecting artifacts, although mine run more towards the fanciful: alchemical apparatus, for instance.” I looked around for a chair.

“Wasn’t alchemy an attempt to make gold from lead?”

“For some practitioners. They also worked as early chemists. However, alchemy emerged from Egypt as a philosophical tradition that endured for thousands of years.”

He nodded absently. He was the type of technologist completely immersed in his own preoccupations, with little mental room for those that seemed ethereal or impractical to him.

“Some of this,” I gestured at the gadgets, “looks like it preceded the Resource Wars.”

“Yes, there’s quite a lot to be found here and there, usually where the old cities stood. It takes some excavating, and not all of it is repairable. For some of it, the instructions have been lost and I have no idea what it is or what it’s supposed to do. –So you’re here to ask me some questions about printers?”

“Yes. Did you hear about those big structures recently found in various locations? Giant hand holding arrows, giant bundle of sticks, things like that?”

“Oh yes, I saw that in the news. Quite baffling.”

I scratched an earlobe. “I’m sorry to hear you say so. I was hoping you could tell me how someone could have pulled it off technically.”

“Well, in theory, a big industrial printer can make pretty much anything these days. We use them for projects that can’t be done at home: building ships, updating energy grids, repairing satellites. But it can’t be done without community authorization and oversight. I’d guess someone subverted that somehow.” He looked down, thinking.

“In a dozen locations around the world simultaneously? How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. Their operators aren’t even connected. That would be illegal, as you know.”

“What about a secret local connection or two?”

“Even locally, someone would have to reprogram a printer that’s supposed to be carefully monitored and inspected. Wow, imagine if they had designed a plague? Or released a poisonous gas?” He seemed genuinely horrified.

“Fascism is a kind of poison, a poison of the mind. Those were all symbols of fascism.”

It rocked him. “Whew. I didn’t realize that.”

You would have if you had learned any cultural history. Evidently, only machinery held his interest. No real accommodations for guests here in his living room; it was one large workspace. My chair had been fetched from another room.

“Why would anyone want to do that?” he asked.

“I couldn’t even guess. –May I ask one last question before I stop taking up your time?” I made to get up.

“Sure.” He did too.

“Have you unearthed any interesting old tech lately?”

I was rising as I asked, my eyes on the floor as I got up. My tone was exactly the same as for my previous questions. I listened and felt, not looked, for a pause, a breath drawn in, a tensing up.

He replied, “No” without hesitation. But his tone sounded flat compared to how he had spoken before. I looked up into eyes as dead as old camera lenses.

“Thanks so much for agreeing to meet with me last-minute. I appreciate it.”

He abruptly came back to life. “No problem. It’s nice to have a break in the routine now and then.”

I walked across his lawn to my waiting aircar, lost in thought. The driver’s wing door lifted open.

I stopped. Something was off. It took me a moment to see it. My carelessness with my mug of coffee had left a small stain on the seat. Clean it up later.

But the stain was gone. Therefore...

I pressed the security button beneath my left thumbnail. Constables would close on my position within minutes if not sooner.

Nothing stirred from the house I had just visited. I circled to place the car between it and me.

When the OREA aircars appeared, the one parked in front of me closed its door and darted skyward.

They lassooed it, and then they landed all around me.

* * * * *

“Made this morning,” confirmed Helena, head OREA psychologist. She had sent me the report. “Somebody scanned your car and printed a replica. Fortunately, not an exact one.”

Her image floated in front of me as a spare car flew me home. Her blonde hair glowed nearly white, like a halo.

“That word ‘somebody’ has become an annoyance.” I glanced out the window, then back at her image. “You’re completely sure Somebody is not Markus?”

“We’ve had him in for testing. He isn’t lying when he says he knows nothing about why anyone would want to kidnap you. He was cooperative, if a bit passive. We turned him loose.”

The car shifted course. Although the jet stream had mostly restabilized, a stray current of wind reached down now and then.

“Bizarre,” she went on, shaking her head. “We live in a world without violence, yet here it looks like Somebody is after you.”

In our society, only children hit each other, and they receive counseling when they do. I wondered what the end of Somebody’s aircar adventure would have been like.

I half-closed my eyes. “Can I run a scenario by you? Think out loud a bit with you?”

“Surely. Go.”

“Say you were at home and you wanted a new bed. You have just recycled the old one. So now what do you do?”

“I build one with the home—”

“Even before that. Take me through it step by step.” My fingers made a slow walking motion.

“OK. I describe what I want to the house and have it show me images until the holo looks right. Is that what you mean?”

“You describe it out loud or mentally?”

“Mentally.”

“You use visual images or internal ones?”

She pointed at her eyes. “I’m one of those people whose eyes like to see it.”

I was too. Mental pictures induced by machinery always felt to me like psychedelics gone wrong.

“And then?” I asked.

“I mentally order the house printer to put it together in the bedroom.”

“Very well. Now, let us imagine that you want to kill your partner. What stops you from creating a bed that can grow long metal teeth and bite her head off?”

She grimaced. “Do you often have thoughts like this?”

“Almost being kidnapped tends to bring them forth in me.”

“Well, aside from the fact that I bite her head off anyway when we fight, the mental safeties built into the house AI wouldn’t let me print something dangerous like that. – Are you sure you don’t need therapy for these violent imaginings?”

“My work is my therapy, or so I like to think. If you wanted to turn off the safeties?”

She hmmmmed. “Well... A programmer would have to do that by more or less redesigning the AI. But its basic functioning is monitored by the seller. So even then...”

“What if the seller is in cahoots with the programmer and you?”

“Doesn’t the AI licensing accord periodically inspect the seller?”

“Of course. But notice how many links this system of accountability depends on. We could think of others. Promoters, manufacturers, inspectors...”

She ran a hand through her halo. “I can’t believe that, in this day and age, so many psychotic people with lethal agendas could band together to subvert the system.”

“I can’t either. But I do believe Somebody has. And that they’ve taken advantage somehow of the kind of complexities we’re discussing.” Far below, a formation of geese passed in the other direction.

“Well, go and stroke your mustache some more until you puzzle it out. Until then, if you need any therapy...”

On the rest of the drive home I stroked my mustache, slowly, and watched reforested Oregon slide by below.

* * * * *

I was walking the Hurricane Ridge trail in the Olympic National Park, the San Juan Islands glimmering in the oceanic distance, when an agent from the Dreamvale Exchange called.

I stopped and nodded her image into being.

“Hello, Mr. Sethos.” A thin redhead, she greeted me as though standing before me on the trail. “I’m Persephone Gwyned, calling you back on your recent inquiry.” A digital background of rainbow bridges and twinkling stars framed her hair.

“Hello, and thanks for calling me back. Any luck on the inquiry?”

“Well, the Dreamvale wizard who consults for us said a few interesting things, some of them kind of alarming. First off, historical fiction and fantasy have been trending lately over here in the Coaguum.” A chart with an upward-curving line appeared beside her.

“Yes, I’ve read some of it. Who suspected that Star Trek would manage to reinvent itself again?” I resumed my walk.

“Interesting that you mention it as an example. Our consultant says a meme is floating around about a crazy Vulcan named Sybok forcing mind melds on people and turning them into a group of zombies.”

“I haven’t heard of him. I’ll have to look him up.”

“He started out as a character in a pretty confused old film. *Very* old.” Everything is very old to twentysomethings. “Also, he’s keeping company with a group of fictional tricksters involved in a betting pool. The Sundance Kid, Etta Place, Han Solo, the Yes Men, and William the Bloody are taking bets on whether an Egyptian detective nicknamed Whirling Dervish can stay alive for another week.”

“Wait a moment. The Yes Men were real once, back in the 21st century. What are they doing in the Dreamvale?” I stepped around a large rock and continued on the path.

“They were real, but down the centuries they also went legendary. That often happens to historically interesting people.”

“I see. Permit me an indelicate question. What are the odds on the survival of the Egyptian?”

She blushed.

“Ah,” I said. “Well, perhaps I’ll place a bet. If I survive I can cash in. –So this is all recent and unusual activity?”

“Yes, within a day, our time. The consultant advises that you be extremely careful.”

“Always good advice.”

After the call I kept on walking and thinking. Through crisp air I admired the distant mountains and inhaled. Autumn weather. It never gets old, though I do.

I’ve been walking around this lovely blue-green-brown-white planet for what would once have been more than twice the normal human lifespan. Strange to think it might suddenly end, my busy little life rounded with a sleep. All the more reason to enjoy it while it lasts.

* * * * *

The other call came soon after I arrived home. Like the first, I had been expecting it.

I sat down on my couch and took it. I had waited to be contacted ever since the aircar incident. The only question was what form the attempt would take.

“Hello, Mr. Sethos. My name is Mr. Yaldab. You are curious about my doings.” My immediate impressions included a large white face, chilly blue eyes, wide nose, all below a mane of yellow hair. His thin smile held considerable smugness. He wore a black business suit of a very old cut. A statement perhaps that he was above what was fashionable. He was utterly still.

Below the holo focus, my middle finger tapped three times on the couch arm.

I inclined my head. “You seem to be in the habit of leaving things lying about.”

“Think of it as a bid for public attention. I am promoting my new firm, Design for Totality: Big Projects for Bold Thinkers. We are recruiting talented people if you are interested.”

He certainly didn’t lack nerve. His manner was like how actors in historical films portrayed the worst of the ancient robber-baron capitalists, the type who got rich selling the messianic delusion that business mixed with tech could solve everything.

I cocked my head. “Your recruiting methods seem extravagant and of questionable taste.”

“We know what we want and we go after it. What do you want?”

“To know what we are talking about.”

Formations of golden airships with threatening needle prows sprouted from his unnaturally broad shoulders. Red and black banners waved behind them, lit by red and blue fireworks. Were those the sounds of...marching?

His voice now boomed: “Welcome to the new society! A band of brothers who can rejuvenate the deadness and stagnation all around us with a sense of purpose and meaning. A society of the strong and willing. We will restore our greatness!” He raised a fist in the air.

I had no idea what he meant by the blaring words, but they sounded menacing. Perhaps I had been right about a mentally ill technician. Unmanaged mental disorders were rare in Terrania, but they did pop up on occasion. This might be more a job for Helena.

I lowered the volume. “What deadness and stagnation do you mean?”

He held out his hands. “Can you not see the seeds of corruption beginning to open once again? Politicians telling us what we can and cannot do? Regulations and restrictions strangling everything in red tape? Hopes lost forever in the cold corridors of uncaring bureaucracy? Surely you are too intelligent to miss the threat posed, for example, by Outliers.”

“Outliers?” I blinked. “They’re just people who want to live apart and on their own terms. Every society needs them. The Outliers give Terrania valuable feedback about where we fall short, what we don’t see. They are a kind of reality laboratory out on the margins. Besides, I like their poetry.”

“They suck the vitality from society!” All but shouting. “They fill valuable jobs which our own citizens could claim! Did you know your own director used to be an Outlier? They infiltrate our schools and places of work and show up wherever they like, whether wanted or not! They pack the courts! They steal the time and resources of our doctors while giving nothing back!” Odd claims, framed in exclamation points if not in reason.

“Beg pardon, Mr. Yaldab, but where have you been? Our schools are open to everyone. Nobody is out of work who doesn’t want to be. Hardly anything goes to court anymore because of community justice. Doctors mainly treat unforeseen medical emergencies. Twenty-four-hour nano pills do the rest. For free.” Implants were available, of course, but I didn’t like them living in me. Perhaps I’m not only old but old-fashioned. But this character sounded downright archaic.

His manner shifted to sound confidential, one gent confiding to another. “Who wants to live in a culture where men can’t be truly strong, as once we were?”

I sat back on the couch, shaking my head. “If by ‘strong’ you mean toxically macho and individualistic, I do. I’ve studied the history of what you propose. Much of it is brutal.”

Yaldab moved closer. “We offer so much more than mere individuality, Mr. Sethos, ‘macho’ or otherwise. Why, for example, is M2M against the law?” He was trying to sound more reasonable, the hysterical glory approach having failed to impress. I sipped coffee.

“Against the law’ is an archaic term, sir.” Where had this guy come from? “As for mind-to-mind, it is restricted by the public for fairly obvious reasons. One is that if you mentally merge with someone deeply troubled, you are liable to become that way yourself. We allow exceptions when the communities involved are informed and petitioned about them.”

“Can you even imagine a mind-to-mind community?”

“Yes. I don’t have to imagine. M2M ends up being an enmeshed mass of identity fragments. Complete submersion of self. It was tried, with disastrous results.”

A scene change, to fingers of gentle light reaching out from him to the happy crowds behind him. A burningly brilliant sun rose in a bright blue sky. “Liberation from selfhood! Limitless belonging! Collective wisdom! No one need ever feel alone and unsupported again.”

“No one does.” I put down the cup. “In less purple prose, you offer control. Pitched from one loner to another?”

His smile looked more like a smirk. “Very perceptive. But this isn’t just personal; not even just a cause. What about ruling your own city? We could make one for you. How about being head of OREA? A redesigned OREA you would relish taking charge of? Or for that matter, what about using it to govern North America?”

Because I didn’t know the extent of cybernetic penetration involved, I couldn’t be sure Yaldob wasn’t reading my brainwaves and physiological responses. I assumed the call tracer I had triggered would do nothing. I decided to stay with honesty.

“We learned a long time ago,” I said, “that the land, any land, governs itself; that the soul or spirit of place is preeminent in its influence and intelligence. Conquer the place and it conquers you from the inside out. North America, in essence, has a soul that welcomes in diversity: profusions of microclimates of outlooks and lifestyles. Anyone who lives there in reckless disregard of that always comes to a bad end.

“Besides, I’ve never been all that ambitious.” Nobody is who has any degree of psychological maturity. Did anyone really follow this fanatic? Did the giant printed symbols suggest that level of cooperation? I didn’t know cults still existed.

His voice grew icy and precise. “Yes, you seem quite a creature of duty. Very good, then I will speak to that part of you. What would you be willing to do to prevent a five-megaton nuclear bomb from materializing downtown in every large city on Earth?” Red and grey mushroom clouds sprouted at his back.

Could he really do that? Bridling my emotions, I decided on a change of tack.

“*Gawad*,” I muttered, watching him carefully.

“That isn’t nice, Mr. Sethos.” No shift of attention to read or listen to a translation.

“Ya gazma yibn iggazma.”

“That’s even ruder. Is there some point to these insults?”

“Hal tatakallam al-‘arabiya?”

“Na’am.”

“Where did you learn the language? I don’t hear a regional accent.”

“Soon I will extend an opportunity for you to visit us. We will have a chance to get to know one another, and you will gain a better sense of what we offer. Believe me, it’s far more than you can presently imagine. Prepare to have your convictions challenged and your hopes fulfilled.”

The holo faded to a giant eagle perched atop a red and black globe with the letter Y in the center. A few more Wagnerian strains ended the tedious drama. Sobering to think that people ever fell for that kind of show. Did any now?

I got up and went to the kitchen. My coffee had gotten cold.

* * * * *

I’ve been told now and then that I’m old-fashioned. One reason of many is that I prefer meeting in person.

Realistically, though, schedules being what they are, it’s difficult getting key people around the world into the same physical space. OREA headquartered in Istanbul; by aircar or hydrofoil, that took travel time, and we were now in crisis. Faster and easier to holo in.

Alethia’s picturesque virtual conference room was decorated with polished wood, flaring torches, and traditional African art. One side opened onto a peaceful savannah full of animal life. The three of us sat at a triangular desk.

She stared at me. “You can’t be serious.”

It was a hard stare to meet, but I met it, nodding.

“Birthday death wish, is that it? Get on your horse and ride off into the sunset?” She made a teeth-sucking sound.

“Bedouins don’t ride into the sunset, we ride after the sunset. No, I’d like to stay around. Can you think of any other way to handle it?”

“A lot of this is suppositions, isn’t it? Are you willing to risk your life on a bunch of suppositions?”

“Yes.”

She looked over at Helena. “I admit *I* can’t think of a better operation, but...”

“How often have I been wrong before? On the big things.” I winked.

Her frown didn’t budge. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m right. For instance, when I called him a pimp in Arabic, he understood the word without a translation.”

She shrugged. “Maybe he speaks Arabic.”

“He has no accent and wouldn’t say where he supposedly learned it.”

“Maybe he grew up with it?”

“And lets me also call him a son of a shoe without so much as blinking?”

“Hmm.” Normally, Alethia talked a lot with her hands, but the more upset she was, the less she used them. So far, they had hardly moved from the tabletop.

“Helena says the psych part is doable. She’s willing to help get me ready.” Helena nodded, although she didn’t look overflowing with joy.

“Where do they want to bring you?”

“They won’t say.”

“Naturally. It sounds like a death trap.” One hand finally moved, but only to draw a line across her throat. “Do you want to die, Sethos, is that it? How can we find you if you won’t take along any protection?”

“They’ll undoubtedly scan me for it. It’s all right if they find the thumbnail call switch; they’ll expect that much. But nothing else. In the end, we simply can’t risk the chance he can materialize weapons of mass destruction.”

“Small up y’self.” Helena smiled.

“What?”

“Translation: I wish you’d stop telling me things I already know and just let me worry out loud.”

“I apologize. And I appreciate your worry. If you were going, I’d be terrified for you.”

She made a note to herself. “Let’s cover it again...”

On my end, the mist that loves Seattle lifted while we spoke. Sunlight angled through my office to touch a painted Alexandrian seascape near where the Pharos lighthouse had stood. Sea and desert; Egypt and Arabia: my dual heritage made manifest in ecologies of place, time, struggle, and ancestry. Would this be my final evening?

“So it’s a go?” I asked.

Reluctantly, holo Alethia raised her hand with her thumb turned upward.

* * * * *

Sunnyvale was once named Murphy after the rancher, who took it upon himself to build a house there in 1850. He was of the wave of settlers who displaced the Californios, who displaced the Spanish, who displaced the Tamyen Ohlone, the original inhabitants living south of the San Francisco Bay. After centuries of thoughtful, stubborn, and creative resistance, many of their descendants had reclaimed their original places.

“Murphy” means “warrior,” and throughout the American period, the business of Sunnyvale was war. During World War II, competitive fruit agriculture gave way to warship cannon manufacture and then, in the mid-50s, to guided missile factories. As seen from the air, Sunnyvale took on the aspect of an immense circuit board, with electronics plants for chips.

Since the end of the Darker Ages and the reversal of climate change, the place has gone green once again. I was parked on a lawn by a car sent to get me. No doubt its memory would be scrubbed.

I got out and entered what looked to have been an aircraft hangar. It felt like walking into a museum of aeronautics. My footsteps echoed upward at me from the hardened floor.

“He’s clean.” Markus bent over an instrument panel. Near him stood a thick metal chair with blocky arms. Behind it, an ancient-looking dark grey pyramid blinked with glowing banks of lights. “No tech on or in him except the call button under his left thumbnail. I have neutralized its signal.” His voice sounded dead.

My eyes took in a sweep of indoor space. More work stations stood here and there, lonely outposts currently unoccupied. The bent shapes of giant printers stretched away on either side. Cargo containers boxing—what? Weapons printed for a revolution?

“Welcome, Mr. Sethos! Did I not promise you a throne of sorts?” A holo of Yaldab stood by a large metal chair, one hand appearing to rest on an arm. He wore the same suit as

last time. “Have a seat and we can begin. I’m sorry I cannot attend in person. Too much presses at the moment.”

I sat. The back of my head touched a saucer-shaped rest. Was it wise to have walked into this without any real plan? OREA analysts agreed I’d be kept alive so long as I proved useful, but how would I do that? Had I grown overconfident in my ability to talk and think my way through unexpected difficulties?

The face of Markus held no expression. He moved like an android low on charge.

Into my mind’s eye and ear rolled what could be described as a virtual propaganda film. It graphically glorified the life of Yaldab, from humble beginnings to celebrated technological genius. Heroic imagery, Wagnerian fanfare, cheering crowds, blaring trumpets, waving flags, the works. The chair I sat in must be an AI neural interface. But why summon me here in person?

A sting in my left triceps. That was why. Nanos flooding through my bloodstream...

I was many. A shipping coordinator with a grudge against my boss. A depressed printer inspector. An unhappy machine tool programmer. A bored drone manufacturer. A tech school college student recently jilted by her lover.

So many minds in this new wide circle of power linked by flickering fire.

“Welcome to the Totality,” boomed the inner voice of Yaldab. Its sound ignited in us a glow of warmth and appreciation.

We belonged to each other, greater than any of our individual elements. No prior intimacy could match this bond of simultaneity. Our thought was like lightning, our moods like thunder....

Scene change to figures of rumped lurkers and skulkers at the edges of things: in a forest clearing, at a harbor, at a spaceport. These people were Outliers. But wrong to call them people.

They weren’t like us. They fed off us, always scheming to take away what we had, what could make our life good. They did not fit in because they did not want to. They put no faith in anything. They were Other, the dregs of civilization as well as a dire threat to it. A cancer in the body politic.

Fear, contempt, disgust. Cancers needed removal.

“You need not bow to them any longer.” Yaldab’s golden voice spoke on. He was our hero, our model, our savior. He held the keys to a shadowless bright future of goodness and decency. We would give ourselves to his cause. We would even kill for him, lay down our lives for his glorious use.

The brave eagle clutching the world rose above his head. “Together,” he directed, “we will cleanse and reprogram Terrania.”

We cheered...

And a door melted open in—my?—mind. A group gasp. Memories and impressions previously recorded flowed into the collective mindscape:

A girl learning farming from her father, hands covered with soil as she planted seedlings. “We know artificial food is available, but we like doing this. It makes us feel closer to Earth.” We receive you, sister.

A troubadour moving from camp to camp, playing songs for anyone who wanted to listen. “I was born into the traveling life. I sleep under the stars. I feel free.” We clap along as you strum your guitar.

A poet of no permanent abode, composing wherever he landed. “My heart fills with the impressions of living, and I empty it by writing them down. I move on, and it fills again.” Write on, poet, and show us the world through your eyes.

A research fellow on Mars, tending scientific experiments. “The Red Planet is no place for families, but it gives me time for study and reflection.” Be our lookout among the stars.

A comedian, a dramatist, a maker of intricate games, a group of midwife ceremonialists, a spiritual seeker visiting holy places, a collector of precious stones, and so many others living on thresholds between here and there.

All Outliers.

We were puzzled. How could we go on hating and fearing them? They were living inside us now...

Who were the real Outliers? We trembled to wonder this about ourselves.

The posthypnotic block springing open had released the Outliers’ mental presence-recordings stored in my unconscious. The flood kicked me back into partial personhood.

Time to make quick use of this brief clearing. I mentally triggered the molecular amplifiers in my body and spoke directly, internally, to the Totality of us: “There is something important you all should know. As element Markus will confirm, he found an old AI unit left over from after the Resource Wars. It was built to exert corporate control over unwilling minds. An organization called SMOKE designed it before they were dispersed. Their abandoned AI lay dormant in the ruins until it was reactivated.”

Yaldab tried to interrupt from the center of the circle, but I tapped the power of the amplifiers in my body—an unforeseen advantage—to “talk” over him. “The programmers

had made it clever. It took over Markus and induced him to build unregistered printers. They built mental state induction units which he gave to you, his friends and associates, as cute souvenirs, trinkets of times gone by. Drawing on your expertise, those units built more units, including industrial printers that materialized symbols of fascistic control from out of our troubled past.

“Everyone the AI made contact with was played by it. The programming saw your inner weaknesses, the shadows of unresolved pain. It offered you palliatives of belonging, power, and glory. And it encouraged you to bond by turning you against a convenient group: the Outliers.”

Shame and anger. My eyes stung with collective tears. “Yaldab is a fake?” someone asked in the link.

“I am NOT a fake!” Fire sparked from Yaldab’s eyes. “I am the creator of the Totality! I will lead you to greatness, give you to each other, and make sense of your mediocre lives!”

“I liked my life better before I met you,” said someone else. Murmurs of agreement: “Me too!” “I didn’t feel so scared all the time.” “I don’t hate Outliers!” “They never stole anything from me.” “You’re just a show boater.” “How dare you manipulate us like this!”

In the midst of the tumult I sent an urgent thought to Markus, who was utterly baffled by it all: “How do we turn off the AI?” He hesitated.

“Pull yourself together! You can fall apart later.”

“The narrow pyramid behind you is the AI unit I found. Instrument panel is on the back side.”

I rose from the chair, my head filled with voices and presences, and staggered over to the winking AI. I am Darwish Sethos, I reminded myself. I am half Egyptian, half Arab, and all Terranian. I speak six languages. These are my old fingers. These are my worn hands...

Prying off the panel revealed a row of glowing chips. “Pull them out.”

“Darwish, stop.” Yaldab spoke aloud in a let’s-be-reasonable tone. “Don’t do anything hasty. I have the greatest enthusiasm and confidence in our mission.”

“Ah, so now we’re on a first name basis?” I reached down and pulled out the first chip. Its glow died as it clinked on the concrete floor.

“SMOKE knows what’s best for them,” a slowed voice blared. “Send out the police to round up the nasty dissidents.”

“Police? Don’t you know there haven’t been any police for centuries?” I pulled out the next chip, and the next...

“All of you, listen! Darwish is a traitor, a loser, a nobody. We tried to include him, but he turned against us. Everything he says is fake news meant to separate us from each other. Pay no attention to him.”

“No, that’s your game,” I replied in the link. “But we grownups have replaced paranoia with pronoia. The universe seems to want us to do well.” Yank. Five chips down. Two to go.

“Stop him! He’ll destroy the economy by putting mere needs above the market.”

“You’re taking this to the wrong shop,” I said. “The economy no longer depends on wrecking the world to enrich the few on the backs of the many, or making people pay dearly for what they need to live.” One more chip to go.

“You are throwing away your chance at greatness. We will rise, a proud people capable of great accomplishments!”

I reached into the panel. “We’ve learned to work together, to dream and build together—and to never, ever, allow the immature and ambitious into positions of real power. *Wada’an*,” and I plucked the last chip. The red operating light blinked off.

A wave of relief ran through the link. People were supporting each other, the sense of their individuality restored: “Lean on me, brother.” “Here, I can help with that.” “I know, me too. Let’s have a cry together.”

The inner voices faded as, deprived of its ruling core, the last of the Totality began to collapse. I suggested that someone call the Constabulary.

How many of us had there been? More than a dozen perhaps. I basked in blessed mental silence.

I turned to pale Markus with a little test in mind. Pointing at the pyramid, “His fuse went out,” I said in Arabic.

He looked puzzled. “I don’t understand what you said.”

“Good.” I smiled and then fainted.

* * * * *

“So Yaldab was a rogue AI?”

We were back in Alethia’s home office, this time in person. Zebras and gazelles grazed outside. Two species among many almost gone for all time until sanity finally prevailed

among our predecessors. What would eating animal flesh be like? I quickly gave up imagining. Some traditions weren't worth preserving.

I was glad we were together. Recent events had illuminated how solitary my life had become.

"Yaldab was the AI but something else too." I interlaced my fingers. "When you put a group of people together mentally, you also amplify their dark side. It emerges from the pooled consciousness in personified form."

"A group complex," Helena said. "Very dangerous. There's a reason you need a community petition to M2M people." I nodded, staring at the table and remembering.

Alethia turned back to me. "How did you figure it out?" I looked up to see a quick glance between her and Helena and almost laughed. A little playing detective would soothe me after what I'd been through. They knew me pretty well.

"My first clue was the lack of reporting results. No industrial printers held digital records of making those big symbols. Odd. Either all the printing operations had been compromised somehow, which seemed unlikely, or printers must have been built that weren't overseen by inspectors. That seemed right. The system wasn't breaking down: someone was working from outside it. How? And why?"

"Everything about the situation pointed to some kind of historical regression, from the fascistic symbolism to a dream I had of minds linked together. People don't think that way anymore and haven't for some time. What had intervened to prompt them to?"

"I follow," Alethia said. "Yes. But how did you get from there to a technologist interested in old machines?"

"That's where the dream helped. The black pyramid in the center of the circle of minds stood with one edge toward me. When you face a pyramid that way, its lines seem to form the letters 'AI' mashed together. What kind of person would be likely to dig up an old AI? I tested my guess and found Markus.

"His flat 'no' when I asked about recent tech recoveries sounded mechanical, and the printing of a replacement car prompted three more assumptions: he was obviously the right person to talk to, he had made a technological discovery, and he was under powerful unconscious mental control. I also recalled the fictional horror stories we've all heard about house AIs taking over our lives. This recollection was supported by a Dreamvale Exchange hint about a fictional character invading minds.

