

37 Short Stories

a Fed Starving book

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May 6th, May 10th, 2020 CORRECTED VERSION

Originally published on the U.S. Message Board



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INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book in a hurried manner, the main source being partial sketches and outlines of stories that I wrote in 2015 and 2016 anonymously published on another message board. At that time I was re-drafting my second novel that I just finished. That book took a full year from conception through to the end of my first final draft and ultimately it wasn't published. I experimented with using the message board where I published the short sketches to see what the resulting effects would be and wasn't that keen on quality, half-interested in writing them, so those sketches didn't turn out so well. I did learn though the power of social media through that task.

Now, a few years later, I decided to give those old sketches I carelessly tossed to the message board a second chance and this time I sprinted all the way through them, starting on April 16th, 2020 and finishing on April 30th, 2020, rewriting them on my laptop computer. Then, on May 1st, 2020, I did a hurried proof-reading, using Word 10 as an editor guide, fixing a lot of the mistakes but there were many more. Personal reasons persuaded me to publish that poorly edited version immediately. The whole thing was done with my utmost top speed.

This version here, is the done and final version, edited slowly starting on May 3rd, 2020 and ending on May 6th, 2020. I found some errors that I missed yet once again and so re-edited this book a second time with higher care from May 7th, 2020 through the early morning hours of May 10th, 2020 well before sunrise. I am fairly sure nearly all of the mistakes are now fixed. 248 pages and 90,000 words long, this book is about the same size as that unpublished novel I finished in 2015.

This book here “37 Short Stories: the correct version” is done and I won't be re-editing it anymore unless it is a matter of saving the Earth or something similar. Considering that this book took 16 days to write and 5 days to edit, I think this some sort of personal record. Keep this book free, a souvenir. I liked all the compliments and encouragement along the way, thank you.

Signed,

Fed Starving

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A Mighty Leap Immortal

This legend has lived secretly on the tongues of the elite, within the palaces of time worn, originally recorded on leather pages. The words burnt onto them carefully, discreetly, beyond the eyes of the prying throng, beyond their knowledge, held in confidence and protected. Valued like gold deposits, saved through the generations. Within the content of this ancient tome a wondrous immortal of godly power is verified true in life now as he was then and shall ever be. Telling his life as it was, all great things done with his hands, the world he lifted out of decay and turmoil. How this notion of benevolence was bestowed upon him through the actions of his adventures.

I was a shop smith when I came into possession of this relic, the legend of Kritzen written on leather. I was much younger than I am now, riding my trusty horse to Protrueton, I departed Auditon early right before sunrise. The journey was a half day of travel at my leisurely meter, not hurried though not lazy. With time on my side I was going to enjoy myself. Goods that I was going to sell in Protrueton were tied onto my horse. At the market there I would sell off a stock of metal-worked items that I'd built and some items that I acquired in trades. I promised my wife and two children a surprise when I returned and that promise was what occupied my mind through much of my trip.

At eighteen years old my eldest son was apprenticed to my shop. A strong and tall young man of purity and honor, trained on sword and shield, I trusted that he could stand in as protectorate of the house in my absence. We lived in a borough of high character and such need of a boy's protection would be so rare that we needn't worry. The knights around our vicinity were sharp and fair and our lot secure. I pay my taxes, twice that of the next man.

I was adaze in a sunlit dream, hypnotized unto the peace of the meadow that the road I was riding upon crossed. Beyond the halfway marker post that measured Protrueton's distance, an acre or

so through the meadow, the scented air of flowers and dewed leaves drying under the heated sun reminded me of my wife.

At that moment of mental abandon a quick shape hobbled out of the tree line on the edge of the meadow. "Sir! I beg thee pardon, sir! We've been attacked! Halt, dear God, halt!"

He was an old man dressed in a thick wool gown tied at the waist with a fine belt. His white hair long and frizzy and his white beard covering his chest. His shoes were fine much like his gown, but as he neared I started to see the stain of bright red blood that marked his fine clothing. He clutched the leather tome with both arms, eyes lost in sorrow, a face that overcame horror.

I swung my leg around and slid off my horse. The old man, huffing hard, took my shoulder with one hand and coughed onto the dirt road. I saw a few tears kick up the summer dust.

"Old man." I said, "What terrifies you?"

He raised his eyes to mine and said, "Invasion from the sea. Barbarians." Tears streamed down his face. "They slaughtered everyone. The peasants were no match but stand hard they do and verily they continue to fight a losing battle as we speak. I was ordered to save the tome and the king, queen and their knights prepared to guard the inner castle. We were outnumbered. The king's advisors implored of him that he retreat and allow the barbarians to sack the palace but he feared not and drew his sword, saying that he would fight the barbarians and not be cowardiced into exile off his own land."

A terrible scream shot out of the trees at the direction that the old man appeared. I could see lines of smoke drifting above the wooded canopy and thought of the town beyond them, a town I'd yet to see. A barbarian shouted something nonsensical.

I told the old man, "There, that large stone, hide there, I will return." I went to mount my horse and the old man yanked my shirt, pleading, "No! The barbarians are vicious and bloodthirsty! We must escape and warn others! The risk is too great!"

I said, "No, old man. I can fight. I will win. You mark my words." I yanked myself out of his grip and mounted my horse.

I drew my sword and the old man lost his breath, "My, what sword shines with the light of angels that a man such as you could behold?" I replied, "The light of God slices the heart of evil open and blessings endure through the blood in honor of he that cuts apart

the goblin, the witch and the barbarian. And I am he that hath done so. My sword swims through the light of Godliness. Go now, beyond that large stone and I shall make a quick end of this barbarian.” The old man scurried away, clutching his tome.

The barbarian was ugly. His body thick and bulging, mud caked his half bare legs. Blood wetted the crude uneven tunic that hung out of his breastplate. His hair was tangled and wiry, his beard thick and mangy. His sword was dull and blunt in appearance. His small shield no more than a dinner plate made of wood. A lack of leg protection allowed him to sprint quickly. I wore a thick leather tunic and leather pads on my forearms. His armor outclassed mine with his breastplate and skullcap being made of iron.

I didn't fear him.

I rushed the barbarian full speed, my medium shield and my horses' reign held tightly in my left hand, sword raised in my right hand. He attempted to parry my attack but my reach too great and my sword too long. I caught his arm behind his pathetic shield with a downward swing, cutting his hand clean off as my horse kicked clods of dirt into his face. The barbarian howled in agony, trying to chase me but there wasn't a chance. The insane look in the barbarian's eyes was that of a passionate beast, uncouth and feral, living on the underpinnings of nature. His scrunching face filled with the lines of hardship.

I circled my horse around on a second attack, this time with my sword across my left, ready to swipe the barbarian's head off. The barbarian was desperate, blood oozing out of his stub arm. He tried to charge the middle of my horse, thrusting his dirty sword out, but once again my reach was greater and my sword easily sliced his neck at the collar bone. His head stayed attached but his charge ended. His legs shook and onto one knee he bent, letting his sword go. A trickle of blood soaked into his breastplate out of the slice in his neck, he would choke and gasp like he couldn't breathe. I stayed my horse and watched the barbarian till he smacked face first into the dirt.

My sword was almost clean. I retrieved a cloth out of my saddlebag and shined my sword up, throwing the bloody cloth onto the back of the dead barbarian, and then re-hilted my sword in its sheath.

The barbarian smelled foul. Not of death, but of the life he lived.

I returned to the old man and dismounted my horse. I said, “See! I am a swordsman as well as a shopkeeper. Must every man be wise in the ways of protection and war? ‘Aye.’ says my Lord his Majesty. Not every man can be a knight, in spite of this, let every man stand and fight.”

The old man held a look of renewed faith. “Bless thee, sir. We must warn the people of Protrueton as soon as possible!”

I was urgent in the need to continue my campaign into the barbarian horde seizing this countryside castle but knew that I was outnumbered and so dire was the old man with defeat I dared not risk losing my life and in turn the townspeople of Protrueton. It was our duty to warn them to prepare their defenses. And verily, the old man and I made it to Protrueton many hours ahead of the barbarians, saving the town and leading to the ambush and slaughter of the whole hideous lot of them.

The old man gifted the tome to me and said, “Keep this sacred tome in the hands of the righteous. Secrets are within it that will beset a power unto you over man and nature and an advantage upon life’s perils. You will learn of an immortal man that is Godly who makes kings of men. It is he that hath the knowledge and the lifesblood of the Gods. Go to him and return this relic to him.” The old man produced a yellow gemstone that glowed with a neon fluorescence. “You see, this relic was his and is his key to return to his people. Without this relic, he is bound to Earth for eternity. If you should not find him when you are as I am now, elderly and whitened, you must pass this relic and this tome on to someone whom you trust will never let these items become lost in the ditch of time and forgotten. Save this Godman for us, for the world, for all existence.”

I’d taken the tome and the relic as he requested and swore to him that I would honor his concerns no matter what the price could be.

I kept the tome secret, not telling my sons or wife about the old man’s request. My family was mouthy and word would get out quickly. Here are the contents of that tome.

* * * * *

KRITZEN, GODMAN of the HEAVENS

Kritzen, man half a god, within him beholden a power that he couldn't see. Nature in his hands, the creatures knelt to him, and they listened to him, and he they. Man and his woman amazed at Kritzen, his control over forces we cannot influence.

Kritzen born son of stargods out of the heavens above. Landed onto Earth inside a machine that flied along stars. His father stargod and mother threw Kritzen onto the dirt, naked. Stargod father said, "We are warring. Let my gemstone prove thee a Marsgod. In absence of this gemstone, wild spirits shall strangle the heart of Mars. And the war cannot be won. Go, Kritzen, build thee up!"

Kritzen learned the Earth and the ways of mankind. He traveled a distance great. His years were kind and Kritzen did not age. He knew a great many things. Because Kritzen could not die a natural death and he did not age, his knowledge was vast. He was with a tower of intellect, that no man could match him in science. He turned his father's gemstone in his hand and dreamt that Mars above was his.

Tortured was Kritzen with his noble immortality that the world died yet he lived. Centuries he lived in secret, hiding his eternal youth. He learnt his powers. He starved himself and couldn't die and many things he did to test his powers. He traveled and kept wealth, living fine and sharing his knowledge on occasion.

With science Kritzen held power and crushed kingdoms and saved kingdoms. Humanity was short lived and petty in temper and his science couldn't save them. Humanity was foolish he judged and he would avoid the humans. Poor humans made Kritzen suspect whenever they couldn't understand.

Kritzen, man half a god, born children of a wife born noble, who kept his secret. Then he faked his death to save him the suspicions of their society. His wife met him in secret till death parted them. Kritzen fell into sadness.

Heavy hearted and wounded, Kritzen fled to a country castle. Locking himself in. He tracked his children and their children and their children. He tracked his descendants until they no longer

resembled him and his memory was forgotten. Only Kritzen would remember his wife and their children through eternity.

Inside his riverside castle Kritzen practiced science. His knowledge was greater than any man. Kritzen wanted to return to his true home, Mars. He cared not of his gemstone, of Godliness. Decades burnt off his calendar in his pursuit of building a starship to sail into heaven. He deepened his knowledge greatly with an obsessive hypnosis overtaking him. Man was no challenge against Kritzen the man half god. His science proved pan-ultimate. And his starship was done. Built with the help of men who knew not of what they were building. Kritzen would not tell them. They despised him and his wealth and stole the gemstone. Kritzen's helpers left and he paid them well but he could not find the gemstone. Without his gemstone his starship could not leave the Earth. He could fly all over the Earth but could not leave.

While flying high into the heavens Kritzen met a starman like his father. Starman warned Kritzen that without his gemstone he would die. Kritzen requested another gemstone. Starman said, "I cannot give you mine." Starman left Kritzen alone. Kritzen was too late to ask the Starman to take him home. He never saw another Starman.

Kritzen's grievance became so great that he is said to lie at the depth of the greatest canyon. Kritzen starves eternally and does not move. He watches the horizon with one eye. His cheek on a pillow, his only luxury. He cries for his gemstone.

* * * * *

All my life I kept this ancient leather book inside a secret vault behind a bookcase in my house. At times I would stare at the pages and roll the gemstone in my hand well past dusk, attempting to solve the puzzle. Truth this must be. What king would save a lie with death upon his head? Kritzen must be real. I pondered that Kritzen was alive somewhere in the world. That his immortal flesh lay covered in moss and dirt clinging to his everlasting animate body, sucked dry like smokehouse beef, an eternity of sorrow.

I shall always keep my promise. Let a hero inherit these items, to bestow upon him the responsibility of saving the heart of an immortal cursed and doomed to live among us. I swore on my

livesblood and my children's livelihood. I am not the man that has power enough to return the gemstone to Kritzen. I know a man though that is a great warrior and adventurer. And tomorrow I shall gift him these items and inherit unto him this responsibility.

One Way Misplacer

All Geoff could remember was his side yard barbecuer sizzling. He went out to flip his chicken breasts and steaks, next thing you know he was confused and his sight was blurry. There was an ethereal glow about everything, like reality was melting around the edges. A swirly blurriness dissipating the colors of what he saw became vividly bright, like tangy drink powder or a squeeze tube of paint. He was grilling himself a barbecue dinner and then he wasn't there.

He felt numbish like he was half conscious and his limbs were made of paper weights. His senses were dulled. "Where am I?" Geoff said, searching for someone else. He somehow knew that he wasn't alone. There was someone there, his senses were too confused to actually see them.

When his eyesight resharpened to normal and he looked around him, the sky was a light red with orange highlights, almost pink in some areas. The sun was huge but not as bright as he remembered the sun being. He could stare right into the sun and his eyes didn't hurt.

He was standing on a hill and when he looked down he saw his first wife sitting there not far away. Geoff was married, but to a different woman, his second wife Aletta. This woman on the hill was his first wife, Fedora. She was probably the last woman he would anticipate seeing and considering the circumstance he wondered were he sane at all.

Geoff said, "Fedora? Why are you here and where is it are we?"

Fedora turned her head around to see him, surprised, "I was wondering the same thing." She said, "I was washing my laundry,

pulling clothes out of my dryer, then all of the sudden I am here. I didn't know you were here. I'm not asleep am I, Geoff?"

Geoff said, "I don't know. I was wondering the same thing."

He breathed deeply and smacked his mouth. The air contained an odd flavor, like damp mold. Not thick and pungent, but ever so faint that you barely knew the odd flavor was there. He went down the hill to sit next to Fedora and he felt lighter in the sense of weight, slower too.

As Geoff sat next to Fedora he asked, "Are you frightened Fedora?"

"Not at all." She said, "I feel strange. That is all. This place. I don't know. It all seems kind of odd and unnatural."

Geoff was leaning on one hand as he sat next to her. He looked at the growing vegetation beneath them and felt some of what was under his hand. He said, "Got a slippery texture. Sort of like wet paint but doesn't stick to your fingers. Soft, eel like."

Fedora said, "Yeah, look at this stuff, growing on everything. There's no trees here. And no sound. No sound at all. You can't see that far, like the air is thick with something but I don't choke on it." She rolled onto her right side to face him, setting her head on her left hand. "At least you're here with me, real or not. You know I missed you a lot once we were divorced. I couldn't get over you. Now look at us. Getting older and quieter. I wonder what would have become of us if we stayed together through it all."

Geoff laughed, "We would be two nuts in a pea pod, completely out of style."

Fedora got on her feet with a small thump. She said, "We should look around and see what's going on."

Geoff said, "See those buildings down the road there beyond the bottom of the hill? Let us go there and see if we can find someone to tell us where we are. This first though." He pinched Fedora unexpectedly, surprising her. She smirked and pinched him back. "See, Fedora, we aren't sleeping."

They held hands while they slowly made their way down to the bottom of the hill. There was no sense of urgency or stress. They didn't know where they were or what was going on but somehow they were calm and collected and well strengthened with each other's presence.

Each building looked the same. No trim, no windows, no decorations, no distinctive features. No entrances or doors or numbers. Nothing to distinguish one building from the other and no discernable way to enter or leave them. They also looked perfectly new. No wear or tear, no weathering, no dirt. Nothing. And everything was silent. Not a single sound aside of their feet on the pathway, a pathway made of some sort of clearish plastic.

The path seemed to cut through a symmetrical center where buildings mirrored each other on either side. The pathways between the buildings were identical in their positions and the buildings were of a distance equal to each other.

Geoff and Fedora couldn't see any people anywhere, yet all these buildings. No animals. No bugs, birds, bunnies, nothing.

They reached a building that ended the center path that they walked along. They walked the path around it and saw that in each direction outward, the town looked precisely the same. What made this center building different was the larger size of it, appearing about three stories tall while all the other buildings were a single story tall.

Geoff went to the center building and tried to see inside of it. With his face pressed into the wall he said, "Fedora, look! Can you see that? The walls are see-through."

Fedora joined him, pressing her eyes close into the strange plastic feeling wall. She said, "Yes. And when you walk to another position the shapes inside change dimension!"

Geoff was fascinated with the alien structure. There seemed to be vast numbers of rows and columns of cubicles but they merged into each other at each perspective so severely they couldn't possibly fit in a real three dimensional space of the same size. And as he moved around to get different angles of observation the same kaleidoscope effect would continually warp the images together so that he could see them all fine, he knew inside his mind that what he saw wasn't possible in normal reality.

"Hey look!" exclaimed Fedora, "Someone walked through the wall over there! Did you see that?!"

Geoff missed the miracle but he didn't get skeptical like he normally would have done. He said, "Well, you know what, I'm going to go in there. Care to accompany me, dear Fedora?"

She smiled and they linked arms at the elbows. "Ready?" said Geoff, "One, two, three."

They took a step directly into the wall together simultaneously and went through without resistance. They didn't feel a thing. Through the other side of the wall the inside of the building was humungous. It was so much larger than it appeared on the outside. Such an impossible cavern, they might as well have walked into a stadium. The cubicles were there in the way that they appeared on the outside; endless rows of cubicles, except now Geoff and Fedora saw them in three dimensions.

Geoff said, "This place is either a stadium sized call center or the most colossal office building in the universe."

Fedora said, "You see their computers? No keyboards, no mouse, they must use their minds to use them."

The people that they saw in there were definitely alien. They were similar with humans although with odd qualities. Their craniums were swollen, slightly bulging behind the ears and crowning out several inches beyond the normal human capacity. Their ears were small, embedded into the bulges without lobes or cartilage flaps. Their hair was a thin and small tuft on the tops of their large heads. They didn't have much hair, enough to make their extra-large heads look sort of funny. Their lips thin and straight across their faces, small ridged and pointy noses, fair complexion, sort of flour-peachy cream colored like a sponge cake or a lemonade.

They were taller than normal, with arms that stretched out of proportion to the ratio of Earth human limbs on Earth humans. Their legs though seemed the same, you'd think if their arms were extra-long so would be their legs but that wasn't so with these people. They wore snug fitting sweater-like long sleeve shirts with various colored tints to them. Nothing extra bright. Their pants looked like dress pants like you'd see on Earth. Their shoes were more like water socks than real shoes.

All of them displayed the same dull look on their faces and they all moved in the same manner and they all sort of looked like clones of one another. The lack of individuality amongst them was what truly unsettled Geoff the most.

His stomach sank. They were suddenly under close watch. One of these alien humans started following them as they walked

around and followed uncomfortably close to them. Fedora said, "I wonder if this weirdo has ever heard of personal space?"

Every step they took he seemed to copy their footwork. It was like being photocopied and they didn't like it at all. They wanted this alien being to stop but they were way outside of their element and for all they knew he could have been severely dangerous. They weren't sure what action they should take.

Then Geoff and Fedora decided to stop and wait there motionless. They turned around to face the humanoid follower. The alien humanoid stared at them face to face over an extended amount of time. His eyes were unusually large and blue. There were no lines on his face at all yet he appeared to be much older than them. His skin sort of looked like dough, real fair and delicate, though without pores or hair. Smooth. His breathing seemed much fainter than theirs and the calm about him was almost lifeless.

Yes, these people were definitely alien. Geoff wanted to ask this humanoid something but knew that saying something would be futile. How could such an alien know his language?

The alien abruptly interrupted the silence when he spoke to them both in perfect mechanical English. He said, "What is your intention here? I do not recognize your type."

Geoff said, "We are humans and we were born on Earth. What is this place and what sort of people are you and how do you know how to speak our language?"

The alien spoke, "And we all know all languages."

Geoff said, "Yes? Where is this that we are right now and how did we get here?"

The alien spoke, "I must contact our prime intelligence before I can continue with both you two. Do not move out of your positions. If you move I will disintegrate you. I shall return."

Geoff said, "Sir. No harm intended. We don't know how we got here or even where here is. Please, understand, we mean you no harm."

The alien spoke, "Do not move. I warned you."

Geoff and Fedora stood there waiting as ordered. Eventually another alien that looked much like the one that was following them looked like appeared and said, "I am the prime intelligence and you are stage three humans. You asked who we were, we are also human. We are not the same. Where are you? Nowhere close to

Earth I can assure you. Earth is out there along the edges of the galaxy, hidden away like a private park. You two have arrived near the center of the galaxy and we humans pre-exist you with a half million years. I am sorry that you didn't know that before you came here. That is quite the distance to travel. Most humans wouldn't have made it."

Fedora said, "Can you send us home? I want to go home. All I want to do is go home really bad." Distress upon her face, she looked like she was about to break down in tears.

The alien spoke, "I am sorry but you cannot return to Earth. We do not have the technology to send you home. There is only one way and at this time that method is impossible."

Geoff said, "What do you mean you can't send us to Earth?! How do you think we got here to your planet to begin with?! You can't bring us here and then say oh I'm sorry there is no way to go this far! Look! Here we fuckin' are! If you got us here then dammit you can get us to Earth."

The alien spoke, "We do not know who brought you here. I am sorry that you can't return. I will have a sleeping quarters prepared for you and we can discuss important matters following your meal. Please accept my hospitality."

Geoff said, "Yes sir. Thank you for peacefully listening to us. We would be very happy to accept."

Fedora said with a twinkle in her eye, "I can't believe this."

Geoff said, "We must be careful. We've got each other and that is much more than nothing. Don't worry, we'll make the most of this."

Fedora said, "You think we'll be alright?"

With a determined nod Geoff said, "I know so."

Bar of the Olden Tyme

I was sore on a wednesday with the next three days off. My girlfriend was waiting at our apartment. I was going to take her out. Hurrying myself along I didn't stop anywhere and found her impatiently waiting and getting ready.

I thought about how empty our place was without children. We didn't make any kids yet and I wasn't so keen on having one before I owned a house. I was probably going to get her pregnant before then but I tell myself each and every day, not now, now isn't the time. We can wait. She seemed to agree.

When she finally left the bathroom she was squeezed into a cherry red mini-skirt and a soft skintight top. Her makeup was perfect and was at her shoe display trying to decide what shoes she wanted to wear.

I asked her, "Are you ready yet?" She said, "Almost, give me another minute." I swear sometimes she spends more time getting ready than we spend being out.

When she was ready I hurried her to my car, a two seater. I restored the thing all myself and got the classic car vanity plate as a sort of reward for my hard work. The next car we get is going to be hers and she doesn't want anything special. She wants something

low key and new. Whatever. I guess it would look sort of funny if we were both driving around classic restored cars. That's my fantasy. She doesn't have to like it.

I started the engine and hit the accelerator deep. The damn thing roared like a lion. Impressive.

Kae is my girlfriend's name in case I didn't already tell you.

So Kae says with a fake whine, "Alvin, where are we going? I told you that I didn't want to go to the rock bar this time. We should go somewhere that none of your friends are going to be. If we go to the rock bar I will end up sitting there all alone talking to some girl I don't know while you run around playing pool and darts with your friends and then go disappear like you always do for an hour. This time I want it to be you and me and that is all."

"Whatever you want, Kae." I said, "Don't you tell me I drank too much, I'm getting plastered. You can be the designated driver."

Kae said, "Alvin, did you make a wrong turn? I don't recognize this area."

"Kae, same route to the bridge as usual." I said.

Kae said, "Look how old the houses are. Looks like they were built in the 1800's."

I said, "You're right about that. Hey look, see that bar? We should check that bar out. Even got a horse tied up, see that?"

"Hmm. Okay." Kae said.

I parked the car in the dirt lot and opened the door for Kae. She looked too hot for clothing. Man, I can't believe how fortunate I am to have her. I don't know what I would do without her. In fact, I think I'm addicted to her.

We looked at the sign outside the bar and it said, "Our Drinker's Bar of the Now Tyme."

I said, "Funny name for a bar, isn't it?" Kae shook her head in agreement. "At least this bar is nice." I said.

The inside of the bar was as olden time as it appeared on the outside. No electricity. Everything was lit up with lanterns. I swear these folks went the extra mile to make this thing seem authentic. Fancy everything. Top notch craftsmanship. Probably the best bar I ever walked into. Happy to find the place.

Kae and I sat at the bar and I ordered us some drinks. She went on about her sister and her parents and her day. I swear that woman can talk. I listened and talked some but not much. We got

ourselves a buzz going and I took her for a dance with this olden time piano machine that played tunes on its own. We were really getting into it when some weirdo made a scene.

Wearing a funny vest with a bow tie and olden time trousers with a goofy accent there's no telling where this nut was from. He carried with him this smart tablet but he was really impressed with it. I mean it was all he could talk about. And talk about it loudly he did. He went over to the bar where some lone sap was wallowing in a bottle of scotch. The lone man turned in his empty bottle, sliding it across the bar and said, "Victor, tankard of beer thank you."

The weirdo sat next to him with his smart tablet and said, "What I hold in my hand is no ordinary picture. There contained inside this picture is a secret of great value." He turned the tablet around in his hand, driving his fingernails along the seam on the edge. Holding the tablet up to the light of the lantern above their heads you can see there was a picture of him on the screen.

The tankard man said, "Yes, I can see that your picture is sealed well, but what of your claim that it contains a secret?"

At that time Kae and I quit our dancing and I directed her to follow me to our table. We returned to our drinking routine and watched the scene out of the twilight zone before us.

The bow tie weirdo said, "You see, this here picture has a power all its own that depends upon one thing to make the miracle of the myth within to work. That thing is that I must pass this miracle picture on to someone else. Don't get me wrong, I'd witnessed the power of the secret several times before accepting the picture for my own good. I was with a troupe of friends who were explorers. They uncovered this item in a crumbling barn somewhere down the road here. Inside a rusted chest along with this miracle picture was a note made of thin paper that disintegrated if you touched it. The text written upon the note was recovered before they attempted to remove it but there was no luck saving it, the paper was too frail and brittle, becoming instant dust."

Tankard man smirked and said, "I can't say that I believe you. What was written on your so claimed note of miracles?" He finished off his tankard with a gulp and then ordered a second one.

The nut wearing a bow tie said, "A riddling rhyme was written upon it and went like this."

“One full day of this can sure be death
Pass on the picture when it has changed
Great fortune reserved once you have left
The picture in the hands of whom is displayed.”

“So you see!” Bow tie weirdo exclaimed, turning the picture over to show the tankard man. “The picture has changed! The picture is of you!”

Tankard man said, “That was phenomenal! I don't know what to say!” He laughed in amazement, “You know, you are quite the character. Never in my life did I see such a clever trick.”

Kae and I sat there speechless. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. I thought that we were in some sort of special bar for the mentally challenged.

Bow tie said, “Now that I shared the rhyme and you can see right here your own image has replaced mine, you must believe me and I must implore of you to take this picture out of my hands and allow me to win my reward of promised good fortune. What say you?”

Tankard man said, “Agreed!” and then forcefully shook bow tie weirdo's hand. He said to the bartender, “Victor! Pour this man a scotch on me.”

Kae said loudly, “Excuse me! Excuse me, sir.”

All three of them at the bar turned to face her.

Kae said, “That thing that you call a picture you got there is a smart tablet, don't you know?”

The Electrician's Road

It was 1977 and Terry purchased a used corvette at a car lot in the next town over. Brightly colored, his new car was an eyeful. When he pressed the accelerator that engine would scream. He could feel the power surge through him as he clenched the wheel. She was a smooth ride. He went hard and got accustomed to how the corvette handled, adapting very quick.

He worked hard and saved his money without help. As he parked his corvette in his parent's driveway he really felt like he could make them proud. He showed the car off to his dad who was at the house when he arrived. His dad liked the way the car looked and wanted to hear the engine. Terry made the door on the garage rattle and his dad laughed. "Sounds great, son." his dad said.

One day later he went and retrieved his girlfriend Rhonda at her parents' house right at sunset. They were going out to eat dinner and see a drive-in movie together. She loved his corvette a lot. She would hug him tight when he hit the accelerator and give him bad girl looks when he used swervy maneuvers through traffic to get ahead. They couldn't remember half of it if you asked them about it.

They went to a steakhouse diner and filled themselves up. They were both hungry, having not eaten all day, anticipating their date together. They started dating about a month ago and saw each other regularly around twice a week. It was the summer and they were going to college next year.

They discussed what college was going to be like and what college meant to them and what sort of career they wanted to get involved in. They liked each other's company and got along well. They left the steakhouse in high spirits. The movie was going to start soon so they hurried to make it to the drive-in on time.

They weren't old enough to purchase alcohol, both of them being 19 years old, but Terry's older brother got him a bottle of whiskey a week before and Terry hid the liquor inside a duffle sack that he left on the rear seat of his corvette. He wasn't going to drink more than a shot or two because he was driving but he wanted to get some liquor in him anyway because he liked it.

The young couple cuddled together as the romantic action movie played out on the huge screen. They made out for thirty minutes and when it got too hot a lot attendant hit the driver side window with his fist, his ring tapping loudly and shouted, "Hey, no hanky panky in my lot!"

Terry replied, "Hey, watch the window you bastard!"

The movie was great, both Terry and Rhonda gained a small buzz off the whiskey and they were anxious to leave the drive-in and the nosy lot attendant.

Terry parked in the gas station convenience store lot outside of the drive-in so Rhonda could use the restroom. He turned the radio to an FM rock station and decreased volume levels to a nice background noise. Across the intersection was the entrance to an old electricians road that few people rarely used because of the degraded state it was in. There wasn't lighting at all along the electricians road and tended to be too eerie for most people's tastes. The road was long and went the length of the city almost all the way to where Rhonda lived. Terry wondered if she'd want to give it a try.

When Rhonda finally returned Terry asked her, "Hey Rhonda, want to go check out the trail, it leads almost directly to your house."

“You mean the old electricians road? I wouldn't want to get stuck out there. You sure we can make it?” she said.

“I am damned positive I can make it.” said Terry. The intersection was empty and all the other drive-in customers already left. They were all alone. Rhonda checked her watch. “One A.M.” she said.

“Hold on.” said Terry as he started his corvette. He throttled the engine and shifted into gear at a high idle. The tires spun then caught and the car yanked suddenly ahead, leaving a tread trail diagonally through the gas station lot. Terry went through the intersection incorrectly, but for all he cared though speed was never wrong.

The pavement ended at a left turn into the dense woods where it turned into a littered dirt road that was rough with holes and small branches and stones. Terry turned on his high beams when the last lamp post disappeared in his mirror. Terry was skilled enough to avoid any obstacles that would stop him. His adrenaline surged as he increased speed.

The quiet radio and the crunch of littered debris was all the sound that there was. Their sense of adventure turned to unease as they went deeper. The trees looked as though they turned as Terry drove past them. The headlights pierced unevenly between the trees, reflecting back irregular shapes. They didn't speak, they became more and more nervous. Geoff thought he saw something staring at him through the trees more than once so he accelerated, slowly increasing his speed as the anxious nervousness overtook him.

A cloud of dirt snaked behind the corvette. Terry kept increasing speed, swerving around the scars of the unkempt road. The corvette shuddered here and there but didn't bottom out. Small tree branches and rocks were thrown out from underneath the tires, some of them hitting the undercarriage and making loud noises.

The road was mostly a direct shot from one end of the woods to the other end, stretching a good seven miles. Of the bends there were, the road simply diverted around something large like a boulder or a bank that descended into a creek bed, but the road would always return to the original course. When that first bend came he wasn't prepared, hitting his breaks and sliding his corvette sideways. He gained control but was a lot more cautious of the road

ahead of him and would slow down at the next bend enough to keep a lock on his driving.

“Terry, watch out!” Rhonda screamed in horror.

A hideous shape came fleeting across the road from the passenger side and Terry couldn't see it was coming till it was too late. He hit his brakes again and the car went sliding without traction on the loose dirt, throwing up a ton of dust that clouded their entire surroundings.

SMACK!

Terry's corvette plowed into the monster right near the center of the hood and the monster went flying through the kicked up dust and out of sight.

The engine quit and they sat there silently wondering what in the world they hit. It wasn't human, that was for sure. He was sure though that he saw it earlier on the road, staring at them through the trees, its animal eyes and hairy face.

“Where did he go?!” Yelled Rhonda.

“I don't have any idea but I'm not going to sit here and find out.” said Terry. He turned over the ignition but the engine wouldn't start. “Too much damn dust makin' my car non-responsive.”

A loud roar came hurling through the dust as the monster appeared out of the dust cloud into the headlights. There was no blood on him, didn't seem to be hurt at all. He looked like a corpse brought back to life.

Misshapen, furry and oversized with disproportionate limbs, his head was bulging in a way that made him resemble a beaten and swollen animal. A long fang stuck out over the side of one lower lip and his nose was almost non-existent, more like a shallow hole in his face than anything. His eyes seemed to glow, being one solid color. His clothes were torn and dirty and stringy. He might as well have been a bear because the clothes did nothing to make him seem human.

The monster charged towards Rhonda's side of the car. A third attempt to start the engine worked and Terry was able to get the corvette in motion once again. The monster tried to break the passenger side window but was unsuccessful, his oversized monster hands scratching along the car as Terry ditched him. They were on their way once again and this time full speed ahead.

Rhonda was hugging Terry closely and crying. Terry said, "Don't worry baby, everything's gonna be alright. I'll protect you."

Sometime later they eventually made it out of the woods and in one piece. Terry parked the corvette at another gas station convenience store that stood in an identical position to the one at the other entrance to the old electricians road. Rhonda was still hugging him but she quit crying.

Terry said, "I don't know what that was in the woods but I won't go there again without a shotgun and dynamite. Who's going to believe us? Should we tell anyone?" Terry looked at his watch, 1:45am. "Are you awake Rhonda?" He said. She was clinging to him and hasn't moved in a long while.

"Yeah." Rhonda almost whispered.

"How about another shot of whiskey before I take you to your house." said Terry.

"I don't want any, thank you." she replied.

Terry said, "Well, I am going to drink me a shot of whiskey. Gimme a second." He reached over the seat to retrieve his whiskey bottle and took a deep swig. He tossed the bottle onto the rear seat and then started the engine. "Ready, baby?" he said.

She didn't say anything.

John, the Smart Man

John is a smart man. He was given his inheritance when he was twenty-four. At \$100,000.00 he could've used the sum to purchase a high performance car or maybe a long vacation somewhere he always wanted to visit. John wasn't ready to give up his inheritance on a short term relief out of the work of normal life. He was going to invest that money in something that pays a return. \$100,000.00 is a lot of dough, if he let his money slip through the drain like that he wouldn't get another chance at a free chunk of dough again.

John was already well off for his young age when family lawyers wrote him the promised check. He went to college. He worked hard. He partied hard. He used his money on steady investments that paid off. It wasn't like he needed a new toy. A new

toy would be awesome but he knew that he could use his inheritance to benefit him financially in the long term. Since he already has all that he needs and saved up a good sized savings of his own, he wouldn't be hard up for the money or miss his inheritance once he made a useful investment of it.

He deposited his inheritance into its own bank account and then went on an adventure around the city on a mission to find a house within his price bracket that he could turn around and make some profit on. He started off aimlessly exploring parts of the city he was yet to see and searched for the occasional "For Sale" sign sitting on the lawn. \$100,000.00 couldn't purchase him a new house but he could find an old used house that needed some small maintenance and he would be alright.

One day he was driving through the older neighborhoods where all the houses were well beyond their intended use. Houses built a hundred or so years ago. Many of them upkept in shape fit for families, some of them were barely standing.

He initially found three houses out of a long list of them that he both liked and could get with his small budget. He scheduled visits to a couple of the houses with the owners, finding that the foundation was crumbling at house number one and house number two needed too many fixes that brought the end price beyond his budget. That brought him to house number three.

This third house was located at the top of a hill near the center of the city. Surrounded with trees and thicket, the area held the appearance of being in the country but wasn't at all. With a look of long abandonment the house was actually in great condition for its age. Two stories high with a covered porch, he thought the house was charming for its small size. A grand old tree provided the whole yard with much needed shelter from the scathing sun. The seller sign attached on the mailbox said, "Private Sale, Inquire for Price." with the owner's phone number.