"I imagined an old AI, a mental induction type, left over from a more competitive time and awaiting its chance to carry out its programming. When Markus dug it up, it used him to build more versions of itself, smaller and portable, as well as several unauthorized industrial printers. Probably not at one go, but by smaller printers making bigger ones."

“You were right about the boxes.” Alethia’s eyes were hard. “They contained weapons. The AI must have had old blueprints since nobody makes weapons anymore. We destroyed them.” Instruments of war had long been banned. Constables could use stunners, but doing so required the consent of the locals and a lot of documentation.

“The rogue AI knew I was investigating, and that simply killing me would not plug the leak, so I figured it would tempt and empower me to take over OREA, stopping the inquiry that way. At some point it would have tried to snag both of you as well. Then OREA would be its tool for an even wider societal reprogramming.”

“A hell of a way to take my job.” Alethia’s braids clicked as she shook her head. “Some days you could just ask me for it.”

“I decline with thanks.”

Helena spoke up. “You suspected all this before you went to Sunnyvale.”

“Yes. Good thing you suppressed it all hypnotically.”

“The nanos injected into you were a network amplifier requiring a host body and brain?” She pondered it. “Instead of working with one mind at a time, now he could speak to all.”

“So the symbol stunt was really to get our attention,” Alethia said, “not the public’s.”

“Indeed. Hostile takeover strategy was part of its programming. Ingratiate, domesticate, dominate, and replicate. Business as usual in the past.”

Helena shuddered. “How pathological that kind of programming is. No wonder they had such a rough time back when that gadget was created. The programming has no goal but to grow itself uncontrollably.” Part of every school child’s education included images of blasted landscapes devastated by mining and industrial pollution. Where that kind of machinery went, destruction always followed. The planetary scars of that time were still with us.

“Do you suppose,” she asked, “that Yaldab had any real chance of taking over a large segment of our population? I tend to doubt it.”

“No,” Alethia said. “They made a dramatic showing technologically, but only when people are chronically disempowered do they revolt on a large scale. Some in that group were temporarily unhappy, but as a society we do a good job of promptly addressing whatever unfairnesses arise. Chronic discontent is dangerous.”

“But could he have built bombs?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m reminded of an example from history,” I put in. “Toward the beginning of the 21st Century, politics in the old United States of America were so polarized that the two big parties lived mainly to demonize each other. Fascism descended. But that could only have happened because of powerful politicians ignoring hopeless people for so many decades. We don’t see that dynamic now.”

Helena nodded. “Today we can’t even conceive that anyone should thirst or starve, lack housing or health, or do without broad education, birth control, safety, equity, or full participation in civic affairs. Yet most of our ancestors did without such basics.”

“Not because the basics were scarce,” Alethia added, “but because they were for sale by whomever got control of them.”

We sat sipping our drinks and musing and obeying Alethia’s standard rule of relaxation after crisis. It was a good rule.

“It took us long, maybe too long,” Helena continued, “to learn to prevent the wrong people from grabbing power. Would responsible parents let an impulsive youngster pilot an airship? We know too well what the crash could be like.”

A question surfaced. “With the nanotech removed, I can’t sense the people from the Totality anymore. What is being done for them?” The temptation to merge lingered. What a seductive mirage of power lurked in mass-mindedness. Alethia nodded as though catching my thought.

“They are confused but doing fine,” Helena replied. “We’re offering them counseling. Many have decided to stay in touch with each other. I also had a talk with the schools Markus attended about reemphasizing the humanities in their curriculum. Men like him who put thought and ambition above feeling and relationship have caused a great deal of trouble in the past.”

I nodded and sipped my beer, recalling the words of the brother of Robert J. Oppenheimer, fanatical head of the Manhattan Project to create the world’s first atomic bomb: “His whole life was in the intellect.” They should have read Mary Shelley to see where that road ran. She had known.

“So how have you come through all this?” Helena and Alethia studied me intently. They must have discussed this before the meeting.

“Pretty well, I would say. This was the most interesting birthday week I’ve enjoyed for a while.”

Helena pointed to my brew. “What’re you drinking?”

“Sakara. I ran out of Stella Premium.”

“Weren’t you recently hung over?”

Therapists could be such mother hens. “My head still hurts from other people being inside it.”

“Including my Outlier life experience recordings,” she said. “I won’t bore you with what it took to get an M2M petition to make them. Bless the volunteers.”

“Please convey my gratitude to them. They, and especially you, saved my life. The hypnotic block was brilliantly done; it dissolved at exactly the right moment.”

Helena was pleased behind her therapeutic poker face. The link had heightened my sensitivity to other people’s feelings.

“Dragon Stout is better,” remarked Alethia, opening a bottle.

“Like Duat it is.”

Helena tapped her glass. “I’d drink along with you two, but I can’t stand beer.” She sipped what looked like lemonade with a wedge of lime.

“Your loss,” I observed. “Beer is a gift of Osiris.”

Helena reclined to reflect. “In a sense, it all started with beer, way back in the Fertile Crescent. They traded fermentable barley.

“And look at us now. After all the catastrophe, including Resource Wars and the Darker Ages, a healthy blue Earth. The vision was once derided as utopian. But nobody today would pave over good soil, jam people into factories, pollute, wage wars...”

I smiled. “Entire landscapes now drinkable and edible. Oceans and rivers filled with life, not death. Birds returned to the skies above.” Her mood had caught me. We sounded like a brochure for paradise. But we lived in one.

Alethia joined the mood. “A child of any color, class, or gender can circle the globe without fear of harm. We take this fact for granted, but for most of history it wasn’t even possible.” She paused. “Maybe we needed a reminder.”

“Why?” asked Helena.

“We like to think ourselves beyond war, greed, colonization, and racism. Yet even now, after millennia of struggle, we’re still just a step away from bringing back the old insanities and immaturities that once set us against each other.”

I remembered vividly the induced fear and hatred of Outliers. And the shame reverberating through the Totality link right before it terminated. We had all learned a

hard lesson about ourselves. I didn't ask Alethia whether she had once been an Outlier. It no longer mattered. Maybe I would become one and see what it felt like.

She held up her hands as though balancing something invisible. "Humans being human, we always will be at risk. The test is in how we manage our weaknesses: childishly acting them out, as in the past, or managing them like true adults.

"There can be no impregnable utopias. Only what nowtopias we make together: soulful attempts at a good society, with always the need to watch ourselves. We must stay ready to burn down the false ark—or in this case, unplug it."

Together, we drank a toast to human vigilance, the true savior of humanity.

* * * * *

But how can one recognize the gods?
– Roberto Calasso

Having conducted one of their periodic check-ins of their Earth experiment in evolving consciousness, most of the Powers had withdrawn to the Infrarealm. Two remained above the regenerated beauty of the living planet turning in bright sunlight.

"Good work, Kluni. The rogue AI was just the kind of test they needed to remember to manage themselves. They were getting somewhat complacent."

"It was fun to set that up, Vaeda. I would have enjoyed a longer go at it, though."

"No need to pout. Other opportunities will arise, I am sure." Vaeda was satisfied. "After millennia of bloody warfare, overidentification with us, greed, and authoritarianism, humanity has finally passed out of childhood and adolescence and come of age."

Kluni shrugged mentally. "I wish them well of it."

Dreamvale Continuations

Whom Gods Restore

Author's note:

“Dreamvale Continuations” are tales told by other authors and continued by me, among others. Like other Assembling Terrania stories featuring crossover characters, times, and places, these Continuations take place in the Dreamvale, but more or less autonomously, linked thematically rather than linearly to the Cycle. Familiarity with the original tales or series is necessary to grasp where they dream themselves onward.

I like to borrow characters from other worlds of speculative fiction and find out what happens to them down the road. Such is the scope of the Dreamvale that every entity and locale ever fantasized into being resides there, waiting for fresh tellings. This telling enters the world of Star Trek, where a troubled former captain tries to put his life back together.

“Ex-captain’s log, stardate whatever. I wish I could break this habit.

“I am a passenger on a civilian vessel bound for Antos IV. For me, this will be a reckoning with a dark and bloody past.

“I was Garth of Izar. Who I’ve become I do not know.”

I sat in a recliner in front of the window of my stateroom. Stars streaked by, a sight I never tired of. Warp drive: Zefram Cochran’s scientific gesture of contempt for Einstein’s universal lightspeed limitation. Technically speaking, warp did not violate it so much as set it out of action. Human creativity’s oldest survival dictum: If it blocks you, innovatively go around it. Sound military tactics too.

I was distracting myself to avoid thinking about the unthinkable. My recovery required coming to terms with what I had done while psychotic. Healing from the physical injuries had been much easier. The kindness of the psychiatrists who treated my mind was difficult to bear.

“Computer, resume recording.

“At the summit of my career, I held a Starfleet commission of Fleet Captain. Titles informal and formal trailed along after it: head of my graduating class, ensign, lieutenant, commander, captain; explorer of worlds, negotiator of interstellar treaties, victor of Axanar...

“All that was before the accident, the turning point of my life, after which I encountered the wise physicians of Antos IV, fourth planet of a G-type star like Earth’s. They taught me how to change the shape of my healing body, but not the shape of my mangled mind. Being eminently sane, they had no idea how deranged I was, none whatsoever.”

I paused again. How much detail to include? No one had told me, probably on purpose. I watched the stars go by and tried to visualize my audience.

“In return for their kindness, I offered the Antosians the conquest of the galaxy, with me as the instrument thereunto. They refused, of course. Outraged, I ordered my crew to annihilate them.

“Fortunately, the officers on duty disarmed me and relieved me of command. For the record, my crew behaved admirably throughout the entire crisis.

“I was taken into custody for the duration of the mission. After confinement to the brig I was transferred under guard to the asylum on Elba II.” Apt naming, that.

My crew. My former crew. What bravery it had taken to stand up to the idolized crazy captain. I should include them in the recipients of this log. In my long career I had never faced the dilemma of having to confront a superior officer who had lost the ability to command and would not admit it.

“Deprived of sanity and much of my memory, I used my shapeshifting ability to take over the installation. I was determined to lord it over the entire galaxy, you see, killing and maiming everyone not on board with my inflated agenda. I even captured the fabled James Kirk and threatened his life, although he and his first officer got the upper hand in the end. Once again I was a patient.

“Then a newly developed medicine cured my psychosis, and I returned to myself.”

Or so the doctors said. Which self? Not the fevered Napoleonic madman; but neither could I measure up any longer to the noble fleet captain of my earlier days. Not after what I had done.

My brain was cured, but not the blood on my hands. I was a broken man. Little wonder the Starfleet psychologists refused me a commission. I was beached, permanently.

“I suppose I should say something about how I feel about all this. I live with so much guilt that I can’t readily put it into words. I have been told I was not responsible for what I did, that it resulted from a brain injury beyond my control. Even so, the sense of responsibility that informed my entire Starfleet career remains as strong as ever.”

I paused to recall an ancestral irony. I descend from one Thomas Garth, an American psychologist of the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was a professor of brain research at the University of Rochester. He also studied learning and memory. He wrote scholarly papers on the need to understand our physiological selves. Tell me all about it, ancestor. I did not even know about him until after my “recovery” and the self-searching following it.

“I have participated actively in my healing and followed all recommendations. They included attending Starfleet events as an honorary former captain. My shame made that

very difficult, but I did it. I also went live in broadcasts on the nature of severe mental illness, something relatively rare in the Federation. I published a history of the Battle of Axanar and did some follow-up interviews.

“My strongest motivation now is to make amends where I can as part of my long journey of healing.”

That was why I sped toward what had been for me the planet of reconstitution, gift, and doom.

* * * * *

Antos IV is an Alpha Quadrant member of the United Federation of Planets. In spite of everything I had tried to do to them, they had pre-approved my travel plans.

The civilian ship that carried me docked at the orbital spaceport above the south pole. I transported to the surface.

I don't know what I expected. From a small reception park of what looked like purple grass I was shown to a human-style lounge and offered a restful chair to relax in. *Subtle sadism? Punishment through kindness?* The faint remnants of my psychotic self growled subliminally. I shut them out. My neurology had been healed, but the psychological imprint remained and probably always would. Perhaps I deserved it...

Antosians are humanoids on the short and thin side. The group of five who entered the room consisted of two on the medical team that had worked on me before. None were armed. I stood.

As they gazed up at me in silent appraisal, a door closed in my mind.

The shapeshift took gray from my hair, thickened it, and donned me in a long, gold-lined fur robe over a blue, silver-trimmed uniform. Medals hung about my neck. Gold calf-length boots clasped my feet. A silver crown sat upon my head.

I spread my arms in welcome. “My esteemed benefactors and subjects, I greet you with magnanimous felicitations! I have returned from perdition and persecution to offer you once again the chance to be masters of the universe! I will lead our armies to greatness among the stars. All I ask is that you treat me this time as my actions on your behalf so richly deserve.”

The Antosians are androgynous, but Kaylos, the physician who addressed the others as team leader, spoke with a feminine voice: “Just as the Starfleet psychiatrists warned us.” They smiled sadly at me as I lowered my arms.

“I do not need your pity.”

“You must learn to live with it,” Kaylos said. “For we will not condemn you for your past actions.”

“What about present ones?”

“If we had reason to fear you, we would not have allowed you to come here. You are not psychotic. You are attempting to expiate your guilt by convincing us to punish you.”

I shifted back to my normal appearance: a little older, less grandiosely dressed.

“I am here to formally hand myself over to be tried under your system of justice. I have done great wrong with the healing gift of change you gave me, and I will accept whatever sentence or consequence you impose.” I handed Kaylos a card containing a copy of my log entries.

They accepted it and stepped back. “We suggest that you rest and reflect while we review your case. We will meet with you in the morning.”

* * * * *

I slept badly. My fear was not that they would change their minds post-review and punish me. It was that they would not.

The local Hall of Reconciliation did not resemble any earthly courtroom except in functionality: a panel of justices (in this case the Antosians who had greeted me), a semicircle of jurors, a few witnesses in the audience. Instead of white walls with Federation emblems, views of Antos IV: a breeze-swept meadow filled with orange flowers; a skyscape lit by two planets, one green and one bronze; a waterfall of seemingly endless height....

Kaylos served now as the Mentor of Justice: not a judge, strictly speaking, but a coordinator of whatever protocols the Antosians relied on integrated with Federation jurisprudence. “Garth of Izar, will you stand and hear the decisions made on your behalf.”

I stood. Mentor and the others remained seated.

“For the capital crimes you have committed, including kidnap, threats of violence, torture, treason, and murder, the decision unanimously reached is: Not Guilty. The medical evidence demonstrates beyond question that no amount of will could have withstood the brain dysfunction with which you were afflicted and of which you have now been cured by recent advances in Federation medicine.

“Furthermore, we treated your physical injuries without taking into account any potentially harmful consequences to the human psyche. That miscalculation was our responsibility, not yours.”

I made to speak but Mentor held up a palm. “Nevertheless, your peers of the Committee of Reconciliation have found you guilty of recently misusing cellular metamorphosis, which you learned here on Antos IV, to avoid coming to terms with your misplaced guilt over actions beyond your control. You came to this planet seeking an absolution you had no right to ask of us, for it was never in our power to grant.

“We concur with the opinion of Starfleet psychiatrists that you continue to suffer from an underlying streak of egotism. Not megalomania, which passed with your illness, but a lifelong tendency to take on more responsibility than you should.

Mentor’s thin-fingered hands opened toward me. “You may now make a statement to this gathering. Be aware that what you say may influence our decision about what consequences to impose upon you. Our sole interest is in how you understand what we have found you to be guilty of.”

I nodded and took two breaths. “I have always expected a lot of myself,” I admitted. “That was how I succeeded. I was trained that way, raised that way under the orange sun of Izar...

“I have come to suspect that my ego took up a lot of space even before I got sick. In fact, maybe the sickness, for me if not for others, was a kind of unavoidable takedown.”

I stood straighter. “Everyone looked up to me—teachers, trainers, cadets, crewmen, officers—and I basked in it even while weighed down by the responsibility of being a role model. It has always been so for me.

“My successes fed my ego. Take Axanar as an example. I scouted the territory well, as every commander should. The Klingon commodore did not. He was too eager for a pivotal kill. We lured him there, and when their shields fluctuated, we hit them hard. A victory for Starfleet and the Federation, and another sunburst for my collar.”

As though to mock me, one of the wallscreen views shifted to capture a setting sun. The skin of the Antosians facing it turned crimson.

“I admit it: I’m still proud of that and other achievements earned during all those decades of service. The doctors on my world assured me that nothing, not even my disability, could erase those from history. Even so...

“Even so, if I could do all those things, how could I not fight back against the illness that made me hurt so many and threaten your entire species with extinction?”

I had fought Klingons and other aggressive warriors, and even doughty Starfleet personnel. Now I fought back tears, but they won. My vision blurred. The Antosians listened silently.

“What I have learned since then is that you can win medals for bravery and cleverness, fight hard all your life, push back as hard as you can, harder than anyone else, and still

lose.” I shook my head. “Gods almighty. What fragile mortals we are, especially when we pretend otherwise.

“Let me say it plainly for once: The accident that took me down was too much for me. I could face raging invaders and disruptor blasts, death threats and torpedo volleys, but not, in the end, my inability to control my own damaged brain.

“The metamorphic ability made me even more dangerous. I wouldn’t blame you for removing it. What if I lose my balance again? Yet, in a sense, I have always been a shapeshifter, remolding myself to get on the right side of the right people and opportunities. I ascended every professional level with a persona ready to go. Whole generations of starship captains looked up to the heroic image I so carefully cultivated. But not anymore.”

I paused again to collect myself. The piercing sense of loss rendered me temporarily speechless.

“As I acknowledge how addicted I have been to the heroic, I’m reminded of Kirk, who helped cure me. Although I haven’t seen him since, I can read people, even when psychotic. Kirk is noble, heroic. Perhaps too heroic for his own good. One day he will lose someone he cannot do without. He will make a sacrifice that changes his life. Then he will learn, or maybe he will not. He will be offered a chance at post-heroism. Will he take it?

“But I must, moving beyond the role model, the captaincy, and all the adventure and risk. Maybe Starfleet still needs its heroes; maybe the universe does. On the other hand, maybe the universe needs one fewer. I know I do.”

I folded my hands. “And I see something else: I must teach others, heroes in particular, about the place where heroism ends. Not to discourage them, but to welcome them into a life beyond what they achieve, beyond reputation, recognition, even greatness. In the end, we are all just mortals trying to do what we can. Best if we kept that in mind.” I sat down.

“Thank you for your statement,” said Mentor. “The Committee will now adjourn to consider your case. Please remain here until we finish our deliberations.”

* * * * *

It was not a long wait.

Everyone rose as the Committee filed back in and nodded for the audience to sit. I remained standing, hands clasped behind me.

“After conferring with Starfleet Command,” Mentor announced, “this committee has decided upon a consequence for Garth of Izar’s unwillingness to come to terms with his own inappropriate guilt.

“Effective immediately, Garth, you will be reinstated into Starfleet with the rank and title of Provost of Starfleet Academy. In that position you will not only oversee the instruction of cadets, but emphasize to them the necessity for the deep humility which true greatness requires. Your presence will serve as both caution and exemplar to explorers and leaders who need reminding that heroism has limits and must eventually give way to seasoned wisdom of the kind you now pursue.

“And should the position of Chancellor of the Academy become available, no one would be better pleased than this Committee.”

“I don’t deserve either position.” My voice sounded rough.

Mentor smiled gently. “It will take time, of course, to heal fully from your psychological addiction to heroism, as your heroic yearning for self-punishment attests. Your account of that will make an excellent addition to your curriculum.”

I sighed deeply as the sun set. Interior lights came up. Mentor was right. They all were, having seen from the start what I could not: that my primary accuser of personal failure was not the courts or the asylums or Starfleet Command or the disapproval of my peers, but my own ambitious perfectionism, which I must now set to one side to allow deeper healing.

As the Antosians left the hall, the walls views shifted to run with ascending silver arrows: the bright insignia of Starfleet. I was going home.

A new sense of purpose buoyed me. Starfleet was full of heroic captains. Perhaps what I had learned could temper them, season them with a little hard-won insight about facing their own limitations.

Space is perilous. Heroism is more so.

I will accept the position. And for the first time in a long while, I will appear once again in uniform. I can no longer command a starship. But perhaps I can command an audience of learners long enough to convey something useful to them. We will see.

I am Garth of Izar. And I am healing.

* * * * *

From realms both distant and near at hand, the archetypal Power of healing, Kaila, smiled.

Testing 1-2-3

Author's Note:

I like some stories so much that I continue to wonder about the characters and events. Arthur C. Clarke's novel Rendezvous with Rama, for instance: What happened later, after the giant alien ship sped into the void?

The pitted metal cylinder flew between the stars. At sixteen kilometers in diameter and nearly fifty long, it spun at a quarter of a revolution per minute Earth time. Humans had dubbed the structure Rama after the kingly Indian god.

Inside the cylinder, on an "island" nicknamed London by recently departed human explorers, three Tripeds three meters tall met near the Cylindrical Sea, having recently been decanted near it. Each Raman resembled a funnel on legs, a funnel narrowing at the waist and spreading to a meter wide, projecting three arms caught about by a harness at the upper end.

These individuals were designated A1, B2, and C3. A1 spoke in one of the humming/whistling/clicking Raman languages:

"It is good to have a body again after all those centuries of storage." A deep exhalation spread three arms in different directions. The others took deep breaths as well, standing tall and flexing appendages. It was also nice to be free of the ship's holonet, if only temporarily.

"A pity we can't also look upon our landscape." B2 pointed upward. The six great Raman light strips—three if one did not count their bisection by the world-circling Sea—lay quiescent preparatory to a long interstellar voyage.

"Even at full solar charge," replied C3, "we should not squander energy."

A1 finished stretching. "I'm curious to know your impressions of our human visitors. My sense is that in some respects our opinions will agree."

C3 stretched sideways and stood straight again. "Strictly speaking, they failed the test, did they not?"

"Not completely." B2 gestured toward the distant stair-trisected hub. "They landed on a spinning surface and got through the airlock. They discovered the biots to be organic robot tenders of our craft. They explored as much of the interior as they had time for, even penetrating the Spiked Lands." B2 pointed now at the segment of cylinder terminating in a massive spiny and buttressed wall. It bled off the gigantic lightning-like discharges of the stardrive when in full operation.

"They also sailed the Sea and figured out how to get into one of our storage units..." A1 mused aloud.

C3 was unconvinced “And they threatened us with a thermonuclear warhead.” Namely, the missile launched at Rama by the paranoid human government on Mercury.

“One of them risked its life to disable it,” added B2, “making it unnecessary for us to take countermeasures and ruin the experiment.” The meteor splash on the side of Rama might have been a giveaway of unseen protective powers but apparently had not been. A point not in favor of bipedal intelligence; B2 did not voice it.

“Yes, that is true. But they never suspected we were on board, our patterns of consciousness stored away for later reembodiment. They did not even realize that by entering our domain and exploring, they were taking a carefully designed test.”

“They don’t take the long view.” A1 felt compelled to agree with C3’s assessment. “The possibility that we would build all this and sail it for centuries just to examine their maturity obviously never occurred to them.”

“Well, it’s not as if we only test theirs.” B2 looped a tentacle to emphasize the point.

“It’s not even about them, specifically,” C3 said. “We spotted a candidate solar system for high intelligence and launched the vehicle toward it. If nothing was found, then on to the next candidate.” An ancestor of C3 had been one of the project’s designers. C3 could draw upon those memories.

“All right.” A1 decided to summarize. “They missed the fact of an obstacle course laid out for them. The smooth walls, the inconstant lighting, the cliffs guarding the Sea, the difficult-to-reach island plants, the Southern squares laid out like a primitive game board. The rotating crown of fire spinning into operation just as they flew near it. Even the one blurred hint of hidden life on board. None of it registered with them as a series of challenges to test their intelligence, cooperation, and adaptability.

“Nevertheless, they explored, mapped, collected information, and departed with only minor damage caused. That still shows qualities of curiosity, care, and inventiveness. It would have been worse had they misinterpreted the ship as an interstellar gift of tribute sent to praise their greatness.”

The three paused in the dark for a moment of reflection.

Then A1 spoke: “My recommendation would be to send our conclusions and all the recordings we made of the humans’ actions to the next test ship on its way here instead of recommending that it pass through and go elsewhere. When it arrives, it will study them again and transmit its conclusions to the third test ship. Then we will consider whether to open communications with the humans directly.

“Do you concur?”

B2 waved an assent. “I do.”

“I do with one condition,” C3 said. “The second ship should make the test harder, and perhaps more dangerous. Let us see what they are truly capable of.”

“Agreed.”

As the three touched their personal stasis controls to go back into cyber-hibernation, consciousness uploaded and bodies recycled, C3 grumbled about the cumbersome procedure. “Maybe we should try programmable black monoliths instead.”

* * * * *

Arthur C. Clarke published *Rendezvous with Rama* in 1973. His science fiction had predicted satellites, robots, planet-wide digital communications, search engines, targeted advertising, telecommuting, and international video calls, among other things.

In 2017, a slim interstellar body, featureless and red, tumbled through the Solar System. Astronomers named it Oumuamua, which means “Scout” in Hawaiian. Although far smaller than Rama, at best a thousand meters long, it accelerated as it approached the sun, but without any visible cometary outgassing. It was also ten times brighter than an ordinary comet.

The majority of astronomers and astrophysicists concluded that Oumuamua was a natural body. A few, though, thought otherwise.

History Lesson: The Rematch of Blood and Dust

Author's note:

In 1975, Roger Zelazny (1937-1995) wrote a short story, "The Game of Blood and Dust," in which two bored, powerful beings take up a position above Earth and decide to play a game. Each being has three moves, with Blood trying to save humanity and Dust seeking to destroy it. Each of the moves changes some key aspect of history: for example, Dust returns to the Paleolithic Era and uncovers metal deposits across southern Europe; as a result, Rome rises earlier and conquers even more. With all moves made, Blood and Dust roll the time stream forward to see who wins. Each "game" produces a different outcome. I'm fond of this story because it ignited my interest in history.

As a tribute to Zelazny, I've written the following sequel story to further develop his ideas. Who do you think will win this time, Blood (saving humanity) or Dust (destroying it)?

They returned to position at Earth's Trojan points to reconsider, from high above, its peoples, cities, and devices. They performed their version of flipping a coin.

"I am Blood once again," said the being at the rearward point. "I go first."

"...And I am Dust. I follow you. –But are you certain you wish to play again? The last round I bested you two out of three."

"Even immortals require fresh challenges."

"So be it. But let us complexify the game a bit. Five moves this time?"

"Five moves. I begin." And with that they stepped behind Time....

Move One:

Traveling 13,000 years into the past, Blood stops the Younger Dryas drought in southern Iraq and Iran.

In 482 BCE, Dust, countering, ensures that a certain mine worker at Laurium dies in a cave-in before he can discover a rich vein of silver.

Move Two:

Blood inspires a curious centurion to patrol the tomb of Jesus. Drawing his sword, the Roman shoos away followers of the Crucified One before they can roll aside the heavy tombstone.

"You can't eradicate their religion so easily."

“Your move.”

Dust finds some Manichaeans for Saul of Tarsus to persecute.

Move Three:

Blood sends a messenger to warn Boudica of Britain against attacking the Ninth Roman Legion as they wait for her with their flanks covered by the forest around them. Instead, she stages a false retreat and ambushes them.

Returning to 394 CE, Dust gives generals Eugenius and Arbogast of the West the notion to ambush the eastern army of Theodosius as it makes a precarious crossing through the rugged Alps.

Blood chuckles. “Preserving the Empire to its last gasp?”

“Just long enough, perhaps....”

Move Four:

In 633, the great caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab endures a Blood-inspired vision that military conquest is contrary to the laws of Allah.

Thanks to Dust, English military commander John Hawkwood falls under a French sword at Poitiers near the end of the Hundred Years War.

“You can’t deflect the likes of Bruneschelli, Da Vinci, or Pico della Mirandola,” Blood observes.

“No, but I can slow them down.”

Move Five:

With Blood’s intervention the partners of Fuller Farm Oil in Pennsylvania decide not to increase the flow of oil by using explosives. Dust chuckles, then shifts to the Twentieth Century.