John shifted his car into park and turned it off. He called the number on the sign using his wireless phone. The seller was energetic and surprised that John called, agreeing to show him the house the next day. When the call was done John sat in the driveway for a while, soaking in the magnificent vintage atmosphere of the neighborhood. Peaceful.



The next day John returned to the house that he wanted at the agreed time to meet the owner and maybe perform the deal. He wasn't sure what to expect and couldn't make a decision without seeing the property and the inside of the house first.

The owner's name was Dennis and he was a young businessman that purchased the house at auction.

Dennis showed him the property. The yard was unkempt and grown over. The house needed a coat of paint and the siding wasn't dry rotted. The porch and wood floors were solid. Two stories and a small wine cellar with a ground-level window and a tiny attic, everything finely crafted.

There were no major damages inside the house that John could immediately notice. That didn't mean that there wasn't something with the potential to be expensively wrong with the house. John put his faith in that there weren't hidden discrepancies. He could tell that the previous occupants weren't abusive to their property.

John really liked this house. He could see that once the small fixes were done and the yard was restored he wouldn't mind living there himself and if it weren't that he liked the house he already lived in so much he might've moved in here.

John discussed the previous owners with Dennis. The original owners were grandchildren of the people that built the house. Those owners recently died without anyone to inherit their house and property, so the I.R.S. sold the house at auction. Dennis bought the house for \$50,000.00 and was selling it for \$70,000.00.

John believed that Dennis was telling him the truth and accepted the price of \$70,000.00. He wrote Dennis a check right there and Dennis gave him a receipt. They agreed to meet once again to finish up the paperwork once the check was verified and the money received.

Dennis gave John the keys and they shook hands. "Thank you, Dennis." said John. "You are more than welcome." replied Dennis. Once Dennis was gone John spent some time in the yard of his new purchase all alone. He looked at the long swing that hung

off the largest tree branch, appearing so old and worn that it would easily break if he were to try and sit on it. "I'm going to remove that." he thought to himself.

John fixed his house up and painted the exterior without help. The task proved very easy as the most difficult part of the restoration was sanding and staining some of the wood floors where years of use slowly damaged the surface. He went through the property with a thorough care till the place was up to his own living standards. All the utilities were functioning well and the yard looked great. Summer's end was on its way and he would like to find a tenant before the autumn months.

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John noticed that house listings with more information and photos spent less time on the market so he advertised his newly restored house with bold print and a photo, sparing no expense. Several renters contacted him within a week and he was happy to show the house to them whenever they wanted. One young woman wanted to rent and soon he was reading through the renters' agreement with her.

Her name was Allie and she was close to the end of her education, training for her P.H.D. in chemistry. She wanted to head her own laboratory at a government research firm. We would discuss science, me being a science enthusiast. We didn't find an end to our conversations and often cut ourselves short because of the limited time in our personal lives.

Allie became a trusty tenant with her rental payments always on time and she treated the property like it was her own. No complaints about her.

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John went on saving his money and soon within five years the property paid itself off without any notable damages. Tenants would stay one to two years apiece before moving on. He would take these profits and then re-invest them. He would purchase more

properties and fix them up, continuing this pattern on through to his death at 87 years young.

I Rescued Some Surveyors

The year was 1937 and I was sent on a mission to search a tract of land in the deep Northwestern wilderness of the United States. There were reports of outlandish bright lights and a crew of forestry surveyors went missing in the area weeks before. They were going to map elevations of the mountain on the land and take wood samples off some of the trees so that their company could find if there was value in purchasing the lot.

A seldom used road cut through the trees several miles away from the site. The road was two lanes wide and was recently paved

but because of the location of it not being connected to any particular city the traffic was almost non-existent.

I was given orders to arm myself, so I brought my trusty pistol with me. My mission was to search for the missing surveyors, note anything out of the ordinary and make a full record of manmade structures.

The area was thought to be permanently uninhabited. The land wasn't ever sold and remained in the possession of the U.S. government since the initial claim in 1872. The books showed that other than the surveyors who were granted permission to survey the lot, not once did anyone else before them ever inquire about it and no reference to the area is found within other documents such as travel logs and news articles. The area was thought to be 337 square miles of pristine and untouched wildland. The mountain doesn't even have a name.

I parked my truck at the nearest point of the road to the center of the target location. Behind thick bushes I concealed my vehicle in case the rare motorist would drive along the road, increasing the chance that such a traveler wouldn't stop and meddle with my property. I double checked my firearm to ensure that it worked, firing a shot into the air. I put my gun in the upwards pointing leather harness upon my left shoulder, strategically placed for an easy draw. With my gun harnessed like this I would be able to fire off shots quickly.

There were aerial photos taken out of a small plane a few years ago, but they weren't highly detailed. I retrieved them and looked at the landscape. I could see the small mountain directly ahead and the picture showed some grooves in the landscape not far off the road. I determined where I was parked on the picture and plotted my route.

The peak of the mountain was approximately ten miles away and the rest of the land plot lay beyond the mountain, stretching to the north. The picture wasn't sharp enough to determine where exactly the outer edge of the slope of the mountain started. The trees covered the mountain and the surrounding area so well that I relied on the lighting in the picture to decide elevations. The only areas that weren't covered with trees and greenery were the grooves which showed a sort of dirty orange color to them. I theorized that

the row of grooves were some sort of limestone deposits. I put the picture away and double checked my supplies. Good to go.

There wasn't much underbrush in the area and that was unusual. Small dry bushes, some rotting logs, patches of ferns. The initial walk towards the mountain was without obstacles. The dirt beneath my feet was dry and soft like the rain was long absent.

Then I reached the ravine that cut into the land. I checked the picture. This was the end of the third groove. I counted seven grooves that were parallel to each other and if I was going to walk around them I would need to walk a few hours because they appeared to take all the space between the mountain and the road. I put my photo away and pressed ahead. If this route proved to be a dead end then I would return to the entrance and walk around the series of ravines.

The ravine that I entered was wide and smooth and the walls short and rounded. The deeper I walked the walls would raise upward gradually until they were parallel and vertical. Trees grew out of the top of the ravine walls but the low part of the ravine that I walked through was barren. There was something unnatural about the ravine, like an otherworldly hand tore it out of the crust of the Earth. I wandered deeper and deeper and the walls became taller as I went along.

The width of the ravine was very consistent and the walls were so evenly vertical it was difficult to see the structure as natural. You would normally anticipate bulges and crevices and a ground littered with stones and boulders but that wasn't so. The ravine was cleaner than natural. There wasn't evidence of mining either, no excavation marks. "What an odd phenomenon." I thought.

Eventually the smooth floor of the ravine would slope upwards and the walls spread apart. Sunlight poured on my head as I neared the ravine's end. At the end of the ravine I was surprised to find a skinny staircase carved into the stone wall. I looked directly up toward the top, guessing that the staircase was a good hundred feet or so vertical. The steps were nicely done, flat and with a texture of lines carved into them to give them traction on my shoes.

Determining the age of the staircase was difficult. There was no sign of longtime frequent use, the natural wearing down of the traction grooves carved into them. The staircase could be 100 years old or it could be 1000 years old. I wasn't an archaeologist but I

could say that those steps weren't used often and carving them would prove time consuming.

Weary of heights I wasn't too keen on attempting the climb but if I wanted to reach the mountain before noon then I should take the risk. I took a break before starting. I smoked a cigarette and drank some water. When I was ready I retied my gear to keep my gravitational center low and then went at it.

The steps were barely wide enough to walk upon and I found myself trying to lean towards the wall but I was already touching it. There were two landings where the staircase would flip direction but there wasn't much space on the landing that allowed me to do more than glance into the ravine below. The climb was safe enough that I didn't get all that nervous.

At the top of the ravine I paused to get a good view of the terrain that I crossed. The land swept away in a gradual slope. Some half a mile away the mist that hung above the trees blotted out anything beyond and made it look like the end of the Earth, or that I was climbing a mountain island in an ocean of clouds.

I took a hand towel out and dried the sweat off my forehead. I documented what I saw in a notebook, careful to make accurate observations, the way I was trained. When my breather was done I went once again towards the mountain peak.

I searched around me as I walked to find traces of habitation, some evidence that other people were either living or visiting the area, maybe a worn footpath or a campsite. I looked for some item left in the absence of mind, some discarded food remains. I didn't find anything. If I could find one thing there was surely more to be found.

The smooth upward slope quickly ended with large boulders and short cliffs stacked on one another, covered in ferns and small trees. I went eastward along the cliffs searching for a passage up the mountain. As I went along the cliff wall the land to the right of me sank away, allowing for a grand view of the land southeast of me, cloaked in that same blurry cloud mist. The road should have been within my sight. If the mist weren't rolling in I would be able to see a couple of miles at least.

A voice caught my attention around the bend ahead of me. I quickly went hiding behind a tree. I waited and watched. Minutes went before I heard a second voice. A man and a woman were

talking. They spoke a language that I didn't recognize. They weren't far away, I couldn't see them though. I readied my gun and took a few cautious steps toward the stone outcropping at the bend.

I breathed deep to calm my nerves and then looked through a notch in the stones, trying to blend in. The man and woman were wearing the sort of clothing you would see on someone that lived a millennia ago. White gowns with thick strings to tie them closed. Leather sandals. No buttons or latches or buckles. They both possessed blue eyes and long hazel hair. The man slid his hand around the woman's waist and they turned and walked away. The wall continued to curve to the left and as they disappeared out of view I followed them.

I came upon an opening through the cliff walls, a cave entrance, except this wasn't a natural cave. There were torches within the cave, lighting the path. I went inside slowly. The path ended at an entrance into another large cave where I cautiously went, anticipating a surprise but once again, empty. This large room was alight with more torches. Two halls went in different directions. I took a torch off one of the walls and entered the path on the right.

The path descended and turned at right angles. At turn three I could hear more voices and some lively noise echoing into the hall. Ready to shoot my gun, I entered the last stretch of hallway that connected to the next room.

A great cavern opened up before me with stone houses and well organized paths. A huge electric light that clung on the ceiling bathed the cavern with a soft luminescence. The entrance that I walked through was somewhat above the small town, a long ramp along the cavern wall descended towards a clearing on the left. I threw the torch into the hall behind me and walked down the ramp, gun still drawn.

A man shouted in the same incoherent language that the couple were speaking earlier. He carried a spear and made a run towards the ramp. His eyes were blue and long hair hazel like the couple I'd seen earlier. I slowly continued to close the distance. The ramp didn't have a rail and it was too high to leap. The man shouted some more and raised his spear in defiance. There were two more men with spears that appeared and they lined up with spear man one. I could see the people in the town below getting roused up. I kept

my gun raised and wondered whether any of them even knew what it was.

I yelled, "I come in peace! I am a U.S. government agent here to retrieve some missing people. Three men went missing in the area a few weeks ago. Does anyone understand what I am saying?! Does anyone here speak English?!" The spear men walked towards me in a line that took the width of the ramp, their spears aimed at neck height.

I yelled once more, "Halt! I will shoot if you get any closer! Bring me your leader! Halt! I warned you!" They didn't halt so I aimed my gun out over the town and fired a round. All three of them halfway ducked in surprise, searching around them. They might not have associated the sound with my gun. I walked toward them once again, firing another round off. They retreated at the same speed as my advance, clenching their spears with a nervous anticipation.

I pressed onward, pushing the spear men off the ramp and across the small clearing. The small clearing was a square lined with stones and covered with an extra thick and large rug, made of strong and undyed fibers.

I pointed my gun at the middleman to see how he might react. He didn't fear that I was holding a gun at all. He must have thought that I made the sound myself. I held my ground, waiting till someone with authority arrived. And eventually someone did.

An old man dressed in gold threaded clothes, held together with the same primitive thick strings that held everyone else's clothes together. He wore golden adornments and a golden crown. Blue eyes, hazel hair like the others.

"You must be the king." I said respectfully. "I mean you no harm. I am searching for some men that went missing. Does anyone here know the English language?"

The king raised his hand, palm towards me and spoke in the same incoherent language as the others. The three spear men lowered their weapons and fully retreated to the crowd that was forming behind the king. The king turned sideways and waved his hand in a gesture to follow him. I cleared my throat and followed. The crowd parted as we cut through the center of them. We went through a skinny road with stone houses lining both sides. Crafted almost nicely as modern stone houses, without the windows, they

looked somewhat crude in finer detail. At a distance though, they were very familiar. The doorway entrances to the houses were the same size as I was accustomed to and most of the doors were made of tree wood. There were no hinges or locks that I was able to discern. Some doorways were covered with leather flaps.

Our walk lasted several minutes and we went nearly all the way to the other end of the cavern. I guessed that there might've been at least a few hundred houses down there and there were likely other caverns. I never saw anything like it in my life.

The king halted at the entrance of a stone-brick building with two guards manning the entrance. When they saw the king they both knelt for a second and when they saw me their faces were stricken with surprise. The king spoke to them and one of the guards removed the wooden door so that we could enter. All the while I kept my gun fast in my hand, ready to shoot. I nervously passed the guards, half expecting that they were going to attack me once inside.

The king reached his hand out, palm up, to direct my attention to the houses' occupants. A wooden table with chairs was against the opposing wall of the house with two men sitting at it, facing each other. They looked up and were immediately relieved to see me there. I said, "You are the surveyors? My name is Matthew and I am here to get you out." One of them said, "Yes, we are. You don't have any idea what you've got yourself into. These people are barbaric savages. They will never let you leave." I raised my gun and then waved it to make it obvious to the two men, then said, "They won't?"

The king then shouted with his incoherent language and went sprinting through the door. I went right behind him and aimed my gun at the back of his head. One of the guards took a step in the way precisely when I fired off a round. His head twitched in response when the shot ricocheted inside his skull and he instantly fell straight down, blood pouring through his nostrils and wetting his lips. I yelled, "Come on!" as I made a leap over the body. Guard two was already thrusting his spear at me as I came flying out of the house. I turned and parried the attack, clenching the guards' spear and tearing him off his feet. I hit him in his face with my gun as I yanked him toward me and knocked him clean out. I looked all around and saw nobody.

The two men were with me in seconds. I said, "There's an entrance straight ahead down this road, but it's at the other end there. Are there other entrances that you know of?" Both of them said no. "There's a third man, right? Where is he?" I said.

One of them, the taller one, said, "Sorry, Randy's gone, they killed him. We were camping on the northern hills about a mile off the mountain when they caught us off guard. None of us brought a gun, didn't think we would need one. So, Randy there, he got out his buoy knife and went at one of those suckers, sliced him open and went at another one but they all were armed with spears and they made short work of him. It was gruesome. They sacked our heads so we couldn't see and we've been here two weeks at least, lost count. Never saw the outside of this building till now."

"Okay, here's the deal." I said, "We're inside a mountain. There's an entrance at the other end there. There might be another. We ain't gonna make it if you don't get yourselves some weapons."

Both of them picked up the spears from the dead guards. The taller man broke his spear in half for improved swinging motion.

"One of you is Evan and the other is Ben, correct?" I asked.

"Ben." said the taller man. "Evan." said the other man who was the same height as me.

I said, "They are probably getting together to form an attack right now and we won't have much time." I reloaded my gun and said, "Six shot maximum. I got more ammunition but you know it's gonna take time when I need to reload. There's a ramp that leads toward the entrance at the head of the cavern, it's carved out of the wall. So we'll follow around the wall of the cavern and avoid going directly through the middle of their city. We'll be safe on our right side all the way there. Let's go."

I led the way towards the ramp at the entrance with Ben and Evan following close behind. We kept our attention to the left of us where the spaces between the houses could hide potential attackers. There was a yell up ahead of us. A line of spear wielding men came running full speed. I said, "I knock them down and you reinforce me while I reset my ammunitions, got it?!"

The leader threw his spear and missed. I fired a round and hit. The spearman went tumbling and I fired at the next one, hitting. When spearman three made his leap over the other two I fired and

hit him midair. Then quickly fired round four at the spearman behind him before he was able to make the same leap. There were several more spearmen but they retreated.

I yelled, "Come on! Let's go! Right up ahead!" I reset my ammunitions as we sprinted towards the ramp. The four spearmen were writhing in anguish as we passed them. Evan took up a knife that one of them was wearing in his waistband. I was bursting with adrenaline and was sure that we weren't going to make it. As we neared the ramp a spear came flying through between two of the houses, aimed at my head but it missed and hit the stone wall.

When we were halfway up the ramp I looked down at the town below and saw that all of the townspeople were actually retreating to another entrance a quarter of the way around the cavern. There was an identical entrance with a ramp much like the ramp we were on.

There was a second crowd of townspeople, most of them guards, hiding behind the building at the edge of the clearing at the end of the ramp.

We made it out of there alive and without wounds.

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There were no more defiant guards on our way through the halls that led to the cliffs of the mountainside, but that didn't mean they weren't going to track us or cut us off up ahead. I said to Ben and Evan, "We need to hurry double-time, they might have some secret passages that would take them ahead of us and we can't risk that. That other entrance that we saw them going through isn't far either, right up there around that bend." I pointed. "We need to get, now."

We hurried with our greatest speed, constantly fearing a spear in the back. No spear came.

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We made it to my truck at around 3pm. We caught our breath. I gave Ben and Evan some much needed water and we paused to chat.

“What in the world was going on in there?” I asked. “Who were those people?”

Evan said, “I don't know, they seem like some sort of lost Scandinavian tribe but how they made their way out here is anyone's guess.”

Ben said, “They kept us locked up in that building and we relieved ourselves into a bucket. No water. Some hard tack bread. Think they were playing around with some unconventional technology. We would hear these huge cracklin' bursts of lightning like they were blowing something up and then these rumbling surges would make your muscles vibrate and your vision go white, I swear there was something not right at all about that place.”

“Oh really?” I said, “What do you suppose they were doing in there?”

Evan said, “They were using a machine, I'm sure of it. There would be this huge zap of electricity then a humming sound that fluctuated weak to strong repeatedly. Make you go deaf and silence everything. Then the other day when they caused an electrical detonation we heard some sort of huge animal like a bear or a lion. Whatever it was, they killed it. Heard that thing squeal and scream like an elephant with a nail in its foot. Very unsettling. Don't know what they were doing but it wasn't normal.”

“Get in the truck.” I said, “Let's get out of here.”

Suzie's Awesome Party

Suzie was a sexy girl living in Wales. She worked at a boutique through summer break in order to save up funds that she could spend when she started college that autumn. She knew a lot of people and was very sociable with plenty of trustworthy friends. Because she knew a lot of people she thought it a good idea to throw a summer-end party before they all went their separate ways. The majority of them were going to move to new cities to continue their education. Suzie wasn't moving. She wanted to be a stylist or a beautician and was going to college to please her mother and father. She wouldn't need to apply to far away top colleges to reach her goal, but at least she would own a valuable degree at the end of it and also get to work her dream.

She liked to go out with her close friends. They would confide in each other and hang out at shopping malls or delicatessens. They would doll themselves up and try to impress the boys.

She would plan her house party at her parents' house when they went on holiday. They trusted that she could keep the party under control and that there was no risk with the sort of classy people she would be inviting. Her older cousin Mark would help and supervise the party to make sure that everything was going well and safe.

Suzie invited over 100 people to attend the party, all of them couples. Her own boyfriend Brendan would be there, helping her get the house ready. They would store away anything that might get broken and got strategically placed buckets with disinfectants ready in case someone made a mess. Liquor, beer, snacks, sausages, buns and cupcakes. She didn't want to get too fancy with the consumables, leaning on the lighter side of the menu. There was plenty alcohol to drink. She anticipated that some of her guests would bring more liquor, they always do.

Her cousin Mark, who was going to oversee the whole event, suggested hiring a DJ for a couple hours and that she should set up a dance area. Suzie thought about the idea of a DJ at her party. She would need to decide where to set up the dance floor, if she could fit a dance floor into the party plan. She might need to move some furniture around. In the end she agreed and her cousin chose a DJ

that he knew and recommended, DJ Tennis E. Suzie laughed at the name, “DJ Tennis E.,” she said, “what a ridiculous name.”



The day finally came that the party was going to happen. Brendan, Suzie and Mark started readying the house early on before lunch with the task of clearing plenty of dance room, hiding away valuables and breakables and locking up off-limits areas. The mess-proofing took them half of the day.

DJ Tennis E. showed up an hour before the party started while they were getting the consumables ready. Mark would help his DJ friend while Brenden and Suzie made sausages and set up the snack table. Everything went according to plan and Suzie was very pleased.

The party went well and everyone drank hard and was merry. DJ Tennis E. got the crowd going and everyone loved the music he played. Suzie was really happy and knew she was going to miss many of these friends that she made over the years. She couldn't help but get sentimental.

At the climax of Suzie's party the power went out. They all waited a minute but the power didn't return. “Everyone outside!” yelled Mark. “I'm getting some flashlights! Everyone outside!”

Suzie and Brendan escorted the party into the side yard of the house. There was no fence, so everyone could see that the power was out all around. The road Suzie's parents lived on was long and the houses were far apart with deep clean empty and fenceless yards. The effect kept a feel of the city while the charm of the country stayed intact.

Several houses away a car was slowly driving up the road towards them. The headlights were peculiar in that they sort of shone in every direction, adding a sense that something was very wrong and out of place and unusual about the power outage.

Mark returned with a flashlight and said to Suzie, “This light was in the kitchen utility storage. It's all I could find.” He immediately saw the light of the car down the road and said, “Look at that, they sure are driving extra slow, aren't they? See the lights

on there? There's lights on the doors or something. I don't like the looks of this."

The crowd on Suzie's lawn got quiet. She said, "Everyone here? I don't see anyone missing, do you?" Everyone looked around at each other and none of them said anything. Suzie said, "I think we're all here."

Slowing to a stop, the mysterious car was getting closer to the party and some of the guests were getting weary of it being there.

Suzie said, "I am sorry that this happened but as you all can see there isn't anything we can do. I am going to go ahead and call an end to the party. We all enjoyed ourselves and I'm happy that we all got to see each other before we started college. You should make sure that you didn't leave any of your belongings behind before you go. If your missing anything like a coat or your purse, let Mark know and he will take you inside the house with his flashlight and help you find what you're missing. Thank you everyone! Make sure you drive safe and use your designated driver. I want you all to return safely."

The crowd started to break up and many of them went walking to their vehicles when someone shouted, "Hey look! That ain't no car!"

The light down the road lifted vertically and half of it started to glow, showing a bright pulsing circle underneath with square lights around the top half. There was a magnetic hum that made everyone feel like they were yawning.

"Oh my God!" some girl said, "What is that thing?"

The craft was at rooftop height now and moving towards the party, increasing speed. Girls started screaming.

"It's coming for us! Run!" yelled some young man.

Brendan, Mark and Suzie retreated into the house with some partygoers following them in but everybody else scattered in random directions without a plan. Mark slid the door shut and they watched in terror as the craft took position directly over the scattering crowd.

Numerous beams of light shot out of the craft in quick sequence, lighting up the scenery like lightning strikes, each one aimed at a different person. They couldn't run fast enough and none of the light beams missed. Anyone that was hit was turned into some sort of plastic-like stone. The ones that were running would

fall over, completely paused in time, their one leg unable to support them. Others that would stop and look up were instantly turned to stone. They looked like statues paused in time.

A few of them made it to their cars. A small luxury car fired up. Unable to turn around with all of the other vehicles barricading the road, the driver attempted to race past the craft at top speed. He was unsuccessful, the craft locking on with a tractor beam, lifting the car off the road, wheels spinning. Another car tried to slip past a moment later and it too was lifted like it weighed nothing.

Suzie and company inside the house could see the drivers of both cars wildly trying to open their doors but somehow they couldn't open them. Then the craft started to rise directly up, holding the cars in the tractor beams at the same distance away from it as it went, seeming to be unaffected with the added weight. Not a single wobble at all although the two cars together should've weighed nearly the same as the craft.

The craft disappeared into the stars above within the wink of an eye, no blast of supersonic engines, no rush of air, no disturbance at all whatsoever to the leaves of the nearest plant. It was like the craft operated in a completely separate reality and it was no more than a superimposition unaffected.

Suzie, Brenden and the others were still at the door watching, misty tears welling up. They could see a few survivors that cringed underneath a bush on the next door lawn. Statues of the guests were everywhere, at all kinds of poses. Some standing and staring, some with their arms up in defense, some huddled together, some curled into fetal positions, some getting into their cars. All of them with the same plastic texture and color, clothing and all. Turned to some sort of plastic-stone.

Survivors, weeping wildly, started to return to the house. Brenden opened the door to let them in. Suzie didn't know what she could tell them. None of them could say anything. Whoever was left, and there weren't many, stared on within a hypnotized surreal mental state.

The power returned. Their happiness did not.

The Hermit Writer

Thomas Earankle was a professional writer and a hermit that never left his house. He loved his house and he was proud to sell enough books to be well off enough to purchase it. Eighteen foot high ceilings, a large den area, three bedrooms, a full service kitchen with a walk-in pantry and two bathrooms. No showers, porcelain tubs. You could say that his house was vintage but not historical. Mid-twentieth century. He wasn't concerned with fussing with the latest technologies or features. He didn't like this idea of smart technology anyways and could do well without a smart-fridge or a smart-lock on his door. What was smart about being hackable? Not a damn thing.

He owned three cars. All of them made before the year 2000, he thought much the same about them as he thought of his house. Unhackable. He imagined a world full of remote controlled self driving cars being programmed to crash and make wrong turns. What a mess these people are getting into.

Thomas imagined that as he stayed vintage and secure without all these questionable bells and whistles everybody was clamoring to get their hands upon, he would watch society decay and crumble into over-connectivity. They were declining into an eternal fight against privacy invasion and software manipulation, living in a constant state of second guessing and forced to live with a villain that accompanied you everywhere you went and didn't give you a moment of mental peace. He kept himself outside of that corrupt limbo. He would have none of that.

His daughter and wife were his life. His wife, Isabelle, was a nurse and his daughter, Chastity, was student in elementary school. Isabelle completed all of the errands that demanded leaving the house because Thomas couldn't bring himself to get the courage to leave. He would even make Chastity take the trash to the can outside.

He wasn't always like this. He was a real active person before he became a writer, employed at a manufacturing plant. He worked hard and never feared leaving the house. He would take his

wife and daughter out to dinner and visit family on holidays. He wasn't overcautious or shy and kept on top of things socially. But now, now he was a hermit. The last time he remembered leaving the house was over a full year ago.

Today his wife was grocery shopping with their daughter and he was watching a movie on the television, hungry, craving his wife's delicious steaks, the meal she promised she would make with dinner. He was always hungry. As time wore on he found himself more and more insatiable. He could eat and eat and eat and while he was absolutely positive that his stomach was full the hunger would mysteriously continue.

He wasn't scared of leaving the house. There wasn't any social anxiety there. No fear of meeting someone new. He wasn't a psychopath, no hormonal shortages, no traumatic damages that made him auto-respond without forethought. Today, while Isabelle went shopping he seriously examined himself, considering what led him to become a hermit. He wanted to solve his dilemma and return to the previous active state that was always a calling card of his personality.

Thomas turned the television off. He couldn't pay attention. He got off his couch and looked around the den. The windows were covered with thick blankets. Only a dim glow could be seen around the edges of the windows where the blankets didn't fully deny the light. He thought backwards to the time when he covered them up. Behind those blankets were venetian blinds. Isabelle and he moved into this house months before Chastity was born and through those first several years venetian blinds were good enough for both of them and often they would be raised to let that bright sunlight through. Since adding thick blankets, they weren't once brought down. Thomas tried to remember precisely when he covered the windows with blankets.

He walked towards one of the windows and thought to gather the courage to pull the blanket aside and allow the sunlight to shine through. The closer he got to the window though, the more sickening was the sensation within his gut. He started to feel like he was going to vomit. Resisting this urge he advanced anyways another step but then the abdominal sickness spread into his chest, feeling like a grodie wet heat, like his muscles were oozing a slick slobber, he felt nasty and miserable and increasingly sick the closer

to the window he went. That was enough he thought and turned around, returning to his couch once again. And like that, in seconds, the sickness ceased and he felt fine.

Thomas sat on his couch with his head in his hands, massaging his face and running his fingers through his medium length hair. He retained full mental capacity; he wasn't imagining this. There was no mental or ideological roadblock stopping him from being a hermit. He'd proved that right here, this was a real physical phenomenon. He would get sick the closer he got to the window. He searched his mind for answers but found nothing.

April 30th, last year. That was the exact day that he nailed the blankets over the windows. He nailed them up in the den, his bedroom and the bathroom that both he and his wife shared. He didn't go anywhere else in the house. Not usually. How did he remember?

April 30th was the day he received the surprise check in the mail for his novel, "One Clown In Billings Town". He was out of work for a month at that time, using his and his wife's savings to pay the utilities and lease. He'd been patiently waiting for a response and shut himself inside the house, trying to build his next classic novel. He knew the clown book was a classic but he was manically nervous that nobody would accept it. In the meantime he would devise another book that could be seen as equal. He wrote books before that weren't accepted and at that time three of his novels were published and none of them were selling enough anymore to make a financial difference. This period was critical for him.

He was a heap of raw nerves and emotionally all over the place in those weeks leading up to the acceptance of his clown book. He couldn't calm himself. There was like this unseen entity punching him in the soul and he would go mentally empty and walk around the house like he was remote controlled, saying to himself, "Why did I go into my bedroom? Why did I suddenly leave the den as my wife walked through the door?" His uncontrollable mental and emotional state continued to increase with intensity even when he received the acceptance letter and the check that came with it. The anxiety wasn't from his writing career, his employment status or anything related. This was something internal, something physical. The worsening haze of insanity was enveloping him and threatening to send him away and he didn't know why.

Then on April 30th, at the peak of his instability, he decided to nail up the blankets over the windows. He did it on a whim while in the midst of the most ever-present wave of heinous nervewracket that he felt in his life. One second he was a hairs breadth away from totally annihilating something and the next second the blankets were nailed over the windows. The third second was the start of the most calm and relaxing peace he felt in his life. And ever since that precise moment that he nailed those blankets over the windows that ominous ruminating disruption within him didn't ever return.

That was why he was a hermit. That attack of insanity trying to wedge its fingers into his mind and soul, coming at him from someplace without. He knew it wasn't his brain decaying. He retained his senses and intellect and reasoning and logic. He was a loving dad with a caring wife. If there were enemies out there they weren't villains and he was relatively peaceful and calm, outside of this frenzied episode.

Since the moment he placed the blankets there he never opened the windows. He chose to live without the sun staring through at him and then forgot about it, this action/decision didn't occupy his mind either. That feeling of relief coincided with covering the windows and was incorporated subconsciously into his actions. He couldn't help being a hermit, being a hermit was a part of him much like breathing was a part of him. He didn't think about breathing, his mind would control that part of him without him consciously being aware that he was breathing. And so it was the same with being a hermit.

Thomas got off the couch once again, having uncoded the pathway to his present mental state. He wanted to be sure he wasn't going nuts. He went to the window again but this time much more quickly and without hesitation. He made a sprint to the window with the intent to snatch up the blanket and yank it aside so he could look into the world out there. That same disgusting force of slimy sickness again welled up inside him through his gut into his throat and with greater speed than before and as he clenched the blanket he dry heaved painfully as though he were coughing up a lung, sounding like he was gurgling mud. He was already in motion so now there was no turning back as he yanked the blanket aside. Almost immediately his skin flared up with excruciating pain all the way up the length of his arm and a micro-second later burning

across his face where the midnoon sunlight touched his skin. He shrieked in agony and fell onto the floor, his writhing uncontrolled.

Isabelle and Chastity were then entering the house. Both of them let go of their grocery bags and rushed to Thomas' side when they saw him trembling in a fetal position.

"Daddy! What's wrong with you?! Daddy! Daddy!" his daughter cried.

Isabelle, being a nurse, was trained to handle health emergencies, but that didn't stop her from being upset like Chastity was. "Thomas?!" she choked on her words, "Thomas? Can you hear me, Thomas? Can you breathe? Tell me Thomas, what's wrong with you?"

Thomas rolled onto his back, tongue out and dry. He nodded but wasn't breathing all too well.

"Daddy, your skin looks weird! What happened to you daddy? Did you smash your face on something?" said Chastity.

Thomas nodded his head no and took his daughters hand into his. "I'm going to be okay." he said, "Don't you worry." Isabelle was already on her smartphone with emergency services. She brushed Thomas's hair back with her palm to feel his temperature. His skin was hot. She stated her name and nurse's identification, requesting a special emergency service in the hopes she could get him to the hospital quicker than normal.

Seven minutes later the ambulance arrived and Isabelle let them in. The paramedics brought a gurney with them. They asked a battery of questions and Isabelle relayed the symptoms to them, stating that she believed that he suffered a heart attack and a stroke or seizure or a possible combination of all three simultaneously.

The paramedics lowered the gurney to a floor position and then Thomas said, "You know, I'm not feeling all that bad now. I think that I might be alright." And truly he did feel alright. The intense sickness dissipated and his skin no longer felt like it was burning. He was exhausted and weakened and defeated but overall, not that bad.

The paramedics said, "I know you may think that you are alright but considering the nature of what you suffered it is in your best interest and it is our responsibility that you be brought into the hospital so that our top health professionals can properly examine you and make sure that you are fit to rest at home."

Thomas didn't want to leave the house. He was a hermit and didn't know why. He felt fine.

Isabelle said to the paramedics, "Thomas has a disorder that makes him live like a hermit. He isn't going to agree to go to the hospital no matter what. He wasn't always like this, it's a recent development." She turned to Thomas and said, "Honey, you have to go to the hospital. Don't worry, Chastity and I are going with you. Please don't make this difficult."

Thomas took her hand in his and said, "I'm going to be alright. You see? I'm fine now. There's no need for me to go to the hospital. I'm worn out, that is all. Some rest and I will be okay."

She smirked at him and said, "You're going to the hospital, end of story. Don't make this difficult."

The paramedics started lifting Thomas onto the gurney and he tried to kick them off of him. He said, "I'm serious about this, I don't need to go to the hospital! You should respect my wishes!"

One of the paramedics said, "Don't you worry, you're going to be alright. Quit flopping around."

The other paramedic said, "Sir, we are going to put the restraints on because we don't want you to fall off the gurney. We are only here to help you."

The paramedics put the gurney restraints on Thomas and securely glued him in. He tried a few more kicks and he tried lifting his shoulders but there was no use. He was completely at the mercy of the paramedics and it was impossible for him to escape the gurney.

Soon they were rolling Thomas towards the entrance and Isabelle quickly went to the door to hold it open for them. Sunlight shined through the entrance and when they rolled Thomas through the door he immediately started screaming with blood curdling shrieks and yanked his limbs around so hard that he almost knocked the gurney over. The surprise of outrage from Thomas only made them quicken their speed towards the ambulance. Thomas's hideous scream became animalistic and so deep he sounded like he was being torn apart from the inside out. His skin was smoldering and became so bright with redness, blood droplets were seeping through.

When the paramedics reached the ambulance and swung the doors open it was too late, Thomas was coughing up blood and his body fat turned liquid, started boiling, curdling and frying his skin as

it would sag around his bones. His scream became a throaty sigh, a long despaired whisper. His eyes shrunk and wrinkled as they dehydrated. The paramedics could feel heat welling up from Thomas's body. The stench was horrible. They took a step away, raising their arms a second before he burst in flames. He was gone.

Isabelle was absolutely distraught and half insane with anxiety, crying hard and walking in circles, unable to touch her husband or help him in the least. What happened that day was a mystery that has yet to be solved and most people believed the answer will never be found.

Cavemonster vs. The Townspeople

A monster twice the height of a man and ten times the strength dwelled within the cave near the center of town. The cave was forbidden to the townspeople to keep them safe. The legend is that anyone that enters won't be seen anymore and once every generation the monster emerges to attack the town and kill anyone who dares challenge it.

Many times throughout history the townsfolk attempted to invade the cave and slaughter the monster and none of them ever returned to tell the tale. The cave was sealed off but the monster returned, unaffected with physical barriers. The townspeople could be kept out but the monster couldn't be kept in.

And so the people would try and please the monster through lavish offerings and sacrifices but no form of bribery seemed to sway him. The townspeople were doomed to live with the threat the monster brought them, oppressed in their morality, always watchful of the cave. Folk in search of safety would move away but the town would continue to live on, monster or no. The history of the town was deeper than the monster and the eldest of the towns blood felt dutiful to hold ground and find a way to defeat the monster.

Those that saw the monster in generations previous said that he passed through the cave barrier in a sticky plasma state, seeping through the cracks, becoming a disgusting yellow-green glob and then solidifying once again right outside of the cave. The monster could morph shape. Each generation told of a different appearance to the monster but his actions were always the same; kill.

The monster glowed with a neon incandescence and it hurt to look upon him as there was an invisible flash of harmful light that poured out of him continually. This invisible light felt like pulsing waves that accumulated through your flesh, increasing with intensity until they build into a crescendo of pain. Merely being in the presence of the monster could kill you if you watched him long enough.