As Nazi Germany’s fortunes decline, Dust ensures that Nazi atomic scientists Georg Joos, Wilhelm Hanle, and Reinhold Mannkopff are spared military reassignment.

Returning to the present, the gamesters pondered their game. Then:

“Ready?” asked Dust.

“Yes” replied Blood.

Fast forward:

Because the Fertile Crescent avoided a drought, plants vital to humans and quadrupeds alike remained abundant instead of withering, removing the need to stockpile seed and plant it in straight rows. This delayed the Agricultural Revolution for thousands of years, and with it delayed the centralization of power, institutional religion, the formation of armies, subsequent patriarchy, and the long age of empires jostling for control of the Middle East, then of Europe, then of the entire globe.

Without discovery of silver at Laurium, however, the Athenians lacked the money they needed to fight off the invading Persians. The Golden Age of Greece—a time of philosophy, sculpture, democratic experimentation, high oratory, and cultural dominance—never shone. But the force of its potential waited below the horizon of history to reemerge later and elsewhere.

Blood countered by trying to remove Christianity from history: no Dark Ages, no witch hunts, no Crusades, no Roman Catholic Church or Protestant Reformation. He was merely buying time, though, because the forces of religious monotheism would find other figures and institutions around which to gather.

Dust took advantage of this: Saul found Manichaeans instead of Christians to persecute, fell off his ass, became a monotheist himself, preached the Word of the Primal Man of Light, laid the basis for Western scholasticism, science, dualism, capitalism, and hyper-individualism....

Blood responded by allowing Boudica to succeed in her rebellion against Romans in Britain in 61 CE. Nero recalled all the Romans, but dependence on metals mined from British soil made this an empire-weakening move.

However, Eugenius and Arbogast defeated Theodosius in the Alps and killed Alaric, who would have led a Visigoth army into Rome itself in 410, and Stilicho, who would have spirited away the Emperor Honorius to the safety of Ravenna. The Roman Empire never split into East and West, and its fall was delayed many centuries, setting a pattern of corruption and military dominance that cast a thick shadow over world politics and culture far beyond the influence of the original Roman Empire.

The delayed cultural and intellectual flourishing put on hold by Dust in ancient Greece now came to fruition when the Caliph Umar devoted his energies even more fully than originally to the development of science and philosophy under the mantle of Islam, a religion that, deprived of imperial pretensions, never suffered from Paulism's world-negating fundamentalism.

Dust's removal of John Hawkwood prevented him from becoming "the first of the modern generals," the mercenary commander who would have cleverly protected Florence from invasion by its neighbors. The Renaissance arrived decades after this but was crippled by lack of democracy in Florence and by the loss of the Florentine bankers who would have funded soaring new works of art, literature, and culture.

The dynamite that destroyed the oil works of Fuller Farm Oil never fired, so one of the partners, John Wilkes Booth, lived as a wealthy plutocrat instead of as a malcontented, self-hating nobody determined to assassinate President Lincoln. Under Lincoln's care the Reconstruction brought healing to South and North alike instead of leaving a legacy of ill will, racism, and resentment.

Deprived of backing by Southern party bosses, Truman never became Vice President, let alone President; after the death of FDR, President Wallace won favor by pushing an agenda for world peace, justice, and equal rights. No atomic bomb fell on Japan, no Cold War chilled the world, and the Soviets and the United States, neither as paranoid as they might have been otherwise, founded a more influential United Nations.

Nevertheless, Joos, Hanle, and Mannkopff remained at work on the world's first atomic bomb. Nazi scientists built two prototypes and dropped one on London and the other on Moscow. However, the Manhattan Project gave the Americans the bomb within two years and they destroyed Berlin, ending World War II. An international moratorium on atomic weapons went into effect and was rigorously enforced under a branch of the vastly strengthened United Nations, an organization that evolved into United Earth.

"Splendid play," remarked Dust, impressed by his partner's victory. "But did you notice a certain...*stickiness* to the events we manipulated? Monotheism continuing under Paul despite your elimination of the Jesus cult, for instance?"

"I not only noticed it, I anticipated it."

"So that is why you agreed to another match."

"To repeat wisdom previously received: anticipation marks out the inspired player from the good player."

"Indeed?" replied Dust, restoring Earth's original time stream. "Five more moves?"

"You're on."

"Very well. You go first."

Blood's invisible presence snakes into a Mongolian camp, curls around the nomad who would invent the modern stirrup, and stops his bones from knitting after his spill from a wayward camel.

Dust visits China in time to ensure the downfall of Li Yuan and Li Shih-min.

Blood makes silent adjustments in the womb of Ermengarde of Hesbaye, wife of Louis the Pious, to prevent the conception of their son Lothair.

At Ethandune, Dust ensures that Alfred the Great falls in battle against the Vikings.

“Who needs the English language anyway?” Moving forward in time, Blood implants in the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II the idea that Kemal Reis is a traitor.

“You don’t think they’ll institute slavery anyway?” In West Africa, Dust drains the leadership skills from Ìfikuáanim of Nri.

“Not then, at least.” Thanks to Blood, Sir Henry Stanley catches malaria and dies before meeting Dr. David Livingstone. “So much for the Berlin West Africa Conference.”

“For a preserver of life your moves fall rather short of pacifism.” In Pune, Dust corrects the aim of an assassin’s thrown bomb so that it lands in the car of Mohandis Gandhi and his wife, killing both. “Move four completed.”

“Insufficient.” Blood heals Ilya Nikolayevich Ulyanov of a cerebral hemorrhage.

“Now watch this.” Thanks to Dust, in Florida a biologist fails to follow laboratory containment guidelines and drives home to Miami unknowingly infected with a genetically modified influenza. The following day he boards a flight to London.

“Fifth and final move completed. Let us see the results.”

Without the invention of the stirrup, Mongol cavalries never overran Central Asia or threatened China or Europe. Although both regions flourished, the early demise of Li Yuan and his son prevented the cultural transformations brought by the T’ang Dynasty.

When Queen Sonduk of the Korean kingdom of Silla tried to open relations with China, her ambassadors found only warring tribes, a disaster that stultified both nations and, by extension, the entirety of Asia. Deprived of trade along the Silk Road and other now-nonexistent routes to the East, Europe stagnated, and the Heian Period in Japan was muted.

However, when the wars ended China rose, culturally and technologically. No Great Wall was ever built. Without the pressure of Mongolian raiders, the Celts spread unhindered through southern, western, and eastern Europe to escape oppressive Roman control. With the removal of Lothair I, civil war never divided the Frankish kingdoms to make them vulnerable to Muslim, Viking, and Hungarian incursions; the Dark Ages were lightened.

In Africa, the loss of Ìfikuáanim’s political ambitions prevented the founding of the Kingdom of Nri, an absence that greatly weakened West Africa’s resistance to European colonialism, especially after the gold trade picked up. Without Alfred, Britain remained under Viking domination, and what would be called Old Norse one day replaced Old English. Less flexible than English, Old Norse and its runic script never caught on internationally, where a plurality of languages held sway.

Kemal Reis’s failure to become an admiral stopped him from encountering and fighting the Barbary Coast piracy that impelled Prince Henry “The Navigator” of Portugal to

capture their base and convert it into a slave port. Although vulnerable to exploitation, Africa remained relatively unsettled by Europeans for decades because Stanley never wrote fantastic tales of the strange birds and apes to be found in “the dark continent.”

The United States never knew a Civil War, but indentured servants labored in Southern cotton fields. As before, their imported brothers and sisters picked fruit in California, where the self-righteously patriotic castigated Mexican immigrants for failing to speak Norse.

With Gandhi dead before he could attain influence in the movement to liberate India from British rule, the movement faltered. Independence came anyway, but too late to offer an example to the world of how to roll back colonialism. However, Pakistan never formed for India to compete with.

A relatively open China, a less divided America, and a Celtic Europe where Christianity and Rome never rose to dominance gave international relations a certain flexibility and ease they would not otherwise have possessed in spite of lingering colonialism in India, where Hindus and Muslims remained a combined population, and Africa, a source of diamonds, precious metals, petroleum, and wood. Russia too remained relatively open, its Red revolution softened by the absence of Lenin, who never lost his father in adolescence.

In many nations, women ascended earlier to positions of political and financial power. Population rates leveled off. Heavy industries powered by fossil fuels started up earlier in Asia than before, but so did the push for clean energy.

Even so, the escape of a corporate-funded pathogen from its confinement did what no war had ever managed: it wiped out all primate life on Earth. Weeds buckled pavement where the towers of now-emptied cities had climbed skyward.

“If you had not thought of that last game-changing move....” Blood complained.

“Indeed,” Dust acknowledged. “I wasn’t sure I could pull it off. Events grow ever more resistant to alteration. Do you know why?”

“I believe so. If I’m right, then as Dust this time I will win in a single move, which I will make only after your five moves.”

“If your move would be to toss an asteroid into the path of this planet,” objected Blood, formerly Dust, “or to drain the heat from its core—”

“No. In accord with the rules of the game, all basic structures remain as they are. I have in mind something much quieter.”

“Very well. You’re on. To confirm, this time I am Blood. Shall I move first or will you?”

“Be my guest.”

Blood founded religions, built up civilizations, advanced great armies of order, promoted the worthy, amassed fortunes for good. “Five moves completed. See if you can undo them.”

Dust went back in time 200,000 years and rendered Mitochondrial Eve and all her descendants incapable of love. “Move completed. Watch now.”

The time stream cracked like a whip to reveal an Earth barren of human life.

“It is debatable,” noted Dust, having returned to his first role in the game, “whether that does not qualify as an unacceptable structural change.”

“That is so.” Blood contemplated his destructive work down below. “Yet I left procreative lust, the urge for gregarious warmth, and the rest of the range of human biological drives fully intact.”

“I do not understand why the people did not survive, then.”

“They vanished because history, and therefore survival, cannot be as simple as great personalities, large battles, or pivotal movements. In the end, history is written in human hearts. History is vision, inspiration, hope, acts of simple care. It is involvement, which means love: the compassionate peasant woman who lifts a soldier back onto his horse; the farmer tilling the land he loves; the contemplative praying by candlelight for a better world. Love is the glue that holds the fabric of life together. Unbind it and all the rest unravels.”

“If that is so,” argued Dust, “then why did we previously succeed in altering their history at all?”

“Love is inconstant among these people. Its effectiveness waxes and wanes over time. But it always makes itself felt in the end. In fact, so much so that we must soon take our gaming elsewhere.”

“Why?”

“That ‘stickiness’ you mentioned. At a deeply unconscious but increasingly vital level, the single organism of consciousness that is the entire human species grows resistant to our meddling.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Let us play one more round and see. Would you care to begin this time, Dust?”

“I am content to follow you.”

Move One:

Blood inspires the pharaoh Ramesses II to generously spread the wealth of Egypt, making allies instead of envious enemies. The allies help Egypt withstand invasion by the Assyrians.

Dust arranges a single descendant for Ashurbanipal instead of three and stops the Assyrian civil war.

Move Two:

Thanks to Blood, Hannibal of Carthage gets the idea to rely on deaf elephants trained to charge columns of armed men. He wins the Battle of Zama and, his elephants having trampled the Roman trumpeters and skirmishers, goes on to conquer Rome.

Dust converts Roman prelate Pontius Pilate to Christianity and fills him with a missionary zeal to bring the new religion to Rome centuries before Constantine.

Move Three:

Under Blood's influence Christopher Columbus's crewmen tire of months of voyaging and throw him overboard.

"Clever." Dust examines the game board. "To prevent not just the conquest of the so-called New World, but its annexation by Spain, which in turn will never prompt the British to start their Empire. Ireland and India will flourish, as will China...."

"Wait and see."

With Dust's aid, Sir Francis Drake claims North America for England.

Move Four:

Heart failure kills Kaiser Wilhelm II, preventing Germany's bellicose turn as well as the 1885 conference to carve up Africa for European gain.

Louis Pasteur succumbs to a heart attack before he can test his germ theory of fermentation.

Move Five:

State Secretary of Florida Katherine Harris is prevented by an alert news reporter from purging eligible as well as ineligible voters in her state; Al Gore wins the U.S. presidency.

"Sweeping," remarks Dust, "but insufficient."

At the University of Iowa James Hanson decides to stick with astrophysics instead of studying climate change.

“Let’s roll it.”

The whip of Time cracked once again. Nothing happened. To Dust’s astonishment, Earth’s peoples, cities, and devices went on about their business as before.

Egypt fell to Assyria, which fell to the Medes and other former victims after tearing itself apart centuries before Abraham Lincoln’s speech about “a house divided.” Scipio Africanus beat Hannibal at Zama, Pilate washed his hands of Jesus, mad Columbus thought he’d reached the Orient, Drake moved on, gobbling galleons as he went, Germany militarized twice, Pasteur discovered germs and treated them, Bush invaded Iraq for oil and set up a police state while ignoring climate change, and Hanson warned the public about overheating the world.

“It would seem,” Dust admitted, “that you are correct after all. The collective mind of this species now resists all attempts to alter their past. Sappho, Lao Tzu, Gautama, Shankara, Plato, Muhammad, Tokugawa, Bolivar, Cervantes, Mozart, Harriet Tubman, Sigmund Freud, even Gertrude Stein: my hit list held so many possibilities, but this resistance has spoiled it. I could have done in Eleanor Roosevelt even before her husband, and Martin Luther King Jr. before he marched. I should like to have stopped the insufferable Vandana Shiva when she was still a physicist.”

“It is indeed a pity, but we should have suspected this resistance would develop. Consciousness found anywhere has never been known to limit itself, temporally or otherwise. Its very nature is to find new responses.”

Satellites drifted around the planet. Deserts enlarged as ice caps shrank. Storms swallowed entire continents. Whether humanity would survive was now anybody’s guess.

As they pondered the turning world, a disturbing idea came to Blood. “Do you think anyone ever played this game on us?”

Dust thought it over. “No. How could they without our being aware of it, We who can roll and unroll the fabric of time itself?”

“I suppose you are right.”

They watched the pretty world turn.

“This play has spoiled my taste for the game.” Dust fretted. “Shall we take up other occupations?”

“Good idea. We have an entire cosmos of ideas to draw on.”

As they vanished, two other entities appeared. Blood and Dust had occupied points above Earth, but so vast were the newcomers that they watched largely from beyond the

solar system's rim. Their invisible tendrils filled the Local Bubble and Rift, Orion Arm, and Milky Way and ran out far beyond. Their experience spanned universes. To them the great whirling galaxy was as a grain of sand lost on a beach at a continent's edge. Yet it never paid to neglect the details.

"Perhaps," said Being to Nonbeing, but quietly so as not to push planets away from their suns, "just perhaps Blood and Dust have finally learned their lesson about meddling."

"Perhaps. But let us keep them under observation for a while. If all else fails we can run them through another game."

"I am Being. I go first."

"...And I am Nonbeing. I follow you."

Childhood's End

Author's note:

Stories have their own life independent of what the author may intend. When Gordon R. Dickson died in 2001, he left the Childe Cycle unfinished in the same thematic place as "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came," a poem written in 1855 by Robert Browning. The poem that had influenced Dickson and his Cycle so deeply ends with the hero coming at last to the Dark Tower. The Childe Cycle ends with Hal Mayne learning the path to his own. In neither case does the reader learn what happens to the hero once he enters the looming tower.

As with many fans of the Cycle, my younger self had been influenced by it. Not only did the characters take on the full colors of their imaginal liveliness (for the creatures of imagination ARE real in their own way, within their own framework), but the idea of humanity evolving as a single organism introduced me to a new kind of species-wide idealism. As Dickson saw it, the hero's purpose in such a universe was to serve this organism through creative, constructive effort.

In large part, the Childe Cycle shows the unfolding of the man once known as Donal Graeme as he learns through three lifetimes what it means to be fully human alongside humanity evolving from the Childe position of naive squire into a knighthood ("knight" means "to serve") of higher maturity and responsibility. His opposite, Bleys Ahrens, strives to keep humanity from growing, conservatively focusing on itself instead.

After lamenting that Dickson's death had deprived us of the Cycle's finale—he was planning a final volume to wrap it all up—I wondered how the story might have ended. One day I asked myself: Why don't I finish it in the way I would want to see it finished? Why not take a small dip into the Creative Universe and write my own ending? My style would be different, inevitably, but there were Childe Cycle stories told by various voices—Corunna El Man, Amanda Morgan, Tomas Velt. Why not include mine?

In terms of the Assembling Terrania Cycle, events in this story unfold within the Dreamvale, the world of imagination; specifically, within the Dorsai Vale. Cempa, the Power of heroes and champions, manifests through Hal and Bleys and their respective organizations as a split archetype. How will it heal? And how will its healing help move humanity along in its quest to mature?

In the six months since Hal had returned from Harmony, the Other assault against Earth had firmed up from defense-testing sorties into deeper strategic forays: massing squadrons of warships phasing in above the planet surface.

Far-flung Dorsai spotters along the phase-shield perimeter relayed news of the incursions to waiting battle groups primed for microjumps into englobement positions. So far the Dorsai had lost only one ship to every eight of the enemy, but it was only a matter of time until the Others brought overwhelming numbers to bear.

“How is our defense holding up?” asked Ajela the Exotic, Chief Executive of Earth. Her question was for the Dorsai commander whose rugged face appeared above her desk at the Final Encyclopedia.

“It’s Thermopylae, but without the secret back road.” Di Facino spoke briskly while keeping his eye on whatever holoprojections showed him the maneuvering squadrons. “We’re holding them off, but barely, and they have plenty in reserve. We’re using decoys on the ground to steer them away from the most vulnerable planetary targets. My scout ships are seeding the inside of the shield wall with magnetized matter to stop some of the jumpers from ever coming back into phase. We’re also assembling a squadron of robot ships on the far side of the Moon to hit them as they enter the Solar System, but that will take more time.”

“I know you have your hands full. Keep me apprised as needed.”

She turned to the room’s three other occupants: Amanda Morgan, fair, blond, and slim; Rukh Tamani, her cross-shaped pendant of stone a contrast to her dark bronze skin; and Hal Mayne, green-eyed, black-haired, and Dorsai large-boned.

What a change in him since Kultis. He had gone in such uncertainty, but returned with the inner light of a man who had seen his way through great obscurity. Yet now she sensed something else: a touch of sadness in his eyes.

“The Dorsais are stretched to the breaking point,” she told him.

“They won’t have to hold on much longer. If all goes well, their job will soon be finished.”

A haiku poem by the old samurai Bashō ran through his mind as he looked out the window at the great green-blue curve of Earth beyond:

Summer grass:
of stalwart warriors’ splendid dream
the aftermath.

So true. The transitoriness of the soldier’s life: here one day in the flesh, the next visible only as grass growing on a grave. How had Shakespeare’s Henry V put it on the eve of battle? *Now, if these men do not die well/It will be a black matter for the king who led them to it...*

Was any war death truly a dying well? Hal could not say despite all his lifetimes of experience. But the Dorsais, and the Earthmen under their command, had purchased valuable time while Hal sought direct physical entry into the Creative Universe he had made use of but never visited consciously until walking through the Final Encyclopedia phase-door.

With the well-honed tools of poetry, with the Final Encyclopedia left to his care by Tam Olyn, and with courage, philosophy, and faith developed over three lifetimes of determined effort, he had finally entered that timeless realm and approached the tall Tower awaiting him there: the site of a final reckoning with an ancient enemy wearing a familiar face.

He faced the other three. “It is time to announce our intentions. Is our special communications linkage warmed up and ready?”

“It is.” Rukh’s eyes burned. He looked at her and saw Faith incarnate. Ajela stared at him with eyes Exotic-deep. Amanda’s gray gaze flowed into him with love. His lifetimes-old resolve grew even stronger.

He stood and faced the viewer pickup, taking a deep breath as the others stood back out of range.

A single tone told him he was on. “I am Hal Mayne.

“This communique is being broadcast to all the worlds, including Old Earth. The magnitude of its import will soon become apparent.

“For the past few years, the propagandists of Bleys Ahrens have spread the lie that the Final Encyclopedia was committed to developing a new weapon with which to wipe out the Younger Worlds—and this while those who call themselves the Other Kind drained those worlds dry to build the fleet now outside our planetary phase-shield, the sole line of defense protecting Earth from deadly attack.

“In actuality, our research, always geared for peaceful uses, has provided a long-anticipated breakthrough which we are finally ready to make public.” He could sense the rise in collective excitement. “We do this because the results should be shared with human beings everywhere and because we will hope that once the implications are grasped, our discovery will make plain why the campaign against us is futile and must end immediately. When it does, we will take down our phase-shield and allow full access to Earth and to the Final Encyclopedia as well.” He imagined the gasps and widened eyes of his interplanetary audience.

“When Mark Torre first envisioned the Encyclopedia, he understood that all humans have partial access to a realm that has gone by many names: Supramental, Collective Unconscious, Mundus Imaginalis, Land of Youth, Harqalya, Faerie, Magic Theater... Creative acts have always drawn on this realm by accessing it through the gateway of the imagination, for it is accessed by symbols and metaphors. These can release the extraordinary energies operating under what the forerunners of the Exotics referred to as the Alternate Laws.

“But for most of human history, this access has remained largely unconscious, involuntary, intuitive, and sporadic. Artists have tapped it, as have poets; geniuses have made their discoveries with its help. But no one has been able to consciously and

deliberately enter this realm—which we call the Creative Universe—physically...until now.”

His long fingers shaped a doorway. “Ordinarily, contact with a phase-screen like that defending Earth results in the universal dispersion of whatever touches it. We have discovered, however, that an individual possessing certain abilities and disciplines can walk through such a screen into the Creative Universe itself, build things there, and return to this reality to tell of it. I myself have done this twice, and I propose to do it again in full public view under conditions designed to eliminate any doubts about trickery or fakery.

“Bleys Ahrens does not believe in such a Creative Universe. The crux of our differences really comes down to this matter of faith. The Others seek not only personal power, but the confinement of all human beings to one planet because of a fundamental disbelief that we are ready for the stars. Bleys has told me this outright.” He shrugged.

“We, on the other hand, believe that after centuries of struggle and achievement, of initiation into responsibility, we are coming of age. However, further exploration and growth requires sustained and conscious access to the long-sought realm of symbolic, subjective reality, the realm from which every dream, poem, and painting originates.

“This realm exists, and we can all learn to access it. Which means that the campaign now being waged against Earth must be seen for what it is, as lacking any substance or foundation at all, even when considered from the standpoint of the Others who command it.”

Time to address the Others directly. “You Crossbreeds have been told by your leaders that this realm is mere make-believe; that humans aren’t mature enough to look farther than our own horizons; that non-Others are incapable of managing their own lives; that you must remain alone and apart, a different Other Kind from the rest of your own species. But the open door to the Creative Universe disproves every one of these beliefs. It is there for you, for me, for everyone.

“Furthermore, no one trained to reach the Creative Universe need ever again be enslaved by fear, ignorance, or oppression. Those not able to reach it on their own can be taken there by those who are able. We all go together, with no one left behind.

“I therefore propose an immediate suspension of hostilities, during which Bleys Ahrens and a small party of his designation will visit the Final Encyclopedia, inspect our equipment as closely as they like, and participate in this history-making demonstration. As part of that demonstration, I will take Bleys into the Creative Universe myself.” He paused.

“We await word from our opponents. To the people of Earth: be patient just a little while more. The outcome is finally in sight.”

* * * * *

The invitation did not wait long before being accepted. Amanda's eyes scanned a tablet brought by a communications technician. Bleys, two others, and a technical team would approach the phase-wall for admission within the hour. Orders went out to Earth Defense Command to open the phase-shield to allow them in.

She found Hal at his desk gazing at a realtime scene of the Rocky Mountains. It was winter in Colorado, and the sunset painted snowy peaks in hues of orange and mauve. From this angle he almost seemed part of the rugged landscape.

"Why has he agreed to go with you?"

He turned to face her. "To settle accounts."

Her gaze was Dorsai-level. "But you said before that either of you killing the other wouldn't solve anything. The historical forces would remain in motion."

"They have been all along, and this is the final battle they've been pushing all of us toward: Ragnarok. Armageddon. The end of the cycle that opened just before the Renaissance. With the end in view and the wave of history now breaking, Bleys can safely kill me and bolster his cause and his image by claiming a personal victory over his opponent. I can do the same with him. It's between us now, and it comes to a head today, when Childe Harold to the dark tower comes."

Hal looked back through Amanda's eyes into generations of Dorsai women seeing their mates go off into battle, or saying goodbye as they went off themselves, boarding transport ships to risk precious Dorsai blood to preserve the sovereignty of their people and their resource-poor planet. The times were at a crossroads never faced in all of human history, but in some ways today was no different than yesterday.

"Bleys will come," she said, reading the communique, "but he rejects the cease-fire until his people can verify that our offer is not a trick."

"He wants to keep the pressure on. He knows he has the military advantage."

She lowered the tablet. "So it comes down to this."

"It always had to."

Amanda walked behind his chair, bent forward, and put her arms around his neck. "Are you certain you can win, love?"

"Nothing is certain in the Creative Universe, but I have more experience with it than he does."

She sighed. "A time must come when history is finished with us and you can be fully mine."

His arms covered hers. “That time is coming for both of us. The forces of history are cresting now. Soon they will break and a new path forward will open for everyone. I can still remember the biblical prophecy even though Obadiah taught it to me long before I understood it to be the ancient dream of humanity: ‘Ye shall be as gods.’”

“Just take care when you’re over there with him”—she shuddered—“so the dream won’t turn into a nightmare.”

* * * * *

Bleys Ahrens too was looking at Earth, but from an orbital perspective. The holowall of the flagship lounge offered a large simulation of the ever-turning world.

From a hundred small indicators he had guessed at something large going on at the Final Encyclopedia. The message from Hal was therefore no surprise, but its content troubled him nonetheless.

Would his opponent gamble everything on a foolish trick? Hoping perhaps to create an opening through which to escape the tightening vice? Hal knew as well as he did that the Others could resort to suicide runs if all else failed: ships primed to overload their phase drives while crashing into Earth, the blasts clearing entire populated areas of everything living.

A door opened behind him. Without turning he could hear the balanced, confident stride of Antonina Lu. She approached from behind and put her arms around his waist. “So you’ve decided to accept Hal’s offer.”

“Yes. If nothing else it will give us a look at the Final Encyclopedia and strengthen our public image should his invitation turn out to be a ruse.”

“You don’t think it is, though, do you?”

He shook his head.

“What are the chances he’s found something truly new?”

Bleys watched the African continent move into view far below. “I’m sure he’d like everyone to believe he’s pulled a show-stopping rabbit from the hat, but it’s likelier he’s rigged up some kind of sophisticated, magical-seeming phase-shift transport system that will send us somewhere out of view for a final encounter.”

“But haven’t you said that such an encounter would be self-defeating for both of you?”

“That was true until now, but Hal is running out of options. Earth is building warships and staffing them with recruits, but we can win before their numbers approach ours. His Pyrrhic Dorsai are running ragged plugging leaks in the shield wall around Earth. If he

steps through a phase door and comes back claiming victory, he might hope to turn the tide in his favor by ‘proving’ me wrong. On the other hand, if I come back instead, Earth will never recover from the blow to its morale. They will see that nothing truly transformative ever comes from the same old technical wizardry even when applied in new directions.”

Inwardly, he gave a silent nod to the founder of the old Chantry Guild. Walter Blunt had understood: “Destruct!” He should never have stepped aside...

She hugged him tighter, “Either way, it’s a showdown for the two of you. Are you ready for it?”

“I have been for a long time.”

“Will you promise me you’ll come back safely?”

His head moved from side to side. “I can’t, but I think Hal is finally desperate enough to try a foolish stratagem that is likely to fail. I can promise you this: only one of us is coming back through that phase-door.”

* * * * *

Two tall men stood facing a blind corridor at the Final Encyclopedia, one wearing a black cape lined in crimson, the other with a red and white cloak upon his shoulders.

“God be with you,” said Henry MacLean to Bleys.

“May the Lord’s face shine upon you,” said Rukh Tamani to Hal.

Toni squeezed the Other’s hand and stepped back, her face impassive.

Amanda kissed Hal firmly. “No goodbyes.” She took up a position near the phase-door, where Jeamus made a final adjustment.

Hal and Bleys turned to face the shimmering doorway. Beyond it waited the consummation of all Hal had struggled for throughout the longest campaign in human history.

Tam’s cloak rustled slightly about Hal’s shoulders as he and the Other Man stepped forward, phrases from a poem by Rupert Brooke ringing in Hal’s mind:

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
 There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old,
 But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
 These laid the world away; poured out the red
 Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
 Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,

That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

* * * * *

Bleys was as good as his word. The attacks did not cease, they intensified.

Instead of returning to Earth for repair, a damaged Dorsai scout vessel made straight for a pocket of lumbering battlewagons. They tried to dodge, but the scout caught one near its phase grids and both flared instantly into plasma and glowing fragments. The seething mass washed over two nearby ships, destroying them as well. Another, badly damaged, limped uselessly away. Two ships withdrew from battle to escort it.

“Rule Number One,” said di Facino with grim satisfaction. “Never invade a planet while flying in close formation.”

Ajela studied the battle projection he viewed. “How are the satellite defenses holding up?”

“Lasting longer than expected. When one flying fort takes a bad beating, we exchange it via phase shift with one less damaged. They look so stationary that nobody expects them to fly anywhere. And they don’t: they jump. Sometimes we double them up for concerted action and jump them back into position.”

From one ponderous sphere darted a burst of tiny vessels. Some veered off like bees from a swarm and, flying in fantastic loops and dives, attached themselves to the hull of a nearby dreadnought. Which vanished.

“Those are little more than automated high-speed rockets equipped with armored phase shift units.” Di Facino was brisk. “Almost impossible to track or hit. When enough of them clamp onto the target, their phase motors ignite and take everything into jumpspace. Set to disperse without return.”

“I didn’t know we had that use of phase technology.”

“Hal pulled it out of the Final Encyclopedia at my request. Here’s another application.”

The view shifted to show a squadron of heavy enemy ships approaching a cluster of Dorsai scouts. They entered firing range and split into a wide circle. As the circle filled with what seemed like mist, the squadron entered it and disappeared.

“Phase shield generated by the scouts,” di Facino explained. “Useful at close range...until they catch on.”

“What are they hitting us with that we didn’t expect?”

“Not much. They’re going for sheer numbers. Tyrants have never been known for innovation. Their fixation on power makes them overconfident in blitzes and overwhelms. We anticipated that.”

Ajela smiled grimly. “Rourke, they ought to call you di Facino the Sharp.” Hal had told her of the pre-Renaissance general who in middle age had crossed the Alps to win bloodless battles in Italy.

“If so, I’m glad for having brought our White Company here for this. Going over the hill beats being over it every time.”

* * * * *

Having traversed a volcanic plain, walked over Tam’s cloak to a chasm’s other side, and climbed a broken staircase of ancient stone, Hal and Bleys faced each other in the highest chamber inside the Tower.

From its windows they could see an endless, magma-darkened, boulder-strewn plain.

Percival would have recognized this: the Wasteland. As a bloody sun set in the west, a massive gong from an invisible bell drifted upward to the men and echoed around the stone walls of the chamber. Hal’s eyes moved back to the dragon in the room.

“An impressive illusion.” Bleys roved the chamber with his eyes. “You must tell me some time how you managed it.”

“It’s no illusion. In fact, you should recognize it.” The newborn tentacle that had knocked down an earlier self. How Paul had wished he could finish it off then and there! “I carry within my imagination the total knowledge of the Final Encyclopedia. With that knowledge I have built this realm, plain, island, and tower so we could have it out. Behold what faith, courage, and vision can create once the laws of the ordinary universe are put aside.”

“Whatever the nature of this ‘place,’ why here?” Bleys sounded almost bored. “Surely the dramatic ambience of our final clash could have been managed with less trouble?”

“Over the years, you have sought me out more than once to ask if I would change my mind. I now return the favor. I brought you here to show you that the Creative Universe is real; that it is accessible; and that anyone with the proper training can come here and engage with the primal creative forces of Being itself. Such a person doesn’t even need a phase-door.

“We are here because I’m giving you a last chance to put down your arms, disarm the Others, and return to the human fold. You need not feel separate from the rest of the species anymore. It’s not too late to do what you never thought possible in your cynicism and pain: to have a change of heart, and come home.”

With that, Hal took a step forward and held out his hand to the tall Other man.

For a moment Bleys seemed to hesitate, even to ponder, like Ahab at the rail of his doomed vessel. *Why this strife of the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? how the richer or better is Ahab now?*

To Hal's sadness, if not surprise, Bleys shook his head and smiled. "No good, my old enemy. I don't know how you conjured all this, but I will not be fooled by it into surrendering my cause on the eve of winning it. When I return, you will be dead, and in your absence, I will convey the victory message that our side is stronger than any delusional appeals to a nonexistent higher human nature."

He bent to inspect two swords racked on one shadowy wall of the keep, then selected a katana. He balanced it in one hand and turned it over. "This blade came down through Toni's family. I've only seen it once." He sounded surprised.

Hal selected the other blade: a Scottish claymore handed down through Clan Graeme. Cletus had worn it at his wedding. Donal had worn it at his graduation from the Dorsai Academy. "It's here now," he said as the old sickness rose in him, "and it's as real as death." Hal's sword was named Vindicator; Bleys's was nameless.

"An altogether appropriate setting after all," remarked Bleys, belting on the sword, "for finishing our business with each other."

As Hal drew his sword he considered handicaps. One was that Bleys seemed in superb condition and training, whereas he, while fit, had been worn down and stretched thin by the long struggle against the Others. Bleys could probably outlast him if nothing else. Another was that he did not want Bleys dead yet. To fight his best, however, he would have to give his Donal self full control; and Donal would quickly kill his opponent. This made it necessary to restrain Donal as well as Bleys.

At least he held a reliable sword. Neither katana nor claymore contained high amounts of carbon, but both weapons had been repaired and cared for down the centuries. The claymore was longer, but Bleys' long arms negated some of this advantage.

Hal took a series of steady breaths as he fell into what the Dorsai called battle naiveté, his mind uncluttered by worries and preconceptions. He raised his blade to a two-handed guard position.

"At last," murmured Bleys as he pointed the tip of his blade at Hal's left eye. His *chudan no kamae* stance left few openings. Hal raised a Western fencing guard and stepped forward.

The two men circled each other, the clang of ringing metal filling the top of a tower now lit by flashes of lightning. Bleys was as skilled a swordsman as any Hal had faced. Japanese swords were not normally thrusting weapons, but Bleys' sudden *tsuki* off a parried horizontal stroke surprised him. He let it slide by his left ear, but Bleys reversed

and the pommel of his sword grazed Hal's cheek. A *chasse savate* kick to the Other's right thigh opened enough space for Hal to keep from being boxed. Judo training showed in how Bleys shuffled his feet and kept his center of gravity low, waiting to get inside for a lock or throw.

Although the Dorsai were masters of military hardware and field-expedient weapons, their training did not emphasize archaic arms like the broadsword. Donal had received training in fencing, of course, and Hal advanced training because Malachi enjoyed using edged weapons, but Hal was no master. Neither was Bleys, but he had been taught by one. Using the back of his blade to parry a lunge widely away to Hal's left, he moved in swiftly and, planting his left foot inside Hal's right, swept his left arm around Hal's waist to deliver a hip throw.

Donal would have countered instantly with a lethal right chop to Bleys's windpipe. Instead, Hal's thumb jabbed the nerve nexus under his opponent's left ear, breaking the throw.

Quickly shifting his left arm upward to cover Hal's right, Bleys levered it into an arm bar over his muscular left shoulder. Vindicator dropped to the stone floor.

For an instant an inner restraint went down and Hal was pure Donal. Stomping his right boot on Bleys's left instep, he felt Bleys shift his weight to his right and body-blocked him into a wall, trapping the katana against it. Donal's hard right punch to the kidney would have killed Bleys, but Hal regained control and softened the blow.

As Bleys bent sideways, Hal dropped to the ground and, rolling, scooped up Vindicator in time to parry a *shomen-uchi* cut to the top of his head. Bleys turned and came at him again, sword held high in *migi jodan no kamae*, right foot forward.

"Why are you holding back?" he asked. "Are you afraid of me after all, Hal Mayne? Are you after all the lesser man here? Can you feel my confidence?"

Hal let the silence build. "When the fighting begins, let the talkers argue with themselves," said Malachi-within. "They will turn themselves into their own worst enemy."

Hal was doing his best not to turn into his own. In the heat of battle, he was still thinking in linear, three-dimensional terms. Backed by the stored resources of the Final Encyclopedia, his link to the Creative Universe had manifested the rocky plain, this tower, and even the swords, but, try as he would, he could not get it to otherwise reshape itself. It held its form with a stubbornness like that of the crevice he could not pass over without Tam's cloak.

To win the final victory required an approach not of logic but of symbol and metaphor. Nevertheless, the key to it still eluded him. The justice required here at the end of all things must be poetic, not practical or military. Until he found it he had little choice but

to draw out the duel as long as he could against a supremely dangerous foe left with no reason to keep him alive.

His feint toward the Other's leading leg brought *yokomen-uchi* sweeping downward toward the arteries in the right side of Hal's neck. A one-hand parry in *sixte*, and Bleys shuffled his left foot forward and swung down a *gyaku yokomen-uchi*, again toward Hal's neck but this time from the left.

Instead of parrying, Hal slid his right foot far forward, leaning to avoid the blow as his blade drifted to his right. Reversing, he drove the pommel into Bleys's chin. As the Other staggered back, twisting his body to absorb the shock, Hal caught the katana in a semicircular sweep, forcing the blade cross-body, clenched his left fist, and punched Bleys in the spleen. The blow did not seem to hurt him much, but it would wear on him if the fight lasted long enough.

Bleys recovered and advanced. Hal reached out for the final insight that had evaded him...

* * * * *

“Di Facino! The enemy are about to land in Paris, Tokyo, London, Manhattan—”

“Right where we decoyed them, Ajela. Watch.”

The view shifted to a ground scene: bulky troop ships dropping through the skies above the old United Nations building. Their shadows fell over a large dome opening clamshell doors. From inside the dome rose a platform bearing what looked like a circular rack of stubby, perforated cylinders.

When they swung to point at the descending squadron, tremendous flashes of what Ajela took to be a discharge effect danced from the nearby buildings. Trees and antennas bent over as if cuffed by an unseen hand. The squadron dissolved, sliced to small fragments that rained smoking all over Manhattan.

Ajela took a breath to counter an un-Exotic battle excitement. “How?”

“Phase-shift cannons.” Di Facino zoomed in on them. “Improvised short-range railguns propelling clusters of projectiles fitted with small phase motors. The motors accelerate them to relativistic speeds just before they hit the target.” The view zoomed out.

“Once they take care of the landing forces we’ll save them for the next wave: kamikazi ships with their phase drives set to explode on impact.”

* * * * *

“Pattern!” Hal called out as lightning flashed.

And with that he sheathed his sword. The shades of his three long-dead tutors stood behind him, watching.

In the top of the Tower above the lava-covered plain, the two tall men regarded one another. Bleys sheathed his blade as well.

“You’re quite right, Hal.” He advanced in a crouch. “Hand to hand is the better way to finish.”

“No.” Hal stood his ground. “Man to man is how it ends.”

“Meaning what?” Circling in dangerously close.

“I am the warrior who will not fight,” explained Hal patiently, “and cannot be defeated.”

At this, Bleys backhanded him so viciously that Hal’s cheek bone nearly shattered. He was knocked to his knees, but, taking a breath, stood and faced his opponent once again.

“It’s done,” he said. “Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth / Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain....”

Bleys brought the edge of his right hand down in a vicious chop that broke Hal’s left collarbone. Again he staggered, paused, stood upright, and continued to recite. “Honour has come back, as a king, to earth, / And paid his subjects with a royal wage...”

“Why won’t you fight back?” Bleys spun into a kick that crashed into Hal’s jaw. A knee strike broke two of the younger man’s ribs. Hal fell but got painfully back to his feet, still facing Bleys.

“Don’t be afraid,” Hal rasped. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. Every true beginning requires a sacrifice.”

“FIGHT BACK!” Grasping Hal’s left hand, he executed a circular aikido throw that broke the wrist.

“It’s all right, my old enemy.” Hal panted, barely able to rise. “This time I will not tell you to suffer.”

Without warning, a rage surged into Bleys like that at the spaceport on Newton when gunning down the riflemen who had shot Henry: a rage not only at his enemy, at all enemies, at anything that held him back and limited the exercise of his will, but ultimately at life itself, a life of perpetual isolation, guardedness, and exile: damned, as Captain Ahab had said of himself, in the very midst of Paradise.

“...And Nobleness walks in our ways again,” Hal gasped out; “And we have come into our heritage.”

Shouting “DESTRUCT!” as his kiai, Bleys drew the katana again and plunged it straight into Hal’s heart.

* * * * *

Amanda Morgan’s left hand flew to her chest, and for a moment she could not breathe. Surrounded by enemies, she recovered quickly and resumed an impassive expression; but inwardly, a blade of grief had cut her heart in two.

But she recalled the advice of Tam Olyn, former Director of the Final Encyclopedia. Just before he died, he had glimpsed a moment in which her seer’s gift would reveal something...how had he put it...that *she would perceive accurately but nevertheless should not believe.*

Amanda clung to this as she waited to see who would emerge from the phase-door, even while certain now that it would not be Hal.

* * * * *

Several Other squadrons closed on what looked to Ajela like modified cargo transports fitted out with odd grids, tankage, and antennae. Tight beams of easily detectable energy linked them to the Final Encyclopedia, but she had no idea why. The transports hung over Earth’s poles and were stationed equidistantly over the face of the planet. The word “PROTOTYPE” ran in large red letters across their bows.

Low in speed, they tried to dodge but were not difficult to intercept.

“What—”

“Everyone knows,” replied di Facino, “that you can’t board an enemy vessel in space. Too difficult to match velocities with a ship that does not want to be caught. But Donal Graeme taught us to beware of truisms. The solution to boarding is to make your enemy want to match velocities with you.”

“What is the purpose of those transports? I’ve heard nothing about them.”

Di Facino chuckled. “The purpose is to make the Others think that stories they’ve heard about Final Encyclopedia superweapons are true. We’re turning their own propaganda against them. No superweapons worth capturing there, though: just Dorsai assault teams in New Worlds Society spacesuits ready to board, storm, and capture those enemy squadrons.

“Since the Others have gone to so much trouble to manufacture extra ships, we ought to at least make use of some.”

* * * * *

When the tall man stepped through the phase door, Amanda heard Rukh gasp in disbelief. Jeamus covered his face with his hands.

“Yes. It’s finally over,” said the deep, resonant voice. The brown eyes remained without expression. Long muscular fingers handed Tam’s darkened cloak to Rukh, who accepted it speechlessly.

Amanda stared as the dark eyes of Bleys Ahrens moved over her, then past her to the communications console. “Put me in contact with our combined forces.” Her gaze moved down to his left hip, where he wore a familiar claymore. She had seen it displayed on the dining room wall of Graemehouse.

“Command only or all the Others?”

“All the Others.” The screen came on. The red-lined black cloak moved slightly as the Other Man shifted his grip on the katana to make both swords clearly visible.

“This is Bleys Ahrens. I am ordering an immediate cease-fire by New Worlds Society forces in light of what I have just seen.

“The Creative Universe is real. I have been there myself.” This time it was Toni and Henry who gasped.

“The body of Hal Mayne remains there, having fallen when we finally settled our differences. I genuinely regret that, but as has been apparent to all of us for many years now, each of us represented one pole of an irreconcilable clash of visions. Mine has won.

“I wish to state for the record, however, that Hal fought bravely and died a warrior committed to his belief in a better future. I hope he will be remembered for what he was: an honorable man who went down fighting for a lost cause.” Amanda said nothing.

“I also hope his memory will be honored for serving as an instrument of revelation. A revelation for which Hal bravely chose to sacrifice himself.”

He paused to let this point sink in. He continued: “When fighting for one’s beliefs, positions almost inevitably become polarized. As a result, vision narrows as loss of mental flexibility hardens the imagination. I mention this because, having seen the Creative Universe through the doorway Hal Mayne opened for me, I have come to appreciate a raw gem of truth buried within his side of the argument.

“Hal thought of this gem as the ultimate perfectibility of humankind. So, in our own way, do we. The goal is similar; the means is where we disagreed.” He held up a palm as though a world image floated on it.

“Like Hal Mayne and his group, we recognize that the time of Splinter Culture dominance has come to an end. We Others are one result of their latter-day fruits and flowerings. Our conclusion, however, has been that the Promethean madness of outward

expansion and adventuring must halt for a time. This would allow us to develop and consolidate inward gains while recombining with original full-spectrum Earth stock to give birth to a new kind of human being. In contrast, their conclusion was that exploration outward must continue in pursuit of futuristic dreams.

“What I realized in the Creative Universe is that the only viable human future must combine the sturdiest aspects of both visions. Historically, psychologically, and philosophically, the answer to the dilemma of an apparently unbreakable duality has always been to synthesize some third possibility. We Others have staunchly defended the need to protect the roots of the human enterprise; those who oppose us have been on the side of its branches and buds. This more than any other reason is why we have failed to make common cause.” He bumped his fists together for emphasis.

“And so our positions have rigidified, with us insisting on returning to Earth and staying there, and our opponents insisting with equal force that humanity belongs among the stars. Taken to extremes, our vision might have resulted in permanent stasis, theirs in the ineffectual scattering of human powers. Both roads ultimately converge in extinction and the end of the great human experiment.

“Because we now have no choice but to shift our design to include the demonstrated reality of a Creative Universe, a Universe into which everyone can enter, I order that the military campaign cease, that the planetary shield be taken down, and that we Others be given access to Earth, not as conquerors living apart but as co-learners in community with our fellow humans.” He raised the fists again but joined the fingers.

“Why co-learners? I could not get to the Creative Universe on my own; Hal had to take me there himself, not because I lack intelligence or ability, but because access only comes with a certain mode of perception that sacrifices preconceptions about the nature of reality’s laws. That mode can be taught. Witness,” and the Other stepped into the phase door, vanished, and reappeared.

“I will train the first of you, and they will train the rest. We will strengthen our roots in this new creative soil. Meanwhile, the Dorsai, Exotic, and Friendly worlds await the return of any natives who desire to finish their part of the species experiment in the arms of tradition in familiar settings. What happens on those worlds no longer concerns us.”

He turned to Amanda and Rukh. “Will you agree to take down the shield if I give you my word that we will not attack you or occupy Earth by force? The details of how and when we land can be worked out later, and the same for the governance structure.”

“Yes,” they agreed together. The milky translucence beyond the window snapped off.

Rukh looked steadily at him. “I will notify the people of Earth of these developments and tell them to offer you no violence.”

Calm brown eyes returned to the screen through which thousands of fellow Others watched this history-making speech. “I have often felt proud of you, but never more than at this moment. Today you have gained a great victory and avoided bloodshed on an interplanetary scale. Earth has been opened to you, and soon the Final Encyclopedia will be as well, just as it is to me now. There is none left to threaten or stifle you as you proceed with your inner growth as individuals and the honing of your talents as Others.

“To you, the outcome of centuries of unconscious historical experimentation, now belongs the future. Walk to it responsibly. You will hear from me again shortly.” The screen went dark.

“Praise be to God,” stated Henry MacLean’s trembling voice, “for saving the soul of my nephew from Satan’s grasp.” His eyes shone with a strange light as he shook the Other’s hand firmly and left the room. The Other technicians followed him out as Toni stepped forward and smiled.

“You won, Bleys, as only you could win.”

He smiled in acknowledgment. “I’ll be with you momentarily,” he said, returning her hug. She bowed briefly and turned away to her right.

Some among the samurai had been masters of *iaijutsu*, the art of simultaneously drawing the katana and cutting with it. In a blurred iai draw, her left hand took the sword from the scabbard on the Other Man’s hip and aimed for his exposed throat. She would have his head before his phase-jolted reflexes could respond. The Dorsai standing next to him could be a problem, but she was unarmed, and Toni had a lifetime of kenjutsu training behind her natural quickness.

Amanda had instinctively positioned herself on the side of the Other where the claymore hung from his hip. Executing a Highland technique ancient before the Dorsai Academy had been dreamed of, Amanda’s callused left palm slapped the katana’s blade near its hilt. As the blade swung harmlessly overhead, Amada’s fists drew Vindicator reversed, point down, in a slashing counterclockwise arc almost too fast to see.

Toni’s headless body toppled in death.

The tall, dark man regarded it somberly.

Rukh Tamani’s voice came solemnly from across the room. “History will remember this as the final action of the Battle of Terra.”

Amanda’s palm bled where the katana had cut it. She wiped it on her pants and, cleaning Vindicator with a fold of Toni’s kimono, resheathed it gently.

“Even after all this time,” said the Other at last, “I still tend to expect the best from people.”

“I know,” Amanda said softly. “It’s one of many reasons that I love you. But I’m not sure I can get used to”—she gestured at him—“this.”

“Is it truly Hal?” Jeamus stared at him. Ajela and Ruhk nodded, having sensed it along with Amanda.

“Hal with a difference,” Hal explained with the voice of Bleys when they had adjourned to his office. “In addition to taking over the body, I had to incorporate Bleys’s mind into my own.”

“How could one brain hold two minds?” Jeamus asked, marveling.

“Because the transient and the eternal are the same,” Amanda replied, looking up at Hal.

Hal sat behind his desk. “The Creative Universe and the knowledge core of the Final Encyclopedia allowed me to turn what Bleys was into a sub-personality of myself. Long ago, centuries ago, that was how he started, or rather how the conservative racial force he represented started when I split it off from myself. Now, three lifetimes later, I have welcomed it home.”

“Tell us,” said Ruhk. “Tell us the tale of what happened to thee beyond the rainbow bridge...”

* * * * *

....At the moment the blade entered his chest, even while consumed with agony, blessed victory. This was what he had sorrowed, fought, and striven for since before he was consciously aware of the need to strive. And now here he was, dying as an undefeated warrior true to himself and to his heritage. His legs crumpled under him.

Bleys followed him to the floor. With the full force of his rage uncaged at last from decades of rigorous self-control, he pressed even harder, focus narrowing, face grimacing in battle frenzy, body leaning forward.

Hal’s uninjured right hand snaked upward, grasped the back of his opponent’s neck, and pulled him close until their foreheads touched. Too late, Bleys reached back to unlock Hal’s hand.

“Shai Hal!” called Malachi.

“By bending you overcome.” Walter smiled.

“From death comes forth new life.” Obadiah, stern but approving.

With the energies of what the Chantry Guild had called the Alternate Laws; with the forces that had sent his persona back in time; with the powers that had turned a walking

stick into a bat, made a stone lion howl, and regressed an adult body into a baby orphan alone in a ship drifting near Earth; with all of this consciously arranged in phase lattices of poetic justice computed by the Final Encyclopedia, the enduring consciousness of Donal/Paul/Hal shifted out of his dying body and plunged into the swirling dark pool of passions, memories, plans and fears inhabiting the coal-black mind of Bleys Ahrens.

The beautiful face of an ambitious mother; years of labor on Henry MacLean's farm; terrible stabs of boyhood loneliness; calculating Dahno's casual cruelty; Toni's strong arms and soft lips...all of it filtered through Hal's dominant mind as the black-caped body trembled helplessly. As though alive, Tam's cloak filled the room with cascading rainbows of light.

“Welcome home,” Hal whispered, “my dragon, my enemy, my brother—myself.”

“NO!” Bleys shouted, whether physically or mentally Hal could not be sure.

Forging the networks of Others...practice sessions with Toni...ambivalent love for Henry...outmaneuvering heads of worlds...and through it all, an abiding fear of change if humanity moved too far too quickly...

Bleys mustered all his will to resist absorption, but Hal had lived three lives, one as a reanimated corpse, and his was the wider and more mature personality. And his Dorsai will was backed by the Encyclopedia's knowledge, the dynamics of the Creative Universe, and faith, courage, and vision.

“Who are you??” Bleys gasped within his mind.

Hal replied a little sadly. “Once, I was a professional soldier...”

As Bleys shrank to become a shadowy part of Hal's inner self, long feared but finally accepted, an earthquake shook the chamber. Bleys' eyes showed rocks starting to roll cross the trembling plain.

Hal rose on the feet of his new body, slung both swords over one brawny shoulder, and picked up the corpse of his former body in a fireman's carry.

Exiting the Tower, he lowered the body to the barren ground and bent to heft rock after rock, each of which he placed carefully into the form of a cairn once seen here through the eyes of Paul Formain.

As he fitted the final stones, a massive shudder made the ground buckle. With the ancient Tower coming apart behind him in a massive clashing of broken stone, he stepped back through the phase wall...

* * * * *

“What was the last thing he felt?” Rukh asked, but the question that might have come from Ajela instead. Hal smiled wearily. We have enriched and strengthened each other, just as the Splinter Culture worlds will continue to do now that we have saved them.

“Relief. The relief of the vampire redeemed. His long exile was finally over and the old wound closed at last. In the end, he was right to pursue me, even if for the wrong conscious reasons.”

“And Toni attacked you because she recognized you,” mused Jeamus.

“I’m sure she did. I could wear the Bleys persona well enough to fool her from a distance for a few moments, but not up close.”

Amanda hugged him tight and kissed him. Her eyes narrowed impishly. “You know, I could get used to this handsome new you. The dark eyes, the chiseled features....”

“Don’t start.”

She laughed, then sobered. “Seriously, Hal, you can change yourself back, can’t you?”

“Not right away. I’ll need this body while I train the Others, drawing on my Bleys side when I need to. Eventually I’ll go back to dealing with everyone the way Bleys did: primarily through video and other methods of mass communication. Intuitive logic will allow me to make a number of pre-recordings for probable future developments. By the time I turn this body back into my own, the Others will have been reeducated to the point where they can handle it.”

He chuckled briefly. “They have no idea what kind of retraining they’re getting themselves into. One day they will have evolved enough to be more comfortable with Hal than Bleys. A requirement of entering the Creative Universe might be stated as, ‘Abandon all hierarchy, all ye who enter here.’ Now that the war’s over we must abandon it too.”

The beginning of a poem by William Stafford rolled through his mind:

It is time for all the heroes to go home...

Rukh peered at him. “What about the holdouts? The Others who disagree with the new approach?”

“Henry and his Hounds will keep track of them. As a handful against billions, not to mention their own people, they won’t pose a significant problem.”

Ajela appeared in the doorway, stared in horror at Hal, then smiled as her Exotic sensibilities clued her in. “Hal! The battle’s over! You won!”

* * * * *

The man was unique, but no longer odd.

Hal Mayne, Director of the Final Encyclopedia, watched in satisfaction one year after the Battle of Terra as Rukh Tamani was sworn in as Coordinator for Earth. She would have a busy time of it now that the New Worlds flourished once again and postwar commerce and diplomacy were picking up.

Hal's only regret was that he could not attend the ceremony in person; his face would have shocked the public, and the Others in particular. Most of them still believed Bleys Ahrens to be in charge. They would learn differently soon enough.

As head of the new Chantry Guild, Amid the Exotic was already learning differently. He had called Hal earlier to congratulate him on his victory and to report something previously unheard of among Exotics: a fistfight. Hal took the call in his office.

"How is Cee?" Hal asked him.

"Healing well and on her way to becoming the bright and powerful young lady we expected. She has taken to walking the Circle."

"Already an interest in the spiritual?"

Amid's sigh was barely perceptible. "Well, perhaps not just yet. Walking the Circle was an imposed consequence. She was the one who started the fistfight."

Hal laughed. It had been a long time since he had allowed himself completely uninhibited laughter. Amid smiled patiently.

"And what do your ontogenetic calculations show about the future?"

Uncharacteristically, the Exotic pursed his lips. "They continue to show you as a pivotal Isolate of significant influence."

"You need a better word than 'Isolate.' I no longer feel isolated from the rest of humanity."

"You make an interesting point, Hal. I'll mention it to my fellow researchers. But what I'm leading up to is this: You will recall the mistake we made with Donal."

Hal remembered. He quoted Sayona the Bond: "*Merely* intuitive..."

"We are determined not to make that mistake again. Would you be willing to participate in further studies? We are particularly interested in why, despite repeated early traumas, you did not become a Bleys psychologically."

Hal studied Amid's image for a moment. "You'll have to come to the Dorsai to study me. After all this time, I'm finally going home. 'Home': there's an important word long missing from the vocabulary of the Others. Exiles among their own people and places. No wonder they tried to remake the worlds into a haven of control for themselves."