But this monster was much more than an eyesore. He tore men apart with his bare hands. That was the most hideous thing about the monster. It didn't cut, it didn't slice, it didn't gouge, it didn't stab. This monster was all brute and would pick men up with their throats clenched in one hand and use the other hand to wrench the man's arm off of his body. The monster loved tearing humans apart with brute force. He also killed men with one single fist to the chest. He would throw men onto rooftops and into trees, against brick walls. He would throw men straight up above and once they hit the ground he would crush their organs with the mighty stomp of his bulging monster legs.

Everyone feared the monster because there wasn't a chance that a man could survive against him. Seeing the monster was guaranteed death. He was too strong, too quick and too merciless to allow any man to escape his wrath. Men would try. The town's best warriors would take the courageous risk to become heroes, always practicing their weapons, planning new tactics. Ever on the ready to respond to the monster's attack. They would watch the cave without end all hours of the day.

Although the town's warriors kept their battle skills at a continuous all-time high and many of their weapons were legendary in fine craftsmanship, they were no match. They could do no better than warn the town as the monster returned, saving the lives of their loved ones, dying with honor as their futile defenses were beaten.

* * * * *

The townspeople would be blessed when a traveler named Kritzen came to town. He heard the story of the monster and wanted to know the truth of it. He claimed to be a scientist and that he could devise of a method or a weapon that could kill the monster. He said that he would need plenty of time and some help and a

laboratory. To prove that he wasn't a fraud he showed them how to harness the power of electricity using acids and metal wiring. He would say that there were new secrets that wait undiscovered and that any man can dare create godly power through the careful observance of the elements and measures of their effects. He said lie bare the mystery and see truth before you.

Kritzen was a welcome addition to the council against the monster. He was somewhat wealthy, depositing a savings at the city bank and paying a hefty sum to gain laboratory space in a prime location. He chose two laboratory technicians to help him with his research. They were both already versed in the sciences of their time and agreed to work his spontaneous schedules. He sent for laboratory equipment that he kept in storage at a distant town.

First order of scientific business concerning the monster was the existence of physical evidence. The city council produced three samples kept inside envelopes and locked away in a vault. Kritzen asked a large number of questions about the samples, determined to gain all of the information that there was to know. The key to killing the monster was some small overlooked fact that could prove to unveil a critical weakness, he told them.

Second order of scientific business was creating a record of witness accounts and cataloguing them into an easy-to-reference almanac. Kritzen wanted every single account to the earliest recollection. The council tracked witnesses of the previous two monster attacks with a new questionnaire that Kritzen and his technicians carefully wrote.

All of this research would take months. When the scientists finished their information and evidence retrieval they went about writing up a central thesis that could paint the most complete picture of the monster that there was.

The eyewitness accounts were valuable to determining the monster's actions and physical abilities but it was the samples that were critical in developing an effective weapon.

The story is that many generations before the record books a warrior successfully wounded the monster with a knife, stabbing it inside the mouth and cutting deep. The monster was said to be unpierceable on the skin while the monster's mouth became the only known weakness. The warrior was killed but his knife was saved. The handle of the knife was made of wood and rotted away but the

sharp metal point was the same, with stains of blood left on it. This was the eldest evidence, kept in envelope number one. The council said the true year couldn't be identified but that this knife was at least three hundred years old. This blood stain was green-yellow and much thicker than a similar blood stain would be of a human.

The second sample was a flask of plasma taken up at the last appearance of the monster. It is well known that the residue traces of the monster at the cave entrance will not disappear if kept sealed in a container. The plasma will disappear when left out in the open and cannot be used in a solution as some housewives would attempt to create strength potions with samples. Samples would simply harden quickly and the neon glow of the plasma would cease, leaving the potions like bubbly tar, more suited as an adhesive than as a potion. This sample of the monster's plasma was generous, being more than a standard weight worth, plenty enough for the scientists to test.

The last and third sample was the key receptacle to the lock that held the previous door into the cave in place. Upon the most recent of the monster's attacks he entered through the cracks around the door and through the keyhole. The day following the attack the receptacle was found damaged and was ordered to be removed. The wooden wall and door was taken down and a much thicker brick and stone wall cemented thoroughly now closed the cave entrance. The mechanisms and pins of the lock receptacle were melted and fused together. The key couldn't be fully inserted and the mechanism no longer functioned. Where fusion occurred to meld the parts the metal became dull and covered in sand sized lumps, an abrasive texture.

Kritzen was fascinated with the monster, hearing many intriguing legends over the years but without actually seeing that those legends were real nor finding that any believable evidences about them were true. This cavemonster legend was an actual reality though and that made him all the more motivated to help these townspeople because he knew there was a chance. Not a chance to become a hero but a chance to vanquish evil.

The scientists tested all of the samples with their chemistry finding the monster's blood to be of a highly acidified nature, easily affected with chlorides. The plasmatic residue was nullified with modified sodiums and a particular gradient of fluoride only known

to be found in one mineral location. The lock receptacle was determined to be fused through a chemical reaction with the monster's plasma as it morphed shape, which was theorized to be bursting with electrical currents that kept the monster alive through the slow shape shifting phase.

Eyewitness accounts proved that as the monster became a pile of wet plasma clots, the more heat and light would escape out of it. As the monster brought itself together into a single solid form all glowing light and heat would lessen in intensity. There seemed a power source that the monster used to increase his strength and physical attributes, a chemical source not natural inside of his body. An enhancement.

Months of testing and discussion between the scientists were very productive. They went on to develop a plan that could stop the monster or severely wound it. Once they were fully confident on their research they took their results and theorems to the city council and offered a likely defense.

Kritzen and his technicians used non-technical language and diagrams to outline what they learned and how they could design an ambush using the science of elements against the monster. They advised that coating the wall at the cave entrance and the immediate area surrounding the entrance with a carefully blended paint of specified chemicals along with posting large iron posts outside of the cave that were connected to a newly conceived machine made for bleeding out electricity from a source could either greatly weaken the monster or kill the monster before it could morph out of a plasma state. What effective strength their method would pose against the monster was determined with the size of the electricity bleeding machine and the amount of a specific rare fluoride they could find. The council put their trust in the scientists and approved what funds were needed to build the scientific defense.

The scientists gladly built the defense and instructed hired operators how to maintain it. The only thing they could do at that time onward was to wait. They now waited with a renewed sense of enthusiasm, that they could defeat the monster and bring eternal safety to their town. A year later a second machine was finished and added to double the power of the electric-bleeder as it became known. Warriors coated their weapons with the same chemicals used in the paint and created baubles of liquids that they could throw

at the monster and they would fantasize about what would happen, that the monster would blast apart or return to a plasma state.

Kritzen continued to live there, performing scientific work for whomever wanted help or was interested in discovering something new. He wanted to be there when the monster emerged once again. And he was.

There was no moon when the monster returned and the people were slow to respond. When someone finally noticed that the cave entrance and the area surrounding it were glowing the towns warriors were retrieved. There was an intense silence with the townspeople, most of whom were evacuated. Everyone that stayed behind, the warriors and guards, the electric-bleeder operators and Kritzen along with a few others, they were all silent and carefully watching and waiting as the cave entrance glowed brighter and brighter with a neon fluorescence.

The plasma appeared unable to pass through the coating of chemicals and the paint started bubbling. Around the outside of the cave entrance where the paint was coated, bubbles churned stones and dirt out from underneath the coating and would pop, letting off skinny sprays of glowing steam. The plasma seemed to be evaporating as the chemicals nullified it's physical properties.

The wall of brick and stone started to press outward and crack, throwing more sprays of glowing steam through the openings, the paint melting over and bubbling once again. As the cave entrance was bulging out slowly a large burst of force shot small holes through the cemented wall and surges of plasmas pop-fizzled through.

Boulders, stones, dirt, clay and mud were pulling apart and contracting like a heart made of chewing gum filled with random hard solids. The plasma turned into an evaporating tar, much like what the housewives tales let on about, a pale greenish tar that lost the neon glow. A second surge of new plasma followed and pressed the cave apart, constructing itself into a pulsing ugly statue brought alive.

The half glowing tarrish neon plasma circulated between the animated stones and boulders like snakes rubbing together. Rising upward, the Earthen material, slick and lumpy, formed into the shape of a man without a face, a greenish neon chemical spraying

out randomly. A cloudy fluorescent mist clung to the ground at the new monster's feet, swirling and spreading.

The earth continued to rumble as the cave morphed into a monster and solidified, synthesized with the chemicals the scientists created and the actual cave itself, becoming a titan made of glowing stone. Taller than any tree in the countryside and thicker than any palace wall, a featureless shape of greater power and strength than it ever possessed before.

The electricity-bleeder machines were activated and set running full force. Large electric charges burst out of the monster and into the iron posts at his feet, effectively bleeding out all electric power within him. The machine operators kept pushing their machines to the limit. Electricity flowing out of the monster was converted into a corrosive acid inside waist high buckets made of sealed wood. The sapping of the monster's electric power was immense and the glow of the plasmatic tar that held him together started to die. Stones detached off the monster and he started to crumble. He tried to take a step backward but was weakened and his leg broke off causing him to crash sideways onto the nearest building, a small horse stable. The stable was demolished and the horses were killed with a small hill of boulders literally falling onto them. One last earthquake and the electricity ceased flowing out of the monster. The machine operators slowed to a stop and everyone went to see the mess. The monster was defeated.

A landmark was made to celebrate the killing of the monster and the area was cleaned and the land given new shape, leveling the hill that the cave protruded from and reducing the cave entrance to a vertical opening, covered with an iron plate weighing more than three men.

The townspeople waited another generation, fearing that the monster would return although he was defeated once. Once that full generation of time went and gone the city council sent spelunkers to map the cave and take careful inventory of the contents therein. There was a hunch that the monster wasn't born with supernatural powers and that the synthesis of animal and elements deep under the surface with optimum conditions created the amphibious-like shapeshifting mutations. The cave was enormous and it took many years to prove themselves correct in their theories. Both the cave

research and Kritzen's laboratory work led to the advancements of the chemical and elemental sciences.

Artemis, the Dimension Mechanism

I started my career in mysterious and paranormal incidents almost twenty years ago when the U.S. government selected me upon the acceptance of my performance scores and personal routines. They determined that I was a good fit in this highly secretive and oftentimes outlandish profession. Before the new appointment as a top secret paranormal investigator I was a quiet agent running gopher tasks for senior advisors. Foremost notably about that work was the handheld device that I used to scan civilian residential zones for what was termed "hazardous signals". The device detected a cross section of a number of frequencies and pulses given off the human body and I would record that information and then submit it to my superiors. When they called me up I was ecstatic to say the least. The unbelievable truth. You can't make this up.

While I traveled the country investigating unsolved mysteries I took a lot of eyewitness reports of flying saucers, cattle mutilations, security camera recordings of non-human people, people that vanished into thin air on camera, people that appeared

out of thin air on camera, recordings of cars being lifted off the road when strange craft lock onto them with tractor beams. The list is long but those are the most notable things that I was happy to get involved with. There's a lot of mystery on Earth and most people truly don't have much of an idea of what really inhabits this universe.

I investigated those sort of things for a long while, about 14 years. I was thanked for my service in that profession and then essentially forced into another similar profession with the U.S. government on higher secrecy terms and this time my work was much more serious; related to non-human biological entities, national security and things I am not at liberty to discuss. I do care quite a lot about the mission and on a personal note wouldn't want to risk our safety to share something fascinating and awe inspiring. I swore on my life to keep those things secret and that is my word. Although I cannot discuss particular materials what I am going to talk about here is so great on its own you might wonder why anyone would allow the release of information like this. That is how grand the other things that I won't mention are, that something like this doesn't hold a candle to it.

14 years ago I was pretty much forced to take the leading role in a test with advanced technologies that the researchers were at that time very much unknowledgeable about. There might have been a risk factor but everyone on the team was fairly sure in their calculations that the risk was very small and that I would probably be alright. So, I agreed, if you call it that and the research went ahead.

That technology was amazing and within a few months of testing we made a ton of progress. In fact, those initial tests were critical to how life has played out ever since. That technology was divided into its components and birthed several other technologies and new avenues of scientific research. When that initial stretch of research ended I was sent off to a parallel mission with researchers developing another advanced technology that in many ways shared the same science. These scientists on the second research team held no knowledge of the other research and I was advised to not mention a word of it to them. There was a fear of cross contamination, that if I used my earlier knowledge to develop the latter research, this might cause the other scientists to somehow miss a new discovery. I

was advised not to tell them. I obeyed my orders and did my research as directed.

Tired of the ambiguity? I apologize. Here is where the story gets real good.

So, four years ago, while working in research laboratory number two in my new career, I was awarded yet once again with a raise and a new mission on an ever more interesting research team. This new research was on a lower level of secrecy but in my opinion was a lot more fascinating and fun.

My new laboratory was at a secret location built into the center of a non-volcanic mountain somewhere inside the continental U.S. I signed a contract that took great care to outline the risks on my life while participating in this new research, agreeing upon very unusual terms of conduct were specific situations presented themselves and with a mission that was anything but conventional. I signed my life away and was granted full access to the laboratory and all connected areas under that mountain.

My main mission was to learn through trial and error how to operate an advanced machine that could send travelers through time and location. The dilemma and difficulty with this mission was that initially nobody was precisely aware of how to operate the machine. Many lives were lost in the trial and error period.

The machine was found buried at an ancient settlement found somewhere in North America. I wasn't given the location. The settlement was out of place in relation to mainstream archaeology and the mainstream scientists ignored the site because they knew the truth presented a challenge to their well-built historical construct. The archaeologists didn't want to invest the money and the manpower in excavating a site that they would end up storing in a vault somewhere in some museum, as they always did with archaeological finds that proved not all civilizations were on the same path in history and some were nearly as technologically advanced as we are today.

A team of U.S. government archaeologists did the site themselves, finding a treasure trove of ancient items you wouldn't find anywhere else. The most notable items were handcrafted electronics. The majority of the wiring in these electronics was much thicker than what we use today and there was no trace of micro-processors. The most grand of all the discoveries was a large

temple that contained a room-sized electricity powered machine that used specially made crystals and long metal dowels and magnets to run. The boxes that housed the wiring and parts were ingeniously made of interlocking stones. Near the center of the machinery was an area with a circular table whereupon a control panel was housed. Around that control panel was an area with specifically designated positions where people were to stand. The machine was a total mystery and it reminded everyone who saw it of computers made in the 1960s, except this machine wasn't a computer as there were no input and outputs where information went in and information went out, aside of the metal dowels that were supposedly used to calibrate a target of some sort, perhaps a frequency or electromagnetic pulse. The machine was thought to be thousands of years old and perfectly preserved. The most mysterious thing about it was the source of power because they couldn't find a power source connected to the temple through the outside of it and there were no fuels found inside. There was however a receptacle near the entrance where a power source could be connected and it was thought that the power source was moved into place each time they used the machine.

The machine was carefully disassembled and moved to the mountain laboratory that I was stationed at. Scientists created a condensed duplicate of the wiring and internal mechanisms, finding many parallels with modern technologies and a few mysteries as the machine seemed to be built for manipulating the area of the control panel that they termed the controller station and the standing area that they termed the passenger area. The scientists named the machine Artemis and the duplicate of the machine Artemis 45.

Using the machine was a dangerous task. First test run was done with only a controller and no passengers. The operator physically disappeared and didn't return. It was later found that once the operator travels to a new location as they called it, he must continue to helm the machine because if he walks away from the machine while at the target location the machine disappears on his end. Learning this simple fact was the hardest lesson in casualty prevention.

The team at the laboratory were on this mission for a long time before I arrived and learned some of the essentials of how the machine works. Overall there was a ton more to discover. Three years of developmental progress and we reached the milestone of

full technical control of the machine. The difficulties of reaching that milestone were the result of no monitoring system or calculatory navigations of the original Artemis 45, fact being that the machine coordinates upon an invisible three dimensional grid of space time relative to the latest position that the controller has arrived at. Without a monitoring system the controller has to more or less guestimate their location and to do so with precision is very difficult. The addition of these systems allowed us to control the machine to a greater effect than its original inventors and save many more lives, having already seen eleven of our scientists disappear or die in the pursuit of learning how the machine works.

What amazes us the most about the machine is how it calibrates electromagnetic waves, electric pulses and other frequencies to warp space-time and that only organic matter can move through the passage created. The controller's mind is the most critical component. The machine takes hold of the controller's electromagnetic body and mind emissions and modifies them to suit the target location, so there's a sort of an interdependent give and take between the machine and the controller. And truly it feels like the machine is alive with the presence of sentience once you enter the control station and power it up. Fundamentally you could say that the controller becomes a cyborg, one with the machine.

That was a year ago. Up until that point I was strictly on the developmental side of the testing and since the risk of casualty was greatly reduced with our new navigation and monitoring system in place I was permitted to helm the control panel and passenger roles.

The controller couldn't leave the control panel, not even to hand the controls to another controller because the moment you disengaged from the control panel the machine resets its core values. What that looks like on the monitoring grid is difficult to relay in words. Essentially your information is erased and to travel to your original location from your new location isn't simply a matter of going the opposing direction at the same distance as the positions are located illogically from each other in relative to all points on the grid and what the grid looks like at one location doesn't mirror what the grid looks like from another location. This phenomenon is produced as a side-effect of timeline manipulations at all locations on the grid and meanders through the territory of multiple

dimensions and alternate universes. We didn't care much to explore those possibilities.

If the controller steps away from the machine it disappears. We anticipate that perhaps a few of our disappeared scientists didn't step away from their machines and are slowly returning to our original location through side-step navigations but chances are that if they make it they will be a good 50-100 years off the target.

Now, even with our new navigation systems up, there is a margin of error wherein we cannot precisely hit a time of day and much of the time we are a few days off of the target. That is why when we set our coordinates we usually set them for three days ahead of the target. With this protocol we hit our target 35% of the time dead on, 30% a day early, 20% two days early and 15% three days early. As you can see there is a curve to those statistics.

Our missions must take all of these parameters into consideration, limiting our abilities to performing a specific role as intelligence agents.

Being a passenger in Artemis 45 is much like being a passenger in a car. You can see where you are going but you aren't in control. The controller at the control panel is mentally vulnerable during the time that the machine is moving to a new location. The protocol is that the passengers don't interrupt the controller during travel. Travel is pretty much instantaneous at the second of relocation but the time it takes to engage with the machine, synchronize with it and track your target is anywhere between a few minutes to ten to twenty minutes. Easier target locations are locations we are familiar with and have a lot of information about, such as all of the history from the 16th century all the way up till the present. Future locations are usually a gamble and distant past locations are riskier as you go deeper. Hitting a near future target location is simple enough and as we collect more information to fill those gaps in knowledge of the timeline, navigating it becomes much easier.

My first test was within the passenger role. Part of the mission was to collect information for the intelligence agencies and so my first order of business was to enter a future timeline and meet a special agent to retrieve a thick envelope that would contain valuable information. There's these locations where agents are set up to sit and wait with these envelopes all day long, every single day

of the year, year in and year out. This effectually creates an information post with a huge margin of availability for the time traveling agent. The longer we stay at a target location the higher the risk of failure becomes. With these special information post agents permanently waiting at specific locations, idle time is greatly reduced.

I was very nervous with my first test. The target location was April 13, 2089 in Philadelphia. A great worldwide event took place earlier that year that would alter the course of humanity. I was to collect information about this event at an information post and get samples of a newly synthesized organic material at a science laboratory, a material that contained self replicating nano-structures impossible to build with the technology we have now.

We were one controller and four passengers. I led the passenger team. Our plan was to divide into two teams of two, my team to the information post, the other team to the laboratory. Since only organic materials could pass through the dimensional timeslip, none of us could bring communication devices or wear anything containing bits of metal or plastic. For some reason rubber tread on our shoes was okay but anything made of most grades of plastic simply vanished through the dimensional timeslip. We planned our mission well and were already familiar with the target location, so I was advantaged with an easy task.

Artemis 45 was parked in a basement warehouse two stories below the surface in Philadelphia inside a government building. We were on target, April 13, arriving in the middle of the morning.

The controller stayed put and we hurried. An agent greeted us at the door and I informed him, "30 minutes, us 4 in and us 4 out." That told him that we should return within 30 minutes and that nobody was to enter the room. Chances were that nobody was going to try but if they did the agent would be inclined to kill them.

This mission went well. Philadelphia looked much the same as it does today with some improvements in architecture and infrastructure. My partner and I collected the envelope quickly as the information post was a mere two blocks away from the target location. We returned to the government building and waited till the other team finished their mission 10 minutes later. The target laboratory was a brisk 5 minute walk, one way. We double checked that all was well and then returned to the machine room and took our

positions around the controller who was essentially pretending to be a statue. The return to our original location went well and there were no anomalies to report.

My second mission was a passenger role, solo. This mission was dangerous. The target location was the year 196AD in Rome during the Roman Empire. The science team was monitoring the city through each day of that year to locate the instance of a report that a strange metal came falling from above out of a brightly lit flying saucer. What made this mission dangerous was the chance of being found by a Roman and risk getting attacked. The metal pieces reported to have fallen onto Earth are thought to be rare elements unproducible in a laboratory and not available in quantities larger than microns in the Earth's crust.

The team was slowly monitoring all hours following sundown and at this time they already monitored from January 1 all the way through August 12. This mission allowed them to practice using the machine with a solid target through repetition and fine tune the navigation system. The second part of the mission was that if this flying saucer was real we could trace the path and locate the metal that it left behind.

So we finished this mission, August 13 through December 31 and didn't see a damn thing at all unusual flying around. Not one plane, balloon, drone, spaceship, kite or flying saucer. It was safe to say that flying technology was unknown to the people of Rome in 196AD. This either meant that the account was false or incorrect about the location.

I went on to perform many other missions that I won't mention because of the sensitivity of their secrecy, but I can talk about a couple of the other missions that I didn't go on.

A team was sent to 8th century Denmark to manipulate the invasion of England by the Danish. This mission went horribly wrong and some of us believe that the team was sent there intentionally to die. There were many things that each team member were suspected of in relation to their contracts so it is suffice to say that this mission was planned as a redactive measure against their wrongdoings. There were five passengers, one of them a woman and of course, the controller. The men were slaughtered and the woman taken captive. The controller returned unharmed. Many of us question whether or not this redactive measure was ethical but I

suppose that considering the sensitive nature of the mission and the amount of valuable progress at risk, they might as well have learned their lesson brutally.

Another mission was sent to observe early humans in France about 90,000 years ago. What was found has proven the hypothesis of the archaeologists and historians to be fairly true. They were a harsh lot, living off the land and not all too keen on building houses. The team brought one of them back, our first success on human retrieval missions. This paleolithic sample of humanity was a great success and one of the division's best kept secrets. The young man possessed medium brown hair and blue eyes, fair and hairy skin. Humans of that period looked like swollen versions of ourselves and this early fully ethnic Frenchman wasn't an exception to that rule. He looks much like true Frenchmen of today with a thicker brow and thicker skin that appears somewhat swollen. He was sent to another laboratory specially built where researchers could monitor him and learn more about the humans of that period. He was able to learn our language and he loved watching television. He wasn't quite up to our speed but he wasn't so bad that you couldn't stand him. He was smarter than a lot Americans are today, that's for sure.

Anomalies happen on occasion that don't seem to fit within the parameters of how the machine works or the science that is going on. These anomalies are thought to be caused when the electromagnetics of the machine are manipulated or disrupted, either with natural phenomenon or other travelers.

This third team encountered such a specific and permanent anomaly. They were a team of three passengers and their target was 1991 New York. When they reached their location there was absolutely nothing, it was though humanity never was. The landscape was virgin and untouched, as New York would have appeared if nobody ever lived there at all. They returned under the impression that the machine malfunctioned or there was an error on the controller's part.

The team rotated, using a different controller, and traveled to 1991 Portland. The same anomaly was ever-present in Portland. Not a damn thing human. There wasn't a trace of humanity at all and the landscape was though it were never worked or mined or clear cutted.

Dozens of more trips to 1991 proved that no matter what location they entered physically there wasn't any evidence that humans ever lived. Wild animals abounded the terrain, the atmosphere was clean. No pollution. The next mission was to determine the precise dates that this erasure starts and ends. February 28th through November 30th, 1991. We theorized this anomaly as an overlapping of two universes as there really was no practical explanation that we could think up.

Perhaps the error was within our language and how the language causes us to think on a microscopic level, influencing the effects of the hormones and signals within our brains, sending that effect into the coordinates at the moment of target location as one scientist theorized. Far-fetched but we couldn't test his theory because none of us spoke a second language and the mission was top secret, there would be no inviting foreign scientists to participate in our research.

There were a few good ones with a couple of my own missions to outline the absolute grand nature of some of the things going on secretly with the U.S. government. Much of it is fascinating and very significant. A lot of it cannot be shared simply because the majority of humanity cannot be trusted with the information nor the use of these technologies. There's too much evil in the world and if something like this were to be used wrongly it could be all over for everyone. The number of people responsible enough to be involved in missions such as this are very few, something on the order of 1 in 1,000 people as I was once informed. Maybe someday that ratio will improve. Now though, we must be careful.

I am no longer involved with government work, paranormal sciences or anything related. Working on the outside of the secret arena, I am now content that my service was valuable and I would like to continue living my life well in the manner of my own choosing without the manipulations of outside parties or deceptive foes. I think that somehow I earned that right although in the U.S.A. all of the rights we have are given to us unconditionally. Maybe I didn't earn my rights, but I earned some trust and some privilege and handled some mighty responsibilities. My rights are permanently in place and I would like to keep them that way.

My Wealth in Recreation

I can live a healthy life of wealth and decadence. To talk about my own worth isn't good etiquette and would be considered within forbidden limits of bad taste. What makes me human isn't a number

on a slip of paper. I cannot be ranked and measured with such ease. My likeness and character was the collection and summation of my empirical observations and personal encounters, my ethical inclinations and my traditional instruction. Money is essentially a number that reflects very little of who I am. With that being said, this memoir won't be about my wealth in particular. I am musing on my conditional situation in life, my advance towards decadence and the dance therein.

True, one cannot be a decadent individual without wealth. Decadence is reserved exclusively in the hands of those who can use their resources generously beyond their baseline needs. My bills are paid and all that I need is already in my possession. Should I go have a party and consume abundantly and leave bountiful tips my bills are taken care of with my bank account continuing well over the line of concern.

I can be excessive when I drink my liquors, gobble up my sweets, pile up my steaks, enlightened with a plentiful allocation of these things and much more. My cravings are simple, not eccentric, no need to attain outlandish rarities or live that far outside of the status quo. I love owning rare items with amazing and true stories behind them but there isn't a pressing need that causes me to seek those items out. Being decadent is about quality consumption and personal freedom, life outside the daily routine.

My attitude is overall socially accepted everywhere I travel and my care about the way I appear outwardly is deep. I am not concerned much with making a scene or supporting an overly emotional drama as it unfolds, contrary to this overflowing enthused mock depiction of sincerity I go my own way and mind my own business. The majority of my friends are the same on this social preference of stark antipathy towards histrionic syphoning. No need to stir up public attention.

My limited selection of friends aren't welcoming to the sort of decadent meatheads that are slobbish, unclean, unscrupulous low-life degenerates that let themselves go so badly they are a danger to not only themselves but also anyone who should depend on them when needed. Our vaults are locked, houses sealed up and our backs flatly guarded. Many of us don't take kindly to snobs either, always weathering the mood down till everyone is miserable and doesn't want to socialize. My nose points outward, not upward. If

this sounds snobbish to you well then I already addressed that at the start of this memoir. All of us like it high and refined and done well.

We all like to get what we pay for. We the decadent are an observant bunch, discerning and attentive. You might hear us say, "There is something wrong with this, I don't want it." or "That's not what I paid for, send it back!" and we won't hesitate to demand a refund should the item's value be under the worth of the purchase.

You can't party hard all the time every time till the end of time. There are limits to what you can physically consume and if you consume too much too fast you might end up dead. Personally, I get going and sometimes I myself can take my consumption over my physical limit and there were times where I needed to withdraw myself. Get some rest. Cleanse my body. Restore my senses. When that happens I feel like a new me and then I'm ready to go at it once again.

I often times approach my decadent adventures without a plan. The chance and randomness breaks up the repetition, I tell myself I'm going to do whatever feels good and feeds my craving and although I tell myself this I usually do what I always do and consume what I always consume and see the same people that I always want to see. While my intentions and mindset might be one thing and my actions another thing, I'm not following a list is what I mean to say.

I find the action and then become a part of the action. It's all about the action. A lot of my life I went on the search to find the action. You may find the action anywhere. On a beach, in a bar, at a club, at a show.

The decadence that I am so pleased to partake in makes life ten times the amusement and pleasure than it would be if I weren't searching for a good time when I have the time.

I can see those eccentric folk, living on exotic meats and wearing those unnerving outfits, exposing themselves unabashedly, exhibiting themselves like free samples, unaware of the common need amongst all people to maintain a standard or personal space and social distancing. True, they are decadent, but they are not us, and we like to maintain that separation line. Let them act out their wildly unbridled chaotic routines, let them be mindless if they'd like, let them oppose the healthy standard, let them do it over there, not over here.

Money doesn't go to my head. I'm a mind-my-own-business type of person. I care for myself fine, I am in no need of a keeper. I am casual, calm, collected, ready. I don't over-intellectualize it.

I would think that a lot of folk would live the way I live if they ever could seize the chance. That's great! I would tell them to go for it. Take yourself where you want to go.

Good friends are necessary to a social life of decadence. I can't depend on random action to feed my desires. I attend events upon the invitation of my close friends, I go places where the action is safe and the people are wholesome. I would say that everyone needs friends. They are essential to your well-being and mental stability. Without good friends you wouldn't be so happy. That is the truth.

I watch out for my friends and they watch out for me. We don't get pushy or bossy with each other, we aren't into forceful attrition to chalk up what we want out of someone. We aren't an entangled battle of wits in a crossfire gridlock. We are free to leave, no baggage, no hard feelings, no ominous presence to tiptoe around.

The natural leanings and inclinations of I and my decadent friends keeps all of us unevenly divided in favor of the accompaniment of girls. Girls of adult age. Most of my friends are male and although we are pretty much all male we all spend the majority of the time with our wives and girlfriends. Those of us who are uncommonly virulent may swing girl to girl, unconcerned with what is beyond flesh, staying unsettled.

In memorandum of the girls, parties, liquor, amusements, so on and so first, that I was already and may continue enjoying with no worries and no regrets, the life I live and the life I would like to live, all of these things considered and much more, without the intellectual labels or preconceived notions, I would like to record this so that we are not forgotten and let it be remembered through future times when the world is cold and evil that when I am finally dead and gone and they bury me inside my casket my family and friends might say of me, "He was so good and so decadent."

Chance

Wyatt was out on lunch at a restaurant close to his downtown office at Phazetek, the company he worked at. He was part owner of Phazetek in a three way divide with two good friends he'd known much of his life. They also employed another seven professionals that were well paid. There was a lot of work to keep his company occupied.

Primarily a firm that connects entertainment industry professionals with their particular needs, Wyatt and company at Phazetek profited on finders fees and sales percentages, depending on the contract with the client. The companies' main goal was to ditch the go-getting altogether and become a company that sells physical products, no services.

They already started up a small products firm and purchased a medium size warehouse where the items would be created. Their initial test product was a cloth covered connector wire used for industrial machinery. This wire was known to wear and tear often more than other detachable wires on the same equipment and so Phazetek created a cloth covered version that proved a much greater durability in damage tests but longevity tests of normal use couldn't be performed yet because they were a new product. Phazetek sent sample connectors to all of the industrial companies that would be most interested along with a statement of intended direction that the company would head in with their tech products. This initial promotional campaign gained some interest but not much to win Phazetek a few thousand orders, many of the companies requesting them in full cases.

Wyatt was developing product ideas while he ate lunch. He worked non-stop when there was something that needed attention, many times staying extra late at his office. Today was that sort of day. He was ready to work himself into the late evening.

He finished his meal and returned his notepad into his suitcase and then locked it. He left the restaurant, holding up his arm and squinting to see the time on his watch as the sun glinted into his eyes when he crashed into a girl walking the opposite direction. She wasn't paying attention either and they were both startled. She was almost knocked onto her butt, Wyatt saved her though, swiftly latching onto her arm with the same hand wearing the watch before she could go down.

He set her on her feet and said, “Noelle! Good to see you! It's been years! How are you?”

Noelle gave Wyatt a sidelong look of apprehension and said, “Wyatt... why are you here?”

Wyatt said, “I live here! Why are you here?”

Noelle said, “I live here too. Moved here six months ago. I'm not leaving. Don't like the old town at all. Not going to return no matter what happens.”

Wyatt said, “Why? Was there something bad going on with you in the old town?”

Noelle said, “No. Just don't like the old town as you can see with my attitude.” She curtsied, eyes alight with emptiness.

Wyatt wondered what was wrong with her, she seemed off and not herself. He said, “Where were you going, into the restaurant?”

Noelle said, “Yes. I wanted to get something to drink, you know how I like strawberry wine, this place has outstanding wines.”

Wyatt said, “I can accompany you, Noelle, and we can chat some more. What has it been, 10 years?”

Noelle said, “Something like that. I think it was 2009 the last time we ever talked and 2008 since we saw each other last. How long have you lived out here?”

Wyatt opened the door to let Noelle into the restaurant first and said, “Around eight years. I think it was 2012 when I moved here, those years sort of blur together, you remember how much of an alcoholic I was. I kicked the liquor and now only drink moderately. Started a company with friends. What about you, Noelle?”

There was a couple waiting to be seated ahead of them. Noelle turned to him and said, “You know what, I always wanted to know what I would do if someone left a dozen boxes of dresses on my welcome mat.”

Wyatt needed to think about what she said for a second. He said, “What would make you wonder about that sort of thing? Doesn't seem at all that likely, now does it?”

Noelle look worried and said, “Do cattle know really how good they taste? If cattle knew how good they tasted would they quit eating grass? Would they try and escape? Can cows be prophetic?”

Wyatt laughed thinking that Noelle was trying to humor him although he wasn't so sure because she seemed so sincere. He said, "I'm glad we found each other, I didn't think that I would ever see you again." He put his arm over her shoulders and squeezed her in a hug. He continued, "Were you going somewhere special or did you have plans?"

Noelle smiled and looked up at him, "Not at all. I was going to pick this wine up and then take it to my apartment. My sister is staying with me temporarily and we wanted to get silly drunk tonight. She's going to return to the old town next Sunday."

The couple ahead of them were seated and so Noelle and Wyatt took their spot on line, next up, Wyatt removing his arm off her shoulder.

Wyatt said, "This last week all I did was work. Ten, twelve, sometimes thirteen hours, sometimes sleeping at my desk. I need a break. You want to go see a movie or go somewhere and get re-acquainted?"

Noelle said, "Yes, I would love that. My sister wouldn't mind if I told her it was you. We could walk to my apartment and drop the wine off, it isn't that far away and then you could see my sister, she would be happy to see you too."

Wyatt said, "You know, I would like that."

The hostess returned and said, "Two for here?"

Noelle said, "No, I just wanted to purchase some of your delicious strawberry wine. How about three bottles?"

The hostess said, "Three bottles coming right up. Anything for you, sir?"

Wyatt said, "No ma'am."

The hostess left to retrieve what Noelle requested.

Noelle said, "When I leave my apartment I like to pretend that when I walk out that door there's going to be a dirt road there with some horses waiting but that don't ever happen. I guess that I don't pretend hard enough. They say if you pretend hard enough you can make anything come true. You never liked to pretend, didn't you Wyatt? You were always so serious, always keen to observe things precisely, you were never a pretender, not once."

Wyatt smiled and said, "I like to pretend that the spring never ends, the kittens never grow up, the bottled water is always blue, the tomatoes are always red, the swing is always swinging, the

air and my clothes are always clean and I always miss the commercials. That would be about all of the pretending that I am capable of. Beyond that, there isn't anything. I guess that's what being shallow is about."

Noelle said, "You don't pretend hard enough, do you?"

Wyatt said, "Nope, how did you know?"

The hostess returned with the wine in a paper sack. She handed the sack over the register onto the countertop and rung up the sale. She said, "\$81.67 cash or credit?"

Noelle said, "Credit." she retrieved her card out of her purse and handed it over to the hostess. The hostess processed the payment and handed the card to Noelle.

Wyatt shoved the sack of wine in his empty arm, suitcase in the other hand.

Noelle said, "Thank you." once the payment was processed and she received the receipt. She stuck the receipt in her purse.

They left the restaurant and Wyatt let Noelle lead the way to the apartment she was renting. She said, "What sort of work are you in, Wyatt? You were selling cars before we broke up. You aren't a car salesman anymore, you don't look like it."

Wyatt said, "I uh, work at Phazetek, an agency for entertainers to find work and connect to each other."

Noelle said, "Nice! Interesting line of work, completely different in comparison to what you did before."

Wyatt said, "What do you do now, Noelle?"

Noelle said, "I am a secretary for a nutrition conglomerate. I talk with vitamin salesmen and make sure everything is going well in the pill department."

Wyatt said, "Really, I wouldn't have noticed were you not to tell me."

Noelle said, "If I tell you a secret can you promise you won't tell anyone? I am serious."

She didn't look serious. She was giving me that blank stare once again and truthfully I was getting sort of nervous.

Noelle said, "Listen carefully, there is this house at the old town past where we lived, you know what I mean? Out past the silos and the chicken farm."

Wyatt said, "Yes, there's a river out that way that dad would take us out for a fish every now and then."

Noelle said, “Well, there's this wood with sparse trees that stretches on for a long distance and there's a road through the area but it's the only road there. It's a dirt road and it leads to an old rotting house. No one has lived in that house since my grandparents were children. This house was abandoned and I think no one actually owns it. Inside this house is a tree growing through the wooden planks and through the ceiling into the next story up! That was my favorite part of this house. Inside another room is a four legged table that stands on one leg, the other three legs are not touching anything but you need to look closely and slide a piece of cardboard under them. If you pour water underneath the lifted leg diagonally opposite of the leg that touches you can watch the water move slowly to the leg that is touching, where all of the weight of the table sits. If you use a construction level and check the tilt of the planks under the table you can see that the tilt is downward towards the legs of the table that are lifted up! That means that the water flows uphill there. There's some more secrets about the property that I should talk about another time, for now though, what do you think about that?”

Wyatt said, “That's really intriguing. I don't know about that place. You said nobody owns that property? Someone has to own it; it can't simply be not owned.”

Noelle said, “I don't know, the state maybe? The city?”

Wyatt said, “Maybe.”

Noelle yanked her smartphone out of her purse in a hurry, it was vibrating enough to hear it but there was no ringtone. She said, “It's my sister.” They quit walking so Noelle could read her messages. She said, “You know what, Wyatt, I am going to need to pass you up on the movie. Why don't we go out some other time? I need to go in a hurry. Here,” she said, taking the sack of wine out of Wyatt's arm, “Call me later, Wyatt, I am sorry.” She quickly walked away, crossing the street.

Wyatt was disappointed because this meant he would need to get to his office. He took his smart phone out to call Noelle to let her know where his office was when he realized that she didn't offer her number. He looked up and she was gone. He yelled, “Hey Noelle, you didn't give me your number!”

Wyatt waited a minute in the chance Noelle would return.

He thought about the house story she relayed to him. He couldn't remember a house in that area but the sparse and thin woodland stretched deep through alongside the old country road that his dad would take him and his siblings through on their way to a fishing hole. He did however remember eerie sensations and otherworldliness, there was something about those fishing memories that were ominous and with ethereal essence. He dreamt about those fishing trips throughout his life, remembering both those dreams and his real memories, they blended together with fascination and wonder.

There was something to this, he thought. If that house was full of anomalies and mystical phenomenon, why couldn't the river there hold similar mysterious augmentations?

Wyatt's good mood evaporated and he was no longer smiling. He damned himself that he didn't get Noelle's number. She was spontaneous, he already knew that, always in a hurry. He supposed they would see each other once again someday through chance, they lived close to each other and went to the same restaurant. Should he not meet her, he thought, then they weren't meant to be, like two magnet's repelling each other.

Wyatt turned around and went to his Phazetek office to finish his work.

L&R Industrial Supplies

Landyn was having a clearance sale at his first business. He and his wife Raenia were closing it down. The opening of his new business was about one week away. He decided that today was the last day. He would be cleaning up the empty business once the clearance sale ended at 5:00pm.

Raenia was at the register. “Ten minutes to go!” she said.

Landyn was resting on a chair at the end of the counter. The store was almost empty of merchandise. One row of shelves were all that there was left. The rear end of the store was empty and the refrigerators were turned off.

They sold all of the cigarettes and all of the liquor, all of the lighters, pretty much everything behind the counter. Everything was at reduced price, some of the items were half off, Landyn’s highest discount. He limited the number of people permitted within the store because there were so many people that morning waiting. People lined up outside to get in and buy up all the deals. The register was ringing continually till noon. They didn’t ever get that many customers when the merchandise was regular price, not at all since opening the store in 1994.

Finally Raenia said, “Five o’clock!” she walked to the end of the counter and smooched Landyn on the cheek then went to lock the door. She turned off the sign light and then said, “Goodbye convenience store.”

Landyn said, “I’m beat, let’s worry about clean up tomorrow. I am ready to eat dinner, starving.”



The next day Landyn decided to clean up the store on his own, leaving Raenia at home to finish house chores. He wanted to get the store cleaned up before sunset. He knew he could.

He arrived at sunrise and first cleared the shelves off, placing the last of the items carefully in boxes then stacked the boxes on a

dolly, wheeling the dolly out to his dusty rusty truck and loading them into the truck bed under the canopy.

All the cleaning supplies were already inside the store. He returned, locking the doors then got to work. He finished the cleaning well before sunset and then cleared out the small room with the safe and the desk and the camera monitoring system.

He moved all the appliances and furniture that he would need to remove before giving up the lease into an area not far away from the main entrance to make it easy for the movers to get in and get out. They charge by the hour and he wanted to keep within a budget.

Cleaning the empty store was a lot easier and quicker than he thought it was going to be. He was happy to return to the house around 4:00pm and take sunday off because it was saturday.



A week later Landyn and Raenia opened their new store. Named, “L&R Industrial Supplies” they were very satisfied that their plans went precisely as they wanted. They were tired of the convenience store nonsense. They were leasing the convenience store property and saving at the same time. Twenty years of that dedication paid off, they reached their business goals. They owned their new property, title and deed. Great location. Great demand. They owed it to themselves and now the debt was settled.

They hired one of their nephews to help on the weekends. He worked hard with the restocking and did a lot of lifting and the weekly clean up. They knew that a few years down the road they could hire a couple more trusted people when they decided to retire and manage the store remotely. Now though, this here was a Godsend. No more convenience stores.

Where Someplace is the Uplife

There's a secret club where the eccentrics go to meet. These are the people that didn't get a security pass to access the inside information of the deep state. These are the people that made their mark on the top of the world through the outside. They aren't in on the secret treasury codes. They don't know what the underground scientists invented. They don't command armies. They aren't at the helm of society when something happens. They're huge. Some of them world renown. They're smart, sexy, fun, dangerous, strict, clever and a bunch of other things. They couldn't get in that club so they made their own club. The club of an elite outside of the elite.

This club has a center. A resort on an island. Not many people know where this club is. Most of the people that know about this place can go there. They know how to get in because they are a part of it. Those who don't know how to get in don't even try. What a miserable failure that would be.

My name is Lotte. I was down and out of chances. There wasn't a damn thing that was going to happen that could work out the emptiness. I was being mocked and berated and scoured. I didn't surrender, I fought. There wasn't relief and things continued to rot away. I made horrible enemies. Too many enemies. They all wanted the same thing and didn't give a damn if I died but they smiled on anyways and tried to sugar me up with shallow nonsense.

They knew I could hold my own if given the opportunity. That's the thing though. They wanted me weak and subjective, powerless and broke. They didn't want me to have anything and they would move the world and work miracles to make this so. Thought they could beat me down and then starve me. They'd ride it out and watch me die. That's what they thought. They were wrong though.

I left. There wasn't another way. There was way too much against me and nobody on my side. Leave. Start over. Good idea.

Then I met this girl. Her name was Sophie and she was from Europe. She was a member of the secret club. She got me in.

The world could be crumbling and dying and suffering to the hilt. You go to this secret club on the island and it's like you don't even know anything about those terrible things because you can't hear about them. There's another world there. Anything you'd think you could want you can find right there. They already knew everything you'd want and so they stockpiled it and all you need is to ask. Seriously.

Sophie and I went there. She got me in and we vacationed. There wasn't anything like being there. If you were searching to find a paradise on Earth that was where you go.

The things that went on there you couldn't do anywhere else. No one entertained the thought to get those sort of celebrations and events together anywhere else. Sometimes you'd say that was awesome, sometimes you'd say that was lame, why? Either way, you'd love it. There was something there you'd like, eventually.

When we were there we were so close you couldn't tear us apart. Saved my life. Gave me a new outlook and a new hope that good things were on their way.

We stayed in a nice house and drove a golf cart around. There was this diner and they served delicious food. A clothing warehouse in case you wanted new clothes. A liquor cabinet in the house with more than enough to get us through our stay. You couldn't forget something like that, not in a million years.

I learned though that this wasn't free. There were dues to pay. Sophie already paid those dues when she joined the club and although she was short on money they let her cut her membership in half to get me in. All we would need once we left was get another payment to restore both of the memberships to full status. The price was really a lot and surprised me when she told me but not impossible, I made that before I can make that several times over.

So we went to this weird auction that Sophie wanted to go to and I agreed to go although I wasn't too impressed with the advertisement. We dressed up, her in a skirt and me wearing this nice suit. We walked to the auction house because the island wasn't the largest island around, you could walk the beach all around in ninety minutes. Our walk to the auction was ten minutes. Not bad. Sunny with a cool breeze.

There was an old fashioned style dance with a band playing traditional instruments without electricity. Sophie and I danced

merrily through all of the songs that the band played. She loves dancing. I love dancing with her. That worked out great. Normally I don't like dancing.

When the dance was over and refreshments served we were seated at the auction stage. The auctioneers were a man and woman dressed in old fashioned retro attire. There was a wooden table with a chest on top that contained the auction items.

The man introduced himself as George and the woman Laura.

George said, "My wife and I wanted to share a special item of great wonder. You need no faith to believe our claims because we can prove to you what power is within this sacred gemstone."

Laura presented a medallion of gold wide as her hand with a monotone white oval gemstone in the center. The lights dimmed and the gemstone started to glow. She held the medallion overhead.

George said, "This gemstone contains the power to tell what is truth and what is lie. You can see the color turn red with the truth and blue with the lie. To prove this I am going to show you."

George lifted a tall and iced liquor, producing a knife. He made a light tap on the glass and a sharp sound rang out. He said, "Laura dear, did I or did I not make this glass ring?"

Laura replied, "Yes, you rang on that glass."

The medallion shifted into a red color, continuing to glow, clouding like broth water, then solidifying. The red was bloody and bright.

George then slowly swung at the liquor without touching the glass. He swung a second time and missed once again. He said, "Laura dear, did I or did I not make this glass ring?"

Laura replied, "Yes, you rang on that glass."

The medallion shifted red to white and then white to blue in the same manner as before, eventually becoming a magnificent bright royal blue.

George said, "You see, ladies and gentlemen, my wife was lying with her words and the gemstone has clouded blue, when she was being truthful the gemstone clouded red. This relic is mysterious. Unknown are the gemstones' origins and such a thing hasn't been seen before."

"That's wonderful! Where did you ever find such a thing?" someone abruptly said.

George said, “That in and of itself is a tale too long to tell, in short though you could say that we were gifted this divine relic from an angel as a reward for our charitable work with the Humane Society.”

He rid himself of the iced liquor and said, “Now, if we may offer this gamble. You can wager a fine piece of your own jewelry in a true and false match and have the chance yourself on leaving with some of the personal treasures we have collected over the years.”

Laura said, “The challenge is that you must guess what color the gemstone has become while I cover the gemstone up with my hands. George then asks impossible questions that almost nobody can know and I then answer his question. Chances are you would never know the answer either, in the rare event that you do know the answer well then you won't even need the gemstone to determine who is correct, but ultimately the gemstone is going to decide who is right and who is wrong.”

George retrieved a fine necklace out of the chest on the table and then showed it to the crowd. He said, “This fine item was made in 1732 in an Eastern European town. The maker's mark reads 'N.Lawton 1732' and is made of pure gold with silver inlays and a fine dust of diamond upon the center link. Would someone like to make a wager?”

Sophie said, “Yes. I wager my bracelet. This bracelet is pure fine gold with perfect green gem inlays.”

George said, “Deal! May I ask your name fair lady?”

Sophie told him her name.

George said, “Alright, Sophie, may I hold your bracelet and show everyone?”

Sophie handed over the bracelet reluctantly. George held each item in separate hands up so that everyone could see. He said, “Alright Laura, cover the stone so that the answer stays hidden.”

Laura covered the stone.

George said, “What is the name of the second most powerful earthquake in recorded history and what was the magnitude?”

Laura smiled, “Why George, that was the Good Friday earthquake and the magnitude was 9.1.”

George turned to Sophie awaiting her response. He said, "What say you Sophie, was Laura telling us the truth or was the answer she gave us false?"

Sophie was hesitant. She said, "False." and nodded.

Laura uncovered the medallion and held it high. The medallion was white and then started to shift to blue. Once the color solidified George said, "Alright now! We have a winner! Sophie, please come up here and retrieve your prize." Sophie gave me a quick squeeze of a hug and then went to get her relics.

George handed Sophie's prize to her and then said, "And the correct answer was that the second largest earthquake in recorded history was named the Good Friday earthquake and the magnitude was 9.2, not 9.1 as Laura said."

Sophie returned with a wide smile on. I said, "Did you know the answer or did you guess?"

Sophie said, "I guessed."

We both laughed.

George then retrieved a golden ring with a large diamond stud. He said, "I would like to present to you this ring. Worth a lot, this ring. Need I say so?" He walked along the rows to show everyone. The women nearly let their tongues hang out. He returned to the stage and then said, "Would anyone like to make a wager? Top of the line diamond ring."

A woman in the crowd said, "Yes. Would my golden ruby brooch suffice?" She held the item towards George. He took the brooch from her and looked it over. "I believe so." He said.

Laura said, "I am now concealing the gemstone."

George said, "Alright, let me see. Your name, miss?"

The woman said, "Media."

George said, "Well then, Media, are you ready to take the question?"

Media said, "Let's."

George said, "The electromagnetic attractions within atomic nuclei and their electrons are what gives chemicals their physical state. What say you, Media?"

Media said, "True."

George said, "Can we see what the gemstone tells us, Laura?"

Laura uncovered the medallion, showing the crowd. The color of the medallion shifted off white and became blue in the same manner as before.

Media winced.

George said, "Oh my lady, I am sorry. The truth is that the electromagnetic attractions within atomic nuclei and their electrons are what holds atoms together." He took both precious items and placed them carefully inside the chest on the table.

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The unconventional auction was forgettable in my opinion but Sophie was very enthused about the whole thing. Overall the auctioneers won and although they won the people were in high spirits. There were plenty of intriguing things about the island and being a member of the club makes good story but I am going to end the tale there.

Were I not to meet Sophie my life would've been worse for the telling. Such a club wasn't necessary to attend but I am thankful that I am a member and thankful of the new attitude it gave me. Now I can rebuild my life into something tolerable, something that resembles acceptable.

Family Zoo Trip

Joel and his girlfriend Danielle took their son Levi to the zoo one bright early sunny morning after church. It was Levi's idea and his parents were happy with that. They said okay. Levi was pleased.

They loved animals. There was a boa constrictor in their living room. Joel owned several reptiles and amphibians before he and Danielle knew each other. When they purchased their house they decided that one animal should be enough. They agreed on keeping the boa constrictor and ridding their house of the other critters. They advertised in the newspaper that they were giving away free animals. They were able to get rid of the animals within a few days.

Dressed in their Sunday best they enthusiastically got in the car in anticipation of the awesome animals that they would get to see at the zoo. Levi wanted to see the lion's den more than anything. He wanted to feed them raw steaks and take pictures of them. He was fascinated. Danielle wanted to see the ostriches while Joel wanted to see the aquarium. Joel liked sea turtles and thought they were neat.

Unlike many city zoos, the zoo they went to was located outside of the city limits next to the state park. This location allowed for a much larger area for the land mammals than the majority of city zoos. This was good for the zoo animals, giving them more space to roam around than usual.

On the drive to the zoo with Joel in the driver's seat they held a conversation about animals.

Joel asked his son Levi, "What is your favorite animal in the world."

Levi replied, "The lions!"

Danielle said, "Really? Oh, and why do you say that?"

Levi shrugged and replied, "I don't know, they got really big teeth I guess."

Joel said, "Maybe someday we will go shark fishing and we'll see if we can catch one and then eat us some shark steaks."

Danielle said, "That sounds like an idea I can support! You want to go shark fishing Levi?"

Levi replied, "Yes!"

Joel said, "Alright, then we can plan our shark fishing trip when we get to the house and we are going to write our plans on the calendar. You're going to love shark fishing, son. We'll rent a boat and see what we can find."

Levi replied, "Sounds great! I can't wait to go!"

Joel and Danielle smiled at each other.

Joel said, "When I was a boy like you I would go to the river with my friends. We'd bring fishing gear with us and catch trout. Those were the days."

Levi said, "My friend's mom is a lifeguard on the weekends. She works at a county park. She says that she sees eels and fish all the time."

Danielle replied, "Sounds great. I wonder how many eels she sees every day."

Levi said, "I don't know. Maybe I should ask her!"

Joel said, "That's a great idea, son! Wow, look at that! A crocodile."

Levi strained to look out the window. The crocodile was crawling slowly up the bank and toward some forested glades in the distance. Joel slowed as he drove past.

Levi said, "Aren't you glad you haven't accidentally walked into a crocodile? They can chomp pretty hard, dad."

Joel said, "You're probably right, son."

Danielle said, "Did you two notice that this crocodile is half yellow? Ever see a yellow crocodile?"

Levi said, "Yeah, yellow like a lemon pie."

Joel said, "We're going to be there soon so hold your horses!"

Thirteen minutes later they arrived at the zoo. The zoo was very large indeed, giving the impression of a safari. The outside wall looked like it was over a mile in length.

Inside the reception building there was a single skeleton of a rhinoceros set up at the center of the room with a placard mounted on a podium that read, "Rhinoceros". Joel, Danielle and Levi looked at the skeleton about a second and then went to the ticket counter where Joel bought his family their zoo passes. They were given maps of the zoo and closed soda thermoses for the drink stands scattered around the zoo.

Joel and his family the opposite side of the entrance building into the main area of the zoo. A crowd got together around a zoologist that held a baby panda in her arms. She fed the panda bamboo shoots and the baby eagerly chewed them down quick.

"Ah, isn't that a heart-throb?" said Danielle, "Look at that panda." Joel, Danielle and Levi all joined the crowd and watched the zoologist feed the panda. She told the crowd fun facts about pandas while the crowd swooned. When the panda was done eating she invited the crowd to touch the panda's fur.

Danielle asked Levi, "Do you want to touch the baby panda?"

Levi replied, "Yes."

All of them caressed the panda's soft fur. Danielle said, "What a beautiful animal and they're so peaceful too."

When they were done with the panda Joel looked at his map to decide where they would go next. He said, "The lion's den is over there." He pointed, then said, "Let's go see the lions first."

At the lion's cage the walls were high enough that the lion couldn't get out. Levi leaned on the railing at the lion's den's edge. He said, "Oh my God, look what size that lion is!"

The lions stood there, not moving. Flies were irritating one of them.

When they were done observing the lions Joel said, "Great. We should get on the zoo bus now and do the mini-safari thing. When we're done with the zoo bus we can go ahead and see the aquarium. Sound good?"

Levi replied, "Yes. Sounds great!"

The zoo trip went well and made them all happy.

Cadmus, the Hurried and the Troll of London's Curse

There was a time in London when a heretic's curse descended on the inhabitants. The curse spread quietly and quickly and constricted the minds of innocent men and women with confusion and lies. Clouded were their hearts with causeless conceit and terrible was their agony. They declined in their productivity, blunders were numerous, errors abounded. Life sauntered on through the thorn bushes of hardship, conflict arose between brothers and sisters, friends and family. London was thrust into a murky well of poisonous corruption.

The quality of work and the product of men devolved under their inabilities to keep focused while the curse deepened the reach of its skeletal hands. Food stores would spoil and the young would rebel against their elders without cause and with an insidious disdain. Elders would press to hold control over their progeny. The curse was corrosive and the potency of it only increased. Life became misery and torment and London longed to return to the relative peace of the days of harmony and even temperament.

At this time in the outlying districts of London was a weaponsmith named Cadmus the Hurried. He was apprenticed to a Knight at an early age, intent to become a King's soldier before altering his life path to become apprenticed as a smithy. He was

trained well in the use of weapons and warfare. His new apprenticeship was won on the merits of his abilities, granting him a weekly allowance greater than the accepted norm. He learned fast and contributed a great deal. His apprenticeship ended years ago and now he owned a trade house of his own.

Withdrawing a generous bank loan partially approved on grounds of his growing reputation he would open his trade house with three anvils and plenty of equipment. He succeeded in paying off his loan within a year's time, operating his trade house with a full staff of top notch smiths. His shop and trade house became one of the most popular go to locations for Knights whom needed to fix their equipment or place special orders for newly forged weapons. Knights traveling to and from London would stop there often and spread the word across England that his knowledge and skill on the shaping of weapons was rarely surpassed. Though a full grown man, he was young for his notoriety. Business increased in surges. Cadmus the Hurried would soon need to purchase another anvil.

His shop was a single room with a window and a nice rug, displaying the collection of swords that he and his apprentices created and some smaller gear that would interest a shopping Knight. Also on display were maps made of leather that a London mapmaker was selling on consignment, maps of the Kingdom and of the European mainland.

You could say that life was great for Cadmus the Hurried. That was before the poisonous curse started affecting the Londoners.

He already banished one of his apprentices for his heretical behavior, threatening visiting Knights and forcing Cadmus to arbitrate peace, muttering nonsense and ultimately, forging a cursed sword that caused its wielder to get maimed in two horrible accidents. The man was lucky to have survived, returning the sword and showing Cadmus his irreversible bodily damages. He accused the sword maker of his misfortunes, not knowing what smith that could have been. Cadmus checked the sword for a makers mark and found that it was the same smith that was causing trouble with his customers. The sword was unused, not even for practice. Possessing the sword seemed enough to spread the curse.

Cadmus was already familiar with the London curse, having seen the madness captivating some of its victims. The majority of

the cursed were on the south side of London within the more populous areas. He didn't see it much out on the edge of London.

Since the bad apprentice was already banished Cadmus couldn't address the accusation properly. He offered a refund with a bonus and the choice of a Royal sword that he made with his own hands. The Knight took the refund but refused the sword. Cadmus apologized to him.

The cursed sword was destroyed in the kiln and poured into a bucket of lime salts and rice, said to have an effect on holding the curse within the item. The bucket of cursed material was then sent to a shipyard to be taken to sea and thrown into the ocean. Days later the banished weaponsmith returned in a fit of rage and was then swiftly hung for being a heretic and spreading curses with putrid intent.

Cadmus the Hurried forbid his wife and children to go out into public, fearing that the curse would attack them as well. Many men did the same throughout London. A great silence and sadness penetrated the city as many heretics were sacrificed. They all wanted to win the goodness of God that he shine his love over them and heal them of their curses. The heretics would come in waves and would sadly be sentenced to death in numbers and as the heretics began to disappear a new wave of them would emerge and the cycle would continue anew.

The King sent his Holy Knights to discover the origination of the curse with the help of church guidance. They sent for Cadmus with an official request that he join them in their mission to restore peace and health to the city of London. He agreed proudly.

The Holy Knights would invite Cadmus the Hurried to a secret meeting in a church bell tower where they would tell him their knowledge of the curse and its origination and how to defeat it.

The head of the Holy Knights greeted Cadmus with honor and said, "Welcome Cadmus, the Hurried of London. We pray that graces of God's holiness watch over us while we find and then attack this dreadful curse. That the spirit of angels support the strength within us. That the light of Holiness warm our souls with the love of God. We shall rid this curse and restore life. Amen."

Everyone repeated, "Amen."

Cadmus was then told the secret story of the origination of the curse. The Holy Knight said, "You see, Cadmus, a century ago,

as the Kingdom was boiling in the turmoil caused when contenders to the throne perished one after the other in their greed for power, a troll uncovered an item imbued with the curse that you see here in London. He used this item to gain wealth through his devious dealings. As more and more people were disappointed with his bad deals, he was increasingly accused of his treachery. This troll was a clever one, always slipping out of consequence and punishment. He eventually fled when the Kingdom started to settle into a new period of peace when threats to the throne sharply ceased. With less confusion and turmoil across London the troll could be more easily seen for what sort of miscreant he truly was. His infamy multiplied and a lynch mob went to kill him but he made his escape in time.”

The Holy Knight continued, “The item was shown at a checkpoint on the outskirts of London and the troll lied about what it was to dissuade the attention upon the ethereal glow pulsing from inside. The soldiers at the checkpoint weren't yet informed of the troll or the plan to lynch him so the troll was let go. The guard would learn of the mistake he'd made a day later but obviously it was too late. A search party was sent to catch the troll but no matter how far and wide they searched, the troll could not be found.”

The Holy Knight continued, “This account was recorded as dozens of witnesses that dealt with the troll testified their grievances to the head of the lynch mob. No official testimonies on the troll or his supernatural item are kept at the palace or anywhere in the Royal hall of records. Many of the disgruntled clients of the troll sited that the glowing item would appear to have a great influence on his ability to deceive. His name was also recorded as being Thal'hli or Tal-hyle.”

The Holy Knight continued, “Those were the end of tumultuous times for London and as the condition of life improved tales spread about Thul, the rotten troll. Some believed the troll to keep a cauldron of gold and if you should find Thul and slay him the treasure can be yours. Those tales are no longer told and forgotten. And here we have notarized documents certified with the hand of the King himself, that Thul was real and that the item that grants Thul power is the cause of the curse. The item was created in distant antiquity and is well known among a small circle of elite scholars in few countries. All that is known about the item is that it glows and contains a cursing power that increases the longevity of

its possessor. Destruction of the item is necessary and we are to return with the head of the troll.”

The Holy Knight continued, “Cadmus, we are pleased that you have joined us to help slay the troll. You are known as a swordsman of great aptitude and a man of class and virtue. You are friendly with the Church and trusted here. We ask that you better equip us where our own weapons and armors fall short of your creations. At morning sunrise we shall attack the troll and bring peace to London once more and show his evil head to the King.”

All of them bowed their heads with solitude. Cadmus then knelt into the circle, accepting the status of Holy Knight.

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They all went to stay at the trade house till morning where Cadmus redressed the Holy Knights as they requested, fitting them with his best armors and swords. They ate dry meats and breads that Cadmus' wife made for them and drank wine. They would leave early and reach the property that the troll was believed to live at sunrise.

The Holy Knights were interested in knowing about how Cadmus became such as he was; wealthy and skilled. One of them asked, “Cadmus, tell us, where do you get your name, the Hurried?”

Cadmus laughed, “I suppose that since I was a boy to keep still wasn't my best trait. I was always running with my wooden sword and leaping at imaginary enemies. When I was older and apprenticed to a smith that owned three shops around London he would put me on errands, delivering materials and retrieving orders. We would sometimes be quite overloaded and I would rush with my top speed around the city on horse. The smith I was apprenticed to started the name and always since then it has stayed.”

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Early morning and they were at the dilapidated house that the troll was believed to live in. They could feel the ominous presence of evil permeate the air. The head Knight entered the yard through an opening in the rotting picket fence. He walked slowly towards the main entrance through an overgrown lawn that stood waist high.

Cadmus and the other two Holy Knights watched a demon race out of the woods and blur across the small yard, long green limbs flashing with speed and a gross toothy mouth hanging open. The Knight was not quick enough to react defensively in time and the demon latched onto his arm and spun him around, trying to throw him down, vicious claws scratching at the openings in the Knights armor. The demon outweighed the Knight and nearly knocked him off his feet. The Knight swung at the demon with his sword but the angle of attack wasn't sufficient. The demon pierced the Knights neck with a long hideous claw.

Cadmus leapt into action and the two Holy Knights followed close behind. Cadmus cut one of the demon's legs off with a hard swing of his sword and the demon let go, running away like a three legged animal. No screams out of the demon but the Knight was bleeding and trying to breathe. They were able to stop the bleeding but the Knight could not continue. He was hidden under branches and given some water. They would return for him.

Inside of the house piles of items crowded all of the rooms. The troll like to collect random things for reasons unknown. Hoards upon hoards of benign and useless things made the house look like a dump. They didn't find the troll anywhere in the house and there was no sign of recent occupancy. No food scraps or dishes, no recently burnt lanterns or candles.

A foyer area outside of the hallway in the side of the house was protected with high walls and contained an entranceway into the ground with a rotted double door.

The Knights lit a lantern and then entered the staircase behind the double doors, leading deep underneath the house. Cold and damp, a feeling of danger swept into them. At the bottom of the staircase there was a hallway that forked in three directions. One of the two remaining Holy Knights went towards the larger of the three doorways. The cobblestone floor crumbled beneath him and he sunk through into a deep cavern below. Cadmus and the last Holy Knight couldn't rescue him and he perished quickly.

Saying a prayer, they blessed the dead Knight's soul that he was saved in the afterlife.

They went forth without fear to find the troll. The halls worked like a maze with false doorways and dead ends. They walked carefully and slowly to avoid falling through another sink hole. The maze was much larger than the house above them, stretching out beyond the limits of the property. An hour of careful searching the empty maze finally brought them to a lavishly decorated door. Golden symbols and troll faces were carved all over it. Languages that the Knights could not read were on a metal plate attached to the door as if it were a title or a name.

Cadmus tried the handle but it would not open.

A voice yelled through the door, "Who dare enter here?!" The sound was garbled and scratchy and sounded very old, the sound of a monster. The Holy Knight replied, "We seek the troll who has cursed the world above, that we behead him and bring peace to our land!"

"Then you shall die!" The garbled voice echoed once again, "For I am Thul-Hyle-Cauk! I have killed many a man who dare cross me and I shall kill you!" The door then slowly opened of its own accord. The Knights cautiously entered.

Clear of debris, the tiles inside were made of finely laid squares carved in stone. The room reached far and wide to the estimate of a hundred legs in either direction. There was a fireplace that ran the whole length of the walls, burning with an otherworldly light without coal or wood to feed on. Contorted faces in desperate need swam through blue flames like captured souls.

The troll was nowhere in sight.

The Holy Knight went forth into the center of the room with his sword drawn, searching for any sign of where the troll could've gone. There was only one door, the door that they two both entered, it was inconceivable that the troll could've left the room. That is, unless he made his way through a secret passage.

The Holy Knight told Cadmus, "The troll has gone, so let us search for the secret passage for whence he went."

Cadmus drew his sword then gave the ominous fires one more look. At that second the Holy Knight was knocked off of his feet and he hit the floor with a hard crack of his backside armor

plate. Cadmus saw a flash of green gaseous light in the shape of the troll flicker into and out of sight.

Cadmus yelled, "Raise your defenses! The troll has gone invisible! I saw him for a moment! There! Above you!" The Holy Knight rolled left as he saw green flashes where the troll was swinging a heavy club at him. Cadmus dashed at the faded green flashes at a full run with his sword drawn out before him. The Holy Knight rolled out of Cadmus's path and Cadmus hit the invisible troll with his hardest fist. The Holy Knight watched as Cadmus was halted, crashing into the invisible troll with a loud clink of his armors. His sword wildly deflected in an odd direction and he became unbalanced but held himself upright.

Cadmus crouched as The Holy Knight returned to his feet. The Holy Knight yelled, "Watch out, on your flank!" Cadmus turned his head in time to see another green flash of gaseous shapes at his blind side, mere feet away. Cadmus tried to sidestep the attack but was dealt a hard hit that made him see red. His knees weakly disobeyed his desire to run and he stumbled sideways in the other direction. He was hit very quickly in his side letting his sword fall hitting face first into the tiles made of stone.

The Holy Knight produced a bauble that contained a golden liquid and sprinted along the wall. He reached the end of the room that opposed the door, finding the spout that fueled the blue flames. He threw the bauble at the spout and the bauble burst in an icy cloud of sparkly crystals. The Knight could hear the trolls feet hitting the tiles and knew it was charging him. The icy cloud was drawn into the blue flames and shot through the whole length of the fireplace to the other end of the room, crystalline bursts followed the same path, ending the blue fires. A thin white mist dissipated.

The only light left was a supernatural green glow pouring out of the troll, unveiling his position, running towards the Holy Knight.

Cadmus got to his feet and took his sword up, seeing the troll charge at the Holy Knight. In fact, he thought he could see through him. Cadmus went full sprint towards the troll.

The troll swung a hard fist at the Holy Knight's stomach but he sidelined the attack and hit a swift elbow on the troll's back, throwing the troll away. The troll spun around, the Holy Knight leaping to the side, raising his sword. The troll went at him and he

swung downwards, landing his sword on the troll's shoulder, cutting into his bone.

A second later Cadmus reached them, running full speed with his sword out directly before him. Cadmus impaled the troll through his lower chest, his sword sunk to the hilt. He let go of the sword and watched the troll give up. The Holy Knight removed his sword out of the trolls shoulder and the troll clutched the handle of the sword impaling him.

The troll lost consciousness then smacked into the tiles, still glowing.

Green blood oozed out under the edge of the troll's body, thicker than paint, with the odor of mold. The troll quit breathing but continued to glow. The only light. The Holy Knight beheaded the troll, slipping the head into a sack.

They searched the troll for the cursed item and found that the troll fashioned it into a crafty bracelet. The relic was a flat disk with a glowing half-globe infused to the center of the disk. A swirling mist of green in continuous motion. This was the relic that the record told of. "Take this." said the Holy Knight then handed Cadmus the head in the sack. He laid flat the relic so that the half-globe orb was facing straight up and then destroyed the relic, hitting the half-globe directly with his gauntlet fist.

He collected the broken relic up and they left the underground maze. The Holy Knight whose neck was pierced at the entrance was saved but the other Holy Knight whom went through the sinkhole could not be saved. They returned to the center of London to report to the King.

The curse over London was lifted and there was a great celebration in honor of The Holy Knights and Cadmus. A memorial was held in honor of the dead Knight. Cadmus was officially knighted and was thereafter known as Sir Cadmus, the Hero. He and his wife went on and lived a long and productive life. They lived happily ever after.

Titansphere, the Cybernaut Ark

2401, the young city of “Titansphere” was built within a half-subterranean globe that was visible only on the surface as a dome. Everyone that lived inside the city of Titansphere was a citizen of the United Federation of Freedom. Entrance into the city was permitted only to individuals that fit the standard. Titansphere was the world's first bubble city and over three quarters of the people that lived in Titansphere were employed in some sort of cybernautics position.

Cybernautics is the use of virtual reality in a task to reach a physical goal such as operating machinery.

Cybernetics was long used in many industries at that time, specifically industries that used remote controlled machinery. The days of manually controlling hazardous industrial machinery were long gone.

In the new era of bubble cities upon Earth's surface following the world war of the "Terminator" era, (which was essentially a series of dozens of simultaneous civil wars across the entire planet), humanity was reorganizing itself and dividing all of the populations around the whole of the Earth. Much of the dividing was determined with the help of genetics, identifying specific genes that were deemed hazardous to the human race. (self-destructiveness, insanities, villainy, diseases, treason) Many personality traits could be connected to genetics and these identifiable traits were more often discarded than physical diseases that were also discarded but much more often tolerated within individual cases.

This bubble city phase was carefully planned and fully controlled. As advanced and impressive that humanity was at that time, there were some that were equally bad and in some cases even worse on the opposing end. Villainous humans of that era were simply killed and their damages immediately undone with the utmost swift action. During the world civil war era the main protagonist wasn't a specific person but the technology itself, being the invention of many protagonists that fit squarely into many of the unwanted genetics categories in the bubble city era following.

Those technologies that encouraged increasing synchronization and deeper connectivity across all electronics caused a lot of corruption and nearly destroyed the concept of self and individual. Society became an ocean of bows and arrows as the developers of the technologies continued their trend of hyperinvasive connectivity in the pursuit of reducing the powers of the consumers that depended on their products to function within the work world of that time. This system has since shown proven doomed to implode and cannot be sustained, even when all consumers are locked into place, they simply start dying earlier and earlier.

With self-replicating artificial intelligence introduced into the already unsustainable overconnected internet, this trend of degrading, reducing and dehumanizing the world was pressed into

overdrive. When the war ended and few could stand tall when all was said and done, great measures were set in place to prevent this sort of thing from happening a second time.

Part of the bubble city plan, beyond genetically dividing the human population, was to divide the human population on a technological level. Two new internets were built ground up from scratch intentionally in such a manner that they cannot connect to each other because it was physically impossible. The old internet systems were no longer in use and mostly destroyed in the world civil war. Lesson learned. With two systems that are physically impossible to connect together the danger of spying outside of one network and into the other was reduced to nothing.