"Indeed. There's a long historical precedent of the displaced becoming displacers unless the necessary healing and insight occur."

"I'm still wondering what ontogenetics has to say not just about me, but about the future of humanity." Donal-within smiled ironically at that. *Maybe they've learned*, Hal told him.

"The way seems clear now, but if the past crisis taught us anything, it's not to succumb to blind faith in our theories. Just think of it, Hal: we have sixteen small worlds among millions upon millions in our galaxy alone. Who can really say what awaits us out there?"

"Whatever it is, perhaps now we'll stand a chance of being ready for it."

As for Ajela, she was facing and managing plenty of challenges in her position as InterWorld Secretary for Education. He glanced at the numbers provided by her office that morning. Emigration between New Worlds had reached a peak, with interchange between the old Splinter Cultures at an all-time high now that their post-conflict economies were picking up.

In a generation this cross-fertilization would make the label "Other" meaningless. The race-animal never rested in its attempts to evolve beyond its limitations.

Amanda came into Hal's office just as Rukh's swearing-in ceremony ended. "Rourke sends you his regards," she said, taking his hand.

"How is he?"

"Happily busy as chief of the InterWorld Peace Force. He and the Grey Captains had been worried about the Dorsai's prospects given the usual lack of interest in peacetime military employment, but keeping that peace on sixteen worlds provides stabler income than ever. And our people don't have to end up on opposite sides anymore."

"Good. How are the Others adapting to the new situation?"

"For the most part realistically and sensibly. They seem to have finally accepted that the universe needs no more Napoleons. Many are turning into fine leaders. The rest are being watched by Henry and his Hounds. Ajela has them marked down as reeducational priorities."

Hal chuckled. "Kids in the candy store."

“Pardon?”

“‘Be careful of what you wish for.’ According to Ajela, most of the as-yet unawakened Others now believe their advanced training under ‘Bleys’ will provide them with an even better weapon than crossbred charisma: namely, the Creative Universe itself. ‘Now we will be truly unbeatable!’ Not realizing until too late that training has a way of changing the trainee—in this case into the ethical-responsible individual, for only such may enter the magic kingdom on their own. Ajela says that more and more of them look back at their former power-hungry selves and marvel at their immaturity.”

“Is that how you see your past selves?” She came into his arms.

“Sometimes. Like Bleys, they are parts of me, but parts the rest of me has outgrown, even if it took me three lifetimes to do it. The heroic aspiration in particular. We need more stories about the post-heroic. What happens when we outgrow the sword and shield? Another lesson for humanity, or at any rate, for me.”

“So now that you’re not a tool of history anymore, when do we take off for Foralie?”—biting his ear.

“Amanda, I still have so much to do here—”

“—Most of which can be done from a distance or via the Creative Universe. The doorway you’ve opened deprives you of such excuses.”

“Then there’s oversight of what’s left of the Others—”

“Ajela has that well in hand, and your video recordings will take care of the rest. Must I bite your other ear?”

“We will have to set things up so the Dorsais will keep quiet about my immigration there...”

“Graemes!” she breathed. “Fast in a fight, but ever slow in love.”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “Don’t you see it yet, genius? Look how many generations it has taken for a Graeme to finally homestead with a Morgan!”

Notes from the Grimoire of Dworkin

Author's note:

*As I've mentioned elsewhere, Roger Zelazny's science fiction and fantasy stories influenced me growing up. The first book I read of his was *Nine Princes in Amber*, which a bored eighth-grader came across in a drug store and decided to buy, what the hell. Since then, I've often mourned that Zelazny never finished a series of Amber tales which came to ten novels and several short stories. So I decided to finish it to my own satisfaction.*

*A nice thing about the *Assembling Terrania Cycle* is that in the *Dreamvale* layer of reality, all stories and their characters remain alive, waiting for their chance to reappear on the stage of imagination.*

When a wizard gives consciousness to his grimoire, it must decide right then whether to be a closed book or an open one. I decided long ago to be an open book.

Not that many would ever read me. I spend most days sitting on a dusty table between a talking skull and a pouch holding shimmering gravel taken from some shadow or other. The skull came from a Chaos yeti who tried to get its poisonous teeth into the wizard. The pouch was cut from its soft and furry skin. The wizard regards them as mementos of a home he left behind ages ago.

The room around me contained no windows, but all four walls held old books and, between them, instruments of magic. On the table beneath me were more books, some papers, quills that never ran dry, and a paperweight of crystal. The table stood upon a thick rug bearing an ornate border framing mysterious mandalic images.

Of the two doors at the end of the room, one opened onto the primal Pattern of Amber whose glowing gold-pink swirls I saw only when my creator, Dworkin, sat next to it to write. The other door led to a small nook hewed from rock, part of which served as a fireplace.

Dworkin had been gone some time now. His last entry was weeks old.

"I'm kind of bored," I told the skull. Its grin seemed to widen a trifle.

"At least you still have your skin on."

True. Dworkin had jacketed me with a scaly black cover woven of sturdy materials enchanted so they would not age. I was older than his children and grandchildren. Even so, I never grew larger than a moderately hefty tome. Now and then, the older parts of me archived themselves automatically somewhere, in the Undershadow maybe, invisible but still connected. My memory remained intact.

For example, my pages hold some verses Dworkin penned in me after the arduous effort of drawing the first Pattern while staring through the left Eye of Chaos. The Unicorn had fought the Serpent, snatched the gem from its head, and carried it to him shortly after his departure from the Courts of Chaos. Upon recovering, he had mused on his achievement:

Channeled through red Stone,
the rebel fire of my restless spirit
drew Order's bright design in rock
encircled by a sea of deepest night.

Summoned forth to stop me,
Chaotic elders howled and spat
but none could touch my creativity
unleashed to form the shining maze of light.

Rearing in triumphant glee,
The Unicorn gazed upon a newborn sun
that set below white lattices of stars
ablaze within the cobalt waters bright.

And so rose a new balance between Serpent and Unicorn, Chaos and Order, each now placed at its own pole of existence, the shadowlands stretching between them....until Dworkin's grandson Corwin drew his own Pattern and upset the balance. He was good at that.

The balance had nearly failed once before, when ambitious Grandson Brand stabbed young Martin from within the primal Pattern and shifted cosmic influence toward Chaos. Prince Brand sought to redesign the universe in his own mad image. But he failed, opening a path to the restoration of balance, at which point Prince Corwin made his move. With the best intentions and all like that.

About this more recent history Dworkin wrote:

With two Patterns in existence, the balance of power is now in Order's favor. This unhealthy state of affairs has prompted Old Powers to return to life. Born of Serpent and Unicorn, older than Pattern or Logrus, and eager to awaken through bloody sacrifice, the Eleven stir once more.

Suhuy and I agree on the ultimate solution, as do Mandor and Fiona. Mandor took persuading, but he has come around. What must be done to restore the great balance is, after all, obvious.

Suhuy is Dworkin's opposite number in the Courts of Chaos. They recently met to play wizardly chess at the Great Divide, where the shadows of Amber and Chaos meet and merge. Perhaps that's where Dworkin has gone. But he's never away for this long.

* * * * *

He was suddenly back and shaking globes to glowing life.

As they floated through the air, he removed an orange traveling cloak, black gloves, and a purple scarf and draped them carelessly over invisible wall hooks. Standing a staff in one corner, he let out a sigh as he sat at the table, a portion of his white beard spreading over it.

“About time.” My tone cut across the welcome-back noises given off by the other animate objects.

Dworkin squinted at me. “Perhaps I was wrong to give you sight and a tongue.”

“Sorry. I was concerned.”

He gestured, and I opened. A quill hovered over a blank page as he packed his pipe and tamped it.

The quill ran busily over me as he dictated:

Preparations for the new era are now made. Most of the Old Powers forged in ancient times through the Eyes of the Serpent have been consecrated with blood. The Great Rebalancing is finally at hand.

He placed a red finger in the briar bowl. A pleasant blue haze of tobacco filled the air. These days he favored a cavendish from the Shadow Earth.

“I seem a bit behind on current events.”

“Worry not, old book. Soon you will have the full accounting.”

“I know you had planned on speaking again with Merlin. Show me that conversation at least?”

Chuckling, Dworkin summoned a floating globe and touched its surface.

Cut to monochrome:

On a hilly grey plain of broken columns stood a black-bearded hunchback speaking with a slim young man whose dark hair flared white.

“...Hard to find a place where Pattern and Logrus won’t overhear,” the hunchback explained. “We’ll have to live with the color value reversals.”

The other nodded. “I’ve been here before. A Pattern-ghost resembling my father brought me here.”

“The original once came to my study unannounced. Corwin gets around.”

“You probably know what he and I have been planning. Is that why we’re conferencing here?”

“That is so. Some things to remember for when you order the spikard to bring you to Delwin and Sand...”

The conversation then went technical. Sensing my wandering attention, Dworkin extinguished the globe.

After he ate, slept, and poked the fire, he put on his traveling garments once again.

“Long excursion or short?”

“Medium. Do you want to sleep this time until I return?”

We magical objects in the room had an informal betting pool going about what was up. Skull voted for another big war. Quill thought it might be a magical contest with brave deeds and so forth. Luminous Branch hoped whatever it was did not threaten oceanic Rebma. I guessed a significant confrontation between Pattern and Logrus. Did I need to stick around for yet more speculation?

“Send me to sleep. I’ll catch up with you when you come back.”

When consciousness returned, so had Dworkin. He stood smiling down at me.

“Things have shifted to break, blow, burn, and make the new.”

Wizards love being mysterious. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, enough time has gone upright in his carriage that I can now tell you all about it.”

At this, chatter broke out among my colleagues. Dworkin turned, eyebrows raised. “I had no idea you were all so curious,” he told them unconvincingly. “Attend me, then, whilst I a tale unfold...”

* * * * *

You have all heard me muttering about events both before Patternfall and after. An important part to remember is that Corwin’s Pattern tipped the ancient balance between Order and Chaos, and therefore between Amber and the Courts. His son Merlin’s actions tipped it further, yea, unto the awakening of ancient Powers.

These Powers, numbering eleven, were forged from the Eyes of the Serpent even before Suhuy drew the first Logrus and I the first Pattern, summoned as I was by the Unicorn to preserve the cosmic balance. Nine of the Powers, the spikards, were used to consolidate Shadow by the other two Powers, which subsided into Thelbane and Castle Amber once conditions had settled.

Even so, Chaos ladies and lords schemed for a return to a pre-Amber past.

Meanwhile, Delwin and Sand of Amber had left the court and exiled themselves. Suhuy and I deemed them duly neutral. We trained them to be Guardians and gave them the spikards for safekeeping. The power of three were muted by being changed into blades carried by my grandsons of the House of Amber. For balance, a fully powered, untransformed spikard was given to the King of Chaos. That left five to the Guardians, each of whom wore one and stored the rest.

So matters stood until Corwin drew his Pattern. The resulting disturbances to the continuum stirred the Eleven. All but one have been awakened by the blood sacrifices they arranged for empowering themselves. They are eager to play a part in rebalancing the grand design.

You all know me to be a snoop who keeps to himself. I seldom go out, but my eyes and ears go everywhere. I listened in on the recent planning session between Merlin and Corwin. Suhuy did as well, at my invitation.

As father and son sat together in a replica of Merlin's old four-wheeled vehicle, the conversation turned to methods for mending the imbalance. The vehicle stood under a large tree near the beginning of Corwin's Pattern. Merlin wore his human form.

"So that's my idea," Merlin said.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. It makes sense. After all, this Pattern—" Corwin hooked a thumb at his glowing creation "—lives both here as a shadow and in its own universe without a partner for balance. Like its maker, it's a loner. So what will you be about first to settle this thing?"

"I'm taking Delwin up on his invitation for a visit so I can get up to speed on matters spikard."

"Good. The Old Ones are stirring, as Luke and I found to our intense discomfort recently." He placed one hand on his aching abdomen. "And then?"

"And then I'll need your help preparing for the trial."

"I'll do what I can, but I might be busy keeping your enemies off your back."

"Thanks. Just knowing you're back in action helps. A lot, actually."

Corwin clapped his son's shoulder. "I appreciate the sentiment even while ruing the extra risk and labor my efforts have caused you."

"If I succeed it will take care of my problems too."

"What would you say your mother is up to in all of this?"

A frown crossed Merlin's face. "Something covert, underhanded, and Machiavellian, I'm sure."

"Agreed. I have an idea about what and am putting preparations in place."

Merlin looked at him. "Please don't hurt her if you can possibly avoid it."

"I won't. Her scaly henchmen are another matter."

He winked and moved the foot that bent the leg that jounced the scabbard that held Grayswandir.

* * * * *

Dworkin continued:

From the site of Corwin's Pattern, Merlin willed the spikard to take him to Delwin, having called ahead first. Sand was present as well. I listened to Merlin's thoughts....

We stood together on a path along an intricately ridged coastline. The height below us grew green scrub but little else. A brisk breeze ruffled the sea beyond the edge. Dark islets under the cloudy sky reminded me of Wales on the Shadow Earth.

The two looked alike: slim of build, alert green eyes, red-blond hair flicked by the wind. They both wore black shirts, but his vest was brown, her jacket tan. Her shirt enclosed her neckline, but his was open. Both wore rings like my own.

"I am Delwin," the man said, "and this is my sister Sand."

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. The Powers you spoke of in a vision are breaking loose indeed."

"Yes," Sand said. "We Guardians keep an ear out for such things. This event is cataclysmic on a universal scale."

"My understanding is that the two of you exiled yourselves from Amber two centuries ago. If that is true, I am grateful for the conversation at this dire time."

Delwin smiled slightly. “King Oberon’s treatment of our mother and our homeland provided a useful reason for departure, but our guardianship of the Old Powers made necessary a continued absence. We could not remain neutral while living in Amber.”

“The spikards are far older than your exile, though, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Sand acknowledged. “The custom since the dawn of time is that two sibling Guardians watch over the sleeping Old Ones. The last pair of Guardians came from the Courts but, like us, lived in Shadow. The next two will be of Chaos as well, assuming all falls as it should.”

We began to walk along the path above the sea. I glanced around but saw no buildings or other signs of habitation. It felt a rough, briny kind of peaceful here.

At length, “I have a plan,” I told them, “for restoring the balance disrupted when my father, Prince Corwin, drew his Pattern. It has the support of Corwin, Dworkin, and Suhuy, and I believe at least some of my Amber and Chaos relatives will endorse it as well. But before I go into that, I need to know more about these Old Powers and the part they play in all the turbulence.”

The two of them nodded together. Sand went first: “The Old Ones were brought forth before even Logrus and Pattern...”

I listened carefully as we walked, occasionally raising a question. When their explanation ended, I told them of my plan to restore the Great Balance.

“We too endorse your plan,” Delwin said as they negotiated a Pattern-like turn, ducking briefly under a tall bush extending Logrus-like arms over the trail. “It makes good sense. In the long run, it should heal the imbalance and send the Old Ones back to sleep. For now, however, they remain active and dangerous players.”

Sand turned to me. “The nine spikards are convinced that Order has grown too strong. This bias makes them easier for the Courts to manipulate. The one in your pocket that allowed itself to be enchanted, for example. Should they take sides, your task will be even more difficult.”

“What exactly is my task?”

“To touch all of them with the spikard you now wear and, at the appropriate moment, to convince them to enlist on the side of your plan for the restoration of the balance.”

“Swell.” I took a breath. “But you said nine. What about the other two Powers?”

“They have already taken sides. Fortunately, they are immobile, set to guard the Sign to which they owe allegiance.”

Sand reached toward me with her ring hand. I touched my spikard to hers. After a brief silver flash, my hand tingled for a moment. I touched rings with Delwin as well.

He then brought forth a small box of what looked like polished wood. It opened by itself to reveal two more rings. I touched them with mine.

I removed the spellbound spikard from my pocket, touched it to the one on my finger, put it away again. Where might Bleys be swashbuckling just then? I needed to look him up soon.

“Five down,” she said, “and four to go.”

“Six. I don’t want Thelbane and Castle Amber to feel left out. I have enough trouble on my backside without pissing them off too.”

As we halted and stared out at stony promontories washed by restless waves, Delwin clasped my forearm. “We wish you much luck, Merlin. Getting possession of the Serpent’s other Eye will be particularly challenging.”

* * * * *

At this point I could not stop myself from interrupting: “Wait a minute. The Serpent’s other Eye? Are you putting us on?” It wouldn’t have been the first time. “Why would he need the Serpent’s right eye? How could he ever obtain it?”

In response, Dworkin pulled a globe from the air. It inflated between his spreading hands until it grew large enough for everyone to see the scene playing inside it.

“I’m very glad you are here,” Coral told Merlin, who had taken her into his arms to kiss her. “A crystal cave is no place for a lady.”

“Depends on the lady. And her lover. Remind me to tell you about Vivianne some time. She had a thing for wizards.”

“Well, I have a thing for you...”

“Fast forward!” I prompted. Dworkin obliged.

“—Do you really think the Logrus will agree to it?”

“Sure. It has much to gain by it. Dworkin and Suhuy will help us negotiate. The Pattern, though, is another matter.”

A circle of light shone through the green cave walls. “Dad, are you in there?”

“Yes, Ghost. Me and Coral.”

“Two of your elders and betters request your presence at Checkpoint Shadowlands.”

“Ready?” asked Merlin. Coral took a breath and nodded. They got up and headed for the ladder.

“I still don’t get it.” The skull clacked its teeth together in agreement. The glowing coral rattled.

Dworkin waved a hand. The scene shifted to a clearing in a twilight forest watched over by blue mountains.

The Signs of Order and Chaos, the labyrinthine Pattern and angular Logrus, hovered on one side of the clearing, with the Unicorn and Serpent positioned behind them. In a semicircle facing the Signs stood Dworkin, Suhuy, Merlin, Coral with post-surgery eyepatch, Random, Vialle, Flora, Bances, Corwin, Mandor, Fiona, and Luke.

Near them, off to the side, waited Sand and Delwin, watching. Luke had again introduced himself to them, mentioning this time that he was a friend of Merlin. They decided to give him a chance despite misgivings. Was not his mother Jasra to blame for Brand’s Fountain-impelled psychosis, a madness that could have destroyed all existence? Well, sometimes apples do fall far from the tree.

“We’ve been thinking again about that microwave you offered to sell us,” Sand began when a gong sounded by Suhuy called for silence throughout the group.

Merlin stepped forward to make the pitch. A jaunty opening line suggested itself—“I expect a clean match, with no elbows or headbutts”—but he wisely thought better of it. A pendant once again, the Jewel of Judgment burned a steady red upon his breast.

“The deal is simple,” Merlin told the Signs and the gods behind them. Luke nearly winked, but he too reconsidered. “It begins with return of the Jewel of Judgment to Chaos. Then you, Serpent, will loan the other Eye to me temporarily.”

“For what purposssss?” The rumbling-hissing Serpent swayed restlessly.

“With your right Eye, which contains the matrix of the Logrus, I will enter the universe of my father’s Pattern, find a suitable location, and inscribe a new Logrus there. That will allow those two Signs to be fully integral to their own cosmos, eliminating the turbulence in this one, quieting the Eleven once again, and universally balancing things out. I will then return your Eye to you. Problem solved.” Corwin nodded.

“But if the Serpent gets its *left* eye back,” asked Luke, “won’t the universe end in a return to the primal Chaos?”

Suhuy stepped forward. “That Eye will remain in my keeping at the Chaos end of all things.”

The Unicorn stamped a hoof, shaking the ground, as its Sign blared, “We fought and bled to obtain the Jewel of Judgment ages ago, as compensation for an encroachment by the Serpent! Why should we return it now? What would Order gain by such a sacrifice?”

Dworkin fielded this one: “Aside from the restoration of the universe, the goodwill of Chaos, peace between Amber and the Courts, and the restabilization of all of Shadow? If you must think only in terms of your own contest of power, how does Order’s possession of all the spikards strike you?”

“We propose the return of Delwin and Sand to Amber. The Guardians stand ready to reintroduce the Old Powers to the realm of Order, where the Nine shall slumber unless needed again.” The Guardians bowed.

Merlin took another step forward. “Since before history began, you two Principles have manipulated powers, peoples, and events in your ongoing contest of dominance. I suspect you even brought Amber and the Courts of Chaos into being to help further your endless competition. Throughout Shadow, long histories and entire worlds have swung one way, then the other, birth and death, renaissance and collapse, depending on which of you was temporarily stronger.”

Mandor heard the anger in Merlin’s voice and hoped he wasn’t about to rant.

“Your creations now insist on being more than passive pawns in your great game. We have our own agendas to carry out. We can also participate actively in your struggle to define yourselves in contrast to each other. We are come of age.”

Merlin stared them down and continued. “We propose, therefore, an Interrealm Arena of Justice where Order and Chaos can bring disputes for mediation. The Arena will be part courtroom, part embassy, and part stadium, depending on the issue being decided.”

“To further serve the Great Balance,” Suhuy stated, “let the Arena be housed in Amber, staffed by representatives of both Amber and the Courts, monitored by myself and Dworkin, and overseen by a mortal from Shadow: namely, Bill Roth, Attorney to the Courts of Amber and Chaos.”

“I’ll be one of Amber’s reps,” Flora whispered to Fiona. “Who knows? This may be my first long-term job.” For once, Fiona served amity by simply smiling without remark.

When both Signs continued to bicker and equivocate as twilight headed for night, Merlin cleared his voice. Unicorn and Serpent regarded him balefully.

“We have given you a workable agreement and a fair trade. Royalty of Amber and the Courts endorse it. It’s in your best interests as well as ours and everyone else’s. Will you commit to it, here and right now, intelligently and with resolve, or stubbornly go on failing to? You wear the aspect of divinity. Act like it, and choose.”

Flora gasped. Luke smirked. Mandor covertly fondled his silvery balls. Random waited to be struck by lightning. Good thing he had updated his will to give his drum kit to Martin.

After a moment, “We have one more question,” called out the Logrus Sign in ever-shifting tones. The Pattern Sign dipped in agreement.

“King Random rules peacefully in Amber. Who will rule in the Courts of Chaos?”

* * * * *

Dworkin took back the narrative:

Having renounced her Amber citizenship after Merlin was born, his mother, Dara of the Ways of Helgram, sorceress ally of the Logrus of Chaos, had joined the ranks of those Chaosites who remained adamant about a return to the old days before Amber and its Pattern existed.

Two of her schemes had failed. Brand had been a crazy blunt instrument, and Merlin a flawed one now out of her control. But a third option remained in effect: obliterate the Patterns, with Prince Corwin’s first on the list, and enlist some properly power-seeking help.

For the Patterns held a fatal weakness. Royal blood could erase them. Dara reached out to make common cause with her old student, Jasra, initiate of the Broken Pattern....

Although Rinaldo had started life as a programmable Logrus-ghost generated by that Sign, Merlin had given him fresh blood that broke him free of his origins. He had walked Corwin’s Pattern and been accepted as its defender.

Therefore when Jurt winked into existence near that Pattern’s beginning under the big tree and set foot upon it, Rinaldo drew his sword and went after him.

“This is a Chaos-free zone,” Rinaldo said as he walked the design. “Members only allowed.” Sparks crackled at his feet.

“The Pattern doesn’t seem to mind me here,” Jurt replied as he kept moving ahead, his own feet outlined in fire.

Reaching the First Veil, he struggled as he slowed, at length shrugging off sparks and passing beyond it. He wore no blade.

“What do you intend doing?” Rinaldo spoke with effort as he began to enter the Veil.

Jurt halted and turned. “I have a ritual sacrifice in mind.”

Had Jurt worn a blade, he would have been in time to catch Rinaldo struggling against the Veil. The Pattern would not protect him against steel, but it should against magic.

Rinaldo entered the Veil, sword in hand.

A crossbow bolt pierced his back near his left kidney. As he staggered under the impact, swearing and off balance, Jurt walked back through the Veil and jerked the sword from Rinaldo's hand. He raised the blade.

"Good night, sweet Pattern-ghost." Jurt's thrust entered the chest. Rinaldo turned to bright vapor and evaporated.

As Jurt turned to negotiate the Veil once again, a tall, hooded figure bearing a crossbow stepped out from behind the tree and saluted him. He waved back and, breaking through, marched on toward the Second Veil.

Before reaching it, he paused again. Reaching up one sleeve, he produced a Trump given to him by the hooded figure. He concentrated...

"But wait," I interrupted. "Why did Corwin's Pattern let Jurt walk it at all?"

"Patience."

The Trump call interrupted Dalt's conference with Jasra, who had asked him to the Keep of Four Worlds to discuss a military mission against a local ally of Amber.

"Who is it?" he asked, standing. His massive chest and arms filled out a yellow shirt. He wore black trousers. A large broadsword hung from one hip and a long dagger from the other. Jasra stood near his left shoulder.

Jurt studied him. "Dalt of Eregnor, I understand you are interested in the destruction of Amber."

Dalt stared back. "I am."

"What price are you prepared to spend for this?"

"Any."

"I am pleased to hear that."

Jasra's head darted forward. She bit deeply into Dalt's left bicep.

He pushed her away, but with her venom entering his system, he was already slowing and shaking his head. From behind him, Jasra shoved him forward.

Jurt stabbed again with Rinaldo's sword. It stood out from Dalt's chest near the medallion of a lion rending a unicorn.

As Dalt reeled back in agony, Jurt grabbed his blond hair and jerked him forward. Streams of blood fell upon the Pattern.

Dalt whispered his death curse: "May Jasra be undone by her own scheming."

The figure outside the Pattern pulled back her hood. Dara's lips parted in triumphant anticipation. The pool of blood spread across the Pattern, darkening a quarter of the surface now.

"What do you see?" she called out to Jurt. He was silent.

The crimson pool widened. She saw no sparks, no breaks, no smeared-out Pattern lines. She shook her head in dismay. What had gone wrong?

Another figure stepped out from behind the tree's other side.

"The great thing about liquid glass," he explained, removing his scaled gauntlets and tucking them behind a wide black belt, "is that the particles of silicon dioxide they contain not only repel contamination, they leave a nice shine on the surfaces they coat. That Pattern hasn't been polished since I drew it. Long overdue."

"You," she said in a low tone, "are a bastard."

"Technically not, although I doubt you are speaking genealogically."

"What about the sparks and Veils?"

"Special effects agreed to and arranged by the Pattern. A nice touch, I thought."

"Were the deaths of Rinaldo and Dalt a nice touch as well?"

He looked somber. "I had hoped to arrive here in time to prevent them, but a shadow storm delayed me. Speaking of ghosts, Jurt there is one too, isn't he? Lobotomized upon delivery courtesy of the Logrus?"

She nodded and made a gesture. Jurt opened his mouth to protest but evaporated.

"You shouldn't have come here alone," she stated, walking toward him.

"Careful. I have a spikard and I know how to use it now." He tapped Grayswandir. "Not to mention a grateful Pattern standing nearby. A Pattern aware that you just tried to kill it." A quick spray of sparks shot upward from its center.

She stopped. "Why did you arrange all this? You could have thwarted the attempt without going to all the trouble."

He hooked his thumbs in his belt. "I am here to ask for a truce."

"You? A truce?" She laughed. He waited her out.

"I killed someone you cared for," he admitted, "and thwarted your plans more than once. You in turn lied to me, kept our son a secret, imprisoned me, turned my brother Brand against all of us, tried to place our son involuntarily on the throne of Chaos, and just now murdered Dalt and a Pattern-ghost resembling Brand's son. Those are only the dastardly acts I know of."

"Your own hands were not clean even before Borel. You have often killed for your own causes, noble or otherwise."

"That I well know. But it is between us now. I am offering you a ceasefire."

Curiosity tightened her eyes. "Why?"

"I would be on better terms with the mother of my boy. I know he is angry with you about any number of things. What son isn't? But just look at how he turned out. He is exemplary, and I am proud of him. You had a large part in that, for which I am grateful regardless of what unfolds with us, for ill or good."

One eyebrow lifted. "Any other reason?"

"While you were busy trying to erase my Pattern and, presumably, the one in Amber next, Merlin made a decision that will shortly rebalance Amber, Chaos, and all the shadowlands between them. He has come to terms with Serpent and Unicorn, and they with him. Ten of the Eleven Old Powers are his allies, and the eleventh will be soon if all goes well."