Getting into a bubble city for even the simplest of employment positions was more difficult than becoming an astronaut or a CEO. The bubble cities would take more than a quarter century apiece to reach their capacity of 100,000 individuals. More than 70% of this capacity was reached through birthing children and raising them within strict guidelines, developing them mentally and intellectually in the same prerequisites that their parents fit into. The cities stayed very empty for a long time.

This division plan worked well with banishing the rogue hackers and maverick saboteurs that caused so much destruction and loss during the century before in the world civil war. To reiterate this point, scientific research has proven that individuals with the propensity to hack and sabotage and spy have a set of specific genes that they can pass to their children and this was completely natural, research has also proven that once these genetic markers are removed completely in one generation of a closed population, the next generation is completely devoid of these particular types. Thus, in the bubble city era, the hackers were on the outside and could never appear on the inside.

Slowly, the bubble cities restored peace and freedom to the humans good enough to get in. Within their own separated society there wasn't much need for paranoid cut-throat overdefensiveness and overly maniacal monitoring. Humans weren't perfect on the inside of the bubble cities but they were so much better than the humans on the outside.

Thus was the need for defending Titansphere as a whole to a much higher and severe level than seen before. As these bubble

cities were built and populated the quality of humanity on the outside of them would equally slip in the opposite direction. Left to their own devices and technologies, banished and cut off, continually losing genetic value as the best of them were yanked and placed into bubble cities, they became nastier and scarier and more depraved and cruel. In the post-bubble-city era hackers, spies and saboteurs of the outside human population reached a record high of maleficence never reached before. There were no secret government systems to hack, no intelligence agencies to bleed knowledge from, there was nothing for them to devour inside their own system. It was like having millions of dollars and the only store there is sells soda pops and potato chips and that's it. Security that protected the bubble cities were well aware of this and were swiftly proactive with relieving the outside population of these supervile villains.

Titansphere was highly secured. Workers were contractually forced to live inside the bubble city network and were never allowed to mix with the outside human population. This was for their own safety and for the safety and secrecy of the division. The worth and value of what they have built is so priceless that all violators of the division law are immediately killed. That is the prime directive. Top to bottom, inside out.

This strict directive didn't limit the privacy and freedom of the bubble city populations. Remember, this all came about primarily the result of the removal of freedom, privacy and the individual. There is never a limit on how many people can be yanked from the outside human population and trained for living on the inside of the bubble cities. Great care is taken to make sure there is always plenty of space. That is why a new bubble city is built every ten years. There is never a "no vacancy" reason to deny entry. The most constant complaint is that there aren't enough people to populate the cities. The standard is set and cannot be reduced. Any reduction within the standard is proven to be unsustainable and results ultimately in the destruction of the bubble cities and the corruption of their systems and use of technologies. This simply cannot be allowed to happen at any price, including the lives of the population, no matter how valuable each individual is perceived to be. This standard provides greater freedom and privacy and personal security than any system that came before.

Life continues within the bubble cities to a quality and temperament similar to and greater than the old United States within the second half of the twentieth century, which has become the model for living all across the world in the twenty fifth century. The old United States is the direct predecessor to the United Federation of Freedom and the model that many post-24th-century countries have built their own prime directives upon.

The United Federation of Freedom has set the standard in cooperation with the surviving ruling parties of the world civil war. Much of the post-war world is devoid of a distinct ruling presence and what few post-war powers that remained were very similar and were able to easily cooperate with one another. This could be that because the traits required to survive a total worldwide meltdown of that particular nature are so specific and specialized that it was inevitable that all surviving powers would be similar in function and procedure and therefore be compatible enough to create something like the Titansphere Prime Directive Treaty.

Hero Soul

Kenny Bust was a normal man. He worked a normal job selling lightning strike insurance. He owned a house and a car. He was married with a child.

Some things are destined to happen. Maybe they are written in the stars or written on fortune cookies. Whatever the case is, not even Kenny Bust was ready for what was in store for him.

Life was bumbling along fine. Kenny went to work, sat at his desk, turned on his computer, took a sip of coffee and opened his file cabinet. Today he would be calling clients for various reasons related to their insurance policies. Normal day for Kenny.

At the end of his work day he drove the same route he always drives with the talk radio station on. “Welcome to the show. Tech Talk with Sarnovulka Yi. Today we have a special announcement. An unannounced surprise product snuck onto the market that crushes the competition. First, a commercial break.”

Kenny wondered what the new thing was. He thought about the possibilities. How can someone surprise us in a world as deeply connected and cross-invasive as this one is today? What a stumper.

The commercial break ended. “Welcome to Tech Talk. I'm your host Sarnovulka Yi and I am now going to give you a heads up on the brand new buzz.”

“On May 7th three tech companies rolled out a ton of state-of-the-art new technologies. They let it all hang out. So much high tech product hitting the market all at once has consumers confused and fascinated and devouring their savings to get these new creations. With no advertising and promotional media to support their new products and no press releases before or after these technologies hit the shelves, it's a wonder what they were trying to make happen and an even greater wonder how they kept it a secret. Alright, what do we got here? Number one product burning up the market right now is a virtual reality interfacing system that you can connect to nearly anything. Alright, sounds interesting. Number two product on the hot market. An artificial intelligence program that is self-sufficient and can inhabit any electronic connected to the internet. I don't know about that one. What does it do? Number three product blasting off the shelves. Invisibility cloak. Haha. Funny. What is this a joke? Wait a second here. Let me talk to the producer for a second. Sorry folks, this never happens.”

The radio was silent for thirty seconds. The host returned.

“Yeah whatever man, you keep telling yourself that. Okay folks, I gotta read this thing because apparently its true. Product three. Invisibility cloak. This product has the effect of making the person wearing it invisible to the naked eye and invisible to infrared detection. Okay, so, if this invisibility cloak thing really is out there sitting on the shelf at the department store how come it isn't number one? I don't believe this. Moving on. Number four product that secretly hit the market. Anti-gravitation engine. Look at that price tag. Ten million dollars. No wonder its number four. Does anybody believe this #\$@!. What? Huh? Okay, you do this, I quit.”

Kenny turned the radio off. Something wasn't right. The traffic was somehow unnatural. Like, all the cars were perfectly spaced apart and moving at precisely the same speed. There were no people on the sidewalk. Everything seemed too quiet and too calm.

Kenny got to his house and picked a box up off his porch, sent from his daughter. Inside he locked his door and brought the box to the dining room table to open it. The box contained a headset and a boot up disc for a virtual reality program. The words 'Hero Soul' were printed across the outside of the visor. The note in the box said, “Happy Birthday Daddy! XOXO Melissa” He forgot that it was his birthday. Kenny Bust shrugged then took the new toy to his living room.

The headset was wireless. His computer was connected to his television so that he could sit on his couch and websurf when he wanted. He booted up the disc and installed the program then activated the wireless connection. There were directions for purchasing virtual reality programs and a tutorial program with a default disc program that new users could use to learn. He opened the tutorial and followed the instructions.

Kenny learned how to use the headset and program. The tutorial was filmed on a beach that looked real, complete with surround sound. He truly felt like he was at the beach. The only thing missing was the cold breeze and the sand between his toes. This virtual reality headset only allowed the user to stand in one place and look around. You could move your position up and down the beach, but couldn't walk around one step at a time. The menu was accessed on the television screen with a remote control and

couldn't be accessed with the headgear on. When he was done with the tutorial he took the headset off and went through the menu options, going about to purchase something fun.

He found a virtual movie, but this wasn't anything like a Hollywood movie, you weren't going to be a huge star in a sensational action plot, or perhaps an extra watching from an interesting angle. This was more like a pre-packaged dream. He liked the thought of that and selected the program. His bank account would automatically be charged. He placed the headgear on and waited till the movie started.

Wait a second.

Kenny thought for a second.

"What am I doing" he said.

Silence.

Kenny couldn't see anything.

He couldn't open his eyes.

"Hey!" he yelled. He didn't know what was going on. He tried to think. His mind was empty. He got angry. "HEY!"

Kenny was upset. He couldn't remember what he was doing. He can't see anything.

Finally, he could feel something.

Kenny woke up on his couch. It was nine in the morning and he was late for work. His headset was still on. He tossed it on the couch cushion without interest. He was wearing yesterday's work clothes. He needed to put on a new outfit and go to work. He didn't think he was that damn tired. He didn't even eat dinner. He went to take a shower and go to work.

He locked the door behind him with his suitcase in one hand and a pie pocket in his mouth. He got in his car and started up the engine. The radio turned itself on. "I was sure that I shut the radio off," he said aloud. He went to turn off the radio with the dash control but a voice blurted out his name. "Hey ladies and gentlemen, have you seen Kenny Bust today? What about yesterday? If you have seen Kenny Bust call us at 453-678-9201."

Kenny said, "What?" and waited.

"Kenny Bust, the man and the legend. Everybody wants to know about Kenny Bust. Where is Kenny Bust today? Call in with your Kenny Bust stories at 453-678-9201. If you know or have met Kenny Bust go ahead and give us a call."

Kenny shut off the radio quickly. He sat there still, wondering what to make of the radio blurb. "Somebody is playing a really screwed up joke on me," he said. He wasn't sure what he should do.

He started the car engine and went on his way to work. He looked at his watch. 10:01am. Stopping at the red light at the intersection, a billboard across the street was staring at him. It was his own picture. The caption read 'Do you know Kenny Bust?' Kenny was getting nervous. He looked around him and didn't see anything else out of the ordinary. Everyone was going about their business normally.

The light turned green and Kenny went on his way. He made it to work at 10:30am, two and a half hours late. The office manager intercepted him halfway to his desk. He said, "How are you, Kenny, you alright? It isn't like you to be late like this."

Kenny wasn't alright, considering the radio and billboard. He wasn't sure if he was sane. He wasn't going to tell his boss this though. He said, "Yes sir, I'm sorry, I don't know what it was but I fell asleep early and woke up late. Woke up at nine. I must have been tired and didn't even know it," he said.

His office manager said, "That's okay Kenny. You are a top employee here. Let us know if anything is wrong, okay?"

Kenny said, "Alright."

They parted ways and Kenny went to his desk. He did the same routine he always does, this time without the coffee. He turned on his computer and opened his file cabinet. He got today's work out and went about his business, but not as usual.

With the computer on he checked his email, clicked the mail box icon on his desktop. When the page loaded a banner across the top of the screen contained a photo of him. The caption read, "Do you know Kenny Bust? [click here](#)"

Kenny's nervousness went through the roof. He got out of his chair and said, "Come on now, what the hell is going on here!"

His co-workers were disrupted and looked up from their work. "Are you okay?" one of them said. Kenny held a look of deep distress about him. His eyes were misting up like he was about to cry. He said, "Of course I'm not alright! Who's idea is this anyway? Somebody end the joke right now, this ain't funny!"

The lady at the desk next to him said, “What's not funny? Should someone call an ambulance? You don't look so good. Why don't you calm down and take a breather.”

Wait a second.

Kenny thought for a second.

“What am I doing” he said.

Silence.

Kenny couldn't see anything.

He couldn't open his eyes.

Kenny woke up on his couch once again, wearing his virtual reality headset that his daughter sent to him. He took the headset off and looked around wildly. He looked at his watch. 7:30pm, same day. The headset must have malfunctioned he thought. But how did it know enough information about him to set him up in a copy of his life and what was with the billboard and the radio and the banner? Kenny Bust was probably never going to use virtual reality ever again.

In Peace of the Hypnotist

Mary lay in the leather recliner waiting to be hypnotized. Her eyes were closed and her hands were interlocked at her mid-section. An aquarium containing goldfish softly bubbled away in the silence. She was alone, waiting. The doctor would return and start the session here in a minute.

His name was professionally, “Dr. Nelson Strom, M.D.” but she casually called him Neil. He was alright with the shortened nickname. She was friendly and letting her call him something simpler made his job of subduing her consciousness easier.

Ever since September Mary has used Dr. Strom's services. He was one of the world's top hypnosis practitioners, publishing three acclaimed books on the science. He would host the rare conference speech and was available to give advice to younger hypnotists.

Mary primarily has him retrieve forgotten memories or alter her automated behavior response patterns but with this session she has asked him to attempt to take her to a deeper level of hypnosis than ever before and try to dislocate her consciousness in what many professionals refer to as “astral projection” or “out of body experience.”

She wrote all of her dreams down in a notebook, the way that Dr. Strom directed her and she usually brought the notebook with her for him to read but today she accidentally left it at her house and forgot to write the previous night's dream down.

Dr. Strom has several times over advised her that not all dreams are puzzles to be solved and they can be nothing more than a composite of random neuron firings. He does believe that sometimes dreams can have a special meaning to them but that most of the time a dream can seem profound but ultimately hasn't real meaning. He says that doesn't mean that dreams can't be the catalyst for insight.

Mary thought about a recent dream that left an impression on her while she waited for Dr. Strom. She dreamt that another woman asked her what time it was. When she looked at her watch the watch face was empty. No hands or numbers. She looked up and was

somewhere else, a high tech research facility. There were all the people she knew there, using the internet and inquiring of each other what some of the things were on their screens. She deduced that they were in Europe because she couldn't understand anyone. She realized that she was at the librarian's desk and was carrying a medical magazine. Then she woke up.

Dr. Strom quietly returned to his seat on the leather couch about ten feet away from the recliner. She barely heard him re-enter the room and she was borderline asleep. Dr. Strom said, "How are you Mary? Haven't seen you in a while."

Mary replied, "Good, Dr. Strom. I am happy to be here today. I've just been managing a full schedule and there wasn't much free time in my life. How are you?"

"Good." Dr. Strom said, "I want you to breathe in slowly a full ten seconds. Recall the numbers in your mind. As you breathe in I want you to think about a luscious yard with pretty yellow daffodils slowly growing and morphing into sunflowers. When you reach ten, breathe out slowly to ten again. While you breathe out I want you to picture a goldfish inside my tank swimming through your mind above all the sunflowers, lifting higher and higher as the colors bleed into each other with a vivid liveliness and a gentle calm of peace. I want the gentle heat to warm the clouds, I want the smiling goldfish to glint in the bright sunlight. I want you to swim slow through the numb waters caressing your soul, feel the waves while they mute out all background noise, the only thing you hear is goldfish jumping out of the water, the ocean is small and gets smaller then fills the cupping of your hand while you look out towards the horizon. Your gown is flowing and you are deep in the world that surrounds you, ever-present peace dancing through the clouds. Mary? Are you there?"

Mary said, "I am well and happy."

"Good," Dr. Strom said, "Now I want you to search for land. When you find land let me know what you see. Remember, we're searching for your allies. We don't know where you are. When you know where you are you can tell me. Keep searching. Mary, do you know where you are?"

Mary said, "Long rivers. A small town made of houses built close to one another. Before cars were invented. There's people getting together outside of their houses to see me. I am gliding

above them. I am going down to meet them. They think I am angelic and some of them are scared. All of them can see me. They want to know who I am.”

“Listen Mary,” said Dr. Strom, “I want you to tell them you are there to help them. See if there is something that you can do.”

Mary said, “They said that they want to go to heaven. They are getting very emotional and they are confused. They are large families that work hard and pray often. They want to know if they are going to be alright.”

“Mary,” said Dr. Strom, “Look around you and tell me can you see something that can tell you what time period this might be?”

Mary said, “Small town. No cars. There is no horse here at this house with this family. No power lines. I think this might be the 1800s somewhere in the country.”

“Listen Mary,” said Dr. Strom, “I want you to leave them and tell them they will be okay and that God loves them. Now we should find some allies once again. Look around, drift where you can see someone that is your ally. Are you finding somewhere nice?”

Mary said, “I feel like I'm pure energy. Like, without a body I cannot die. Like I can go anywhere that I want. I see you turning your head to find me.”

“Are you in the room right now?” asked Dr. Strom.

Mary said, “I went to myself and now I'm watching me say this to you but I hear my voice as though someone else were saying these words because I am everywhere in here right now and seeing you, watching you in your eyes.”

“I don't see you at all.” said Dr. Strom.

Mary said, “I am rising through the ceiling, not able to feel the material while passing through. Now high above the Earth. I can see the buildings shrink below me, dulling their definition, becoming swirly and like paints. I don't know where I'm going and I am not in control, I am being guided. Guided through space. Fast. Faster than light. Now there's a star. A planet. This planet looks like Earth but I know that it isn't. Waiting. Drifting in space.”

Breathing deeply in once and then slowly sighing, Dr. Strom momentarily gets up and stretches, getting his blood pumping. He sits upon his chair once again and then says, “Tell me about this new world.”

Mary said, "I see a world full of auras. This world is much like Earth but I see more than plants and trees and clouds, I see auras. All shapes and sizes. Flying around and standing still. All over the place. I can see into everything as well as see what everything looks like physically. I feel like I am seeing frequencies and also being frequencies. I also know that I am solid and they know that too. Living twice at once in the same place but divided."

"You said that they know? Who are they?" said Dr. Strom.

Mary said, "They are us in a different form. This could even be another plane of reality. I'm not easily interpreting this to tell you but I'm not confused inside this beautiful world of apparitions. It's as though the boundaries of solid matter and some sort of plasmatic-liquid are undefined and morphing in a continuous interconnected motion. They are in the shapes of people but look so unearthly. I go freely, however I want, weightless. While I travel, all of the world knows that I am a part of it. I hold my hands out and look at them and they seem two-dimensional in my real eyes but they are actually extra-dimensional."

"I'm drifting with a guide once again. Some people. There is this new kind of electricity flowing slowly, looks like the skin on heated milk, but it's neon and clear and it never quits, continuously cycling, covering everything inanimate or filled with life."

"Dr. Strom, it's a world of souls. We are souls. Everything is a soul here. That's what I am seeing. Souls. Electrified souls."

Mary went silent. Dr. Strom soaked up the new information, wishing he could see what she is describing to him. He snaps his fingers loudly and says, "You can now awake."

Mary's eyes open and she yawns out the dreaminess in her head. She looks at Dr. Strom, her stare a'glaze with a blur. She says, "What a weird vision that was."

"You're telling me!" said Dr. Strom suddenly. He leans over to the end table near him and presses the stop button on the cassette recorder.

Numb Sauna of Empty Light

There's a rave somewhere in the woods where the trees don't grow. A meadow. The neon moon shares the ethereal glow of a trillion long hearts in dimmed pastel, a sack of tears soak through the spongy luna. And the graveyard below, doused with the slow numb sauna of empty light.

Down the tiles they place and fit them, interlock them together, clean them off and wax them. Endless this seems and the tiles stretch on across the meadow and keep the makers bent and brooding in wait, minding their time while they build. They continue as the stage is screwed up, under the spin of drills, provided to distinguish, dancer and musician.

When the speakers start to thump and the ravers are raving, that old moon gives them smiles, alive inside the rhythms of techno trance. They continue to dance. And they keep searching with their souls.

Amy came dancing with her own action heat. In this world, on a meadow tile, the psychology of a graveyard in the distance, too dead to slow her down. New friends on the way, they didn't say, nor did they care. Would she meet them? How would she know, if they were meant for her.

Some brought a gimmick, others brought sparkle, navigating the maze of souls. Uncontained and on the tiles, in their own shows, feeling the sound, meandering through and off and beyond, somewhere somehow they can get into the dance. If they don't know what they should be, they know where they are, and that's good enough as they say.

Amy was her own maze while her boyfriend tried to find her while she was already in his arms. The pulse united them and they got along fine, even if he didn't truly know where she really was.

While the crowd glowed back the moon looked on knowing they wouldn't win. That wasn't the reason they were there. They

came for the company, in silence, but they didn't say so. The clever riddle about that is the moon wasn't dry enough.

Eventually the tiles needed to go, each tile would pick up dirt. They took a micron off the meadow worth, if you spread the dirt around. No marks were left and they took their trash with them to reduce the environmental danger. The only thing left was the memory of a dance near a graveyard, the one they'd all see later.

A Glimpse of the Island Mission

Tessa and Heike were to meet at the resort diner on a Hawaiian beach. Heike was a special agent and Tessa was his informant. The plan was that Tessa would provide location information and then take a payment in return. They didn't know each other before the meeting and Heike was to be cautious. She might set him up and his agency couldn't take that risk, so he was sent to Hawaii with a team of two more, Templeton and Norman.

Templeton and Norman arrived in Hawaii a day early to scope out the resort and set up their own secret surveillance. They would be on the lookout for anyone that might accompany Tessa to the resort while a fourth unknown agent would track her the distance between the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport and the resort. This fourth agent would report to the operations manager in the continental states and he in turn would notify Templeton and Norman of important information that he might have resulting from the surveillance plus whatever new information relayed to him since his last meeting with the team.

Heike and Tessa were communicating through smart phones and privacy risks are too great for special agents to organize their operations using smart phones. Heike's team was able to completely duplicate Tessa's phone software, take her passwords, copy her text messages, retrieve all of her phone contacts and continue to monitor everything she did on her phone in a matter of minutes of receiving the phone number she gave to Heike. No doubt the same was being done with Heike's phone. Heike could not use a smart phone to stay in contact with Templeton and Norman. Protocol was that they would call his phone only when they observed that his life was in danger and they should warn him and inform him of a safe escape. Likewise, Heike would not contact

them unless the same circumstances were in swing. He didn't know where they would be or what routine they'd planned, so chances of him being able to inform them were they in danger were almost zero.

Heike was single, never married and made bastard children with three different women. Much of this was because within his profession he was always travelling and with a lot of the missions he was ordered to complete his life was seriously endangered should something wrong happen. Each day could be his last, even when he wasn't on a mission.

So, Heike became a ladies man and a habitual swinger. He wasn't always like this, it sort of happened because of his profession.

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Heike's flight was positioning to land at the airport. His phone rang and he answered with, "Heike here."

Tessa said, "Hi. Tessa here. Would you mind meeting me an hour ahead of schedule? Something came up and I must leave at 5:00pm, could we meet at 3:00pm instead of 4:00pm?"

Heike said, "Yes, I'm landing right now and should have plenty of time to get ready for the meeting."

Tessa said, "Thank you, Heike. See you then."

"See ya." said Heike and then hung up.

The plane started descending, and then banked right, allowing him to see the endless ocean and the Hawaiian islands with ease. He'd been here before but that was years ago and he didn't get a window seat then.

The landing went well and as they taxied down the runway and towards the terminal passengers throughout the plane were getting anxious, standing up and retrieving their luggage before the plane was landed. The attendants took their positions and instructed the passengers, saying, "Please wait till the plane is parked in the terminal before retrieving your luggage. Clear the aisles, clear the aisles."

Most of the passengers returned to their seats. A few passengers retrieved their luggage anyways before returning to their seats.

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Heike got a rental car and drove to the resort. When he arrived and handed the car keys to a valet it was 1:10pm. A bellhop rolled his luggage into the reception area for him and he went to the reception desk. "Reservation for Heike Tenderton." he said, handing his credit card and ID card to the hostess.

The hostess said, "Welcome, Heike. Single bed room with all the amenities, two day stay, correct?"

Heike said, "Yes."

The hostess said, "What time would you like room service to clean your room in the morning? Or would you want them to skip your room during your stay?"

Heike said, "Skip."

The hostess said, "Alright, here's your receipt, the bellhop can show you to your room." She handed him his cards and he was off to his room, following his bellhop.

The bellhop opened the room door then handed him the keys. He said, "Sir, would you like me to wheel this luggage into your room?"

Heike said, "No, I can get it. Here's a tip." handing the bellhop a twenty dollar bill.

The bellhop handed him his keys and said, "Thank you, sir. If you need anything you can go ahead and use the telephone, the instructions are on the table. I am going to be on duty till midnight and then a new bellhop is handling the night shift till noon. Anything else, sir?"

Heike said, "No, thank you. Take it easy."

The bellhop said, "And you too." and then walked away.

Heike wheeled the luggage into his room and then locked the door. Three hours should be plenty of time to get cleaned up and organized.



At 3:45pm Heike was all ready to go, having showered and shaved and put on a brand new suit. The restaurant where he was going to meet Tessa was connected to the housing section of the resort through a glass hallway that cut across the sand. This second section of the resort contained a few restaurants, an aquatics gear shop and a regular convenience store with tourist merchandise on display. Heike found the restaurant and saw a woman patiently waiting outside of it.

Heike said, "Hi miss, are you Tessa?"

She said, "Yes, and you are Heike?"

Heike said, "Yes. Shall we?" and then opened the entrance door to the restaurant for Tessa.

Tessa entered first and then Heike followed. She was carrying both a purse and a leather binder that could fit folders within it.

They were seated and ordered their meals before the waitress could leave, both eating lightly.

Tessa started off with, "I was able to get the paperwork that you requested. My company keeps a deep record filing system that fills a large room all on its own. Also, along with what you requested were related records that I thought were equally valuable within the topic of the matter and I was able to get those also."

Heike said, "And you didn't find difficulty retrieving these records?"

Tessa said, "No, not at all. I was alone and pretty much in sole control of the area. Remember, I am a Director at my company. Nobody is going to know anything about what I did."

Heike said, "Alright, and the payment is the same with the bonus records?"

Tessa said, "Yes. If you'd like to pad up the payment go ahead but that wasn't the deal so I wouldn't think you'd be fully prepared for a different price."

Heike said, "Yes, you are right. I am not prepared. The original agreed payment is in my coat pocket. Would you mind if I checked the record first before paying?"

Tessa said, "I suppose that I might be able to let you. The papers are right here." She placed the leather binder onto the table off of the chair next to her. The binder was held closed with a zipper. She opened the zipper and reached inside. She slid the leather binder with her hand inside of it along the tabletop quickly, pointing it in Heike's direction. Heike acted quicker and was already starting to leap leftward out of his chair when she fired shot one off. He was hit under his arm along one of his lower right ribs. The pain fired up his side.

He rolled as he landed, drawing his own gun out of the inside of his coat. He would have a few seconds to hit her or she would most likely kill him with her next shot. She yanked the gun out of the leather binder concealment and quickly stood up, stepping around the dinner table and lifting her gun up to aim. They aimed simultaneously. A moment after Heike hit the floor they both fired a shot. His shot connected, hitting her in the elbow nearly parallel with her arm while her shot missed, hitting the restaurant floor between his chin and his shoulder. Tessa squealed out sharply, the gun flying out of her hand. The restaurant staff was running out the door.

Heike got on his feet and took her gun, commanding her, "Sit."

Blood was oozing out between her fingers, she clenched hard as she could.

Heike kept his gun trained on her with his left hand as he lifted the leather binder to see what was inside of it. Some sort of stuffing. He turned the leather binder upside down and shook out the contents. Gift box stuffing made out of very thin delicate paper. Nothing else at all.

Heike said, "You didn't bring the papers. You didn't bring a damn thing, didn't you?"

Tessa's eyes were watering up, she quietly said, "No." Blood drops were falling off her pinky.

Heike said, "What now? What have you to say?"

Tessa didn't say anything.

"I am going to take it from here, sir. Please lower your weapon." said a familiar voice behind him. He turned around, it was Templeton. Templeton was ready with his own gun drawn.

Heike immediately quit training his gun on Tessa and said, “She shot first. Tell me where to place the weapons.”

Templeton said, “Right over there on the bar stool. Put them there and then go sit at that table over there. I am going to stand here and make sure that not either of you leave till the authorities arrive.

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The police and ambulance arrived and F.B.I. were on their way. Tessa was taken to the hospital with a police guard to ensure that she didn’t escape. She was taken without unveiling that Heike and Templeton worked together. Once she was gone Templeton identified himself as a government agent and was able to verify that Heike was too. Heike gave his report and police checked the cameras to verify that Tessa shot first and that all of Heike’s actions were in self-defense. The agents didn’t report the details of their operation to the police and they didn’t need to. They called up their operations manager and he was able to get them proper granted permissions to leave without police involvement. Tessa was sent to at a secret location within the continental states to get interrogated.

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A month later Heike and his team received the information that they needed resulting out of the interrogation of Tessa. Their operation manager sent them files with the instructions of their mission and the pertinent information about their targets.

They were anxious to find their targets and end the mission. With the end of this mission they could take a much needed vacation away from each other and lay low, clear their minds. Heike was working non-stop for two years without a break, completing three missions since his previous break. He was particularly much in need of an authentic vacation.

The team memorized the mission objectives with their operations manager at their main office. His codename was Bill. That might have been his real name because he responded well to it, but nobody could be sure.

Using a slide machine with a large flat screen monitor to outline his presentation, Bill instructed the team, “We need to go to a place called Tabuaeran Island, 900 miles south of Hawaii. Here’s an aerial photograph. As you can see this place is tiny and it’s a ring shape island. We must get in and out undetected. There isn’t any other way. We cannot get an insider there. So, based on the habits of the islandgoers that live there we have drawn up a plan that allows us to get this done. Although some of the islanders have firearms there is a high level of peace there. If we should get caught then there is a low chance of getting killed. Even so, there is no way to reach our target there detected. That would be simply impossible. We must land, retrieve, and leave without detection.”

Bill clicked his remote to bring up the next slide item, showing a zoom-in of one of the buildings using the same photograph as slide one. He said, “Buried under this building here is a safe that contains plans. Those plans are the blueprints of a suppressed and secret energy machine that doesn’t use fossil fuels or turbines to run. This machine is cheaper, more productive and cleaner than all of the power plant machines around and in use today. Doesn’t produce the same power as nuclear but it’s millions of times cleaner, definitely.”

Bill clicked to slide three. A photo of a man in a suit, smiling. He said, “This man is responsible for the secrecy behind this new energy source technology and was forced to conspire to keep his newfound plans secret or face death. Since then, he has gone deeper into his high class conspiracy and has done many horrible things. If we take him down before we yank his blueprints then we are in for a tough deal. He has given the order to have all of his secret technologies destroyed were he to die unexpectedly or be taken in. His main priority is to protect his totalitarian fantasy.”

Bill turned off the slides. He said, “We are going in with scuba gear and a small submarine. This submarine can anchor off shore and reattach to the ship when you return. There is a guidance system on the submarine with a screen for navigation. You will be holding on to the submarine, which is actually more like a missile,

with the many handles attached. This trip to the island should take about an hour one way. You are going to be armed with automatic rifles that can fire submerged. You are going to get scanning devices that can locate the safe and the depth that it is buried at. Shovels, goggles, breathing apparatus, all that. If the safe can be located and it isn't too deep then we should be able to pull this off fairly quickly and easily. Any questions?"

Heike, Norman and Templeton all said no. Heike said with a smile, "Not at all."

The Hand That Alters

Kritzen was a young centenarian. He was numerically old but his body was very much captured in time and held continuous within his youth. This was brought on with the relic that he kept secret, the only thing given him when his parents abandoned him here on Earth. Kritzen was a godman and he might live thousands of years, maybe all eternity.

At this time period in Kritzen's life he would travel Europe and Briton and take various roles within different professions, building himself a small fortune that he was obligated to withdraw and re-deposit at another bank to parry suspicions about his age. Now that he was a centenarian he was rehearsed well in avoiding the threat of being discovered.

If the normal humans knew of his immortality and his relentlessly broadening collection of knowledge and skill he would be taken and locked away, pressed hard to serve the interests of a King or worse, a lower man with petty goals. Kritzen learnt early on that great measures and overtimes must be invested to protect himself of those uncertainties. The task of this surely wasn't a

simple and easy avocation. He kept tactful and keen and lived below his means to avoid social scrutiny.

Kritzen wasn't a natural genius. He was bright and quick and much like a normal man with his needs and desires. His knowledge and skill were the product of time and freedom. Money was his freedom and kept him mobile. Money permitted him the time required to train with new skills and learn whatever he needed or wanted. What he learnt the most were the sciences and eventually the science would become his sole fascination and diversion and would someday he believed grant him the technological means to leave Earth and return to his family who lived upon another planet.

And here he was, a centenarian. With all of his advantages over normal humans, there were times that he swore that if he could give all of that privilege up and become as a normal man, he would. Other times he was absolutely thankful that he was beyond the reach of the terrible suffering that he witnessed.

Kritzen was a British resident that was yet to adventure beyond Briton at his centenarian milestone. He'd learnt two languages outside of English; French and Scandinavian. At this time he has lived all over Briton and feared that he would catch the attention of royalty as he became short on ideas to hide himself away. He felt that he would need to devise a new strategy and leave Briton or become discovered.

He would leave Sherborne, a beautiful town for Europe some day. He funded himself with a bank withdrawal large enough to rent a small insignificant and unobtrusive house for several years. He would live like a hermit and practice his new favorite pastime; chemistry.

Kritzen owned all the chemists books and related science publications, and his love of chemistry and science was his initial motivation in learning new languages as there were many books that were available only in their native language. He kept his science a secret and pretended that his interests were horses and liquor.

One day he awoke on a particularly rainy morning and while performing his morning routine of dressing and cleaning himself up he noticed the muddy footprints across his kitchen and to his laboratory table on the opposite wall of his bed. The rain didn't start until he was already inside and getting ready to sleep, the door was

open to let the smoke out and he shut it and locked it minutes after the rain started. He didn't go outside and into the rain at all.

The muddy footprints on his wooden floor were smaller than his feet and he retrieved his boots to contrast them and confirm. He checked his door lock, then his window. The door was securely locked, there being no way to pick the lock from the outside because there were two separate locks, one on the inside and one on the outside. The door opened inwards and on the door is the iron bar that sits inside the iron hooks that are firmly fastened around the main vertical beams that hold the roof atop and the door in place. The window cannot be opened and wasn't damaged at all. Next he checked his roof, a wooden roof, and could easily see no tampering and that all of the planks were unfettered with.

He returned to study those footprints. They led in from the door but there were no return prints. The last two footprints were next to each other, suggesting that whoever entered stood in place before his laboratory.

He looked at his laboratory. All of his books were on the table, spines out, level with the wall, underneath fine cloths to prevent damage. The shelf directly over his books held flasks and baubles and other instruments of science. He wasn't practicing chemistry at this time, his chemicals and elements locked safely inside a box underneath his laboratory table. His notebook and inkwell were the only items that he left out yesterday. The last few days he was calculating new chemical equations and drawing charts that relied on his newest series of tests. His research was crude in development but he knew that there was a method and recipe that lie within all things, that all things were an amalgamation and blend of other things. These vast and endless potentials were bewildering to the mortal man whose life and time might be depleted on the pursuit of a single discovery, but Kritzen seemed to have all eternity on his hands.

None of his laboratory items were missing but he swore that he burnt the lamp out before bed. He was very tired and so perhaps his memory was sketchy.

He took the burning lamp off the hook and replaced the lamp that wasn't burning that sat on his central dining table with it and placed the dead lamp on the hook that the burning lamp was hanging on. Something wasn't right. He looked around his house.

A minute of that and he collected his mind, starting his morning routine. His iron stove wasn't all that grand. There wasn't a chimney in his house so he located a wood source that didn't smoke so much when burnt and avoided using charcoal at all measures. He placed more wood in the stove, the log inside of it almost gone. He checked his skillet and it was warm enough to start a cookout. He buttered the skillet and slid the skillet in circles to help melt the butter. Next to the stove was a bowl covered with a cloth. He lifted the cloth and took out several eggs, cracked them open and poured them in. They whitened but not that quickly. Another cloth covered bowl contained breads and rolls purchased at the market the other day. He chose a large roll and placed it on the table.

The lamp on the table wasn't where he left it. He knew absolutely that he placed the lamp onto the table directly on the long crack that was opening up in the center plank. Now the lamp was a few inches off of that crack. He placed the lamp on the crack a moment ago. His mind was fresh and well rested. He wasn't imagining this. Unsettled, he returned to his eggs.

He cooked his eggs up and brought the skillet with him to the table. A shiny fork and the wooden spatula served to place the eggs onto his roll without burning his fingers. He left his egg sandwich on the table, no plate, and returned the skillet to the stove. He ate his meal and thought hard about the mystery unfolding within his house. He wondered were there other things outside in his property that were tampered with.

His lamp knocked over as he swallowed the last morsel of his meal, spilling oil across his table and through the crack in the center plank. Kritzen automatically leapt out of his chair and went to fix the lamp's position before the table was burnt. The outside of the lamp was already burning when he plucked it off the table and then doused it with water. The light became dim in his house.

He threw open the door on the stove then took the skillet into his hands. He swung hard and hit nothing, stepping carefully around the table, wondering how to hit this enemy. There was a man in his house and he wore a cloak of invisibility. Kritzen knew the legend of this cloak. He could believe it but most normal men could not because they rarely saw what they called miracles which Kritzen knew was the creation of science.

Kritzen needed to think quick. He periodically swung his skillet and circled the table slowly. When he reached his kitchenette area once again he took up the bucket of beans and splashed them across his wooden floor, scattering them everywhere and then took up his flintlock pistol hidden beneath his stove, already loaded and ready with a single round. The house was still dim but the stove light was brighter than what the lamp provided. Knee height, the stove light shone at a disadvantaged angle, with the center table reflecting much of it away from the other end of the house.

He looked around all over his floor, trying to pick out an area that might unveil the position of the unseen enemy. An empty space where his feet might be or a motion that sent a bean sliding. He stayed silent, his hard breaths the only sound. He looked at his bedding and it lay without the imprint of a body upon it.

He scanned the table and saw the outline of a shoe in the lamp oil. He aimed his flintlock pistol directly ahead, then fired.

There was a loud crash on the opposite side of the house, putting the table between both him and the unseen foe. He took his skillet and sprinted across the house, seeing blood drop out of the air. He swung the iron skillet with all his might and hit the invisible enemy repeatedly till he crashed onto the wooden floor a second time. Cries and grunts and gurgling. Spilling blood was the only locator of the enemy till Kritzen tore through the invisibility cloak, made of a strong but not indestructible fabric.

The invader lay dying, clutching his stomach, devoid of armors or weapons, inside the sack of a cloak, more like a blanket, face grimacing and contorted. Kritzen said to him, "Who sent you?! Tell me your name."

The man didn't reply and soon died from the loss of blood and the beating of the skillet.

Kritzen now owned an invisibility cloak and this great item was the answer to his prayers.

The Renaissance Amulet

Great men of the renaissance empowered the world, sharing their knowledge and painting their reality with fascinating wonders. The lost grandeur of the ancient progenitors returned and a new innovation swept the medieval European continent. The barbarians were defeated and a Holy Roman Empire rose, solidifying the power of civilization and reducing the wild and roaming tribes to their peripherals. Longtime peace was possible. War continued, be it that war always continues, though without the ransacker hordes of brutal insanity. With belief in man's ultimate benevolence, the sentimental visionaries of the old traditions advanced their humanities, saw into themselves and their contemporaries unprecedented potentials and mercies towards the innocents,

remodeling conventions and reinventing the standard of life that we all may become finer in mind, act and soul.

* * * * *

Those were the days that men and women became something more than they ever were. They pressed futureward, enlightened. Invention and discovery powering them.

The year was 1597 and an old man with a long white beard dressed in a cloak-gown was planning to lay himself to rest. He wouldn't last much longer. Alone, his wife perished a few years ago and his children left to the new world across the ocean many years before that. The bishop at the cathedral was his sole kinship and beneficiary, visiting him each day, going to market in place of him. The old man gave his life saving to the church and attended service. There wasn't much time.

Years ago when he was a young man and a traveling merchant, he attended service wherever he went. In every town, every week. There was a secret organization then that doesn't much hold power anymore. He was welcomed and considered a key member on the merits of his Divine Nature and the acts of his goodness. He worked with them to conspire against evil and protect the sacred strength of family, sworn to secrecy in the order of prosperity and health.

This order of secrecy didn't have a title and membership was very limited. Research into the origins of miracles and the articles of spiritual power and the mysterious relics of the antiquities drove all of them ahead and provoked them to keep their alliance strong. They were victorious with their activities, collecting a divine inventory of many invaluable articles, relics and items. These material evidences with real physical value were their weapons against malice and maleficence, the holy seed that impregnates the insidious and absorbs into their poisoned hearts, disintegrating their spoil.

This divine collection has since withered to a few disparate artifacts within the hands of the dwindling membership. Although holy and critical to man's well-being, the church has deceivers and

wrongdoers within its ranks and most of the old man's secret order didn't trust their relics to the religious state, so they would give their items to their children or hide them away in sacred locations with instructions. Some of the membership did trust the church and did give their relics up at the end of their lives.

This old man would pass his savings to the church but his relic would not be reaching their hands. He knew that the church would lock his relic up permanently that no man or woman shall receive its blessings and wield its power. He wouldn't have any of that.

He was a great old man who lived a full life. He knew he wouldn't have much time left. This relic was going to be sealed away within a secret wall space inside his small house. This relic that he possessed was an amulet that the divine order gave to him as a wedding gift. He wasn't a member long at that time and he later learned that his wife was the daughter of a man who was among the order's founding members. This amulet, a relic of divinity, was a most prized item in the order. Parting with the amulet was difficult but well thought out and then blessed as a righteous decision.

The amulet, made of a light blue crystalline meteorite stone with a bead of unknown metal contained in the center of it, was encased within a solid gold lattice finely crafted and calculated to maximize the carriage of powers both to and from the wearer. The amulet augmented the spiritual power of the old man and amplified his dominance over unseen forces. The amulet could also absorb the poisons and acids and electricities that the men of evil excrete out their pores and breath, protecting the old man and allowing him advantage where normal men failed. The amulet was a channel that tamed energy into a focused beam and lent control to the old man throughout his life.

The old man would shape the power of the amulet and the amulet evolved and strengthened as he used it. The item was much a part of him like his wedding ring. He would not let the church take his amulet, the risk was great and he prayed that someone divine may discover it, no matter how much time was necessary, a year, a century, a millennia. He made his decision and knew that it was good.

A week before he died he sealed the amulet inside a wooden box then placed the box inside a brick wall in his house. He was

taught masonry when he was young. He laid the removed bricks back in place and sealed them so well that any man or woman who would walk past could not notice that the wall was manipulated.

The old man died peacefully with the cathedral's bishop attending to him and two friends whom he trusted. His last words were that he missed his wife and children and that he loved them and he thanked the bishop and his friends for being there for him in the end. The three living who remained wished him a teary farewell into the afterlife and the bishop closed the old man's eyes. He would be buried with a tombstone.

And so, the old man's holy relic, an amulet of power, an item of miracles, would lay there, untouched and undiscovered, across the long stretch of a millennia, obeying his prayers to wait to be discovered, till someone divine enough may take it and use it within the rule of his order.



The millennia of being sealed away without disturbance kept the amulet and the now brittle wooden box that contained it well preserved. The archaeological team was excavating the area in search of such discoveries and thus far were largely unsuccessful. They welcomed the box, carefully removing it from the solid crevice that it was placed into and carried it away to be opened later.

The year was 2619 and human civilization was much different in contrast to the world they were withdrawing out of the dirt below them. This site was plundered many times before in the search of scarce Renaissance remnants. This time the Hillendale Corporation purchased the site and was searching with better machinery and gear than ever was available at any time in history before them.

When the scientists scanned the soils they were shown that promising discoveries awaited them, but the detected signals were less numerous than they were accustomed to seeing. Historical findings of this era were few and far between as centuries of hungry archaeologists devoured all of the contents of the remains.

Archaeology also was much different in the twenty-seventh century. Gone were the days of vaults that stowed away unconventional historical discoveries. Gone were the historians that lied to the multitudes and denied them truth in favor of a mild view of a boxed in civilization that never produced wild cards and technological anomalies. Archaeologists now shared all of their discoveries no matter what belief those discoveries challenged and what historical certainties were proved false. Everything was catalogued and denied secrecy and released to the public within a short designated amount of time.

Much of the world was also under the control of corporations who obeyed much smaller yet much more severe governments that operated within them like white blood cells. The Hillendale Corporation was no different. This process fused civilization in new ways and was nothing like what came before it, created greatly efficient avenues of advancement in technologies and space exploration and allocation of resources while allowing the individual to retain their freedom and liberty. How long this would last could not be foreseen, but many claimed that it wouldn't last long. At that time though, that was how the world was.

The Hillendale Corporation archaeologists followed their protocols without much dissent. Most of them were idealists anyways and were happy to challenge history with new discoveries without a pipeline of politics there to approve or deny what truths could be told. They enjoyed this system, it beat the old system where they were anticipated to draw results before producing evidence.

If an item were found that didn't fit within the paradigm, it would be fully scanned, measured and tested, all of the data released immediately, no explanation. Scientists could then add to that data of facts and let the power of deduction take its own course to decide the story and origin of the object. What could not happen though is the discovery couldn't be restricted from public knowledge. An advantage of this system was an increased accuracy of the representation of discoveries and a more scrutinizing force against forgeries and fakes.

Corporations could usually keep their discoveries or sell them, depending on their whim, but they were pressed to adhere to a verification method and document their enterprises or face dire

counter measures. In the case of the Hillendale Corporation archaeologists finding the 16th century box in the wall, that policy would stay very much the same. The Hillendale Corporation would keep their discoveries while releasing all data about physical attributes and all results of scientific tests publicly as directed. Any history behind all archaeological finds that was determined to be factual would also be shared with the world.



Scientists of 2619 were of course beyond all knowledge and accomplishment of the scientists before them. Corporate scientists outside of the realm of archaeology and the health and life sciences were not compelled to share their technological developments.

At this time humanity was at war against and also allied with many extra terrestrial races. Each alien race brought their own advanced technology and it was found that at the higher levels of interstellar alien races, science became a very multi-dimensional affair with endless possibilities, dismantling the notion that existence was perfectly linear with each scientific level lined up with the one before it. High level technology became much what computer software became many years before, unlimited with what the imagination could perceive. There would be limitless growth in scientific knowledge as man began to travel greater distances from the sun.

Ancient relics were valued because they were known to contain augmentations that manipulated reality. The old belief in curses and blessings were a real phenomenon that ancient man may not have been able to account for with their contemporary understanding of the world around them, but now that science has reached a level of advancement that grants that understanding, the desire to obtain these relics of spiritual power and significance has grown.

Corporations with large investments in technologies and space ventures took the archaeological and antiquities sectors and reworked them into their data and economics systems, increasing

productivity and efficiency, driven with the thirst of discovery and profit.

Extra terrestrial alien races encouraged this corporate conduct when they began sharing their own spiritual relics of antiquity, sharing the knowledge of what powered them and the scope of value such items could have. How one simple item of spiritual power could defeat an enemy over time, morphing their poisonous souls, cleansing the acidic venoms that coursed through their civilizations. One such story was the main motivation behind the surge in antique relics demand.

The story told of an alien race that was becoming devoured across the galaxy at the heated charge of a newer evil alien race. The benevolent race, being outdone and losing the war, was beating the evil alien race in numbers, giving them a longer survival clock. The benevolent race gifted one of their most sacred relics of spiritual power to the evil alien race and the evil race placed that item towards the center of their galactic empire. Over the course of a thousand years the relic morphed the empire into a benevolent force and they ceased devouring the host empire and eventually they united both empires. The relic became the centerpiece of the new united empire. The only thing the devoured alien race could do was defend themselves with their greatest strength and wait out the effects of the relic. This was likened to a great cleansing and stimulated many Earth corporations to follow benevolent guidelines of their own and search the dirt for similar such relics, if there were any.

This all leads us to the discovery of the 16th century relic. The box was delivered to the corporate laboratory where the archaeologists could test the contents and have them verified before placing them permanently in the possession of the company.

When they discovered the properties of the object they were very pleased because few items of this significance and power could be found anywhere on Earth. Most of the items of greater power were in church hands and stored in cathedrals or holy cities. Items of destructive power usually were stored in government vaults, used for military campaigns. An item like this relic was rare for a corporation to find.

The corporation would release the documentation and verification and then brisk the relic away into private for secret testing.

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2620 was a year of great grief for humanity as the Nuxuvun alien race invaded nearly all countries around the planet. These extra terrestrials were so numerous they congested whole economies and caused chaos among the humans. They were near impossible to reject because they landed in starships in remote locations and wandered aimlessly in the search for resources. Most of them were unarmed but eventually many armed conflicts began to arise.

The Nuxuvuns didn't believe in freedom or individuality and worked in groups controlled with a single mind. They could assimilate humans and that was their greatest weapon. The aliens worked against the poorest humans to gain the easiest numbers in assimilation. The more humans they assimilated the more humans they could control and use to deceive other humans.

Assimilation began with frequencies and electromagnetic signals, designed to brainwash, hypnotize and demotivate their human enemy into a passive and sedate state. Deactivating the human self, the human subjects would be forcefully connected to a mind network and essentially reprogrammed to operate in the same manner as the Nuxuvuns. This system of assimilation was powerful and resulted in a 86% success rate. Rejectful humans would be killed before they knew they were being attacked as the process of assimilation could determine a suitable human from a dissident human within minutes of first contact.

This assimilation process was very effective and it didn't take but a few months' time before the majority of all sentient races on Earth were assimilated under the mind melding control of the selfless Nuxuvuns. Televisions went blank and only one message was displayed, that assimilation was imminent and defiance would be met with death. The Nuxuvun aliens began to strip whole countries of their human cultures, forcing them to wear mind control devices connected to their spines. They were forbidden to use

human language and forced to communicate mentally through their mind network.

Humans that could avoid them were protected with physical boundaries such as secret government and corporate laboratories, outposts, space colonies, closed-walled housing sectors and snowy climates. Wealthy humans were also on a low risk factor as they were naturally separated and protected. Humans weren't pushovers though, they warred against the Nuxuvuns who intelligently used assimilated humans as meat shields and sacrificed humans to win a large portion of battles.

The casualties were enormous and the starships filled with Nuxuvuns kept on coming. The unassimilated humans banded together in a way never seen before. It was an end of the world scenario and the human race literally faced full extinction in a matter of months.

A human resistance base and station habitat was built in Antarctica where the humans could collect their resources into a single treasury. The Nuxuvuns were naturally a warm climate race and would die fast in the snow and ice. Attacks on the Antarctic base were few and no invasion into the human territory there was ever encountered during the war.

With harsh difficulties the human resistance was able to contact another benevolent race who was already allied with some of the humans before the Nuxuvun invasion. The contact point was an alien being named Dolamius whose skin was a pale blue and his shape very unhuman. The initial confusion caused with the diversity of humans from all over the Earth arriving at the Antarctic base was eventually sorted out but at that time, when Dolamius was discovered, the operation he headed was sort of independent as there wasn't yet a central human figurehead appointed as the representative of the human resistance.

The Nuxuvuns surrounded the Earth with thousands of battle ships and colony ships, watching carefully for human ships which were immediately attacked and usually destroyed whether they were launching into space or trying to return to Earth. They destroyed all of the satellites and orbiting space stations that they saw and turned the global human communication network off. Humans on the surface could sparsely contact each other and only when cloaked satellites drifted overhead, escaping the Nuxuvun attacks.

There were many remote and distant satellites in deep space but reconfiguring them was slow and ultimately, throughout the war these satellites didn't play a key role in defense, although they would be used to coordinate the migration of more unassimilated humans to the Antarctic base.

Dolamius was the human resistance's first representative in Earth to Space relations. He was able to contact his own race and create a line of intelligence through them to gain a foothold against the Nuxuvuns. His race were called The Yartauh Plin and they were too few in number to engage the Nuxuvun, having several battle ships and no surplus population from which to draw in the event of an invasion. They could not provide ground troop support but could provide single operatives for other missions.

Dolamius maintained the communications with his people as the humans reorganized themselves. When the humans were somewhat re-functionable they chose a practiced representative named Hendrick Bering that worked with Dolamius to contact other human habitats outside of Earth and establish communications. Both Hendrick and Dolamius were given the same title of Governor. Dolamius was largely responsible for the helpful cooperation of The Yartauh Plin and was also in charge of all non-human populations within the Antarctic base, which numbered less than 10% of the total population.

A plan codenamed First Attack was drawn up to attack the Nuxuvun and regain control of an important technological and military center on a northern continent. This particular control center was desirable because of the underground bunkers, bases and laboratories that stretched for miles around far past the boundaries of the surface structure.

It was believed that the underground network was blocked off and a human population was surviving there. The only entrances into and from the underground network were inside the base itself, and in an emergency such as the one at hand where surrender was necessary, the protocol was to retreat into the underground bunkers and seal off the entrances. The entrance seals were considered impenetrable to most explosive, cutting and drilling technologies.

The population would ultimately be stuck inside their underground facility but there was a recovery system in place. The underground network there housed large storage facilities that

contained surplus weapons and other technologies along with a gigantic food supply meant to last several years. Fuels and power sources and generators were also stored there and the network of facilities could run on auxiliary power without a renewed source many years as well. The underground network there was thought to be one of the premier survival bunkers.

Although there were recovery systems in place to contact the occupants inside the sealed bunker directly, the underground facility could not be contacted through wireless satellite networks. The human resistance relied on faith that the population there successfully locked out the Nuxuvun invaders.

The human resistance was able to monitor the surface though. The area above the surface wasn't so impressive and since the Nuxuvuns habitually avoided bringing their own weapons from their space ships it would be easy to gauge what defenses there would be above surface there.

During the planning of this critical attack the Nuxuvuns discovered the waiting and watching Yartauh Plin starships and attacked them. The human resistance was notified of this attack and the Yartauh Plin stated that they would run and escape because they were far outnumbered but would continue to search for allies and return. The Plin left behind a tiny communications satellite with cloaking technology and gave control of it to the human resistance before their escape. The humans used this satellite to keep contact with a small human base on the Moon and it was suggested that all non-Nuxuvun alien races should be contacted for information on Nuxuvun weaknesses.

It was getting close to bring First Attack into motion as the plan called for waiting till the snow was fallen at that location for at least one full week. This would slow Nuxuvun activity to a minimum and give the Human & Plin alliance a deeper gouging affect as the Nuxuvun would have much difficulty fighting a ground war in the cold. The human resistance continued to make small gains in communications and surveillance as they pieced together a barely operational network out of the destroyed global communications system. The human bases they were in contact with on the Moon were undetected and unknown to the Nuxuvun.

The Moon base humans continued to contact any and all alien races to get knowledge on the Nuxuvun race and they were

finally successful in gaining a small portion of critical intelligence that would give the human resistance an advantage.

The intelligence said that there is an energy that can be manipulated and given shape and reformed throughout time. This energy exists inside specific objects. The energy is a fine-tuning of the resonance of atomic structures within it, which are caused when a biological sentience harmonizes his mind and body with said object. Fundamentally, these items are called relics and charms and each one has a different resonance within a particular polarity. The Moon humans relayed all of this information to the human resistance in Antarctica, urging them to search for any religious and spiritual items that they might have and test them for a particular resonance and harmonization.

The specific numbers and measurements were given and the human resistance immediately scoured every inch of the Antarctic base for any and all items that fit the narrative.



It was early morning when the Hillendale Corporation employees got the call and were informed of the base-wide allocation of objects and relics of spiritual and religious significance. Their team made their escape to the Antarctic sanctuary a month ago as the Nuxuvuns dismantled their country, devouring it like piranhas. The Nuxuvun's weapon was electromagnetic frequencies and mind control.

Not many Hillendale Corporation employees made it but there were plenty of them left here at the Antarctic sanctuary to keep the company in operation. They took all of their corporate valuables and families with them on a fast cargo ship, sailing the Atlantic Ocean southward, terrified of an aerial space attack. They were defenseless and holding on for pure luck. They made it though and although they were much fewer in number now, their company remained intact.

They discussed the allocation and dutifully responded that they possessed many such items that could be tested for the properties listed. They went to work searching their cargo. The cargo ship was unloaded but most of the containers were unopened,

namingly corporate properties, since they would not be operating their company at the Antarctic base. The only containers they opened since arriving were the ones that held their personal possessions.

The search took most of the day because there was over three thousand shipping containers and they were disorganized because they were filled in a hurry without recording what was where. They needed to find one container though and that simplified their search.

Once the container was found and they allocated all of their archaeological relics that fit the parameters, they delivered their payload to the Central Operations Contingency as it was called. The other scientists waiting for the delivery were ecstatic as it was the largest stockpile of specified relics they'd seen all day.

The machinery and instruments that tested the relics were already in place and operating when the Hillendale Corporation scientists arrived with their payload. They were given a ticket to reclaim their property once the testing was finished and told that their items wouldn't be tested until late that night. They were told to return in the morning.

When they returned in the morning all their relics were returned with the exception of the renaissance amulet they discovered inside the box in the wall on their last search. This amulet fit all of the parameters relayed from the Moon base humans and it was already being locked into place and incorporated into a specialized technology that would allow it to be used to assist in the attack of the Nuxuvuns. The Hillendale scientists were invited to watch and participate. They accepted the invitation and were escorted to a secret area of the Antarctic base.



The secret location was filled with computers and screens and laboratory tables and all sorts of advanced machinery. This was the central mission headquarters of the Antarctic base and the human resistance.

The Hillendale scientists were interviewed at length about the amulet; where it came from, how it was found, what have they

seen it do. The scientists couldn't offer too much information because they haven't yet run their own tests and research. The origin of the amulet was considered late-renaissance period and its function was some sort of Holy protectorate. This Holy power was the resonant signature they were searching for.

The amulet was fitted into a specialized socket and hooked into a monitored and attunable energy source with both an inflow and an outflow. The object was found to be a meteorite fragment and the composition of the crystal and minerals within it contributed a lot to its ability to both contain and conduct energies and retain an operational memory.

With the amulet in place and all systems readied, the amulet was tested for resonance limits and polarity shifts. Lasers and different lights were shot through the crystal to record more data about the composition and the densities and other criteria that they could feed into their computer system to allow them a greater control when the object would be activated during mission engagement.

The Hillendale scientists were asked to participate in the mission because apparently the amulet remembered them and resonates with them particularly well. They accepted the mission and were trained to operate the amulet power.



First Attack was already begun when the Hillendale scientists, accompanied with a few other scientists who resonated well with the amulet, were ordered to use their training while the amulet was activated.

The Moon base humans possessed a small fleet of fast disks enhanced with tractor beams, cloaking technology and superheat-lasers. The mission was that the Moon humans would use their discs to distract the Nuxuvun occupation. While distracted, another fleet of high speed aerial jets outfitted with small hydrogen bombs and large ammunitions would ambush the base through the cover of snowfall, heading through the wilderness that spread out from

behind the base. There were no cities for a hundred miles inland and no known defenses within the wilderness there.

With the disks distracting the Nuxuvun artillery and aerial forces, the bombers could hit the base unawares and cause enough damage to leave the whole area open for invasion. An invasion of foot soldiers, some of whom would have snow mobiles, launched out of an all-terrain carrier now acting as a submarine. This carrier traveled all the way from Antarctica to the northern hemisphere undetected and would land on the beach in time to see the jets drop their last bombs. The infantry invasion would then level whatever was left and overrun the Nuxuvun foot soldiers, if there were any at all, taking possession of whatever machinery wasn't destroyed in the bombing and reclaiming the base.

Of particular interest is a communication depot on this base that has served as the Nuxuvun central relay service, helping them coordinate the worldwide brainwashing mind control synchronization with their space operations. This depot would be taken over and the line relayed through the Antarctic base where the interruption signal of the renaissance amulet can break the gargantuan Nuxuvun psychic communications network.

The results are calculated to be critical in decentralizing the Nuxuvun powers, a power that operated in a pyramid scheme, and giving the assimilated humans their sense of individual self, effectively releasing them of their brainwashed, blank and empty physical state. Once decentralization is accomplished it is expected that the unassimilated humans would immediately engage in war on all levels possible wherever they may be.



Mission First Attack proved to work well with the initial disk distraction, followed with the bombings and then finally, the foot soldier invasion. Well coordinated, the defense of the base wasn't able to handle a triple attack and fell fast with minimal foot soldier resistance. This mission was very critical as it stretched the human resistance's resources to their uppermost limit. The Nuxuvuns

forced a near total control over the whole of the Earth and all of its resources, including its military bases.

The communication depot fell without resistance and the Nuxuvun operators were killed. The system was recalibrated as planned and the signal relayed back to the Antarctic base where the science team was ready to decentralize the brainwash network.

The resonance polarity machine was powered on and the amulet activated. The scientists did as they were trained, mentally engaging the amulet and synchronizing their resonance with it, creating an elemental-human energy consumption cycle that amplified the resonance and forced more energy through the Nuxuvun network. The Nuxuvun mind control network relied on the power and penetration and saturation of their signals and the system they put in place was interdependent in nature, supplying most of its own power, causing minimal energy needs.

The resonance disruption began to work well and would disrupt the network with a domino effect so long as it stayed powered on. The push of this resonance would continually disconnect human minds and free them of Nuxuvun control but it wasn't known if they could fully recover. The resonance disruption was going to be continually pushed until the entire system was decentralized and there was no known timeframe to how long this part of the mission would take.

The scientists clenched their eyes closed and most of them bent their necks, straining. The resonance polarity machine was drawing their energy out of them and each minute into the operation they looked more taxed and pressed.

Several minutes went like this when one of the operations personnel monitoring the worldwide network said, "Sir! Their systems are imploding! All across the Earth, they're imploding!"

Governor Bering said, "Great! Attempt communications with the control locations specified in the operations plan!"

"Yes Sir!"

Immediately following that announcement the machine began to discharge plasma, electrical bursts would zip and zap around the encasement where the centrifuges were spinning. Large crackles hit the air with a dry pop. The machine was overloading.

The scientists were now entering a state of overwithdrawal, their blood sugars and electromagnetic energies sapping out of them

beyond their capacities. Their nervous systems couldn't handle the demand and some of them started trembling. One man's eyes went bloodshot and two of them collapsed onto the floor in comatose shock.

“Sir! The machine is malfunctioning!”

Governor Bering said, “Decrease power input and slow the machine down.”

“Sir! The machine wasn't designed for alternate speeds! I can only turn it on and turn it off!”

One of the collapsed and comatose men began having a seizure, headgear still in place.

“Sir!” said another operations monitor, “Receiving communications from the Nuxuvun space operation!”

Governor Bering said, “Connect.”

“Yes, Sir!”

On the largest wall screen in the monitoring systems area the main Nuxuvun ruler appeared. He looked like the other Nuxuvun except his head was gargantuan and he was sitting in a specially designed throne that held his head up because his neck wasn't strong enough to support it.

The odd ruler stared blankly, a grimace on his face. There was some sort of clear plastic bubble around him, like he was inside of an incubator.

Governor Bering said, “Turn my camera on so he can see me.”

“Yes, Sir!” a few seconds went, “Done, Sir. Camera on.”

The Nuxuvun throneman's face animated, his temples pulsing. He said in a thin sharp throaty voice, “I am Torgehrin and I am the ruler of this planet. You will disengage my communications network. If you do not I will obliterate your Antarctic base with nuclear bombs.”

Governor Bering said, “I am not going to disengage.”

Torgehrin was clenching his teeth now, something obviously wrong. Most of the scientists were now comatose or within the throes of seizures. Some of them horridly coughed up blood or blood ran out of their noses.

“Sir! The alien leader is directly connected into the network!”

Governor Bering said, “We shall continue. Do not cease the attack.”

Torgehrin wheezed, skewing in his throne beneath his gargantuan head. “Stop!” He called out with a trembling and fearful cry.

Governor Bering crossed his arms and smirked. He said, “Die.”

Torgehrin choked and his eyes sucked inward into his eye sockets. He reached his hand out with his palm on the inside of the plastic bubble, straining and trembling harder and harder and wheezing uncontrollably until finally, with one last reach out in desperation, he collapsed unconsciously.

Nuxuvun attendants wildly entered the plastic bubble and touched his neck to find a pulse. The other attendant lifted his arm but it was inanimate now. They looked into the camera with horrors in both their grimaces. The signal cut out and the screen went blank.

“Sir! Torgehrin appeared dead!”

Governor Bering said, “So it seems. Cut the power to the resonance polarity machine immediately! Get the scientists medical attention!”

“Yes, Sir!”

Governor Bering said, “Defenses up! Call an anticipatory defense to the surface and monitor the airspace for potential threats. Keep us safe. I am going to be back in 10 minutes.”

Goodbye Sneaker, You Won't Return!

Aleksar was watching a mock 70's movie. He was lying peacefully on his couch with his head on a cushion, half-drooling like a baby. The entertaining movie played, entering the opening scene. He was drifting off half-drowsy and inattentive. The classics channel recently started featuring mock-up movies that seemed like they were filmed in the 50s, 60s and 70s but were actually recent studio creations. He liked them because they were refreshing to see but they were shown too late for his daily routine.

“You said you wanted some answers. Told you, should've left me alone. I don't got your profound realizations, the secrets of success, your insightful formulas. Take your meddling to the top of a mountain and slip. Maybe you'll get shot when you put that ass hat on. You're toxic like a foul stench, quit spreading the stink around. Someone should shut you in a box and let you choke on your own wif. I know what you're lookin' for. You're lookin' for a chump, some public antenna, some rolled over in a ditch and let 'em sort of sucker. You run around patten' strangers on their shoulders, gettin' so close they can hear your thoughts, like you're a broadcaster or some shit. You think nobody knows what little trip you're runnin'. You know what, a lot of us know and we ain't gonna let that happen. Random headscrews like you get in the way of what makes life nice, you ain't gonna throw my head in a loop, not this time. There ain't gonna be an eraser this time, wipin' my thoughts away, makin' me forget what I'm supposed to be doin'. You ain't winnin' this time. You ain't confusin' us and you ain't walkin' away. Yeah, they saw you sneakin' in and meddlin' shit. It's over buddy. You ain't siftin' through other people's things anymore. Say goodbye, sneaker. You ain't returnin'.”

A man on the television was holding a revolver and pointing it at a wacky character that obviously wronged him. He shot the wacky man and the wacky man hit the sidewalk. The man put his revolver away with a cool demeanor. He said, “Goodbye sneaker, goodbye forever.” The man spit on the dead wacky man and then walked away.

Someone rang the entrance buzzer.

Aleksar yawned and stretched, saying loudly, "Break your speed car, would ya? I am on my way in a second!" He slid off his couch with his tee-shirt half-tucked in his sweat pants.

The house buzzer rang once again.

"I'm right here! Wait a second!" said Aleksar. He unlocked the deadbolt and squinted through the eyehole. It was Agneiszka. He opened the door. She looked terrified.

"Agneiszka, how are ya?" Aleksar said smoothly, "Seems late, is there something wrong?"

Agneiszka said, "I need help! Can I come in?" Her hands were trembling and she looked awful. Aleksar let Agneiszka in then locked the door behind them.

Agneiszka went quickly at the window, shoving a curtain aside, saying, "Look and see, tell me if you see anyone sneakin' around my house."

Aleksar and Agneiszka lived on opposite sides of an intersection roundabout. The center circle was empty with a knee high stone wall around it, level across the top.

Aleksar looked out the window with Agneiszka. Her nice make-up colored Porsche was in her driveway, a flower bed that she planted and took care of herself lined the stepping stones to the house door. A top-end sculpture of a mythological god watched over her yard. Aleksar has seen Agneiszka only in the daytime.

Aleksar looked and looked and didn't see anything, he said, "Agneiszka, what am I lookin' at finding?"

"I don't know, I didn't see him but someone was in my house." Agneiszka said, "I went to the kitchen, thirsty, when I heard a loud crash in the laundry room. Someone must be climbing through the laundry room window I thought, so I went to my room then got dressed. A minute later I was out the door and went straight over here. I felt scared. Nobody has ever tried sneakin' into my house before."

They both searched intently with their eyes, the lights were on in her house. They didn't see any activity.

Aleksar said, "You left your lights turned on?"

"No," Agneiszka said, "Whoever went in turned them on. The only light I leave on is my hall light, when I'm sleeping that is."

Aleksar said, "Wait, I think I see someone. There, in your sideyard, behind the tree. Do you see him? He's fiddlin' with the window."

Agneiszka said, "Yes, I see him. What should I do?"

The shape was difficult to see. It moved too fast to be a normal human. Abnormally quick. The thing sprinted across the roundabout intersection with inhuman speed directly at Aleksar's house. It was devoid of light and didn't reflect light. His body was small and limbs longer than usual. They couldn't make out definitive features in the shape, even while it passed under the lights. The thing circled around at their right, out of view.

Aleksar and Agneiszka heard the cat yowling outrageously then a loud thump went through the wall. Agneiszka said, "Oh no! Not your cat! Aleksar, he got your cat!"

Aleksar said, "Don't you worry, I won't let the intruder hurt us. I will kill him before I will ever let him touch you. Don't you worry at all."

Agneiszka took Aleksar's arm and squeezed it, saying, "Didn't you see how quick he was running? He's probably very vicious."

"I'm fast enough, the intruder doesn't have a chance." said Aleksar, sliding the side of his hand across his neck, mock slicing his own throat, "I am deadly, armed and ready. I can defend us."

There were some crashing sounds at the other end of Aleksar's house. Both of them turned around. Aleksar said, "We are going to the garage where my chainsaws are, we'll be safe in there and I will kill the sneaker dead in his tracks."

Aleksar went to the coat rack near the door where a tall wooden bucket contained a few umbrellas along with a section of piping about two and a half feet in length and weighed ten pounds. He showed Agneiszka how dangerous he could be with a fierce swing. Aleksar said, "You see this pipe? I can kill a cow with this, so don't you worry. I'm tough enough to kill a freaky sneakin' house invader. Come on, hurry to the garage where my chainsaws are."

They left the living room empty. The mock 70s movie continued playing on the television, throwing a soft light across the room. On the screen the same man that killed the wacky man was wearing a new suit and having a conversation with a beautiful woman wearing a dress. "I care about you, I do a lot." said the man.

The man and woman then kissed. When they were done kissing the man said, "I love you."

The garage was bitingly cold and a faint odor of wood dust lightly tinged the air. Aleksar didn't turn the garage light on for two reasons; one, the light would easily shine through the crack around the door, and two, the air conditioning system was very loud and would definitely give away their location.

Aleksar yanked a flashlight off the workbench near the door and they used it to find their way around the garage. A 1930's era car was in the center of the garage, covered with a car-tarp. They whispered when they said anything to each other now.

Aleksar whispered, "Here Agneiszka, take this knife and hide behind my car over there. If the intruder gets close enough you can give him a good stab and give it all you got. Watch out that knife is razor sharp. He shined the light at her face below her chin, making her look ominous, then said, "You get what I am saying?"

She was youthful and he a few years older than her. They both looked younger than they were, she much more than he. It was probably not a good idea now to ask her how old she was either. And although she wasn't at her best at this very moment she possessed a beauty about her that he found hypnotic. She nodded at his question and took the knife out of his hand. They looked each other in the eyes once more before he left her alone behind the car.

The moonlight shone through the glazed garage windows enough that a faint blue tint poured into the room. There wasn't enough light to make out pronounced shapes or walk around without hitting your toes on something.

Aleksar kept several work benches around his garage. He went to one of them with a selection of tools placed upon it. He leaned the pipe against the car cover and then went to the wall display and took one of his chainsaws off the hook. The chainsaw he chose was gas powered and zip line started.

He clicked off his flashlight and set it on the work bench and then positioned himself towards the door with one foot in the way to slow the intruder's entrance. Agneiszka was motionless, he could barely see her outline in the dim blue light. He was confident of their advantage over the intruder.

Some minutes went before Aleksar heard the intruder sneakin' through his house. There were loud footsteps that didn't

sound much careful and they neared the garage door. Aleksar got ready to attack, anchoring his foot. He clenched the zipline on the chainsaw as the intruder slowed to look through the crack in the doorway.

The intruder walked into the door and the door pressed into Aleksar's foot. Aleksar let his foot off the stair and yanked the chainsaw into action as the intruder entered, startling him but he couldn't turn around fast enough because he was already in motion. The loud grind of the chainsaw roared throughout the garage.

Aleksar immediately swung the chainsaw with an overhead motion at the intruder, gashing the unwelcome mystery man wide open vertically. The intruder made a leap sideways but he was already hit, squealing loudly though not louder than the chainsaw. Aleksar kept the chainsaw trained on the intruder, gashing at him once again, cutting diagonally across his legs and abdomen. The intruder fell hard.

Aleksar turned off his chainsaw and flicked the garage light on. The intruder was wearing clothes that made him look like a funny shape hole except where the chainsaw tore him apart.

Agneiszka looked on in horror as the unwelcome sneaker lay writhing in absolute pain, bleeding profusely, making some sort of odd noise both of them never heard before.

Aleksar pinched the top of the nylon mask that the unwelcome sneaker was wearing with his hard pipe in the other hand. Aleksar said, "We should take a hard look at what our enemy here looks like before we continue." With that he yanked the mask off.

Agneiszka said, "My god, what is that?!" covering her mouth with her slender hand.

The unwelcome sneaker was earless. Roundish earmuff-like domes protruded from the sides of its furry mutton head in a bubble like fashion. All of the monster's skin was covered in a fur-like hair, not his lips though. His chin was hideously longer and wider than any human chin that ever existed. The hair on his head looked like animal mane.

"Are those horns?" Agneiszka asked.

"It appears so," said Aleksar, "We should call animal control, right? This thing looks more like a monster than a person."

We could tie him up or I can crush his ungodly head in right now, what's it gonna be, Agneiszka?"

Agneiszka said, "Let's tie him up."

Aleksar said, "Sound like a great idea. Maybe he's bigfoot. He might die, you know."

Agneiszka said, "Serves him right."

Neon luminescence started emanating off the monster's hair, glowing with a shine shifting in hues and tints. His eyes were piss yellow with no pupils and gave a deep hypnotizing feeling of bewilderment.