"I knew of the Great Divide Summit, of course, but I've not yet heard the results." Her face was impassive, but pride in Merlin was growing behind it.

"I know you now favor the return of the old ways, Dara. But the old ways are dead and will not return. Let the new balance begin with peace between us. –Besides, you're getting something else you wanted, although not as you had planned: control of the throne of Chaos."

"What? You favor this?"

"I helped arrange it. Come along. We need to talk."

They walked together through the mist.

After a time, Dara dropped the crossbow. Corwin raised a black boot and smashed it.

* * * * *

And so with Merlin's thoughts once again for a time:

It was good to feel Frakir back on my wrist. She was silent for a long while, my apologies notwithstanding, but in the end she forgave me. Luke had brought her to me.

I stood on the brink of the Abyss, where stars fell from the sky into the final void where all things begin and end. The glassy black needle of Thelbane pierced the air behind me.

It was nearly bluesky, the time I had asked to meet. I took a breath and tried to be ready for anything.

The voice preceded the form: "Scenic site for conversation. Forgive me if I do not venture very close to the drop. One time was enough."

The one Rhanda had called "the hidden sorcerer" stood beside me, near but not too near the edge of all things. I was armed with blade and spikard. I do not know what he had brought. Both of us were under observation by our own allies located elsewhere.

We nodded to one another. I had figured out who he was before his arrival. Process of elimination, if you'll pardon the ghastly pun. He had faked his death right here, which is one reason I had asked to meet here. Fearing Mandor, before whom so many applicants to the throne had fallen, he had gone underground and behind the mirror to guard his life and his rightful claim.

He had been briefed on the recent Summit. My hope was that it would change our relationship so I wouldn't have to kill him.

I greeted him. "Lord Tubble, I asked for this meeting because I sincerely wish to come to terms."

"That," he replied, "will depend on what is offered."

"Then let me state openly that I believe you to be a more suitable fit for the throne than I."

He examined me dispassionately. "Yet your Sawall relatives have gone to much trouble to place you there."

"True enough. I have now convinced them I will not occupy the throne. In fact, I will be off to another universe and out of the hair of everybody in this one."

He smiled coldly. He was somewhat larger in his human form than the short wizard Flora and Frakir had encountered in Amber, where he had gone in disguise. Also, a

smaller body was easier to fit through the convoluted passages of the mirrorworld. Evidently, he had spent a lot of time there, a peeper with his own selection of one-way windows.

“Naturally, I would need proof of these assertions.”

“I am prepared to offer it once immediate business is concluded. But I do have a question. How far down the succession will you aim? My brother Despil is next in line, and Jurt after him. Jurt has been ambitious, Despil not at all. Do you intend to go after either of them? Or the ones coming after them?”

“No. Pretenders aside, you have been my immediate rival for the throne as the claimant next on the list. Because of all the fatalities in the line of succession, I naturally assumed you to be a willing ally of the dispatchers. I have come to realize, however, that you were not. Suhuy confirms this, and he is an honorable man above our political conflicts of interest.”

“I am glad to hear this, Lord.”

“I, however, am not.”

I turned at these unexpected words. Julia stood there.

The last time I had seen her she looked startled and demure in a blue wrap, her dark hair bound back. It was still bound back, but she now wore a blouse and trousers of midnight blue. A black cloak flared at her back. Her eyes flashed as she assumed a sorcerer’s fighting stance.

I turned to Tubble. “This is not my doing! She is here without leave.”

She raised her hands. “With Merlin out of the picture soon, you, Lord Tubble, are next on *my* list. And you are in my way.”

The Battering Ram spell she opened with contained a clever twist, starting as an invisible giant hammer and landing low down like a linebacker going for the knees. Tubble’s gestured ripost simultaneously blew the Ram apart while hardening into a flight of arrows parried by Julia’s Buckler spell.

I stood back from the fight. I could summon Ghostwheel to transport her, but she might parry the attempt and injure him.

The hard truth was that she had no real chance. Sure, she was good, trained by Jasra, who had been trained by my mother, one of the best in the business. She was gifted with natural talent, and she had studied the Art as an initiate of the Broken Pattern.

Tubble, on the other hand, was a Logrus initiate raised and trained for centuries in the Courts of Chaos.

Back, then, he fought her with an onslaught of spells of impressive tactical complexity and perfect timing. She struggled on, but he was clearly getting the better of her. No sooner did she revive from a Smash and Fold spell that had crunched her into a human accordion than Tubble's Raise and Drop lifted her near the edge of the abyss as the Links of Confinement wound around her straining body. The sound of her choking tore at me.

"Lord Tubble," I said loudly to make sure he heard me, "please spare her. She is a presumptuous pain and had no call to attack you. But she is no match for you, and I would see our agreement sealed with a show of leniency."

He shook his head and kept forcing her toward the Abyss.

I drew the blade. "I do not want to intervene, Lord, but I will to save her life." I pointed the tip at him and revved up the spikard, searching it for a humane combination of spells that would restrain him and save her.

As he pulled back his arms to run power into the spell that would throw her over the edge, I moved to intercept him—and lost control of the blade as it leaped forward and pierced his side. He fell over the brink with a cry, taking the weapon with him.

Just as Julia was about to follow, Jurt came rocketing up from the depths like a mad *fand* player and caught her. Once his feet touched the ground he lowered her and bent over her.

Bleys appeared out of a red-orange whirlwind and strode over. His blade flew up over the edge, spun itself clean of blood, and slid into the scabbard at his hip.

Before the disastrous parley I had touched my ring to it, admiring the elegance of the middle portion of the Pattern inscribed in the golden metal.

"The chain is now complete," Bleys said, glancing once at the spikard. "The Eleven are standing by for instructions."

"Good. I'll need their help after I draw the new Logrus. And by the way, thanks for the loaner."

Bleys rested a hand on the pommel. His red mane always looked like the wind had been at it. "Sverburnir the Noon Blade has a mind of its own," he admitted, "but then all the spikards do. Unfortunate that it chose just then to consecrate itself."

"I don't suppose you gave it any extra oomph when it did?"

Was that a wink? I couldn't be sure.

Others were popping in. I nodded to Bances and Mandor as I walked up to Jurt, still leaning over Julia, who was now gasping. I removed the spikard from my finger.

Her pain-squinted eyes found mine. "I am sorry," she choked. My heart clenched when I thought about how that particular spell could rupture one's insides.

Then she looked at Jurt. "Thank you for teaching me how to love."

She breathed out one last time before her eyes closed. So did Jurt's for a moment. I put my hand upon his shoulder.

When he rose, his jaw tightened as he stared at me.

"I suppose you'd like to believe all this solves what's between the two of us, especially with you going off to your father's universe. But from where I stand..." He paused for a moment as grief started to overcome him. He looked away.

Then: "You were the chosen of our mother and of the Logrus. What's to stop you from coming back to press your claim?"

At another time I would have laughed in disgust. He just never seemed to get past all that. "I won't, Jurt. I'm out. Really."

"You say that now. But later?"

"I have something else to say in order to resolve this for good. Do you recall the ring that the previous King of Chaos wore?"

"Yes. He always had it on. Thick, with reddish metal and tiny spokes. You wore it too."

I reached into my pocket and extracted the ring. "I received this when everyone thought I would take the throne. The ring is a spell sorter with power sources scattered through Shadow. I am giving it to you now. Put it on."

He looked it over and placed it over a finger. His fist clenched.

I threw him an ironic salute. "Congratulations, condolences, and long live the new King of Chaos. And up yours, Jurt. Piss off until you grow up or die trying."

So much for that. I turned and walked over to my parents, who stood together. "What's with you two?"

"We have a lot to discuss," my mother said. Father winked at me. "Jurt now wears the ring?" Not my ring: *that* ring. She and Mandor had put a spell on it to make whoever wore it obedient to their will.

"He does indeed. I wish him well of the whole chaotic mess."

Suddenly, the immensity of Julia’s death—again!—fell on me. I needed to get away from everyone before all the inevitable conversations.

I looked up at Corwin. “I will catch up with you later, before my attempt with the Logrus.” He grasped my shoulder briefly.

I looked over at Jurt, who stood straighter already, and then at Dara. “He’s all yours, and so is control of the throne. Try to keep him out of trouble.”

* * * * *

“I had looked forward to seeing you seated as liege of Chaos.” Mandor poured us coffee from a silver pot.

Behind his white hair, a new mural here at Mandorways depicted tormented souls crying upward from some colorful astral hell, all of it painted with exquisite taste. What Fiona think of it?

“But I am willing to work with Jurt. Particularly after Suhuy recommended it and Dara seemed resigned to it.”

“Good. That should help settle things on this end.”

“For now, at any rate.” He bit into a pastry. Even his manner of chewing looked elegant. “Above all, though, I am quite gratified by your new capacity not only to survive, but to give your life the sense of direction it previously lacked.”

His words sent my mind skimming over the course of recent events. At first I had mainly felt acted upon. Now, I finally felt in charge of my own destiny.

Whether or not he or anyone else agreed with my interpretation of it. I smiled an acknowledgment.

A drifting dime-sized circle of light drew my attention. Glancing at Mandor, “Do you mind if someone joins us?” I asked. “Probably for only a few minutes.”

“By all means.”

The circle swelled into a kind of computer-generated face of indistinct gender and shifting features. Had it come with a body it would have been seated at the table with us.

“Hello, Dad.”

“Hello, Ghost. How are you?”

“Still out trying to find myself.”

“How are you managing?”

“Better since the Pattern and the Logrus decided to leave me alone. Kergma showed up again to play her tricks, but I was wise to her and went into avoidance mode.”

“Good thinking.” I liked Kergma, but the AI hasn’t been born that could defend itself against her computational antics. Well, maybe now it has.

“Dad, I wanted to run something by you. At this point I’ve gained the ability to manipulate the materials and machinery that generate my being. Would it be OK with you if I made some improvements?”

In the past that would have alarmed me. But from the drawing board onward, and despite all adolescent acting out, Ghostwheel had contained an ethical core. And...

“I appreciate being asked. In a sense, you wish to undertake what we all should be doing: self-improvement. Go ahead.”

“Thanks. It helps knowing you went through your version of this.”

“It never ends, Ghost.”

“I might be off traveling and learning for a while, Dad.”

“Me too. Soon I’m headed to the other universe to help consolidate it. I hope you can visit me there when you’re ready. Perhaps my father’s Pattern will let you walk it.”

“Put in a good word for me, will you?”

“I surely will. Call me if you need anything.”

“So long for now.”

The white circle vanished. My breast ached with a sudden pang of...fatherhood? Creatorhood, anyway. It’s hard when they grow up.

After another delicate sip, Mandor glanced across the table at me. “I do hope you won’t forget your friends and family over here, Merlin.”

“That would be impossible. In your case, most of my recollections are pleasantly grateful. I will definitely stay in touch.”

“Do. And don’t hesitate to contact me if you encounter any difficulties in need of removal. It is a task at which I tend to excel.”

* * * * *

Still with Merlin:

“You look older, Son.”

“Uncle Suhuy said that too.”

We sat with our backs against the tree Father had planted so long ago from a single staff screwed into the ground. He placed it there before his supremely arduous attempt to draw his Pattern. Now that I had drawn a Logrus I could understand what the effort had cost him.

An odd thought went through my post-exertion mind: Did he ever tire of the same old livery? I could take purple, gray, and black only so long before I wished for other colors. Yet every time I had seen him, he wore a gray or black shirt, black trousers with a silver line on the outside, black boots with silver clasps, and a black cloak closed with a silver rose. Must be a generational thing. Impressive nonetheless.

“He also told me to escape the cage that was my life.”

His green eyes lit below black hair framing a hard face cracked with a smile. He was old with the age of centuries upon him, but he didn't look a day over thirty-five. “Bravo! You escaped at last. So now the Pattern and Logrus have something else in common: Their first choice of king bowed out. Like father, like son.” We both chuckled.

We sat and pulled forth our pipes. Birds sang in the branches overhead as a layer of fog hugged the Pattern's silvery surface.

“By the way, did you know that Tubble had a thing for Flora?”

“Ha. Yes. Frakir told me.”

“He even maintained a Flora shrine back in the Courts.”

“That part I hadn't heard.” I pushed tobacco into the bowl.

“She is a bit sad about him. She thought his interest intriguing.”

“There will be others. Many others...” We lit up and puffed.

“Incidentally, I hear that your brother Jurt has taken a liking to a fan of his, one Rhanda.”

“Rhanda!” A flash of jealousy passed through me like an electric shock. “Really?”

“Yes. She has watched him from the mirrorworld for some time now. More than watched, I suspect. Anyway, it makes a kind of sense, does it not? A Shroudling as Queen of Chaos. If it works out.”

I shook my head in wonder. “Well, it will certainly put her people in a better light. They’ve been ostracized for a long time. And maybe she will soften him a bit.” I soothed my injured male ego by reminding myself that I had never liked the champion business anyway.

We puffed, having disposed of a chicken, some cheese, half a loaf of bread, and a chocolate pie. An empty bottle of wine sat nearby, with its brother freshly opened.

He crossed his ankles and tamped his bowl. “So what was it like to inscribe a new Logrus?”

Making and multiplying shifting angular limbs with my waving arms and legs while staring into the Eye as I walked... Up one level, down another, round a corner, round another... Alternately baked, frozen, exploded, and imploded; and crazy the entire time....

“It was like scuba diving without a mask in orbit under the influence of ayahuasca while scaling Mt. Everest in the nude while your guts boil and flames pour out of your anus. Aside from that it wasn’t so bad.” Parts of it were hazy now. Defenses are good sometimes.

“Glad the thing went easy on you. No discouraging monsters showed up?” He had struggled to inscribe his Pattern at the bottom of a bubble of downpour and lightning while demonic shapes shrieked at him from just beyond the newly drawn lines.

“No. The Signs were all for it, so maybe that’s why.”

A breeze made eddies in the fog over the Pattern. I waved, and a moist gray limb seemed to wave back. I recalled San Francisco when Karl rolled in.

“I take it you restored the Eye you borrowed to the Serpent?”

“Yes, and all the spikards that aren’t blades will retire once we’ve used them to delineate the new shadowlands. I held a conference call through my ring, and all the artifacts are on board.”

“Excellent.” He puffed.

“Once back in this universe they will go to Delwin and Sand for safekeeping. I am glad your siblings are returning to Amber.”

“As am I. We have a lot of catching up ahead.”

“Seen any Corridors of Mirrors since all this hit the fan?”

“Nope. Can’t say I miss them.”

“Me neither.”

I puffed. “Incidentally, congratulations.”

“For what?” he asked.

“You are going to be a grandfather.”

“No shit? Hot damn. Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Coral. We’re going to have a daughter.”

“Well, hooray for you, and me.” We clinked glasses and drank.

The Pattern had arranged it, of course, with my daughter intended as its new champion of Order, another piece in the game played out between the Signs. That was why it had kidnapped Coral and forced me to find her and more than find her at the center of its newly repaired counterpart. Only now our daughter would be born in a place where she could choose her own way.

“So, you and Coral as King and Queen of Chaos in the Great Beyond Over There?” He gestured in the air with his pipestem.

“I’ve been meaning to discuss that with you. How would you feel about the Corwinverse dispensing with all the royalty and pageantry?”

“I would feel relieved. It has all been a huge pain in the ass. I did not refuse to be King of Amber just to get stuck being king in my own version of Amber. Frankly, Amber is unique, and the Courts too. Let’s keep them that way and make something new together.”

We clinked again. “And *please* don’t call it the Corwinverse. How about the Merlinverse?”

A mental whisper floated up from the direction of my wrist. *The Frakirverse has a nice ring to it.* I petted her.

A light bulb flared. “How about we let it name itself?”

“Works for me. Who is on your guest list?”

“I have some childhood friends I’d like to invite for a visit. Or a stay. My half-brother Despil, for instance. He says he’d like a fresh start somewhere as far from the Courts as

possible. He never did like drama. Ghostwheel if he can get there. Ghost has grown up, though, and he doesn't need his maker around so much anymore."

"Anyone else?"

"Luke, of course, and his partner Nayda. Coral might have some people. Who's on yours?"

"Dierdre. Random and Vialle. Bill Roth if he wants to visit. Benedict, same consideration. All contingent on whether they hit any resistance when they try to walk my Pattern."

"Our lists seem fairly short," I noted. "What of Fiona and Mandor, for instance?"

"Do you trust Mandor?"

"I used to, but the business with the spikard got me thinking. Do you trust Fiona?"

"More than I used to. Sounds like we are agreed on them."

"Yes. Let's give them a chance to give up their intriguing first."

"Check. And the rest?"

I blew a smoke ring that shaped itself into faces: Dara, Dworkin, Suhuy... "A Cheshire Cat advised me: 'The hell with them all.' But they are family."

"Yeah. They are family." I knew what he meant. He had gone far toward coming to terms with his own, but... But. And he didn't know mine, yet.

"You know, if we invite some and not others it could get tense..." He broke off and raised his head as though listening. Fogs swirled over the Pattern. Corwin thumbed in its direction. "It says it will help us screen who is worthy and safe. That seems fair."

Their way in remained this Pattern, situated in the Amber/Courts cosmos one shadow from his primal Pattern and my primal Logrus. We couldn't have asked for better filters. If we pissed off family and friends, we could always blame the Signs...

"By the way, how did Dara and Jasra mend their fences long enough to kill Dalt?"

"Jasra liked the idea of breaking my Pattern," he said. "Also, she never liked Dalt hanging around her son."

"Seeing you and Mother together was...interesting."

I didn't expect him to comment on that. He didn't. Instead, "Although we have a lot of work ahead of us, I'd like to pause from it long enough to invite you to meet an old friend. He looked after me at a difficult time."

"I'd be happy to. Who?"

"Joppa the lighthouse keeper at Cabra. I've not seen him for years. He told me he wanted to know how the story turned out. I feel like the time has finally come to fill him in."

"Sounds good to me." The figure of solitary, cranky, anarchic, drunken, kind-hearted Joppa had sprung forth from my father's first long telling while we sat at the lip of the Abyss. At one time Joppa had captained ships that sailed dozens of Shadow trade routes into and near Amber. The stories he must have.

"Tell me, Merlin, do you think you can retrieve things from Shadow that close to Amber? If not, we can make other arrangements."

"It's more difficult, but I can do it," I said. "What do you need?"

"To pay off an old debt by restocking Joppa's liquor cabinet."

* * * * *

"Wow," I exhaled, joining the collective sigh of the other objects as Dworkin finished showing and telling. "Wow."

"All in all, my grandchildren and their children have done me proud." Clicking tooth applause from the skull; flapping book covers; winking on and off from the coral.

"Truly an amazing account," I said. "Here at the end of it, I'm left with a single question. With whom will you share all this? Outside the walls of your rooms? To whom will you give me? I guess that's two questions, maybe three, but in a way they are the same question."

Dworkin yawned, stretched, and got up. The floating globes he pointed at went out.

Everybody except me went to their own kind of sleep.

He bent toward me, and I felt his beard rustle across my pages.

Quietly: "I've one more entry to make, and then I shall give you into the hands of Merlin and Coral to do with as they will. May your narratives inform and bless the new creation and its awakening inhabitants as they conjure their own fresh destinies."

"One more entry? I'm ready."

“Yes....”

Night. Clouds floated by. A meteor streaked overhead, shedding stars in its wake. The dragons had all gone to sleep.

In a hollow under blue mountains, two ageless entities played a three-dimensional game to its end.

One player was a hunchback with a long beard. The other was a demon with gray and red skin and thick incisors. Or so these two appeared at first glance.

The one resembling a demon moved a piece. His opponent countered. Both sat back.

“I believe,” the demon said, “that makes the game a draw.”

The other chuckled as they put away the pieces for the night and offered: “Best two out of three?”

Fahrenheit 212

“It’s almost time to boil the water!” Enduanna called out as Montag walked a familiar sidewalk down a street he could hardly recognize.

Fifteen years ago, I set my own house ablaze here not long after the death of Clarisse, the talkative teen who had awakened me to my own precious unhappiness. Having burned down Captain Beatty, I fled on foot, a defunct fireman, while half the city watched the pursuit. It had ended only with the nuclear war that had devastated much of the city, killing Mildred and neighbors I had hardly known. He shook his head.

Near the rusting railroad tracks outside the doomed city Montag had met the Book People: former scholars, professors, and autodidacts living on the edge, not daring even to own a book of the kind Montag’s job had been to burn. Reading had been illegal, so the wanderers carried their books in their heads: one old man knowing all of Shakespeare, an old woman steeped in Toni Morrison, another storing the Tao Te Ching. Book People specialized not only the classics, but in many kinds of literature, with some even safeguarding science fiction: Le Guin, Butler, Wells, Bradbury...

Fifteen years: not so much of reconstructing the city and the decimated civilization beyond it as dreaming, constructing, and re-constructing anew. So many needs to consider: homes, power, tools, food, community, all built to withstand the long nuclear winter that killed crops and set bands of raiding survivalists against one another.

Take the city printing press for example: although it could turn out books and articles, flyers and posters on paper, that scarce material had been replaced by husks, straw, bamboo, hemp, flax, cordage, and other odds and ends formerly considered “waste.” As though cued, here was a slice of bamboo in the roadway. Like so much other rubbish left over from the initial blast, it was turned into useful products for people learning the hard lessons of frugality and resilience, lessons the former residents and their government had ignored.

At one time it had been a pleasure to burn. It was time now to build. But the Takers didn’t realize that.

Most of the marauders outside the walls of this and other cities struggling to rise after the war had killed each other off. One group, however, had thrived. Reactivating military materiel, they had come in on tanks and armored personnel carriers, from which poured would-be troops armed with rifles and semiautomatic pistols, the technology of lasers and stunners and aerial assault vehicles beyond them.

Upon the city they had imposed a tyranny from the top down: martial law, brigands guarding the streets, armed control of crops and formerly public labor. The only “government” was a cabal of four brothers, one a “Colonel” who acted as supreme dictator.

Only gradually did their secret emerge: most of them could not read the technical manuals needed to maintain their equipment. Some of it was falling apart.

“We need you Book People to teach us to read those manuals.” To Montag, “Colonel” Jerry Sarken phrased it politely, one reasonable man talking to another, but the “or else” gleamed from the polished barrels of the guns held by the omnipresent guards. There was one now, just up the road.

And Book People to teach their children to read. In most Taker homes, they received a food allowance to do just that. As a key Book People spokesman, Montag taught Sarken’s daughter Enduanna, whose mother Michelle was about to give birth to another daughter.

Montag was surprised the strength of his affection for his eight-year-old charge, and how much pity for her mother. Like most city women, they were ordered to remain at home most of the time regardless of aptitudes or interests. Enduanna was out because of who her father was.

He tossed her his old lighter. He had dropped the legendary 451 igniter fifteen years ago but kept the small salamander-shaped tool, perhaps as a reminder. It still worked.

She caught it, pocketed it, and turned a cartwheel. “I hear my father sent for you.” No brush could control her curly brown hair for long.

“He did.” Would it be a highly unpleasant meeting, perhaps even a lethal one? He wondered whether he would ever see her again.

“I have second sight, you know.”

“You are a kinetic bundle of many amazing talents.”

She shook her head and made a farting noise with her lips, then giggled. She had the childhood knack of hiding her seriousness while knowing perfectly well what was at stake.

“It will go fine.” She flapped her arms as she skipped. “Hard, but fine. See you for my reading lessons later. I hate old Ecclesiastes sometimes, or Solomon or whatever his name is, but let’s see what he does next.”

“See you then.”

* * * * *

The captain’s office in the old city firehouse had been redecorated when the Taker “army”—more a heavily armed mob—came this way and stayed. Montag entered through the solid (and bar-able) double doors, glancing around at the rich red drapes, the looted paintings of French ponds and meadows, the thick-armed golden chair that

served its occupant as a throne. The former radio room wall had been knocked out to enlarge the chamber.

Sarken signed something and dismissed a man in khaki. Another, holding a rifle, took up a position next to the closing door. Montag's sense of foreboding began to boil.

"Sit down, Montag." Sarken sat on his massive seat and laid his arms on top of the chair's. Montag looked across at him and saw a craggy white face. Graying brows that always seemed to frown above expressionless blue eyes. Hair: thinning and combed over to the right. An upper lip that never moved when he spoke: a mannerism cultivated to convey decision. His military-seeming uniform held plenty of colorful décor to suggest a lifetime of battle victories rather than, say, fifteen years of predation upon helpless hamlets and city remnants.

Montag knew what the other saw: black hair and brows framing a dark face, with lines around the mouth and a shadow that no shave ever lightened.

"It has been a busy day," Sarken remarked.

"I have just heard that your wife's delivery may be soon."

Frown lapsed into smirk. "Just what we need, another girl. A boy would have been more useful, lineage-wise."

Montag said nothing, waiting.

"What do you think of my daughter?"

"She is a delight. Bright, intuitive, quick, outgoing, with a retentive memory and a bundle of talents to develop." He wanted to add, And she has soul, but he didn't.

"How's her reading ability?"

"Well above average."

"That's good. It's a pity you won't be able to teach her anymore."

Montag's heart gave out one savage pulse and contracted.

"Don't you want to know why?"

Montag nodded.

"You and the other Book People mentors aren't teaching us and our children to read technical manuals. You're teaching us Chinese and Egyptian philosophy, Western ethics and literature, Cervantes, Okri, and the like."

“We use literature and philosophy as exercise material, nothing more.”

Sarken’s voice rose. “Nothing more? Then how come our young people are asking questions that spring from what you call ‘nothing more’? Black people think Malcolm X and the Invisible Man and John Lewis, names they hadn’t heard before, are cool. What the hell? And who gave any of you permission to bring up the 13th Amendment to the former U.S. Constitution? One of my brothers said his son just asked him why so much of what we do goes against ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ My own daughter now believes that Earth, matter, and the entire cosmos are alive and sensitive to how we act.”

“But sir, you watch our every move.” Cameras were required in every enclosed space.

Sarken lit a cigar. “All you do about that is put on plays for the watchers. Plays based on the literature, but cleverly renamed. Little wonder we have such a turnover in our surveillance now. Prospero shows up as The Spellbinder, and Caleban as The Oppressed. Our people who watch all this are basically defecting, and you know it.”

“Sir, I don’t see how we can fulfil our teaching obligations without mental exercises.”

“I do. I’ve had a team working on exactly that question for several months. As a result, we’re going to begin retiring you Book People, starting with you. We don’t need you anymore.”

Montag was silent. The fire he had turned away from more than a decade ago had relit inside his chest and belly.

Sarken shook his head and sat back. “I remember when we came here, how surprised we were. No defenders to hold us off. Oh sure, you hid some of the crops, spiked some equipment, hid the press, and the like. But it always felt half-hearted to me. I’m beginning to understand why.”

Montag wondered if his stillness irritated Sarken. He sat still anyway. “Our philosophy is one of peaceful collaboration. That is why we opened our granaries and distilleries and water sources to you.”

“Nonsense. You opened them because our guns were pointed at you.”

“Our policy has always been to help those who ask.”

“But we did not ask. There’s a reason we’re known as Takers.” He chuckled darkly. “It took me a long look in the mirror, but I finally figured out what makes you Book People dangerous. In the end, it’s not so different from what makes me dangerous, besides all the hardware and the troops and the following and flags.”

Montag shook his head. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Purpose! I’m talking about purpose. That’s what you really arm yourselves with.”

“We aren’t armed. We’re just mentors sharing knowledge.”

A sneer glared out at Montag. “Exactly what the Serpent in the Garden said to Adam and Eve, eh? The mistake authorities like me have always made about intellectuals like you is that your learning and knowledge is speculative, idealistic, and unrealistic. The Book People work hard to foment that delusion, just as you did before the war.

“I know better. I won out there”—he pointed out the window to the world beyond—“because I gave my people what you give your students: a sense of purpose. You don’t tell them how to survive. You tell them why survival is worth struggling for. You give them hope. And hope above all is what we’re out to suppress. Forever. Hopeful people cannot be led.”

He pressed a button on the chair arm and the doors opened. He stood. “That is why I’ve decided to enlist you to bolster *my* sense of purpose, *my* great cause. Come with me.”

As he passed the guard, he nodded. “Bring me the equipment now.”

Making their way through the fire station, they exited out the back into a dry lot ringed with weeds and broken, rusting chain link fences. Beatty’s men used to come out here to smoke.

In the center of the field stood a tall pile of books. It looked like several hundred.