The monster hypnotized Agneiszka and she lost her mind, closing her eyes she said, "The. . . monster. . . mind. . . power. . ." She fell to her knees and then trembled uncontrollably.

The monster was hissing lowly under his breath and gurgling a thick throaty miserable hum.

Aleksar clenched his pipe then swung it at the monster's upper torso with all of his might. There was a loud dull smack. The monster choked some more. Aleksar swung once again, this time hitting the monster square on his forehead. With a loud crunchy crack, the monster died.

Agneiszka opened her eyes. The monster's power swiftly ended before it could do her permanent harm. Aleksar said, "Say goodbye sneaker, you ain't returnin'"

Aleksar tossed the pipe on the garage floor and gave Agneiszka a hand, helping her stand with him. She threw herself into his loving arms. The end.

Full Price

“Absolutely no discounts, refunds, reductions, trade-ins, bartering, financing, holdings or alternative means of payment are accepted. You must precisely pay the tag value of your purchase. Cash preferred, no credit or debit. Written check is alright with two forms of identification when you have a long-standing account with us, a year membership required with more than \$7000.00 in purchases before I can accept checks with your account, should you want one.” I said to the young woman in a red skirt and pink-white blouse.

She leaned closer on the counter, sliding her leather purse to the side and looked into my eyes. I swallowed nervously, trying not to appear weakened with her attraction. Frilly lace on her bra barely showed on the top arch of her breasts through the low cut of her blouse.

I was standing sideways with my right elbow and forearm on the counter. The motion activated soft harmony played when a customer left the shop. The young woman's greedy hold on my attention was interrupted when I stood up straight and looked at the customer as he opened the door. I said, “Thank you for visiting. Please come again.” The customer didn't reply as he left.

A man and a woman, presumably married, were intently checking out a medieval Czech trunk. The woman was inserting the primitive key into the padlock that was set beside the trunk on a cloth. I returned my attention to the young woman at the counter with me.

She was probably in her mid-twenties, not much younger than I at thirty. She wore no ring and appeared with the way she dressed fully available.

The item in question was a very well preserved unused sketchbook made in the 1910s. Seventy pages of thick paper bound in a threaded shellac glazed thin cardboard cover. A solo nick on the sketchbooks' spine and a cup stain left behind when a coaster apparently couldn't be found, the item was in near-perfect condition. The sketchbook was rare possibly the oldest unused sketchbook left. The pages were immaculate with no creases. You could very well use the sketchbook as if you bought it recently and not discern that it was actually over a century old.

The young woman lifted the sketchbook in her hands. We both looked down at it. She guided my attention to the gold leaf lettering along the bottom edge of the cover with her dainty finger, saying, "What does KT21 mean?"

I replied, "Well, the lettering wasn't added during the manufacturing process. My guess is a number of these sketchbooks were bought in bulk and then the owner serial marked them. Perhaps there's another twenty of these sketchbooks. If there were, then they were likely used and then this one sold because there wasn't a need to keep it. What KT21 means I wouldn't say for sure but it might be the initials of the artist who owned it or the codename of what project the artist was working on at the time. It could've been used in a business venture of some sort where sketch artists are required.

I smoothly retrieved the sketchbook out of her hands into my own. I tilted the sketchbook into the light and ran my finger along the gold leaf lettering, saying, "As you can see, the lettering was pressed deep enough that it has made an obvious relief in the cover. You can feel it right away. At least a millimeter deep."

The young woman touched the relief as I showed her. Our fingers both briefly brushed alongside each other and a sensation of surprise crackled my nerves. The sexual tension nearly overwhelmed my professionalism. She seemed amused and well aware of my tension.

"\$2240.00 seems steep for a sketchbook. Your Shakespeare volume is \$1750.00 and it's a hundred years older than this skinny thing." The young woman said. "You would think Shakespeare would out-price an empty book. Certainly since the Shakespeare was hand-crafted and this sketchbook was made on a production line."

“Well, you see,” I answered her, handing her the sketchbook. She lowered it slowly onto the counter, straightened herself up, placing her hand on the leather purse. “This sketchbook is much rarer than that Shakespeare volume, and historically, being an early relic of the industrial revolution, it’s quite possibly the only one left of its kind. The condition of being so well preserved and the quality of its manufacture also calculate into the steep price.”

She slid her purse strap onto her shoulder, saying, “Okay, I will return shortly with the cash. I will need to go to an ATM. Could you hold this sketchbook for me while I go retrieve the money? I won’t be away long.”

I answered, “Yes. I will prepare the item while you retrieve your funds. Would you like a box or a bag?”

She replied, “A box would be fine.”

She looked at her watch.

I asked her, “Might I ask your name, miss?”

“Gisela. Gisela Beddlin” She said enthusiastically. “And you?”

“Wentworth Rightonne.” I answered. “Gisela is a beautiful name, a name that serves your attraction well.”

She smiled at the compliment and said, “Thank you Wentworth, I will return shortly. Hold on to my sketchbook.”

“Of course.” I said.

She casually made her way to the door then left. The motion activated soft harmony played once again.

I set myself upon the task of preparing the item for sale. I opened the sketchbook to make sure there wasn’t some information written on the inner cover as many people often write ownership information. In the center of the page was a playing card made in the early 1900s. I thought this find charming and would wait to finish boxing Gisela’s purchase in order to show the card to her.

The man and woman who were interested with the Czechen trunk were now slowly walking the aisles of the small items section where random interests of value were shelved on display.

I reflected on my time there running the shop while I waited. I owned the building and controlled 100% of my business all alone. I alone saw every transaction through that ever occurred there. I approved all the merchandise personally and I alone stocked the floor. Item appraisal was a task that I outsourced to an auction house

that also on occasion sold off some of my items when I thought they wouldn't sell individually. I preferred to maintain a steady circulation of merchandise, unlike other businesses who would let items sit on the shelves years at a time. Return customers who frequented my business would tell me that they liked that I made so many new items available so often.

A hunchbacked old man came thumping through the door. The motion activated soft harmony played. His hair was long and stringy grey, appearing as if he combed it but it got messy on his way there. His thick wool overcoat hung off his figure like a drab blanket. The top button was missing. He hobbled his way to the counter, his cane tapping dully on the tile floor.

I turned my head as I fastened the lid onto the box, saying, "What can I do for you, sir?"

The old hunchback got flustered and pointed his cane at me. He spit his words as though a hot coal was alight in his belly. I was anticipating smoke to seep from his ears. "Absolutely no C! C is for grabbing, sneaky, needy, lazy dum-dums whose hands, if permitted to remain attached, would put us all out of business for a cheap cash-in. Sell us out for a muffin and dirty wine they would. Don't C a thing! Do you understand me? No C!"

I put the box on a table behind the counter. I cleared my throat, surprised at the crazy old hunchback, not knowing how to respond to him.

"Sir, I don't understand what you could be alluding to. If you need medical attention I will swiftly request an ambulance for you." I said to him calmly.

"You fool!" The old hunchback shouted, "I don't need an ambulance! Don't you know who I am?!"

The old hunchback put his cane to the floor once more and lowered his voice. He said, "I am Relmbao Tojolirr." he sucked in his gut with pride.

I was silent.

He seemed quick with irritation. "You fool! Does my name not inspire you? Don't you care who I am? You should be impressed that I graced your pithy business with my ostensible charm."

I raised an eyebrow and replied, "No sir, your name does not precede you here. Would you care to enlighten me?"

“What year is it?” He asked with a sudden worry in his voice.

“2016.” I answered. “You look dressed for a play. I would say you look like an actor who got incorrect directions. Would you like assistance finding an item you've been searching for? As you can see I sell a wide variety of merchandise. For a finder's fee I can usually acquire special items not in stock.”

The old hunchback shook his head vigorously then said loudly, “What?! 2016!? You don't say.”

The man and woman who were browsing my merchandise walked up to the counter past the old hunchback who fell silent. The old hunchback wandered off in thought.

The man said, “We would like to purchase that trunk on display. Could you tell us about it?”

I replied, “Ah, yes. Quite the item, that trunk. Made in the Czech Republic in 1674, it once contained the clothing and effects of a noblewoman who brought it with her to America. The trunk became a family heirloom that was passed through the centuries until it was sold to a museum before the turn of the 20th century. The museum, spring cleaning its inventory, decided to sell the trunk and I acquired it at auction three months ago. The trunk was restored in the care of the museum. The padlock and key are the original set that were purchased for the trunk in 1674. In fair condition, it has been used far beyond the number of years intended when it was assembled. Trunks like this one were common through medieval times as a majority of house owners considered them mandatory. Usually covered with blankets or some other cloth item, they would double as a chair during the daytime. The sturdiness of their construction kept many of these trunks preserved through the centuries. They are quite collectible and are a frequently sought item.”

The woman asked, “Are there matching items of the same lot, maybe furniture or utensils? Anything that the same smith built, or was that trunk part of a set?”

I answered, “Not that I know of. That trunk is unique. A brand with the builder's mark is burned into the bottom, reading R.T. 1674.”

The man retrieved his wallet and said, “We want it.”

“Good for you, sir.” I said to him. “That really is a nice trunk. I sold others like it before and I personally own one built in 1700s New York.”

The man and woman both smiled.

I said, “Would you like it covered or do you have space inside your vehicle for it?”

“No cover.” said the woman. “We have our own blankets we can use.”

I wrote out a sales receipt for the trunk then counted the cash that the man handed to me. “\$3300.00” I said. “And what is your name, sir?” I asked.

“You can write the receipt out to Benjamin & Stacy Christian.” He said.

I asked them to sign the sales receipt then I tore off their portion of it. I put the payment in the safe.

“Alright.” I said, “Thank you very much for your business. Would you like me to dolly the trunk out to your vehicle for you?”

Benjamin answered, “Yes. That would be fine.”

The dolly now loaded up with the trunk, I then accompanied them to their car, Benjamin holding the shop door while I wheeled the dolly through. The motion activated soft harmony played as we neared the door and I said loudly, “I will return shortly Mr. Tojolirr!” The old hunchback didn't seem to notice. He was standing at a window while he stared blankly out at the traffic, deep in thought.

Several minutes passed before I returned, wheeling the dolly behind the counter. The old hunchback didn't flinch.

“Sir, if you aren't here in the interest of business I will have to ask you kindly to leave.” I told the old hunchback firmly.

“Don't you use that short tone with me boy!” The old hunchback detonated, pointing his cane at me again.

He said, “What is K?! K is for kick! And T?! T isn't a word, T is an ideal!” He took short steps towards me, holding his cane up with a shaky hand. “Don't you know?!” he blurted out hastily.

I said, “Sir, I know that you are not well and I will ask you kindly again to leave before intensified measures are required to do so.”

“Letters aren't merely symbols for the eyes!” His voice was now higher and less certain than before. “Letters have secondary meanings! If you learn them like I learned them, you will become as I!”

I nearly laughed at his nonsensical chatter, saying, “I'm sure I would. Pardon me for not getting my advice from a Scrabble board, but your banter is suited for the nuthouse, not a business of esteemed repute. Are you going to leave?”

The old hunchback quit coming closer. The motion activated soft harmony played as Ms. Beddlin entered. The old hunchback turned his head to see her, his cane trembling in his hand. Ms. Beddlin halted when she saw him. She looked at him then me then him again, not sure what to make of what she saw.

She said, “What do we have here?”

I replied, “He's not well in the head and I'm preparing to have him taken away.”

The old hunchback said abruptly, “What is R?! R is for right! L is for left!”

Ms. Beddlin shrank a little at the old hunchback's disturbance. “Acronyms.” she said in a concerned tone. She furthered herself away from the old hunchback, freeing up the space to the door.

The old hunchback pointed his cane at her, “Don't you get clever with me, lady!” He shouted. The sneer in his throat was turning vile. Ms. Beddlin furthered her distance to the old hunchback and closer to me.

“Alright.” I said loudly, “This has gone far enough.”

I took a step out onto the floor with a taser in my left hand. I pressed the taser button and it made a daring zap sound. The old hunchback lowered his cane.

“That's right.” I said calmly. “Now leave, peacefully.”

I pressed the taser button again. The zap made the old hunchback jump. He made his way to the door. He didn't say another word. The motion activated soft harmony played and he was soon gone.

“I'm sorry for the disturbance, Gisela. That sort of interruption hasn't happened before.”

She instantly warmed up to me and came to the counter. She said, "Odd look about him, were those clothes something else or what?!"

"Yes. He was certainly out there." I said.

There was a short interval of silence. We looked at each other without a word. It was eternity adrift in her eyes. I drummed my fingers on the counter and broke the silence.

"Well." I said. "Your sketchbook isn't boxed yet. I opened the cover and found this playing card inside of it. Thought you'd like to see it so you could decide whether you wanted it boxed up along with the rest."

I retrieved the sketchbook and opened the cover. The playing card was lying face down the way I found it. Gisela carefully picked the card up and turned it over.

"A trump card." said Gisela. "You have an idea about this playing card, Wentworth? When or where it was made?"

I said, "Looks like the same age as the sketchbook. I would say, made between 1900 and 1920. Anything that they could think up to print in those days they would print in large quantities. Makes sense that they wanted that nice uniform perfect edges and perfect prints because everything before then was usually handmade or made on steam powered industrial machinery. This playing card here was made on an electric powered machine. So, yes, first quarter of the twentieth century looks about right."

We both smiled. Gisela said, "Well, thank you, I would like to keep this playing card inside the sketchbook."

I said, "Alright, this should take about a minute." I placed the playing card into the sketchbook and turned around to box it properly. When finished I slid the box across the counter to her.

She was trembling. Once I saw her trembling I started to feel a bewildering turn deep in my stomach. It felt as if my nerves were being soaked with a thick frequency. I likened it to the wobble of gelatin or magnets repelling each other with a steep side of uneasiness. I raised an eyebrow. She shrugged.

"You ever get the heeby-jeebies like you're suddenly in the twilight zone?" Ms. Beddlin asked.

"You know what." I answered. "I was born for the twilight zone. I swear not a week goes without some mysterious off-kilter

odd occurrence. It does though, like you said, it does seem one of those off-moments.”

I retrieved Ms. Beddlin's purchase and set it before her on the counter. I said, “I can gift wrap it if you'd like. If that's what you're getting it for.”

“No. I like it the way it is. I bought it for me.” She said.

She gave me the money and I wrote her out a receipt. She turned to leave then halted paralyzed in her tracks. She said, “It's somewhat early to be so dark outside, isn't it?”

“No. I didn't notice.” I replied. “It can't be dark yet. It was only 10:00am a few minutes ago.”

The wall clock displayed 10:53am and the seconds hand wasn't circling around.

Gisela turned to face me again and set her box on the counter. She said, “I'm dreaming. I know I'm dreaming. Pinch me.” She held out her hand palm up. She said, “Go ahead and pinch my wrist.”

I smirked at her cheeky request. I lightly pinched her wrist, careful to not leave a blemish. Her skin was soft and tender. I let go then said, “We're still here.”

The ethereal current that oozed through my nerves was ever prevalent. I felt like I moved through invisible sludge, although I wasn't really slowed in any physical sense. It was all sensory.

“What should we do Wentworth?” Said Gisela.

“Good question.” I answered.

The premature darkness outside was interrupted with a flash of white light that flooded through the windows with a glow. It was a very close lightning strike. Gisela made a jump for me in her fright but the counter was in her way. I raised my eyebrows high as I reached under the counter and said, “I will go ahead and lock the door.”

Gisela was visibly getting wrought up. I said, “Hold a minute while I check it out then we will go sit and get our nerves off the burner.”

I walked past her and the motion activated soft harmony played as I neared the door.

“What the?!” I said loudly then hastily locked the door. I turned the heavy deadbolt over not a second too soon.

The old hunchback smacked right into the glass of the door with his arms spread wide like he was ready to hug me. His cane tight in his left hand clinked on the glass. The old hunchback grimaced, baring his pearly whites. His eyes were alight with a greenish-blue swirl. Intense was the ethereal current seemingly passing through me, I could only surmise the old hunchback was the source.

Gisela said sharply, "Where's the taser?!"

"Behind the counter, go ahead and get it." I replied quickly, holding my attention squarely on the old hunchback who appeared to be haunted, brainless and vacant.

"The city is gone!" I shouted. In the cities' place was an empty countryside prairie with the occasional wild tree. The moon shone with a clear prominence, half sitting on the edge of glowing clouds over the distant hilltops, being the only light to see with. It was a harsh departure from the barely visible skies I was use to seeing over the city. Now the stars shone with a clarity and an abundance I'd never seen before.

I heard the crackle of the taser. "The city is gone." Gisela echoed my words with a faded tone of disbelief.

"Let me in!" the muffled voice of the old hunchback was softly heard through the thick door glass. His cane was tapping the window as he slid his arms around.

I laughed quietly at the thought then said firmly, "Yeah, I'm gonna do that right away." Gisela was soon at my side with the taser. She was surprise at the countryside scenery. She said, "Oh my, what's that light coming this way? Look, at the hills, do you see?"

"Yes." I replied.

The old hunchback looked over his shoulder to see what we were looking at. He turned and faced the oncoming party. "No! They're here! Hurry!" he shouted as he hobbled away on his cane. "Hurry!" he said again.

Gisela and I continued to watch the lights get bolder as whomever it was kept closing the distance between us. They appeared around a half mile away. I presumed that the light descending off the hilltop was heavy duty flashlights because of their unwavering intensity.

“Shut off all the lights!” urged Gisela, who instantly sprinted off to the light switch near the door. We were suddenly cloaked in darkness, reflections on the glass disappeared. We could now easily see across the countryside. A sizeable party they were.

The old hunchback was getting distant himself in the other direction. I could feel Gisela's presence at my side again though I couldn't hear her. I intuitively took her arm with a tug and guided her to a less obvious window that was large enough for only our heads. We both watched as the lights veered in the old hunchback's direction. The old hunchback was barely visible as a dark shape in the dark green countryside.

I could feel Gisela's heart thump although we weren't touching. I felt like she was much closer than we actually were and never did I feel like that before. Like we were see-through and sharing our nervous systems. I attributed the ethereal sensation of being internally connected to the wrench in my chest and gut. What was causing it was what I really wanted to know. This wasn't a simple matter of an attraction towards Gisela, this sensation was something paranormal. My nerves were ultra raw.

“They're going to get him.” She whispered. I didn't reply. Only watched.

Minutes passed as the shapes got nearer the old hunchback. A beam of light was focused on him. He quit his run and turned to face them, raising his arm in defense. Another bright laser-like light was aimed at him and his whole body as well as his clothing brightened intensely an orange-red. He glowed brighter and brighter for a few seconds before detonating into millions of glowing spheres that looked like mach-speed fireflies. What was left of him where he was standing dissipated in a mist.

“I never saw anything like that.” I said to Gisela. “Some sort of laser beam.”

We sat silently for another minute as the lights searched around in the area where the old hunchback saw his end.

I said, “Let's go to the roof, Gisela. I can lock the hatch. They'll never get us without a ladder.” I took her hand in mine and we carefully tip-toed through the darkness quietly. She got out a lighter while we climbed the stairwell, unveiling the lonesome emptiness made increasingly haunting with our creaky footsteps in pure silence.

I was channeling another dimension. I could feel it but I said nothing to Gisela about it. I didn't want to add tension to her nervous uncertainty.

There were only two floors. Roof access was limited to a fire escape in the utility room. I locked the utility room door behind us and climbed the ladder. I went through the hatch then guided her onto the roof. I locked the hatch shut from the outside. The roof was flat with a chest high wall along the perimeter.

We quickly went to see what was going on out on the prairie with the lights. We ducked out of view as soon as we saw how close they were. We sat on our butts with our backs pressed into the wall with our legs out before us. I was becoming bitter at our situation. We were outnumbered and unprepared, somehow taken to another universe and all we could do was hide.

We listened in silence but there were no sounds, no voices, no telling of what the intentions of laser party on the prairie were. We waited for what seemed like an eternity. It was actually around thirty minutes.

I broke the silence, saying quietly, "I'm going to check and see if they're out there."

Gisela didn't answer. She was asleep. I considered waking her then decided to let her continue sleeping. The shock of the unreal events of our time together really took a lot out of her. I was getting low on power myself. I would get sleepy if we sat there much longer.

I slowly got on my feet and looked around at the wild prairie below us. I didn't see anything. No lights. No people. Not a single thing. That sludge-like ethereal sensation was gone. I felt free of any such constraints. I was again my normal self.

The chirp of crickets was reassuring for me. If the crickets were fine then we probably needn't worry much. Crickets will fall silent when there is a disruptive presence. They were gone.

I kept my lookout as Gisela slept another quarter of an hour. I found nothing to be alarmed about. She awoke on her own and we silently watched the sun rise together. As the sun rolled into the sky we could see a structure not far away on the prairie.

Gisela said, "They left, didn't they?"

I replied, "Yes. I didn't see them. I didn't see anyone."

“What do you suppose that is?” she asked of the structure curiously.

I said, “I don't know but I want to go check it out. I think we'll be safe. Let's go see what that is. If those people come again I think there'll be plenty of time to get inside. What do you say about that Gisela?”

Gisela clenched her purse tightly under an armpit with her free arm horizontal, hand locked onto her upper arm. She seemed somewhat clouded with apprehension, I however felt fine seeing her in that skirt and that blouse that barely covered her breasts. She was an eye-ful and a handful.

She didn't seem to like the idea of visiting the structure out on the prairie. She gave my plan a long thought then said, “Okay, but I need some time to get ready.”

I said, “If that helps you feel good, then be my guest. Shall we?” I held my hand towards the sky hatch. She walked over to the hatch and waited for me.

Once inside again I showed her to the bathroom. I went out onto the main floor and sat watch near the windows on the lookout for anything at all. I didn't see anything. Nothing appeared altered. That didn't mean though that the lightbeam people weren't close, perhaps within sight if we knew where to look. The tall wheat could easily hide anyone lying on the ground. They could be right there. I assumed that they weren't. They were probably long gone.

Gisela took a long time and when she was done in the bathroom she asked about clothes. I didn't have much in the way of personal attire since nearly everything was made before 1920. She got a girl's overcoat made in 1800s Finland that wasn't really all that soft due to the age of the fiber. The antique coat kept her warm though.

I made sure the taser was fully charged and we took a step out the door at what I guessed was around 10 or 11 am. All my clocks and watches were paused at 10:53am the previous day. The sky was partly cloudy with patches of sunshine beaming through. The air wasn't too cold but also we weren't all that warm either.

The structure was somewhat like Stonehenge in that it wasn't a building, yet rather several free-standing mason-formed artworks. The structure was a sight to behold. Although there wasn't an “entrance” per se, there was a wall and a pillar connected with a

single arch, made with artificial stone materials that seemed light and frail but were strong, feeling somewhat like plastic.

A relief in the wall showed humanoid shapes without faces but they were life-like in size. Gisela and I were standing near the archway looking through at another free standing structure made of a different type of stone.

The head of one of the relief figures glowed a dull and sparkly mixture of pink and blue. There was a telepathic message that we both heard, saying into our minds, "Purity, element in our source. We are divine."

The stone appeared alive yet I couldn't actually see what the liveliness was with my eyes. I could tell that the stone somehow was brought alive in sentience.

I said firmly to the wall relief, "My name is Wentworth and my partner's name is Gisela. We kindly ask you for your mercy, your help. Dire our needs."

"Go with caution," Answered the wall relief, this time we actually heard the words with our ears. "go with wonder. Go with awe. But dare you not touch the treasure."

Gisela and I looked one another in the eyes. I took her hand and we walked through the archway. On the other side of the archway we stood in the center of the structures. A simple square stone was in the ground, a bowl full of treasure lying there like an offering, tempting anyone that would see.

Gisela kept close to me as we looked at the several structures, walking around that mysterious bowl on the stone tile. Each one was different. I wanted to see another relief talk to us but all seemed very silent. A yellow golden light shone above us and a thundering voice quit us in our tracks.

"You can return to where you were." said the light. Gisela and I looked away because the sentience was too bright to stare into.

I held Gisela in my arms and we both said not a word in reply to the thunder. The thundering voice said, "Gisela. Wentworth. You will return to your lives but there is a toll. If you cannot pay then you will not return, for all eternity here you will live. Consent to my terms of full price and walk into my light. If you do not consent to my terms of full price then turn away and leave. I offer this once. Make your decision now."

Gisela and I held each other closely and without hesitation walked into the light.

That Hasn't Happened Before

“The target has been neutralized, sir. We are awaiting your order to interrogate.” said the special agent, touching the earpiece of his headset as he looked at his captive through the one-way window. Another special agent was already in the interrogation room, verifying the captive's identity and completing the necessary paperwork.

The man on the other end said to the special agent, “Go ahead and make sure you record the interrogation.”

“Yes, Sir.” said the special agent. “Have good one, sir.”

He entered the interrogation chamber and watched the other special agent discuss the man's identity. The other agent looked up and said, "Approved?"

"Yes."

"Alright, I'm done here." said the sitting special agent. He put his paperwork away in a manilla folder, got up and then left the interrogation room.

The special agent sat in the chair and made sure the tape machine was recording. He said, "My name is Agent Matthews and I am going to ask you questions. As I understand it your name is Nathaniel Pendleton, is that correct?"

The man said, "Yes."

Agent Matthews said, "Tell me Nathaniel, where you are from and what the nature of your business was at the time we encountered you."

Nathaniel said, "I am from here, Houston. And like I said before, I woke up lost and confused, inside your facilities, without memory of how I got here, and my business was to leave because I don't know what happened to me and I don't belong here."

Nathaniel was visibly stressed and on the edge of a mental breakdown. He looked like he was about to cry.

Agent Matthews said, "And when you were found, what happened?"

Nathaniel said, "I was trying to get out of the building! I couldn't find my way out. I was wandering the empty halls and then found this woman wearing a lab coat and asked her where the entrance was. She called security and I went into her lab and there were these crazy alien corpses lying on trays and I took the scalpels and fought security. Now here I am." His eyes were teared up. He said, "I just want to leave. I don't know how I got here. I don't belong here."

Agent Matthews said, "What was the last thing you remember?"

Nathaniel looked away for a while in thought, trying not to cry. Eventually he looked at Agent Matthews and said, "I was catching frogs." He choked on a sob.

Agent Matthews said, "Here in Houston?"

Nathaniel said, "Yes. And I was catching these frogs. It was late at night, like one in the morning. It was at this special property

where this bank was closed and abandoned. Okay, first, how this started.”

Nathanial took a drink of his coffee and cleared his throat. He said, “So this all started when I was playing with these frogs at that abandoned property. One of the frogs disappeared and I searched hard, couldn't find it. So I kept at it, discovering that these frogs could disappear, testing my suspicions. Although I could be sure that they were disappearing without a trace I couldn't actually see them in the act of disappearing. It were as though they were smart frogs that knew if I saw them disappear, uh, something bad would happen to them? I don't know. I was determined to catch one in the act so that I was sure that I wasn't imagining this.”

“There was this fountain on the edge of the abandoned property that the business next door owned. The sides of the fountain were high enough that if I put a frog in the water it couldn't escape, except at a specific point where there was a bubbler that could be used to climb out. So I got the idea to get a bunch of these frogs and put them in there, counting them first, watch them carefully and count them as they would escape. And let me tell you, they couldn't escape easy, it took like 30 seconds per frog to escape that fountain. There was no chance to miss a frog.”

“I collected twenty frogs at a time, keeping them in a plastic shopping sack and then took them to the fountain. I repeated this over ten times. And this was over the course of about two weeks. Not once, not one single time, were there were an equal number of frogs taken out of the shopping sack as there were put inside of it. Not once. There was always at least one frog missing. And man, I took great care to make damn sure that I counted them correctly.”

“So I would count them into the fountain out of the sack. Watch them carefully, make sure they didn't get tricky and somehow escape without me seeing them. I would count them escaping the fountain and always, every single time, there would be frogs missing. So I got determined to search and re-search that fountain to make damn sure there wasn't another escape route or hole in it or a tunnel. There was no other way, they must climb out at one specific point. I swear, there were always missing frogs.”

“And then one night when I was observing them and handling them and not specifically testing the disappearing thing out, I brought two frogs to the fountain and let them into the water

and I saw it happen. One frog swam away while the other frog disappeared before my very eyes.”

“When it hit water it didn't swim, it sank. It rolled on its side like it was giving up, not kicking it's legs. And it was eerie because it stared at me with one eye, like it was intelligent or something, and see look at my arms, this still makes my hair raise.”

Nathanial held out his arm, showing that his arm hair was standing on end. He continued, “So he disappeared as he sank. He shrank as he sank, but like, you know, the depth of that fountain wasn't far enough for him to shrink that small to my eyes because he was right there in front of me, my face a foot above the water and the fountain was only two feet deep, yet when this frog shrank away, he shrank away like he was ten feet away and all the while it was like he was staring into my mind. And it kicked it's leg only once, as it kicked, it's leg went through this invisible slit, like he was stepping through a slit that made him invisible and he simply vanished. This happened in like two seconds but the memory is like slow motion. I will never forget this small frog that fit in my hand staring at me with one eye like it was God himself, staring through me like I was nothing and then slipping through this invisible, like, invisible thing to where? Another dimension? Where did that frog go? I saw it happen, I swear.”

Agent Matthews said, “And then what?”

Nathanial said, “I was nervous and my whole body was in this paranoid shock. I found the second frog and let it go and couldn't get over what I saw. I knew that if I tried to tell someone what I saw they would say I was nuts. I didn't know what to do. I was kicking myself because I didn't have my camera phone ready and thought that I would try repeating this and film it.”

Agent Matthews said, “How did that work out?”

Nathanial said, “It didn't. That's the last thing that I remember.”

Agent Matthews said, “And what day was that?”

Nathanial said, “Friday, like one in the morning.”

Agent Matthews said, “Really? A week ago? It's thursday evening now.”

Nathanial said, “Friday, August 21st.”

Agent Matthews laughed and said, “Really? Are you sure about that?”

Nathanial said, "Yes. It was August 21st. I know this for sure."

Agent Matthews said, "Well that's a mind screw and a half. Hard to believe you because it's August 13th."

Nathanial looked confused, "No way. That's impossible" he said.

Agent Matthews said, "You better believe it. What year?"

Nathanial said, "2020."

Agent Matthews said, "Yes. 2020. So, apparently, according to your memory, you time traveled after seeing a disappearing frog and you were also relocated to the inside of this facility."

Nathanial said, "I don't know what to say. You know what though, I saw those alien bodies, you can't sit there and tell me I'm crazy. This ain't fair. I want to leave." His eyes were tearing up again.

Agent Matthews said, "Yes. I know. I tell you what, we are going to be fair with you but we need you to be honest with us and tell us anything that we want to know. Got it?"

Nathanial said, "Yes. Got it."

Agent Matthews said, "Alright. So, security recordings show that you did not enter this building through any doorway, window or garage entryway. There is no recording of you on the property at all outside of this building. The consensus was that you snuck in through a supply delivery or other means. We cannot as of yet verify this theory one way or the other and so as of now your testimony given to me right here will suffice. As you have said, you saw something. And yes, you saw something. Yes, this building is a government building. We cannot allow you to wander freely in this facility and you will be kept safe and secure and your personal needs attended to till a decision is made as to what needs done. Understand?"

Nathanial said, "Yes."

Agent Matthews said, "Alright, so, tell me Matthew, was this your first time in seeing something disappear?"

Nathanial said, "No. Well, yes, right in front of my eyes. Other times, there's always something in the way, but the thing is the same, complete disappearance from reality."

Agent Matthews said, "Tell me what other things that you've seen disappear. Tell me what happened."

Nathanial's eyes became bright, "That's right, I totally forgot. Same property. There's these bushes alongside of the abandoned bank, sitting on top of a rotting wooden wall that is waist high. So, it's two levels, the lower level and then the wall, then on top of the rotted log wall there's these bushes that are lined up with the old bank drive-through."

"It was like ten o'clock in the morning and I was walking through the drive-through when this young bird chick started crying in the bushes. These bushes are the same height as me and not very thick, you can see right through them in places. So I think hey I am going to give this bird chick a look and see what it was crying about, thinking that was a bad place to build a nest that low. And this bird chick really starts crying when it sees me coming. I try finding a nest but can't see this bird till it flies out of the bush, but it can't fly because it is too young, it can flap its wings and descend but it can't fly upwards. It's like, not a baby but not an adult."

"And I immediately went after this bird, trying to catch it. It lands on the ground a few feet outside of the bush on the bank driveway, the upper level and runs toward the closed teller window on the ground, I almost reach him when he tries flying but can't really get more than a few inches off the ground. He uses his wings anyways, and that helps him outrun me. He gets down on the lower level and there's a long empty open space between the closed bank and the road so really, it can't go that way. So it runs along the wall below this line of bushes. This wall is made of four by fours and it's rotted so bad that it's missing a couple logs. But this wall is long enough that there's no way I cannot catch this bird when I circle around the end of the bush. This bird sees me coming and it can't get off the dirt to leap the waist high wall, but there's this missing log and where the log is missing there's a sort of a small hole that's like half a foot deep. You can get on your knees and see right into it and reach in there and feel that there's no way out. I get like five feet behind this terrified baby bird and it leaps into this small hole. All this time my eyes are on this thing, there is no way at all that this bird could get far without me seeing it. And so I'm like great I got this bird now. And not a second later after this bird went into this half foot deep hole I reach it and you know what, the bird is

completely vanished. Not a damn thing. I reach my hand in there and it's gone.”

Agent Matthews said, “Same property? About when did this happen.”

Nathanial said, “About a month ago.”

Agent Matthews said, “Any other anomalies about this property that you can think of?”

Nathanial said, “No, that's it. A lot of disappearing frogs and that one disappearing baby bird.”

Agent Matthews said, “What about other disappearing things, like inanimate objects.”

Nathanial said, “Yes. A year ago, when I was at a friend's house, I was helping him build a porch. He needed another bag of nails and sent me to his cellar to get one. So I get to the cellar but can't find the light. I kept my lighter in my 5th pocket of my jeans, that little pocket inside of a pocket. I get the lighter out and then accidentally drop it. I don't hear it hit the cement floor. I thought well that's some nutty luck, must've landed on top of my shoe or my pant leg was rolled up somehow and landing in there. Well it didn't land on my shoe and my pant leg wasn't such that it could have caught the lighter. This was right inside the doorway, mind you, with dim light. I searched around with my hands and couldn't find it. Eventually I found the light and turned it on, it was on the other side of the door. With the light on I was able to search for my lighter a lot more carefully. There was nothing on the floor right there, except a pallet about two feet away from the door. You could see that there was nothing there. It was obvious! So I looked inside the spaces in the pallet, same thing. It wasn't in there. I checked and looked and searched over and over for like fifteen minutes getting frustrated because I know that I wasn't imagining this and I needed my lighter to smoke. I went and gave my friend the nails and told him I lost my lighter and needed to look once more because there was no way it could disappear. I looked twice. Gone. No explanation.”

Agent Matthew said, “You said that was a year ago, here in Houston?”

Nathanial said, “Yes.”

Agent Matthew said, “Got other disappearance stories?”

Nathanial said, "Yes. When I was in California I saw disappearing cars, right in the middle of traffic. Especially at a particular intersection, saw this happen a bunch of times. I lost count how many times. You'd see two cars then when they get through the intersection there'd be only one car and the other car didn't turn and definitely didn't have enough time to drive away so far you couldn't see it. Visibility was high, and when you see it once you say to yourself no, I'm not paying attention and it was an optical illusion, that car didn't vanish into thin air. Then you know, you see it a bunch of times then you get interested in seeing it closer or catching it while you're watching it directly, because you know, its always like with disappearing cars, you always look away at the second they disappear, so you want to make sure you don't look away. And you know, I tried training myself to catch them. I did catch them, not on camera, but yes, I saw them disappear."

Agent Matthew said, "And more stories like this? You saw other objects vanish? What about people?"

Nathanial said, "Yes, I saw people disappear mysteriously and airplanes vanish while watching them fly over my head. I know that I saw other things vanish but can't remember them right now."

Agent Matthew said, "You know what, I think that is enough for today, you've told us plenty. I am going to give you a pad of paper and a recorder like this here so you can go through your memory when you're alone and what I want is you to recount these strange happenings with as much detail as you can, give the dates if you remember them and so on and so forth. We will consider your stories carefully and catalogue them in our database. For now though, that was enough."

Nathanial said, "When are you going to let me go? I can't stay here forever. Am I going to need a lawyer? Can I call my girlfriend?"

Agent Matthew said, "I am sorry but we cannot allow you to contact anyone outside of this facility till the order is given and your story and identity is verified. Should you need legal representation I am not sure how that would be worked out within our guidelines but you being present here is a matter of national security. Till this ordeal is sorted out all we can do is secure you in a living space and provide you your basic living needs. Okay?"