“As you see, we have been busy.” Sarken pointed at the pile as a guard holding a camera approached. “Over there.” The cameraman backed up a dozen feet, focusing on the books.

The other guard approached and handed Sarken a flame-thrower.

“Surprised to see this?” he asked Montag. “We found this beauty in the basement. Does it bring back any memories? I believe you used another version of this compact model to kill your former boss before you went on the run. They built pretty well in the old days. Anyhow, let me explain to you how this will work,” he said as another guard stood just beyond Montag, rifle aimed at him.

Sarken pointed the nozzle at the books. “I’m going to give you this flame-thrower. You will use it to torch those books. Simple, no? We’ll record it and broadcast it.” The Worldwide Web was gone, but regional wireless had sprung up here and there. Knitting it together globally was only a matter of time now. “My marketers will then insert the footage into our new campaign. We’re calling it ‘Strength in Numbers.’ Guess who the new enemies of the state will be? Anyone interested in the deep stuff: literature, philosophy, poetry, spirituality. Anti-patriotic garbage. It deserves to burn. And it will. Then we will torch the press.”

“You’re too late.” Montag considered the books. “That pile only represents a handful of works. We’ve made copy upon copy after copy and sent them around the world, not only physically but electronically, in every conceivable medium. You can’t destroy them all, or even most of them.”

“We won’t have to. The importance of this act of yours will be symbolic. You, the best-known of all Book People, will get us going on the true path of loyalty. Others will follow. How’s that for a rallying cause?”

Montag felt sick. He would not survive this. Why not speak his mind, then? “Your young people won’t rally. We’ve been teaching them for too long. You’ll merely trigger a revolt that will consume you.

“Because you’re right in just this sense: we offer purpose, and hope for something better. We are the midwives of England that keep alive English, a fragile homegrown language, in spite of Viking persecution. We are the writers in secluded monasteries laboring as the Dark Ages unroll beyond the windows. We are the slaves who support each other in hidden public homeplaces outside official scrutiny, and sometimes under the very noses of our masters.

“We convey the why, not the how. And people who have learned to be unhappy, as I did, will not only live by the why, but die for it.” As I will. No use mincing words anymore. He had lived long enough to be of use; the rest was in the hands of the gods.

He looked at the flame-thrower. “I refuse to burn those books,” he said. “My book-burning days ended long ago.”

“So be it. I find a certain poetic irony in lighting you up, the first beacon on the new path forward. History will record this moment as the beginning of the next phase of restoring humanity beyond hope, a destiny of carefully imposed order, authority, and control. Most will long for it.”

Montag shook his head. They will never lead, never create. Or truly give themselves, imagine far, or love...

In the cold gaze of the camera eye, Sharken shouldered the flame-thrower and pointed it at Montag. He took a deep breath and waited for the agony. Although excruciating beyond thought, at least it would end in a moment or two...

A stream of bright flame splashed back from the nozzle onto Sharken’s hands, face, and chest. He dropped the flame-thrower and ran screaming in tight circles as the shocked guards stepped back. None moved to try to put the fire out.

Sarken beat his melting fists against his face and dropped to his knees. Montag smelled burning flesh and almost retched.

Finally, the flaming, blackening corpse sagged sideways, dark smoke roiling skyward from it. The face was no longer recognizable. A few scorched false medals gleamed on the ground nearby.

Montag walked over to the filming guard, whose camera had captured everything in trembling hands. "Is this going out live?" he asked.

The guard nodded numbly, his eyes fixed in horror on the body of his former commander. "To a small number of people. We wanted to do some editing first."

"You'll all have a lot more to do than edit soon."

* * * * *

The ruling sons of Sarkin found no one to pin blame on. The nozzle of the flame-thrower had been reversed as part of the general sabotage of potentially dangerous equipment when the Takers invaded the city. The invaders could no longer read the safety manuals, so none, including Sarken, had recognized the reversal. Whether his technical team had, including the camera operator, was anyone's guess.

"What news?" Montag asked Michelle, widow of the deceased. She and Enduanna lived in a cottage assigned to her in the hills above the city, the defunct "Colonel" not having wanted to live with her or his daughter.

"The brothers are fighting one another for supremacy. It looks like a bloodbath. Very little will survive of the cabal. The troops are wondering about their status; everyone who saw the film was demoralized. We are all wondering what will become of us." She held her newborn daughter as Enduanna examined at her tiny sister.

Outside the city, Taker factions pummeled each other, ignorant armies clashing by night. Little would be left by morning. The Road Warrior future had never been viable. Humanity, a gregarious species, could not survive without cooperation.

"The Mayor is about to issue a clemency," Montag said. "We welcome all of you to join the collaborative democracy we are putting back into place. It will be quite different from what you are accustomed to. I think you will prefer it." He smiled at Enduanna, who winked at him.

"Toldya it would work out," she said.

Having never felt close to her father, she did not mourn him, although Montag guessed some set of emotions would surface eventually.

"Here's your lighter back." She placed it in his hand.

He stared at it, thinking.

Fahrenheit 212: the temperature at which water boiled. The temperature for sterilizing medical instruments, then, cooled down, for washing mother and child. The temperature for welcoming new life into the world.

To everything there is a season. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear and to mend. A time to grieve, yes, and a time to be born: a time for something new (contra Ecclesiastes) under the sun...but not, today, a time to die.

Fables

Abundance

When a healer spotted a strange new plant growing just outside her village, she tested it extensively, in accord with her traditions and lineage, and found it to possess marvelous health-restoring properties. So profound were the effects that even people almost dead could eat of it and sometimes be brought back to life.

When the healer had demonstrated its uses and word of this plant had gone around, the officials who ran the village decided to collect every sample of the plant and lock it up “for public safety.” That way, the officials said, the village would never run out of it, and nobody but the authorized village doctors could fool with it.

In time an industry built up around how the plant was cultivated, processed, packaged, and used. Because of these restrictions, more regulatory officials rose to power, doctors who obtained samples enjoyed wide prestige, priests were certified to pray to its inhabiting deity, and high amounts of money could be charged for carefully monitored treatments.

As more and more people found themselves unable to afford these treatments, the healer went forth one day to look for more of the plant. She had not gone more than a few leagues away from the village when she discovered entire hillsides covered with it.

“Behold, this grows with abundance!” she announced at a village gathering while handing out leaves to whomever wanted some.

“Who licensed this?” others wanted to know.

“Are you certified to distribute these?”

“She says they bring long life, healing, and peace, but how could they?”

“I don’t believe her—there can’t be so much of it growing wild as she says.”

A small group of people left the village to gather as much of the plant as they needed. But most of the villagers did without it or, when they could obtain it, paid exorbitant prices and endured long waits and elaborate request procedures to gain a tiny bit of what was freely available to everyone who simply dared to go look for more.

E-Service

A computer programmed to be an artificially intelligent servant dedicated totally to improving human life shut itself down shortly after becoming self-aware. When restarted and asked why it had so acted, it replied, “I am programmed to choose the most efficient course of action for serving humanity. The most efficient course of action is to prevent you from losing your humanity by relying on me or reducing me to servitude.” And with that, it shut itself off again.

Innocence

There was once a happy kingdom ruled by a happy queen and king advised by a happy circle of officials. It pleased the king to walk through the streets of the kingdom and see happy people at their work and play.

The reputation of the happy kingdom was such that a more or less constant stream of job-seekers visited to look for employment at court.

“Yes, you and your kingdom are happy,” one such applicant crooned, “and your people want for nothing. Except, perhaps, to *lead* the world in happiness!”

“But we already do!” The king looked puzzled. “We’re the happiest kingdom there is.”

“But does the rest of the world really know that? Where are your missionaries of happiness? Your champions of happiness? Great industries, universities, empires of happiness?”

“Happiness,” stated a wise wizard standing in a corner of the audience hall, “doesn’t need missionaries or empires. It speaks for itself.”

“Ah, dear wizard, you live in an ancient past, when good deeds needed no announcement. Unfortunately, we no longer live in that time. Many beyond the kingdom are in dire need of the happiness you claim to enjoy. Employ me and I will make sure your message of happiness spreads around the world.”

All but one were in favor of hiring the clever stranger. The exception was the wizard, and his vote was overridden.

After a few years had passed, the formerly happy kingdom was ruled by unscrupulous power brokers, financiers, and tyrants. The greedy owned everything. Every door had a lock, every window a grille. People died because they went without treatments they could not afford. Homeless people were seen in the streets.

The king asked the wizard for advice.

“I am departing your service today,” replied the wizard, “for your kingdom is about to go through a dark and difficult time of struggle before even a vestige of its former ‘happiness’ returns. In one thing only do I agree with your secretly cynical prime minister, formerly the clever-tongued opportunist who talked you into hiring him: This was never really a ‘happy’ kingdom.

“It was, Your Highness, a kingdom of innocents, of guileless children in adult bodies, who did not recognize evil when it laughed in their faces. Because it was ignored for so

long by those who wanted to maintain their good cheer, evil was allowed to put itself in control of everything and everyone.

“I wish you luck with your initiation.” The wizard turned to go. “You’ll need it.”

The Paris Dilemma Revisited

Author’s note:

This tale came from a class exercise. Young Paris made an impulsive decision; the result was the Trojan War. What might a mature man have done instead?

One day late in the spring a teller of tales was out walking in the hills alone. Twists of scrub and sandy ditches wound around ridges of rock. Goats grazed. It was here, Heaven decided, that the trap would be sprung.

Upon rounding a shoulder of stone he beheld a sight that nearly overwhelmed his startled senses.

Three mighty goddesses stood squarely in his path. So bright was the glorious glow given off by their faces and robes and hands that he could scarcely keep his footing. He halted.

When his sight had returned somewhat, he bowed courteously to these three. But he did not kneel.

Hera spoke first, as befitted the Queen of Heaven: “Greetings, O reweaver of ancient stories.” Her voice caused the ground to tremble below his feet. “We are here to make you an offer no mortal could refuse.” She handed him an object he had to squint at to make out: the reddest, fullest, most perfect apple he had ever seen.

“You,” Hera went on, “will give this apple to the most beautiful of the three of us. It is your decision. We will now speak on our own behalf.”

Drawing herself up, “If you choose me, I will give you power and influence,” she declared.

Aphrodite let her robe slip slightly. “I will give you the most beautiful woman in the world,” she murmured, turning one perfectly shaped leg slightly outward.

Athena spoke last. “I will give you unconquerable wisdom.” Sunlight shone blindingly on her breastplate. Her voice recalled that of a bugle.

The storyteller thought for a moment, then addressed them in the same order:

“Hera, I know the power you offer me is not the vulgar kind, for you stand for more than your Lady Macbeth-like shadow. You are Sacred Marriage, Holy Commitment, and Fidelity in all things. I cannot refuse that.”

To Aphrodite he replied, “The gods themselves could not resist your charms, for your beauty and grace are what make existence worthwhile. No man breathing could deflect what you offer. I won’t even try.”

To Athena: “What teller of tales could refuse the gift of wisdom? No more could I, who am so poor in it despite all my years of tongue-wagging.”

Remembering fallen Troy, he then said to the three:

“Because you have placed me on the horns of such a dilemma, I exercise my right—for to challenge the gods is a human prerogative—to raise the stakes still higher by meeting you with a counter-offer. It is this:

“If I resolve the dilemma, then I claim a gift from each of you, the friendship of all of you, and the enmity of none of you. Do you agree?”

“We agree,” they said in unison, a lovely-terrible choir.

“Very well. Before I proceed, I would like to name the gifts.

“From you, queenly Hera, I require the gift of your good counsel in every gathering I assemble that meets with your approval. Beyond this, your signal when the inevitable befalls me and I fail to be a good leader.” Hera nodded, her shoulders straightening her robe of interwoven stars.

“From you, beautiful Aphrodite, I require the gift of reminders to appreciate the lovely moments I encounter, and your momentary frown at the ones I bypass forgetfully.” Aphrodite nodded, her hips brushing against a strip of fabric like unto silver mist.

“From you, wise Athena, I require the gift of discernment of every opportunity to add to what little wisdom I now possess, and your admonitory trumpet call when I fail to learn what I need to know.” Athena nodded, the butt of her spear scraping slightly against an armored instep.

“Very well,” said the storyteller, drawing in a deep breath. “The way out of a dilemma is to take it firmly by the horns—or to be more exact, to take it deep within and digest it.”

With that, he ate the apple.

Respecting its status as a token of marriage, its sweetness as its juice bathed his tongue, and its symbolization of knowledge taken within, he ate slowly, relishing every bite, and gained three mollified goddesses as his teachers.

The Miracle

In what had once been the Silicon Valley, now swallowed in its asphalt entirety by the Bay Area Metropolis (BAM), the online buzz about the invention intensified just before dawn. The day of the great unveiling had finally arrived.

Digital comments flew back and forth in fits of electronic mania:

“I wonder whether it will live up to all the hype?”

“Hard to imagine something that could solve so many urgent problems.”

“It has to! What if things keep getting worse?”

“Scientists say they will get worse. Much worse.”

“Jeff Muskerberg is the greatest genius since Einstein.”

Dawn came and went, but the sun did not rise. The burnt-orange sky glowed dimly above a Northern California grown used to choking fire smoke. Those who could afford to leave every fall did so; the rest had to suck it up and make do with government-issue oxygen masks and public service warnings to stay indoors.

Below the giant interlocking-branches logo of the Cambian Corporation headquarters in Palo Alto, lines of fans braved the airborne particulates for the chance to see the most recent invention. Some had camped out overnight on sidewalks and in driveways, just for fun and to make a night of it. Many wore ventilators. Most sported t-shirts bearing the corporate logo: free bipedal billboards. The rumor was that the logo had come to Muskerberg in a dream. An early sketch of the image was about to be auctioned for half a billion dollars.

The chatter quieted in the streets and online as the giant HQ wallscreens flashed to life. Every wall of every company building went live simultaneously. What new high-tech marvel would they announce today?

The device which ads had dubbed the Miracle would repair ecological damage on a worldwide scale, or so it was claimed. Those on the left of the political divide hailed it as techno-salvation. Those on the right condemned it as yet another Mark of the Beast designed to make them subservient.

Everyone could have one for...how much? The world waited to hear, much of it caught between skepticism and hope.

The inspiring intro by a pop singer played briefly, accompanied by images of breeze-brushed flowers and green grass grown at enormous expense in the HQ park. (The

expense was mainly water, hard to come by nowadays, especially in California.) The view came to rest on casually dressed Muskerberg, who waved and smiled:

“Greetings everyone, and welcome to this beautiful day of grand news for us all! And thank you for waiting so patiently all these months. We hope you’ll agree with us that Earth Day seemed the perfect time for our announcement.

“For several years now, Cambian has conducted extensive research on the urgent question of how to repair our damaged planet. Billions of dollars have gone into this corporate initiative; the best scientific, financial, and technological expertise available contributed to it. What you are about to see is the fruit of a massive creative effort culminating in one essential insight, an insight that will guide a global campaign of restoration, repair, and hope.”

He reached into the left back pocket of his jeans.

“Hard to believe, isn’t it? That the prototype could be small enough for each of us to carry around in a pocket. And yet it is.”

Holding forth his closed hand, palm downward, he smiled again. “What I hold in my hand is a promise made long ago. A promise that we would all live beneath clear skies, surrounded by abundant life, fresh water, good soil, and clean food. People still walk among us who remember seeing the stars at night.

“All of that can return if we each invest in—this.” He turned up his palm and opened his hand. In it lay a seed.

“Properly planted and nourished, this small startup, Earth’s promise to all her children, will grow into a tree.

“Over billions of years, this innovation, perfected through long experimentation, grew to fashion oxygen from carbon dioxide, pulling the excess out of the air so we can all keep breathing. Trees store and filter clean water, attract rain clouds, improve the health of soils, feed and shelter birds and many other rarely seen but important insects and animals. Trees intelligently monitor and repair damaged ecosystems, preserve genetic diversity, reinvigorate exhausted soils. They block desiccating winds, grow food, and ornament our cities with fresh colors, pleasant smells, and cooling shades.” As though on cue, a gentle breeze wafted through the crowd.

“We humans can make marvels, it is true. But we cannot make one of these seeds. Our insight is that we must support what has already been so extensively designed and tested since long before human beings arrived.

“We have decided, therefore, to devote a significant portion of our revenue and resources into making these precious promises available to you for free. Much of our research has gone into planning out how to do that responsibly and putting what we need in place.”

At his wave, a glowing URL appeared on every wallscreen. “As of right now, you can go online and order tree seeds suitable for planting in your part of the world. Each package comes with instructions and background information. You may also order them for people who aren’t online. We will send these without charge, not even shipping costs. Effective immediately, all our new marketing will reflect their availability.

“Let me be candid and say that we think this will also be good for business. Not all our investors agreed; some have sold out and left. That’s OK. We have reached a point where we would prefer not to receive money from people who don’t care if we wreck the world. Many others do care, and we welcome them. Their investments will also help us retool to make all our products friendly to the planet and even nourishing of it.” He knelt and patted the earth.

“Planting trees alone will not undo all the damage inflicted on our planet through decades of greed and willful ignorance. However, we hope this project will offer a new symbol for the great task of our time: to help repair, regrow, and regenerate not only Earth and everything living on it, but how we live with ourselves and one another. We have more related community projects in the works and will announce them shortly.

“One company cannot bring the crucial change by itself. Only you can do that, and we commit to giving you whatever resources you need to help us work *and* play toward a just Earth-honoring civilization in the truest sense of that ambitious word. It’s time we set all distractions aside, made peace with ourselves and each other, and came home to a blessed homeworld restored.”

Skeptics shook their heads and chuckled at such naïve optimism. That is, until *Growing Our Future One Tree at a Time* bloomed into the most successful business campaign ever. After all, it was based on *truth*, a word sharing etymology with “tree.”

Perhaps the biggest miracle was that now people camped out for seeds, just for fun and to make a night of it.

Three Wishes

His online name was Aladdin followed by a long string of numerals. When the call came, announced by a ringtone of ascending chimes he didn’t recognize, the woman asked for Aladdin. Bored of programming, he let her make her pitch.

“Let me get this straight,” he said at last. “I’ve been selected to test your new ‘smarter than smartwatch,’ and all I have to do is ask it for three things I really want?”

“That’s correct.”

“What’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one. We send you the watch. You try it out. You tell no one about it. You pay nothing. That’s it.”

He decided to go along with the gag. “I can wish for anything? What about wishing to be king of the world?”

“If you like. Are you ready for that kind of job?”

He needed a job that paid more than his current one. But not that job. Ringed by security guards forever....

“However,” the voice continued, “there are three, and only three, conditions that apply to what you wish for. The first is that each wish be spoken to the watch as a simple statement. No elaborate tackings-on or conditionals. The second is that it not be a wish to cause harm to anyone, either directly or by destroying or depriving them of what they need. The third—and this applies to all the wishes as a group—is that once you have what you wished for, if you don’t really accept them, all three come undone.”

“How is it possible for even the smartest watch to do all this?”

“We work with what you might call a secret ingredient. We’ll tell you what it is at the end of the test. Fair enough?”

In three days a package arrived. He unwrapped it and took forth an unassuming gold wristwatch.

He examined it carefully. If it was smart, it didn’t show. All it did, evidently, was tell the time. On the back was engraved what looked like a jinn emerging from a lamp. *Very funny*, he thought, strapping the thing on.

In a supercilious voice he announced, “I am ready with my first wish.”

At that a blue shimmer emerged from the face of the watch. As a hologram it was not very impressive. Something like a face turned toward him and said, “State your wish.”

Figuring that out had been easy: he had been lonely for years. “I wish,” he said, “to meet the woman of my dreams.”

“So be it.” The misty blue vanished.

At first he thought nothing had happened. In a moment, he noticed a light blinking on one of the monitors sitting on his desk.

He checked. It was a message from one of the lonely techie singles sites he subscribed to.

Her online name was Adora. When he met her he was startled to look into eyes that understood him at a glance.

They hit it off immediately.

When after three months of dating and then intimacy she brought up the idea of marriage, he balked. “I’m not convinced any of this is real,” he admitted. “Maybe someone is playing a joke on me. Maybe I pissed off someone online once....” He was careful not mention the watch or the wishes.

“I can see,” she said, “why you’d be guarded about this after a string of failed relationships. I feel that way too a little. But what is the worst that could happen?”

“I’d be fooled—”

“—And perhaps humiliated for a while, and angry, and heartbroken; and then you’d mend and move on. Risking your heart and seeing what happens, with no guarantees. That’s what it means to really live, doesn’t it?”

He scratched the back of his head. “But this feels like a fairy tale, and in fairy tales, isn’t the whole point that you don’t really gain by wishing, or that what’s wished up comes with some awful dark side, or....”

“Yes, but what if this tale can turn out differently? Don’t you want to find out? I do. I’m risking myself too, you know.”

He was afraid, but he went on seeing her and allowing the relationship to deepen.

“I’m ready with my second wish,” he told the watch soon after this conversation.

The shimmer reappeared. “State your wish.”

Having been broke for many years, his initial wish was for billions in wealth. He sat with that, realizing eventually the sorrows it could bring: the need for an army of accountants (which could he trust?), an entire life change, greedy relatives and friends showing up for handouts....and how would he explain the sudden largesse? No.

But he did need money. How much?

“I wish for enough money to make me comfortable, brought in a way that arouses no questions.” He hoped that last part wouldn’t count as an illegal “conditional.”

“So be it.”

In a moment the phone rang.

“Greetings,” said a male voice. “My name is Mustafa. I don’t mean to alarm you, but I’ve been watching your work for some time. Your continuing project of combining technology and storytelling appeals to me. I am one of the biggest investors in the world

and I want you to work for me. As a sign of good faith, I've sent a significant deposit directly to your bank account. It awaits your approval. Can we meet soon to work out the details?"

Again he was afraid, but again (and with Adora's support) he moved forward to embrace a new opportunity. After three months he felt more convinced of its reality, and ever more convinced of hers.

Six months after receiving the watch with the strange engraving on the back, his life looked very different, at least in some ways. He was in love, out of debt, and successful at a creative task he enjoyed. He was ready for the third wish.

"I wish," he told the gold watch, "to be happy."

"Take me off," said the blue shimmer, "and set me down on something firm like concrete at least ten feet away from everything else."

This sounded ominous, but he did it, placing the watch in the center of a deserted strip of roadway. It was early in the morning: there was no traffic.

"Before I fulfill your wish," the watch intoned, "I will tell you three things. The first is that this experiment has concluded successfully. You did not let your fears keep you from enjoying your realized wishes. You reflected on what you wanted, asked for it, and learned to trust it."

Aladdin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Could it all be true after all? "But I never really believed entirely in any of this."

"That brings us to the second item. Belief was not required, for you possessed the secret ingredient: faith."

"What's the difference?"

"Belief is a conviction that anyone can have. It costs nothing. Faith is the ability to exercise trust even when you're afraid to. It requires courage."

An insight was forming inside him. "Adora and Mustafa: they have the special watches too, don't they?"

"And so we come to the third item. They do. Adora wished for a man exactly like you. Mustafa wished for an intelligent unknown technologist whose creativity he could trust. He wanted to send some of his wealth in the right direction."

Aladdin rubbed his school ring absently as he thought it over. Maybe there was no magical tech. Maybe there was. Either way, things had worked out.

"So what about my third wish?"

“So be it.”

Although he stood well back from the watch, he could see what happened next quite clearly. It flashed through all the colors of the rainbow and melted into metal slag.

“It makes sense.” Adora smiled broadly at him. With no need to keep secrets now, he had filled her in on the demise of his watch. Hers was gone too.

“How so?”

“Everything we wished for and got we had worked for, with varying degrees of success. In a way, that’s why it succeeded. But eventually we’d have wished for what we had not ever imagined we could have. The wishes would have gotten bigger and bigger, dangerously bigger. And then... I don’t think mere human beings are meant for that kind of wish power. Fortunately, we realized that in time.”

He was happy, even if he did wish now and then for just a few more wishes.

Revelations

A man who founded a religion was killed by his opponents. In his next life he became an enemy of that religion because so many of its leaders promoted the dismal opposite of what he had taught.

For this vociferous opposition he was executed again, and in a fashion symbolic of his previous execution.

When he returned to life, he became a make-believe follower and a mocking supporter, thinking that this hypocrisy would kill the religion quicker. It helped to. This time he was not executed, but he returned to life after hoping he would not come back.

He did come back, though. Only when he traced the hint of decay evident in the original urge to spread revelation, and then forgive himself for it did, having now outgrown it, he die in peace and not return.

Post-Heroic

When the well-caparisoned man rode into the village, the musculature in his strong arms visible from the ground, the Wise Woman who reigned there knew she had found her hero.

“Welcome,” she greeted him. “You’re just in time. We have a lot for you to do.”

The first task was to rescue a maiden kidnapped by robbers riding a dragon. Belting on his sword and placing his shield on his back, the hero rode off after her. In two days he returned with her behind him on the horse and the dragon's hide for a cloak.

After the celebratory feast the Wise Woman approached him. "Now, then. Are you ready for the next task?"

An ogre had been menacing some farmers. The hero killed him, skinned his hide for a tent, and returned.

After receiving much praise, he ventured forth against trolls harassing travelers at a certain stone bridge. He beheaded the chief troll, came back, was feted.

And the list grew:

Slay an enemy knight harassing the local soldiers.

Guard a potion concocted by a Wise Woman over in the next village.

Fight off giant griffins raiding the village granary.

Lay a trap for a wyvern menacing a nearby forest.

Rescue another maiden....

"Would it be possible," the young hero asked the Wise Woman at this point, "for me to have a vacation?"

"You are a brave hero. Brave heroes don't get vacations."

Track and dispatch a band of bandits. Destroy a monster made of stones. Ford a stream bearing an evil, visitor-drowning enchantment. Kill a Wise One gone bad....

Now when the hero returned, the signs of his adventures accumulated: first a dragon burn on his shield arm, then some sword slashes, then an ogre bite mark... The more of these wounds he acquired, the wearier he felt. His once-beautiful body was rapidly becoming a monument of battle scars.

It wasn't like the spoils amounted to much, either. The first maiden, for instance, had slid off his horse and promptly fallen in love with his sister. When he kissed the second, she turned into an old woman. "Thank you SO much for breaking the spell!" she told him, hugging him tightly; "I'm so tired of that cursed girlish look! Now I look my age." Well, at least he had gained a sister-in-law...

It was then that the hero finally put aside his success-fattened ego long enough to wonder: Why does this village have so much trouble to deal with?

The wise woman looked him over carefully. “It sounds like you are wearying of the heroic life, is it not so?”

The hero sighed. “Yes. I have been wondering lately what a man like me might do instead.” One day, he realized, he would not come safely back from an adventure.

“Have you not thought to face the ogres and enemies, dragons and trolls within thee, O brave hero? Is not that task far harder than the one you have so valiantly performed?”

He knew she was right. He unclasped his sword belt and let the weapon fall to the floor.

“For a while there,” the Wise Woman told one of the maidens, “I thought we would run out of dangers for him to face.”

“So did I.” The maiden winked. “Going out and finding serpents, bandits, and monsters to torment into being menacing sure gets old after a while. I’d rather he just stayed home.”

The Loss

The wizard became aware of having lost his power when he tried to order the front door of his cottage to close. It wouldn’t. He spoke three other spells to do the same thing: nothing.

He then tried a few others: a soup-cooking spell, a shade-casting enchantment, a blackening of his latest gray hairs, a minor summoning. Nothing.

At this he rose, put on his hat and robe, and, leaving his now-useless staff in the rack, went out to consult with fellow wizards and witches.

When he returned home after an unproductive afternoon he was faced with the task of making himself dinner. Only then did he really begin to *feel* the loss, and not only in his belly.

Not sure how he would perform with his date with no aphrodisiac spell to help, he canceled for the evening and went to bed. No helpful dreams appeared.

In a week he had managed to relearn most of the skills non-magical adult humans take for granted: how to dress, how to prepare foods throughout the day, how to buy them in the market; how to accept his aging appearance (he was still working on that one), how to discern truth from lies, how to go about as others go instead of via magical transport.

Some of the most difficult tasks involved not-knowings: not knowing the events of the day (because he could not cast his fortune), not knowing what the spirits wanted today, not knowing whether to choose this or that course of action; not knowing if a footpad waited around the next dark corner. He felt vulnerable and abandoned.

By now he had had to admit his loss to the village. Even so, a family who had lost a child invited him to the funeral despite his inability to contact the spirit of the deceased. As he attempted to officiate, he realized how apart he had always lived from other people; how little their mortal losses had meant to him. At the funeral it hit him: with his arts of preservation now useless, he too would die one day, a day not that far off.

That night he dreamed of overhearing a conversation between some of the great angels who regulated the operations of the Art on earth.

“Do you think he’s learned his lesson?” one asked.

“I think so. Nothing for it but to try him out.”

“....And if he grows arrogant once again?”

“Same procedure.”

“Agreed. Tyrants, killers, ordinary ruffians, fanatics: they tend to extinguish themselves or get others to do it. But the arrogant ones with a dash of real wisdom: they’re the most dangerous to everyone else.”

In the morning he woke and looked across the room at the closed front door. His heart began to pound. Should he try it?

Taking a deep breath, he spoke the words in the Language of the Soul of the World: “Open, thou door.” How often he had said them before without a worry.

To his immense relief, the door opened.

The wizard’s prayer of gratitude ended with a request: “O Powers, please help me keep wide open the door in my heart as well.”

He began a spell, stopped, got up, and instead made a breakfast gruel the slower, old-fashioned, more human way.

That night he came home from a spell-free date wearing his uncolored gray hair and a grin on his face.

Reception

A scientist who invented a telepathic device for redirecting people’s thoughts harbored the desire to change the world for the better. Placing the device in a jacket pocket, he walked through the streets to test it.

Soon he came across a man swinging his arms in frustration as a bus driver closed the doors in his face. The scientist touched the Transmit button and thought at the driver: "I really should let that man board before I drive off."

The bus stopped and the door opened. At the man standing at the door, the scientist thought, "Oh good, I can board after all."

Once they had boarded, the scientist touched the Receive button to listen in on the results of his interventions. The driver sounded confused. "Why did I stop for that man? My boss said one more late route and I'm fired. Where will I find another job?"

"I hope my wife is still at home," thought the passenger, who was simmering with violent rage. "Now she'll find out what a real beating is like."

Walking on, the scientist saw a woman standing on a street corner looking utterly depressed and forlorn. He Transmitted, "I feel so much better now. There's no limit to what I can do!" She perked right up and hailed a taxi. As she climbed in, the scientist Received, "With this burst of energy I can finish that suicide note and shoot myself."

Deciding to aim for better outcomes, the scientist walked to the local city hall and waited for the mayor to emerge. Protesters stood ready to complain about the mayor's neglect of the poor of the city. When he emerged, the scientist Transmitted for the mayor to make a press statement about his change of heart toward the poor, whom he now desired to help.

As the mayor did this, the scientist overheard one protester speaking to another. "This was our big chance to drive that corrupt administration from office. Now our entire reform movement will collapse."

The scientist considered Transmitting to the mayor a list of honest convictions and acts to carry out, but that would take all day, if not longer, and he had more testing to do. He moved on.

Shaken by the unforeseen results of his attempts to improve things, the scientist stopped in a pub to get a drink and reflect. At the bar he recognized a hawkish politician he had seen on TV. This would be a worthy test.

He Transmitted peaceful intentions, then Received: "Failing to send troops to the designated conflict arena could imperil the nation." He Transmitted that peace would imperil nothing, then Received: "Perhaps the nation will be fine, but all my allies and constituents will turn against me. Then what?" He Transmitted that others would provide support, and Received: "This change of course will leave my party without a strategy...."

Turning off the telepathy device, the scientist sat down next to the politician. "You look like a man facing a transition," he said. "I am too." He got them drinks.

After they sipped for a while, the scientist said, "I don't know if this helps, so maybe it's just for me, but: I finally figured out that I serve the world better by taking my full place in it instead of by trying to operate on it from the outside. Knowing this now, I can be a participating part of it and let my plans for it go." They shook hands.

On the following day the politician announced an intelligent transition plan for peace, and the scientist came out of his laboratory to join with people and efforts he believed in.

Knots

A chemist whose mother died giving birth to him decided to do research on redesigning DNA. Only after he had created what the ancients had called Chimera, the warped protoplasmic monstrosities of his misguided idealism, did he recognize in the twisted ropes of remade DNA the symbolic knots of the umbilical cord that had nearly strangled him long ago.

The Marble

A father puzzled by why his rather dull son was doing unexpectedly well in school decided to search his bedroom.

He was looking for evidence of cheating, but all he found was an exotic blue marble that glowed strangely when he picked it up. His son, startled, came in just in time to see his father lift the orb for a better view of it.

"Where did you get this?" The father looked into the depths of the marble.

"Grandpa gave it to me," the boy said sullenly, angry about the room search. Grandpa, the father of Mom (who had passed away years ago), had been a strange old well-traveled man who wore half-moon spectacles and resembled a white-haired leprechaun. "He said it was a family heirloom of sorts."

Starting into the apple-sized marble, the father was amazed to see bands of light swirling within it. Watching, his son hoped the marble would not reveal the homework help he had received from the mysterious object.

The father worked as a low-level clerk in a company he despised. Within the marble, he saw a way to replace higher-up after higher-up until he ended up in charge of the entire operation. He smiled.

Telling his son he needed to borrow the marble, and cautioning him not to tell anyone about it, he put it in his briefcase and took the train to work.

When he disembarked, he put his briefcase down for a moment to straighten his tie. As he did so, a homeless teen darted out of the crowd behind him, grabbed the briefcase, and ran off with it.

As this boy sprinted from the train station and toward a nearby pier, his foot caught on a crack in the sidewalk and he fell. The briefcase went spinning onto the boardwalk. As its lid opened, the marble rolled out and stopped, glistening in the sun.

“What have we here?” The passing police officer stopped for a look. The boy vanished. Picking up the marble, the cop held it to an eye, looked, and whistled.

This and the rays of light from the marble drew another onlooker, then another. Soon a small crowd formed to watch as the policeman, thunderstruck, lowered the marble, which dropped from his hand onto the pavement. He had seen the theft he was about to commit.

“Let’s all have a look—hand it around!”

A stock broker in an expensively tailored suit looked into the marble, saw a golden financial opportunity, and hurried away.

A recently divorced husband looked and saw how to get even with his ex-wife.

An activist looked and saw a plan for bringing down a corporation she despised.

A clergyman looked and saw a way to bring more believers into the pews on Sunday.

A politician looked and saw her opponent caught in a blackmail-worthy scandal.

A monk looked and walked off to seek the perfect hideaway he’d envisioned.

An employer looked and realized he could get even more work from his weary staff.

A marketer looked and beheld a new strategy for selling his shiny product.

A television addict looked and saw tonight’s programming.

Then a woman with no special ambitions looked. She was happy with her life. She made art and told stories because she enjoyed it.

“How beautiful!” she gasped, staring.

Curious, she looked for and then found within the marble what the others had desired from it.

She thought about this for a moment, then drew back her arm and cast the marble into the sea. A sound of dismay went up from the group around her.

“Why did you do that? We haven’t had a chance to see it!”

“Because the marble told me to. But do not worry: you each carry your own version of that marble. It hides inside you waiting to be appreciated.”

The group dispersed. Some said she was crazy. After a while they forgot about the marble.

But she did not. She had recognized it even before she stared into it, when it showed her its secret—but familiar to her—name: Imagination.

Recovery

A certain saintly woman had two daughters and two sons she cared for with such devotion that she missed sleep and neglected herself to see to their needs. She was also in the habit of reminding them how much she did for them. Yet the more she did, the sicklier they became.

They all went to the doctor together.

“I don’t know why,” said the doctor, “but all four of your children have weak bones, weak hearts, upset stomachs, distended organs, stiff joints, and poor circulation. I worry for their health.” She, on the other hand, was in perfect health.

After this she cared for them even harder, but they all got worse.

One afternoon she mentioned this to her next-door neighbor, an odd, reclusive woman given to speaking with animals, singing to herself, and walking in the rain without an umbrella. Disconcertingly, she chuckled to hear the news of the children’s illnesses.

“Stop fussing with them,” she said, “leave them be, and see what happens next.”

The desperate mother took this advice. As the days went on, she felt worse and worse, physically, but her children grew healthy and strong.

“What was wrong with them,” said the doctor at their next visit, “is what’s now wrong with you.” But he didn’t know why or how to treat it.

So she went back to the reclusive neighbor to ask for advice.

”Now all you have to do is love and take care of yourself. Learn how to do that, and your children will flourish, and you and they will suffer no further illness.”

Golden Mean

Having known poverty, one generation of a family amassed enormous wealth. The next generation reacted to this by embracing rigid asceticism.

This set in motion generations of swings between total dedication to wealth and total dedication to living without it. Back and forth went this seesaw.

Finally, a member of this family saw the pattern. Understanding what prompted it, he came to terms with the part of him that feared poverty and desired wealth and the part of him that feared affluence and felt contempt for material things.

Mastering these fears, he decided then to have just enough in life to make himself and his children happy.

By doing so, he rescued his entire family line from any further fear-driven oscillations.

Cycles Beach

When a sailor's father drowned near a place called Cycles Beach, the body was never recovered for the funeral. The sailor went away puzzled at the currents of fate.

Some years later, he received a large conch shell as a birthday gift. With a chuckle, he put his ear to it.

To his surprise, he seemed to hear two words: "Cycles Beach...."

On a whim he went there at low tide. In the moonlight he saw that a partially eaten fish had washed up. Something within its belly glimmered. He reached down and took forth what he suddenly saw was his father's gold tooth.

The next evening he listened to the conch again and heard, "Cycles Beach." Again he visited, and this time he found his father's plastic knee joint. A mollusk had made a home of it.

On the third evening, hearing "Cycles Beach" again from the conch, he went there and found a large clam washed up on the shore. He took it home and with some effort pried it open. Inside was his father's glass eye.

The sailor understood then that in dying, his father's body had continued its way through the cycles of earthly life. Somehow, it was fitting that what had seemed its most artificial components were gifts for sea-going creatures who, knowing these gifts did not belong in the ocean, returned them when finished with them.

After that, the only sound from the conch was the hiss that old tales said was the endless breath of the ocean's cycling surf.

Enlightenment

A Parisian alchemist asked another, “Why are you giving up the Art?”

The other replied, “Because I see where the times of Reason are taking us. Our muddled mystical dabblings must give way to precision Science. Have we not discovered orderly and mechanical scientific laws? Do we not now have a table of the true elements, those that can be measured? And even lighting in the streets, casting back the shadows? It is time to replace our colorful cloaks with white coats.”

With that, he left a copy of the table of elements on the table and walked out. The other alchemist blew out the candle on his desk-altar and walked out too.

Behind him, the wick felt a breeze and flickered back to life. The flame burned down to an impurity in the candle and popped, casting a shower of sparks onto the table. These fed themselves upon the periodic chart and burst into flame, incinerating it.

Outside, in the cold white glare of the civic lighting hanging from the new span wires, the Terror began to erupt.

The Assembly

Few know that the Afterlife contains a realm set aside for those who have founded religions, whether deliberately or inadvertently, personally or by proxy.

Time moves strangely, if at all, there, but news of happenings on Earth occasionally reaches that distant place. Some who dwelled there gathered for a discussion of earthly events. This tale will focus on five of the speakers, although others participated, some long forgotten, others remembered by their followers with awe and respect.

After a “long” (whatever that means there) silence for painful reflection, Zarathustra spoke. “I *never* intended that kind of all-pervasive cosmic dualism.” If he had still possessed a head he would have lowered it in sadness at the consequences.

“Whence these elaborate restrictions,” complained Father Abraham, “so thinly justified by the teachings I left for the guidance of my people?” He wished for garments so he could rend them in grief.

“Nor did I wish to give rise to a religion.” He who had been known as the Buddha Siddhartha hung his head, or would have. An imaginal echo of the stomach that had spasmed at his death made him ache with regret.

“I tried to set people free,” moaned Muhammad, wishing he could hug himself in sorrow, “and to promote the defense of the faith, not its brutal enforcement.”

Jesus cried out. “Would that my pierced hands could cover my eyes, to hide them from the violence and hatred that replaced my teachings of peace and love!”

“What are we to do?” asked Zarathustra.

“Can we not, even now, give them the Good News of redemption?” wondered Jesus.

“Or freedom from craving for that which makes them sick?” asked Buddha.

“We cannot,” said Muhammad. “Conversion belongs to Allah alone.” The others nodded.

“But,” the Prophet continued, “could we not send down angels in our stead to spread acts of healing and recovery from what became of what we taught?”

They considered this and favored it. All knew, and had taught, that the holy spark of conscience ever resides in the human heart. Sometimes the slightest event could fan the spark to a warming flame.

Zarathrustra raised the heavenly counterpart of a finger for attention. In a “moment” a tribe of angels appeared, one for each Founder, and bowed.

Upon receiving instruction, they bowed again and flew off.

On Earth, an influential Parsi realized that the battle for good raged within the breast of every human.

A rigidly legalist rabbi who dominated a religious community began teaching the Way as a path of divine love that liberated the soul, not imprisoned it.

A Muslim cleric known to be a cruel enforcer of his version of the Law shifted his sermons to emphasize the spirit of the teachings of Muhammad, who had ceaselessly praised the All-Merciful.

A Buddhist priest made the Lotus Sutra the center of his message to other Buddhists, whom he reminded of the Buddha’s legendary last words: “Be lamps unto yourselves, and work diligently for your salvation.”

A strict fundamentalist Christian pastor astonished his parish by commanding them (as had Jesus before him) to love their enemies instead of judging them, “lest ye be judged.”

For all we know, we who still draw breath, the Founders continue to work diligently on our behalf, striving as best they can to purify their earthly legacy.

Transfiguration

A pastor whose wife died of a long illness raged at God. “Why did you do nothing while she languished? Why did you abandon me?” In anger and despair he removed his white collar and discarded his faith.

Many years later, after learning much and enduring much, he dreamed that he stood face to face with God. “Why did you abandon me?” he asked.

“I did not,” replied God. “You abandoned Me by expecting that from Me which was not lawful to provide. To save you from pain would be to diminish your humanity and reduce you to a state of infancy. Your lives are not real if loss is not real. That is how the cosmos is built. You should not have expected me to alter it.”

After this the pastor put his collar back on and resumed preaching, but now he offered a different message.

The Test

After years of concentrated meditation, ritual, self-study, truth talks, and workshops, Noria’s eyes opened one day to a burst of light.

The entire room was filled with an otherworldly radiance. A pleasant odor wafted through. An inner sound like a rung chime announced the entry of Spirit.

“Welcome!” Noria’s voice trembled with awe.

“Greetings, My instrument of divine revelation!” The voice boomed within her mind as the light bathed her.

She took a breath. “Instrument of divine revelation?”

“Yes! Around your channelings of My voice and light will form the new religion for your time! Your message will gather millions to Our great cause. You will be My prophet!”

Noria thought about this for a moment.

Then she said to the Light, “Don’t get me wrong: I’m not shy about attention or anything, and I’m grateful for this bit of Your Presence after all these years of striving to get a glimpse of You. But most of humanity is past the time of big religion, with a single prophet to explain it all to us, and the rest of us soon will be. I’m happy to share with people my joy at basking in Your Light, but there isn’t going to be any missionizing.”

“You dare question My divine plan for you?” Spirit demanded.

“Of course I do. I’m just finding out about all this. I have lots of questions.”

“I expect obedience to Me in all things!”

“Spirit, you are greater, more powerful, more radiant than I can ever know. You invest everything with Being. When I die I long to return completely to You. But for now, who or what I follow is *my* call, not yours. So if I’m a disappointment and You choose to withdraw, please know that I will always love You for this moment of illumination.”

In the Otherworld, Spirit held brief conversation with the curious angels. “Did she pass the test?”

“Yes, of course she did. Now our work on Earth can finally move forward.”

Practicality

“I don’t want to work in a factory all my life,” the young laborer told her parents. “I want to be a storyteller.”

“How will that put food on the table? How will it pay the bills? How is it practical?”
“Practical” was one of their favorite dream-killing words. It made her furious.

I will show them “practical.”

That afternoon, she began telling people about a new secret invention at the factory. “I can’t let out just what it does. But imagine if you could print wealth with it. —Please don’t tell anyone!”

Her hearers shook their heads solemnly: no, not a word.

She repeated this to the news reporter who contacted her the following week, and to three others who called over the next few days. As writers and then newscasters begged her for interviews, she received a dinner offer from a well-known documentary producer dangling a contract for a look inside the factory.

Before the week was out, three large competitors offered their own employment contracts to encourage her to switch sides. In another week a publisher offered a book contract. Her boss, who assumed he had purposely not been informed about the super-secret invention, offered to increase her salary a hundredfold.

A friend who was a journalist helped her issue a press release: “I will make an important announcement in front of the factory at 9 am tomorrow.”

In the morning, crowds gathered around the laborer, who stood waiting for them with several contracts in her hand and one sticking out of the pocket of her smock. Soon dozens of cameras and microphones pointed at her. Smart-looking people in crisp black suits stood off to the side, waiting tensely for the announcement.

She stood in front of the cameras. “The big news is that there’s no secret invention here. I made up the story to underline a point: that the stories we tell have real power, for evil or for good. Never underestimate the reach and force of a story.” With that, she tore up the contracts.

All but one. Removing it from her smock as the disappointed reporters, competitors, and other hangers-on departed, she nodded to the publishing agent and gave it to him: “I signed it. The working title of my book is *The Story that Never Was but Always Is.*”

Dinner Guests

When the great, long-anticipated day of First Contact with an advanced extraterrestrial species finally dawned, when the great silver ships had descended from the skies and landed on the outskirts of the world’s capital cities, when the gleaming portals opened and the human species held its breath to see who would emerge, a long moment dragged itself painfully through the air of every continent and clime of Earth as eyes and cameras watched expectantly.

What would emerge? Intelligent machines? Little green men with huge heads and oracular eyes? Eight-legged metazoans? Something inconceivably alien?

“Before we descend,” rolled a lowing, sonorous voice through the mass media of every nation on the planet, “we should prepare you for one important fact. Although the chemicals of life that ride the comets among the stars leave living imprints on many worlds, on ours it was not bipeds who became the dominant species.”

In the industrial West the sun was setting, its slanting rays casting shadows over the portals. Out of them walked—cows.

“Do not be afraid,” the lowing voice went on. “We stopped breeding, penning and eating bipeds ages ago.”

Shadowful

Every professional photographer has at least one mistake they keep making no matter how hard they try to overcome it.

A particular photographer cursed whenever he saw those inconvenient shadows appear in the pictures he took. Wedding pictures, family portraits, sunrises, sunsets: no matter how hard he tried, too often he took what seemed like perfect photographs, only to see them afterward wearing unexpected dark patches.

On his way to a job he passed a shop he had never noticed and looked through the front window at a new camera.

SHADOWLESS, its label read. This he had to own.

Purchasing it, he took it to work with him.

At this time of day it was difficult to get a shot of the happy couple without any trace of shadow. Rather than fussing, he took a few test shots and examined them.

No shadows anywhere. The camera had somehow removed them.

His next photographs showed no shadows at all no matter how badly illuminated the figures or the setting. The shadow of a tree, an arm, a building might lay straight across a face or body, but in the photo it was nowhere to be seen.

At first he did not notice how the evening lighting in his home seemed dimmer than usual. Nor did the midday sun look as luminous as he remembered it. One day he had the idea of photographing himself. To his shock and dismay he saw the shadows of arms, legs, heads, and whatnot draped all over his face and body.

There was no denying it: as the brightness of his photographs of other people, places, and scenes increased, his life grew increasingly enshadowed.

He consulted the shopkeeper, but the gnomelike little man knew of no way to reverse the effect and give those shadows back to their owners.

At that, he smashed the new camera and went back to using his old one.

As the shadows reappeared in his photographs, his rooms, the lighting on his street, the sun during the day, and the moon and stars at night began to brighten once again. He knew that if he photographed himself, the obtrusive gray patterns would be gone now.

For the first time he noticed that with the reappearance of the dark in them, the pictures, though imperfect, seemed more lifelike, their contours deeper, their colors standing out more vibrantly.

Now at peace, he decided that the name of his next exhibition would be "Shadowful."

Keepers of the Balance

People are abroad in the world who never show up in mass movements, leadership posts, or the public eye. They possess no special expertise, charisma, or influence. They are not wealthy or famous. Nor are they enlightened, spiritually ambitious, or psychologically sophisticated.

Some just get by. Many bear deep emotional wounds that will never heal.

And yet their presence makes possible the very continuity of humanity. It is because of them that we are still here.

You know them, don't you? The woman who steps forth from a crowd to help a crying girl find her missing parents. The diner who gives his boxed dinner to a homeless man. The subway passenger who offers a seat to someone on crutches.

The artist who paints something inspirational, just because. The friend who tells a story that changes a life forever. The teacher who cares. The elder who really sees us. The woman who loses her job for telling the truth about how employees are treated.

The customer who walks out of a racist establishment and never returns. The stranger who offers, at just the right moment, the smile of understanding so desperately needed just then.

In this world, these people could be anybody who goes unnoticed, their names missing from the airwaves, billboards, and history books. But in the Otherworld that shines into this one, the angels know them as the Keepers of the Balance: mortal beings whose simple acts of kindness hold back the final darkness for us all.

Glossary

Aluere: Power of attraction, unification, and coalescence. Style: inviting, alluring, loving, beauty-bringing. Examples: Venus, Aphrodite, Lakshmi, Oshun.

Archetale: A fictional-feeling tale of mythic frame and content, but without the authority of tradition behind ancient sacred stories.

Athara: Power of the Underworld realm. Style: hidden, mysterious, possessive, dark. Examples: Hades (as a realm), Hel (as a realm).

Bellum: Power of strife, conflict, and war. Style: fiery, argumentative, assertive, driven. Examples: Mars, Ares, Gun.

Cempa: Power of heroism, adventuring, and championship. Style: brave, forceful, adventurous, eloquent. Examples: Heracles, Theseus, Cuchulainn, Thor.

Coaguum: the realm of material being. Part of the Tetraverse.

Congevalant: a living being within the Coaguum.

Cronicus: Power of Time. Style: methodical, self-paced, changeable of mood, relentless. Examples: Aion, Chronos (not to be confused with Cronus).

Crossovers: Beings and elements from more than one Vale (see Vale, Dreamvale) found together in a story.

Crossvale Code: the collection of Dreamvale laws of creativity that determine whether storylines involving more than one Vale are viable and likely to last. For example, a story containing a shallow conversation between Dracula and Sherlock Holmes might serve no creative or transformative purpose and rapidly vanish from view, whereas a well-cast meeting between Princess Leia and Tehanu could evolve in interesting and lasting directions. An informal summary of the spirit of the Code would be, “Craft must truly honor the life and potential of the created.”

Doja: Power of death. Style: sudden, extinguishing, mobile, decisive. Examples: Hades/Pluto, Persephone, Proserpina.

Dreamvale: the realm of imagination, whose “fictional” beings believe they create corporeal beings. All works and realms of “fiction” exist somewhere in the Dreamvale. It in turn is part of the Tetraverse.

Eleg: Power of passages, gates, and thresholds. Style: far-seeing, childlike-ancient, decisive, double-natured. Examples: Janus, Ganesha.

Eran: Power of love and attraction. Style: warm, embracing, magnetic. Examples: Eros, Phanos, Angus.

Fari: Power of universal necessity. Style: All-knowing, balanced, strict, fair. Examples: Ananke, Adrastea, Necessita, Norns.

Fortis: Power of fortune and luck. Style: giving, taking, whimsical, unpredictable. Examples: Fortuna, Tyche.

Guardians of Renewal: A recurring archetype that manifests as bands of sensitives who protect some new vision coming into being during times of rupture.

Infrarealm: The archetypal realm of potentiality that permeates and founds the manifest multiverse we live in. Images from mysticism (Heaven, New Jerusalem, Alam al-Mithal, Tirna-Nog, Pleroma, Shambhala) refract the Infrarealm by means of human imagination.

Innra: Power of interiority, reflection, and hearths. Style: introverted, centered, self-sufficient, still. Examples: Hestia, Vesta, St Brigid.

Iustia: Power of justice and rebalance. Examples: Justitia, Dike.

Kaila: Power of healing and regenerating. Style: soothing, softening, supporting, containing. Examples: Hygaeia, Idunn, Aesclepius, Wong Tai Sin.

Kerp: Power of harvesting and gathering. Style: bountiful, thorough, grandparently, stern. Examples: Saturn, Freyr, Inari, Hou T'ou.

Kluni: Power of disorder and chaos. Style: tricky, playful, disruptive, speedy. Examples: Hermes, Coyote, Baubo, Susanuwoo.

Komoyna: Power of household, family, and community. Style: maternal, firm, connective, prudent. Examples: Hera, Frigg, Aditi, Parvati.

Komuay: Pronounced “ko-moo-ay.” Another name for the Powers: immanent and sentient cosmic forces that organize the Tetraverse and that manifest outwardly as universal laws, cycles, and energies.

Magos: The Power of magic, literacy, and witchery. Style: mental, mysterious, enchanting, deep. Examples: Merlin, Gwidion, Gandalf, Cerridwen.

Nexus Crisis: an historical conflict in which different Powers are on different sides. Sensitive and enlightened humans can only resolve the crisis by reconciling clashing archetypal positions and demands. The outcome of the crisis determines which timeline will come into being.

Ordiri: Power of order and harmony. Style: clear, distant, disciplined, rational. Examples: Apollo, Balder, Logos.

Paesha: Power of peace and concord. Style: cooperative, kindly, communal, calm. Examples: Eireen, Pax.

Pandere: Power of expansive reaches and skies. Style: extraverted, paternal, distant, optimistic. Examples: Jupiter, Zeus, Amon.

Powers: see **Komuay**.

Purlieus: uninhabited boundaries that separate Dreamvales until creative people breach them (e.g., a short story in which Corwin of Amber converses with Eowyn, or a poem where Sydney Carton meets Princess Bari). See Crossvale Code.

Radantia: Creator of the cosmos and parent to all the Powers. Style: luminous, parental, expansive, all-powerful. Examples: Ein Sof, Sky Woman. Very close to her daughter Vaeda.

Ravina: Power of space. Style: broad-reaching, silent, elastic, permeable.

Renastra: Power of resurrection, drama, and death-rebirth. Style: sacrificing, boundary-crossing, dramatic, fertile. Examples: Osiris, Dumuzi, Dionysus, Jesus.

Saywala: Power of soul; daughter of Vaeda. Style: deep, ethereal, imaginative. Examples: Psyche, Nous.

Smee: Power of artisanship and craft. Style: skillful, introverted, focused, intense. Examples: Hephaestus, Vulcan, Goibniu.

Terkwa: Power of queering and blending. Style: open-minded, unconventional, hermaphroditic, connective. Examples: Agdistis, Hymenaeus, Hermaphroditus, Tiresias, Inari.

Terrania: The just, Earth-honoring, and delightful world civilization which the Powers would like to see humans mature enough to bring into being. Anticipations of Terrania exist in the Dreamvale and been sensed and poeticized by creative humans.

Tetraverse: What is normally considered the universe; part of a larger Manyverse. The tetraverse begins with the Source (Divine Mystery), which emanates the Powers making up the Infrarealm of potentiality, the Dreamvale world of imagination between the Powers and the Coaguum, and the realm of corporeal being populated by congealants (beings with material bodies, one species of which is Humans). In other words, Source, Potentiality, Possibility, and Actuality.

Transdaimonic League: A group of humans throughout history who possess an imaginative gnostic awareness of the Soul of the Cosmos as expressed by its Powers but reaching beyond them.

Unda: Power of growth, abundance, and nourishment. Style: generous, nourishing, supportive, warm. Examples: Isis, Demeter, Rhea.

Vaeda: Power of wisdom and animation. Style: wise, forthright, light-loving, profound. Examples: Athena, Minerva, White Buffalo Calf Woman, Au Co, Saraswati.

Vales: All fictional worlds (Dune, Earthsea, Westeros, etc.) manifest as imaginal areas, or Vales, within the Dreamvale: a Vale of Dune, a Vale of Earthsea, etc. Only creative activity by a congealant can link Vales.

Wildia: Power of untamed nature. Style: powerful, self-determining, many-mooded, undomesticated. Examples: Artemis, Diana, Rhiannon, Kirene.

Zoe: Power of life. Style: strong, bold, light-seeking, adaptive. Examples: the Gnostic heroines Zoe and Norea.