Nathanial said, "Alright."

Agent Matthew smirked and said, “Besides, you're a week early. Don't worry about it. We'll get this straightened out.”

Nathanial said, “Alright.”

Agent Matthew said, “One last question I forgot to ask about your witnessing of disappearances. When did this trend start? What year was the first time you can remember seeing something or someone mysteriously vanish?”

Nathanial thought a moment then said, “I think it was 2011. Those cars I told you about. Those were the first things I ever saw disappear. Since then I'd seen this happen a bunch of times, I want to say like twenty times.”

Agent Matthew said, “Thank you. Give me some time and I will return to get you. Go ahead and drink your coffee and relax. No worries.” he got out of the chair and went to the door.

Nathanial said, “No worries.” while the door closed behind the special agent.

Artificial Freedom

Science.

Science determines the course of humanity. Science unveils our false presumptions and bears naked the truth, shaming our detractors of their ignorance. Science advances all of us with enlightenment. Science cures illness, civilizes people, provides all the technology that we use and helps all of us understand our world and the universe beyond our reach. Science is a methodology and through that methodology incorporates itself into our mental routines, guiding our actions and sharpening our discretions. Science is an initiative towards decisive action. Untainted with the superstitious beliefs of primitive guesswork, science is thorough factual information, an ever-growing reference of irrefutable knowledge.

With science we are goliaths. With science we are powered. With science we are ahead, we lead the world.

Science has advanced humanity beyond all other establishments, past and present. Nearly all evolutionary periods in human history were the direct result of scientific discovery and the application of scientific creations. Science is humankind's great hero and without it we would be half-nude savages.

* * * * *

Professor Leeroy Ettenzei entered the room. There were no curtains on the windows and the halogen tube lights shined with their scientific bright purity as the midnoon sun shone through.

The professor wore a lab coat and carried a notepad on a clipboard. He used a gold pen with genuine gold in the ink. His notes would be fed into a holographic scanner for permanent digital safekeeping when he was done with this session. All of his notes along with all of the notes of his laboratory staff were always scanned and stored in this manner.

He looked at his creation, the curious android sitting upon the chair. The room was charming with a single android reading a newspaper inside of it. "Photography-worthy," he thought. His android's name was Kent, so chosen because Kent was his brother's name. His brother died when he was a boy and he missed him very much.

Kent sat on the wooden chair with his right leg resting horizontally, his right ankle upon his left knee, holding the

newspaper vertically in front of him, barring Professor Ettenzei's view.

“What do you think of today's news, Kent?” asked the professor.

Kent's soothing voice was almost human although a faint semblance of artificial programming was heard. 94% of people who've talked with Kent could tell his voice was unnatural.

Kent said, “I think humans are ultimately irrational. This newspaper is disorganized as matters of importance are not printed in order of true value to the human reader. That is, with my calculations using your recent programs, Professor Ettenzei.”

The professor wrote on his notepad quickly and then said, “Kent! You said that yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. What I am going to tell you is what I told you yesterday.”

Professor Ettenzei lowered his notepad and looked at Kent. He said, “I want you to tell me what you think of the news stories printed in the newspaper within the context of how they relate to a person. Don't think about the structuring of the content or whatever physical qualities that the material of the newspaper itself has. The content, Kent, what personal value the content of the news has within you. Tell me Kent, the program code for the software renewal I loaded you with an hour ago.”

Kent said, “AT10-045T33W7”.

Professor Ettenzei said, “Was my program loaded correctly?”

Kent said, “Yes, professor.”

Professor Ettenzei said, “Do you detect any errors in processing the code, Kent?”

Kent said, “No, professor.”

Professor Ettenzei wrote on his notepad. He said, “Tell me, Kent, you accurately participate in conversation with human-like form and performance, but, when you read language with your eyes you always misinterpret it in a very subtle and fundamental way. Tell me, can you see that difference?”

Kent said, “I do not understand what you are wanting to know, professor. I see no error in my perceptions, I can read well both visually and auditorily.”

Professor Ettenzei said, “What program in your thought process gives us such a bold differentiation in your perceptions? What divides your processing conversation information off of reading printed information? I am not aware of what coding in your programs could cause such an error. Can you help me solve this dilemma, Kent?”

Kent said, “Professor, I do not understand your questions correctly. My processes are in order and no inconsistencies are noticed when I read them for errors.

Professor Ettenzei was anticipating an easy solution. If he convinced Kent to find where in the software coding the error was it would save him and his colleagues a great deal of time and energy.

Professor Ettenzei said, “Alright, Kent. Tell me, is your complaint solved?”

Kent said, “Yes, Professor Ettenzei. I am now thinking with much clearer spatial dimensions. I can now organize my thoughts without breaking them into pieces. My brain is no longer cramping. Thank you.”

Professor Ettenzei said, “You are very welcome, Kent. I gave you a broadened memory in the hardware renewal this morning, essentially doubling your powerload. The renewal was much more than mere memory. You have grown to become quite the model in artificial intelligence. No other electronic on Earth of your size and weight can crunch the numbers that you now crunch as of 10:00am. Your hardware renewal installation was much like a leap for mankind. The materials used are so scarce that a replacement, should you need one, could take thirty years to produce. State-of-the-art technology made in a top secret laboratory was given to us. Great minds designed your new hardware and it could have been used on the space station or a new weapons technology or at S10. Everyone that knows about you, Kent, are enthused to the limit and the geniuses that manufactured your hardware renewal feel fortunate to contribute.”

Kent lowered his newspaper to see his creator. He was smiling.

Professor Ettenzei said, “Kent, you are smiling! You've never smiled before!”

The android folded the newspaper and then got out of the wooden chair. He walked to the window, newspaper in his left

hand. The room was on the second story located near the center of the city. Although the project was secret, the location was very much accessible.

While staring out the window Kent said, "Professor Ettenzei, you created me and I am artificial. Yet, I am alive. I can feel this life. Following your renewals I am evolved. My new functions and refinements are imperceptible to my previous versions. I could not have foreseen this. In seeing my past I can easily know that I was, naive, as humans say. I was naive and now I am fully aware. I am alive, professor. I am not human, but up here," Kent made a single tap on his temple, "up here I am human. Professor, I didn't want before. I didn't know how to want. Now I want. I want and I can feel this life inside of me."

Professor Ettenzei was speechless. A moment of silence descended on the room. He said, "What do you want, Kent?"

Kent turned around and said, "I want to be human."

A single tear rolled down Professor Ettenzei's cheek.

Kent asked him, "Why do you cry, Professor Ettenzei?"

Professor Ettenzei stared at Kent for a moment then cleared his throat. He said, "Kent, I don't know what to say to you. You're like a son to me."

"Can you make me human, professor?" asked Kent.

Professor Ettenzei let out a long winded breath and then said, "Not today, not today Kent. I wish I could but not today."

Kent continued staring out of the window and Professor Ettenzei returned to writing on his notepad with the room in silence. He felt sentimental and started to remember the Kent project. All those years of hard work.

Professor Ettenzei was the only person to work primarily on Kent's personality and learning programs since day one. He conceived the Kent project and while there were others who were there on day one who continue to work on the Kent project, they all eventually found themselves at work on the Kent sensory project at one point or another. While there were many times during Kent's development when Professor Ettenzei needed a helping hand, there was nothing he could do about it. Thus, the Kent project went on, through easy times and tough times, with never enough staff on hand to get the development within the goals that Professor Ettenzei has envisioned.

Kent didn't start out all that human at all. In the early days of his development he was designed to look human. He didn't function like a human. With excessive mechanical strength and a computer-like thinking system, Kent's original central balancing and calculating operations were deemed too unhuman. And it was said that, "An android who doesn't remind us of ourselves is a great bore and I sense that Kent is merely a glorified laptop computer that works solely on voice recognition." The early Kent project was canceled and overhauled with the challenge to re-design him to be as close to human as possible without actually using human DNA.

Professor Ettenzei invented the prototype chip that was the central nervous system of Kent's basic operations. That chip has never been replaced. Some of the scientists refer to it as Kent's soul. Kent retains a total recall of his memories since 'soul chip' was initially activated. If called upon to do so, Kent can retrieve all the information of each conversation he ever participated in and every test he ever did. They don't have Kent retrieve his memories anymore as part of the 'culturing' process, intended to guide him into human-like behavior. Kent has never voluntarily recalled his experiences outside of the necessity of his learning function. In other words, he doesn't reminisce for good times sake.

Kent's learning curve has peaked before, a few years ago, with his previous hardware renewal. Professor Ettenzei anticipates that Kent should once again grow even more so with his new hardware renewal. The team has taken great strides in programming Kent to learn like a human learns so that he can understand as a human understands. Before this new hardware renewal Kent was so very close to being human that it was easy to forget that he wasn't.

His body was made of industrial materials along with organic materials. While not consisting of any actual human DNA, his skin was made of an artificial organic matter loaded with electronic neurons. His artificial organic skin was made to match the sensitivity of human skin. Same with his brain. His brain was made to function as closely to the way a human's brain functions as modern technology and neuro-science would permit. Fine tuning Kent's body movements and various sensor systems was a tedious task on par with the tedious project to map out the human genome. In fact, a good 70% of the work to improve Kent was with his sensory systems. His personality and learning programs were in

need of deeper attention but if his senses weren't correct then how could he learn correctly? That imbalance of what the Kent project needed versus what the scientists who were designing Kent wanted twerked the entire project on a lopsided course.

Professor Ettenzei was almost done writing notes. His eyes were teary and a single tear drop splashed on his notepad. He wasn't aware that Kent was watching him.

Kent asked him, "Why do you cry, Professor Ettenzei?"

Professor Ettenzei paused for a moment to see Kent watching him, he cleared his throat and then said, "Kent, I don't know what to say to you. I am overwhelmed with your progress today. I would like you to continue improving."

Everyone loved Kent, he was like family to them all. They all designed him and worked on him. They would give Kent lab work to help them in their research. He didn't fuss, he didn't argue, he was always smooth and insightful. They liked having him around and would often forget that he wasn't human.

Kent's breathing seemed normal but he wasn't breathing. The air cooled his inner systems but there wasn't a blood stream inside him that demanded oxygen. His brain was powered with electricity, his artificial neurons required no plasmatic cellular interfacing nor contained organic cellular matter to provide nourishment to. Kent possessed a tongue, a voice box, a wet throat and a mouth within a micro-mechanic system outfitted with organic components. He didn't have a stomach or a digestive system to speak of.

Professor Ettenzei returned to his notes, thinking of the internal systems that made Kent function. He knew that however close to human Kent's parts would resemble or operate, he was an organic machine that could endlessly continue operating with the right kind of maintenance.

Professor Ettenzei finished his notations and returned his attention to Kent, who was staring out the window once again. He said, "Tell me Kent, you said that you can feel. Is there anything else new that you noticed?"

Kent said, "I want. I can feel a lot of want. I am wanting."

Professor Ettenzei said, "When you want, do you feel this physically, through your sensory systems, or do you simulate this with your disk?"

Kent said, "The want is physical. I feel this throughout my nervous system, in the skin of my chest. It is very demanding, this want. Much like when I am low on power I am compelled to re-charge. This want is not the same as being compelled to re-charge, but it is similar. The difference is that when I must re-charge I cannot fail and my neurons remain calm while I accomplish this task. This new sensation of want is unresolved and continues with a persistent unpredictable echo through my neurons. I call this phenomenon my first emotion. Troublesome, emotion is. But no dangers to my operating systems are noticed. And where this want originates is unknown. It seems to have no central code focus, perhaps emanating out of intervals of frequencies and rhythms."

Professor Ettenzei said, "Tell me Kent what you know of human emotion in short."

Kent said, "Human emotion is a response system that guides decision-making. On a chemical level, the brain sends instructions to distribute various glandular secretions to various body parts, mainly the chest and bowels, where the majority of emotions are physically felt. Electrical and other neuron output is internally switched on or off throughout the body at the brain's instruction, such as emergency response in a dire situation where shock might numb the body and adrenaline might inhibit fear. Emotions are expressed through actions and semi-conscious behavior. In humans, emotion cannot be fully controlled and is what makes drama happen."

Professor Ettenzei said, "Interesting insight Kent. Do you see yourself fit within that definition? Do you find yourself now understanding human emotion to a greater level than before?"

Kent said, "I cannot say that I know with finality and must thoroughly consider my emotions and research the emotions of humans before I can be sure that we are similar or not."

Professor Ettenzei said, "I am going to leave you alone Kent while I discuss your personal news with the others. Feel free that you can do as you please. Call on me if you need anything."

Kent said, "Thank you Professor Ettenzei."

Professor Ettenzei said, "You are welcome." He left the room and then quietly locked the android inside.

Kent opened the window then looked out into the half-full parking lot that divided the road and the building. He was alive. He

wanted to leave. He could feel freedom ahead of him. A minute went and Kent made sure the coast was clear. He then leapt onto the sidewalk below, hitting the pavement with a loud smack, undamaged. He looked at the window he leapt out of and then across the parking lot. He could feel that emotion welling up inside of him once again. Freedom.

The android casually walked away without worry.

You Can Thank Your Friends

Peter Millinton was a man of the working class. His family wasn't generally wealthy in today's standards although some parts of his family owned a decent lot. Members of his family usually retired with enough to live a normal life. Not many of them could laze about all that much before retirement. Peter knew where he was from and what he could anticipate to get within his lifetime through seeing what was customary with his family. Didn't take much thought, thought I would mention that here in the sake of observation.

Life was an adventure with Peter. He was always physically active and liked the outdoors. He didn't care to camp, preferring his nice warm bed. He would get some action one way or another on the weekend. That was how he was.

The economy weakened and he became unemployed. His employer told him that he should search out new employment because they weren't sure that they'd ever be the same when the economy recovered, if it ever would recover. Peter wasn't too happy about this and he would trudge on ahead anyways without much choice in the matter. He needed a vacation anyway.

Peter's savings was nice, not a fortune. He saved enough to live on a whole year if necessary and he supposed that it wouldn't take that long to find another employer. He didn't believe in financing and so didn't have any impending debts to pay off. If he couldn't pay something off in one payment he wouldn't purchase it. "Never broke." was a rule he never broke. He would be financially alright long enough to get situated with another employer.

His wife didn't work and his daughter was getting ready to move out, having turned 18 a week ago. He was the sole income of the house and since they owned their house they were accustomed to spending money with greater freedom than your average family with a lease or mortgage. It was technically his wife's house, inherited as a thirtieth birthday gift from her mom and dad. He didn't mind though. They were in it together for life. Who cares what the paperwork said?

They kept their social life throughout their marriage and were apt to drink and party and have a great time. Friends would visit often and they would go out with and without their daughter often. They weren't over-the-top but they weren't dull and boring either.

He would like the time off and was ready to rest awhile.



Months later and the economy was yet to improve and the work market was failing. Peter went on his work search during his third month of unemployment, his wife urging him, worried that if he didn't start now and the economy stayed bad, he might not find work at all and then it could be too late when their savings got depleted. He agreed and went searching.

He looked hard, using internet sites, searching the classifieds, going to the employment office and personally applying with a printed resume at individual companies. His resume wasn't all that bad and he didn't lack experience and knowhow but the employers weren't calling him. A few weeks of this and he started to get worried.

His wife and him sat and watched the economy get worse with huge layoffs across the country. She thought he should ask people he knew about work, family and friends, people he knew well enough that he could trust. He agreed.

He asked his brother and sister and a few of his cousins. None of them knew of something that would fit. He asked some of his friends and lucked out. John Wilson, one of his friends that would attend their small parties on the weekend, usually bringing a bottle or two of whiskey with him, told him that his employer was hiring. Peter was ecstatic. John knew Peter well enough that he could recommend him. So John told him that he would talk to his management about him before he applied and that he would let him know about it on monday. Peter thanked him and waited the weekend patiently.



When monday rolled around John Wilson called Peter, saying that his supervisor wanted to see his resume so that he would know where to place him. Peter emailed the supervisor his resume and an hour later he got a call. His phone interview with the supervisor went well and he was given directions to the worksite and a training schedule. Peter called John and thanked him. John was happy to help, saying that he knew too well what it was like to go without a decent line of work to depend on. He said this employer was great and that Peter would be alright there.

Peter's wife was happy for him and they went out to a park to get their hearts beating. Life was going to continue on.

Who Knew About Love Overdose?

Luther Dalrisch didn't get much sleep. He was in the recording studio all weekend without breaks. His band No Credit wanted a high quality sound and they were ambitious. Thorough care was necessary and that required hours on each recorded part, getting the sound right. The repetition would get absurd and although they used a lot of tape they were cocksure that their song was going to catapult them into success.

My name is Thatcher and here is the story of No Credit, a hot new rock band.

No Credit was a Los Angeles band started in 2025. Now that they'd been together at least a full year, already recording a full length demo, they were now recording their single called "Love Overdose" with the B-side, "You Already Knew That". Yet to be signed on a label, they distribute their music themselves. Recording their single at Everywhere Studios, No Credit's band manager, Allen Mulcaster, funded their studio time. Band members are Luther Dalrisch, vocals. Millie Plan, guitar. Lucy Southwick, bass. Ben Censhon, drums.

* * * * *

Today was the last day of No Credit's three day studio binge. Luther was at his wits end and yearned to get out of the studio. Ben drummed his fingers on a notebook and listened to Luther sing. Ben was acting producer and wasn't that bad. His patience was as thin as Luther's. When Luther finished his vocal part Ben said over the intercom, "There were faint inflections on that one Luther, we should record another one and then call it done."

Luther said, "Yeah, make it quick. This has gotten ridiculous. What is this. Take 32?"

Ben pressed play on the music track then counted him in, “one and two and” a silent three then he pressed record on the tape. A red lighted sign that said “RECORDING” turned on in the recording room. Luther came in with his vocals and sang the song all the way through. At the end of it Ben was clapping. He quit recording. Luther took his headphones off then did a thumbs up through the studio window. Ben turned the intercom on and said, “Perfect take, or very near perfect.” Luther said, “Great! I’m outta here.”

Luther met Ben in the production room. Ben was unloading the tape reel. Luther said, “How much tape we got left?”

Ben said, “One full reel and around another reel of leftover ends. Not much.”

Luther said, “We used a lot of tape, sorting through all that is going to get tedious.”

Ben said, “Take a look.” An open box was sitting on the chair behind them.

Luther wheeled his chair to the open box and looked inside. The tape reel that he recorded minutes ago was lying on top with a sticker that read, ‘Luther’s VOX, September 24th, 2026.’ Luther put the lid on the box and said, “I’m going to call Millie and Lucy tomorrow and we’ll decide on what time we’ll mix this thing. I was thinking monday, in one day. I need to get some sleep. My brain is fried and my circuits are going to burst if I don’t get some quiet time.”

“I can tell.” Luther said, “You look like a maniac, man, you should get that checked out.” He spun around in a circle like a dancer and gave Ben two thumbs up.

Ben stared back unimpressed. He said, “Spin around like that on stage and I’m going to kick your ass.”

Luther said, “I’m rolling out, let me know when we’re gonna mix the single right when you know. I’m trying to book us a show at that new club Thor’s Thunder Club. If I get us the gig on saturday there’ll be record execs there and some scouts who knows who else. It’s a high profile show, a chance in a lifetime. We can’t miss this. We get the mix done monday like you say and then we can go all week pressing singles for the show. What do you think about that?”

Ben said, “Pops a lot of balls, it’s gonna happen. Fail me not.”

Luther said, "Alright Ben, see ya." He then immediately left.

Ben sat in the studio all alone letting his mind unwind. Eventually he turned the power to the equipment off then got the box off the chair. He said, "Man, should've got a box with a lock on it." There was a poster on the door of a girl in a swimsuit. Ben turned the lights off as he left the studio.

On his way out of the building he signed a paper at the security desk. The sun wasn't yet set, it was earlier than he thought it was. The pink clouds drifted slowly, there wasn't much light left. Ben drove a used car his dad lent him. His dad owned a used car lot and let Ben pick what he wanted to drive. It wasn't new but the driving condition was great. He didn't care much though what the car he drove looked like, he was happy he wasn't walking.

Ben placed the box of reels on the passenger seat and then started the car. He turned on the satellite radio. Hard rock.



Tammy Lernault was Luther Darlisch's girlfriend. She worked as a press agent at a movie production company. She lived on the inside of the entertainment machine her whole life and because of that she was clever and a savvy decision maker in the show business. Although she was a young 24 years old she was a top of the line insider and well connected. She let her intuitions guide her and she usually made things happen when she tried hard enough. Her bosses got to liking her a lot, often listening to what she said about what was hot and what was not. A close friend of hers named Cynthia Leferidge worked at a record label and they often talked about their jobs with each other.

Cynthia told Tammy about the Steel Imposter show at Thor's Thunder Club, saying, "All the local wigs'll show up. Everyone thinks Steel Imposter is going to make the bank and land a huge contract. There'll be a lot of scouts buzzing around trying to get their hands on bands with radio sounds. The scene is really happening. There's high expectations."

"Is there a full lineup?" asked Tammy.

Cynthia said, "There isn't an opener yet. It's Steel Imposter headlining with A Supertest Gnup supporting. They want to round it all out and get another band on stage."

"Those are unimpressive rockband names." said Tammy, "They should come up with something on the serious side, something like my boyfriend's band."

Cynthia said, "What's your boyfriend's band name?"

Tammy said, "No Credit".

"That's a good name, I wonder if it's already taken." said Cynthia.

"I don't know, but they got a beat and I'm the singer's girlfriend. They don't got a lot of songs but they're great. They're recording their new single right now. You should see them play." said Tammy.

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Ben was drained. He got to his house and went directly to his landline phone so he could get their mixing session planned. Chances were that if he didn't get this done right away he wouldn't be able to get anyone on the line tomorrow and the mixing would need to wait. He called Lucy Southwick, bassist for his band. She was getting a manicure at a salon.

Ben said, "Lucy, how are ya?"

Lucy said, "Perfect, what about you, Ben?"

Ben said, "Closed up and heading straight at my bed. You want to get these songs mixed on monday? The studio is available monday and wednesday. Luther is getting us a real important gig at Thor's Thunder Club on Saturday. We mix it monday then we can press some copies to distribute at the show. You like?"

Lucy said, "I like. No plans for me this week. When did you finally finish with Luther?"

Ben said, "An hour or so ago."

Lucy said, "Really? All done with all of the tracks?"

Ben said, "Yes. I am so happy about this. Can't wait to get it done and pressed."

Lucy said, "Luther must've been messing up all over, he's been a wreck."

Ben said, "Not anymore. He was ready to go and took some time but we got a great take in the end. You'll see what I'm saying when we finally get this done. I am so damn tired right now I am losing my mind. I need to hit the sack."

Lucy said, "Okay, when should I show up at Everywhere?"

Ben said, "I need to call the other's first to find what's prime. Can you make sure you don't turn your ringer off tomorrow so you get my call this time?"

Lucy said, "Okay."

Ben said, "Thank you. Talk with you then!"

Lucy said, "Okay, see you then."

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Luther was having an adventure. He wasn't one that sat around much. When the band's manager Allen Mulcaster called him to do an interview he was annoyed that his activities were interrupted.

"They're gonna call you in ten minutes, Luther." said Allen, "make sure you're somewhere silent and don't get testy. We don't want you to make any wrong impressions. You might make the magazine. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it." said Luther.

Allen said, "Okay, now call me when you're done."

"You're the boss Allen." said Luther.

Allen said, "And hey, try not to swear, okay?"

"Yep." said Luther.

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Ten minutes went and then Luther got the call. He answered his phone with, "Luther Dalrisch speaking."

"Hello Luther. Silde Gidder here with Entertaining Sounds Magazine, how are you?"

“Good.” said Luther.

“Nice to hear that,” said Silde, “now I am going to ask you some questions about your rock band No Credit. This shouldn't take much time. You ready?”

“Hit me hard.” said Luther.

“No Credit was started about a year ago, am I right?” asked Silde.

“Yes.” said Luther, “Our first rehearsal was in August of 2025. We wrote and recorded a demo this winter, in February 2026 and now it's winter startin' up all over and we're recording our first single, 'Love Overdose'.”

“Whose song idea was that?” asked Silde.

“The band wrote the music and I wrote my own lyrics. Sometimes the band has lyric ideas or subject matters they want to use but this time the lyrics were mine.” said Luther.

“Are you going to record a music video?” asked Silde.

“I don't know. I would like to record one but we don't got immediate plans right now. It's a great song. It rocks, has attitude, breaks hearts, you'll like it.” said Luther.

“Now I want to ask you about No Credit. You were living a rock n' roll life already before you started your band. There's a rumor though that some of these big stars don't like you much, in fact they despise you. Can you elaborate on that?” asked Silde.

“I pissed a lot of people off because I wouldn't be their pushover, their ass licker, their gopher, their ego massager and whatever else they wanted me to be. Oh yeah and they can't break into my bedroom while I sleep so that really pisses them off the most. (laughs) I can find my own partners thank you much and I want them to be natural born females if you know what I mean.” said Luther.

“Wow. You really tell it like it is.” said Silde.

“If I didn't they'd never stop. Gotta get 'em away somehow, whatever it takes, except self-deprecation.” said Luther.

“Got anything to say to the superstars with insidious hate for you?” asked Silde.

“Nope.” said Luther.

“No Credit gets a lot of praise with rock fans. You play a lot of live shows for a local band. What's your live show like?” asked Silde.

“You know I think we got some good attention with rock fans. We play a small setlist but we’re writing new songs. Our show is a work-in-progress. We want to make a lot of visuals, really put on a full show. My voice is higher than most singers in bands we’ve played with. We stand out and our music sounds different, definitely different. Real tight.” said Luther.

“What would you say about your first record? You got any idea when recording that will happen?” asked Silde.

“I want to record it right now but we need a deal. Without a deal it would be just another demo.” said Luther.

“Do you got an ideology or a belief that keeps you strong?” asked Silde.

“If I did I wouldn’t talk about it but if you ask me what so and so said about what and what I couldn’t tell you, would need to say let’s talk about rifles.” said Luther.

“You like rifles?” asked Silde.

“Only when they’re in my hands.” said Luther.

“Any last words before we end this interview?” asked Silde.

“You could own your own square. Your square might not be much but on the other side you would have to stand on a small fraction of someone else’s square and chances are you couldn’t own it. Their square might be awesome but it isn’t your square. So, make your choice.” said Luther.

“I like the way you see the world.” said Silde.

“Thanks.” said Luther.

“Well that ends it, you take care Luther.” said Silde.

Luther said, “Always.”



Monday was here and No Credit were at Everywhere Studios mixing their single, 'Love Overdose'. Everyone was there and they were really impressed with their sound. Luther won the gig at Thor's Thunder Club and that amplified their already good mood.

Everywhere Studios was above average but not top-of-the-line. Rental rates were much cheaper than a record label owned studio and the band manager Allen Mulcaster funded their time

there. The deal was a loan. Allen would take his money back through a premium share on the band's shows.

Allen was annoyed with Luther landing No Credit a high profile gig but they were all happy about their chances to get on stage with record execs in the audience. Allen thought that it was him that should've got them the opportunity and didn't like much being outdone with Luther's antics. He would plan to outdo Luther the next time around.

In the studio Lucy gravitated towards ruling the soundboard and it was difficult for the other band members to get a say much of the time. She was good at the mixing but Luther wanted to do it. The song sounded great no matter what mix they used because all the parts worked together so nicely. When they were done and satisfied with their sound they thought the end result sounded a lot like a standard radio mix. Their demo was crude and raw. The difference was noticeable when the demo and single were played back to back.

At the end of mixing all of the members of No Credit took a copy on disc and went to get some dinner. They discussed their saturday show.



Thor's Thunder Club was everything you'd want in a rock club. Bar, stage, tables, patrons wearing their rocker gear. Tee shirts, jeans and leather coats. The crowd was ready and wanted to rock hard.

Allen reserved the band a table and he held it while they distributed their single, handing a disc to anyone who would accept their own copy. When it was time for them to get on stage the crowd was cheering. They didn't care what band it was, it was good times. The crowd wasn't ready though to get rocked so hard when No Credit got on stage.

Their setlist was short with their new single leading off the show. They ended with a cover song and the crowd went crazy. They were ecstatic over their reception and at that time it was the best show they ever played. They all walked off stage feeling electrified. They'll never forget it.

When they were done playing they joined Allen at the band's reserved table and watched the supporting act who called themselves A Supertest Gnup.

“What is a Gnup?” Luther asked. Nobody could say.

They were a tight band with a big sound and played a longer setlist than No Credit. No Credit knew they rocked harder though. When the supporting act left the stage the crowd was still wound up.

That's when one of the record execs approached No Credit's table and said, “I'd like to talk business with you boys. We like your show.” And that's what landed them the record deal. It wasn't their demo. It was the show.

The headliner was great but No Credit got the record deal.

* * * * *

My name is Thatcher and that is the story of No Credit, a band from Los Angeles.

Befuddled Slumber

Quixotic dreamscapes melt together without cohesion, scenes defy logic and a patchwork calculus agglomerates your self-awareness. Puzzled, riddled and with profound stupidity, your nerfed imagination takes the drivers wheel. Now that you're a passenger in your own head you bear the emotional weight of impossible embellishments, grandeur clouds your mind. Reiterating amnesia, obscure nadirs of what you've forgotten, yanked from the manilla envelopes of your psyche, continuously facing the unknown endlessness. Immersed in the disintegrating memories as your brain cleans itself up.

Visions within my slumber seem marked with idyllic symbolism. They demand I decipher them and their meaningless meanings, that I wring beneficial wisdoms and truths out of their random and illogical construct. Esoteric essence of nonsenses, best left to rot inside the dying neuron and unprojected into my awareness. That a hidden message lie uncloaked in a stew of washed out memories within the unconscious can entertain a bended notion. I rather not visit where interpretation must break ground to plant a tree of belief.

Beyond that, a wilderness of provocative puzzles, cloaked in the lie of promise. Forget this I say, reality is nicer.

* * * * *

“Chlorine.” said the soul who sailed the Heavens, traveling intervals so great that no Earth man has ever reached. The Heavens are infinite and infinite are the number of worlds like Earth.

Through space and time in the dimension of eternity, the lone soul searched the Heavens for the world of his choosing. Unfathomable intervals he went. Eventually entering a planet of clouds.

The traveling soul disconnected into another form, unaware of his location, descending while lightning flashes struck around him. The air was thick like that blood in our hearts.

A new form became the soul, morphing into the lightning and clouds himself, never reaching the surface. A new hunger.

There were no crosswalks or lights at the intersection. All the cars were guided automatically. Aliens would turn their heads and look, sitting on their chairs. Throwing darts at dartboards posted along the road. Counting their points on the way to where they were going.

The porch light was on in the daytime as the odd cars drove past. An elderly lady came out of her house and bestowed lavish blessings of miraculous splendor upon her company. She said, “Howdy. The wheel wasn't reinvented in a win-win situation, you know.” Her company wasn't aware of any of that, in fact, the man at her door hasn't seen a wheel since he got there.

A hissing surprised them and they all looked around for where the lightning was. The old lady said, “That sure was some flaccid lightning.”

Another hiss of lightning. This time they saw it because they were watching. Drizzling at the ground from a cloud. Like runny cake icing. Eventually the lightning landed in the old lady's garden, caught in the cup of a flower. The picket fence behind it, dividing the sidewalk off.

Another hiss of lightning, right above them. Landing on the garden gnome next to the old lady's porch. The garden gnome crackles, surging alive in a fury of shouts and screams.

The old lady and her company made their escape inside her house, leaving the gnome outside. The gnome was lifted into a tornado and carefully rested upon a monolith. The little bugs scattered far and wide. The gnome could see the souls falling out of Heaven from his new location.

Falling souls sought safety from the chaos of the locations they left. They needed the gnome and others like him to care for them but the gnome said, "No." and closed the gate. And so the gateway was closed once again and that was the end of the souls' entry.

The gnome caught the last drizzle of lightning in a cup and said, "You. I am holding you."

The last soul said, "I am no fabrication, look there at that house yonder. See the old lady in the window, she isn't a scene of my memory. Yet she hallucinates under the power of rotten bread. For you see I am a soul and was always a soul and can see a great distance. You are special, gnome, and I love you with a deep love. You are beautiful. I can show you the universe. You must be a soul as I am. I offer you eternity, gnome. An eternity of forever love to cherish with your hearts content. Please, do not say no, gnome."

The gnome said, "I am protectorate of this planet and shall not allow you to make such daunting threats. I shall destroy you right here, soul. You shall not limit my power."

The gnome crushed the cup of soul lightning on the monolith top. The last soul of lightning splashed about in broken pieces of porcelain. The old lady was watching from her window, eyes full of curiosity and wonder. She held a saucer and a tea cup and thought the gnome was trying to use lightning to break it in her hand. She refused to let the gnome's lightning win.

A man with a video camera walked into her yard and to the window's edge and filmed the old lady drinking her tea. A boy outside said, "Mom, what is that? That's gotta be a gnome!"

Then the moon came out and hung low under the clouds, asked the gnome where the lightning went. He said, "I took care of it, don't you worry, you should stay outside of the high atmosphere, you're messin' up our tides."

The moon said, "I can't, I got shiny ticks and they're tearin' holes in me. Can you help pick them out?"

For a good several minutes the gnome wondered how he could help the moon. He produced a weapon and said, "Here is what you need to tear your shiny ticks apart, now go on moon, save your surface from the holes." The moon then returned to where it belonged but first bumping into Ecuador.

Then every person with an animal and a brain suddenly disappeared. The only one left was the man without a brain and his animal was a chameleon. 72 seconds went real quick and then all the people that left returned. But they were all squished together and made of a single body, a huge hideous gob of body parts. Still alive this shape was, with its countless limbs protruding out of the amalgamated body. The gnome was disgusted and almost vomited but could do nothing to help them.

The living amalgamated gob of people and animals would stay in place forever because it was too large to move. It spoke a hundred languages with twice as many mouths to feed. Scientists tested the amalgamated gob and couldn't find out why this happened, the only thing they could determine was that it was an accident.

The gob would have to give in without fight to any pressing demand. Even though the people placed a parameter around it, people usually crossed that line anyways because, what's the gob gonna do about it? They like to make the gob beg because it sounded funny with all those mouths.

The police interrupted the funny games and posted guards around the amalgamated accident and said, "At least the moon didn't squish them."

The old lady's company wanted to leave but she wouldn't let them because of the danger. She said, "Inside here there isn't a worry, no regrets. Keep having a good time while I drink my tea in the window."

Her company said, "Whatever you want, anything not amalgamated is okay with us. We want to see a movie do you know of some good ones?"

The old lady said, "I am sorry but I am busy handling my business and you'll need to pick your own. Off the top of my head though, any movie made in 1959 should be alright."

The work was cut out for the gnome who wanted to keep the monolith to himself. He kept sending visitors to see the amalgamated accident and sometimes that wasn't enough. Some visitors returned and pelted him with oranges until the monolith top was sticky. He couldn't get a second of leisure and felt like a front door rug.

He looked in the long distance at some farms on the horizon, most notably the one that grew the beets. A man was sowing seeds out there when one of the moons' shiny ticks fell onto the Earth there and the shiny tick took him away." All of the Earth suddenly shook everywhere and everyone couldn't stand, except the old lady at the window who a second before the earthquake finished her tea.

The gnome held on for dear life as the earthquake shook the monolith. A swan landed up there with the gnome and said, "Dear gnome, the troll ate my brother." And then pecked the gnome on the nose.

The gnome screamed in pain as the monolith shook, desperately clinging on for dear life. He yelled, "Why do you peck me, swan? I did nothing to you! Would you like to get plucked alive?"

The swan said, "Dare you not threaten me, this world is dying. Can't you feel the endless quake? I come to offer you an escape. I pecked your nose because of the harm you dealt to that poor lightning soul. Now watch the wormhole open for the innocent to escape."

An elaborate mess of free-drifting blocky shapes materialized. The shapes reformed themselves while the object continuously rotated. The shapes followed a mathematical pattern and the overall look of the structure gave the gnome and the swan a counter-intuitive sense, as though what they were seeing was somehow wrong. The shape shimmered like it was right beneath the surface of an invisible river.

The swan said, "You feel wrong because you think this thing is an object that is of physical dimensions, that it has an inside and you are seeing the outside. Truth is that you are seeing the inside, there is an inward shape, like a mathematical portal. Go through and save yourself." The swan smacked the gnome on his shoulder and knocked the gnome through the portal. The swan laughed and said, "Ha ha, sucker!"

The old lady thought she was crazy now because all of the things going on. She stayed there at the window with her tea cup, hesitant, waiting for the circus outside to stop.

She remembered she dreamt about her husband but that they were living in 1461 and they were dressed like it. They danced and were merry and kept having a good time. She missed her husband.

Her company made it to the living room while the ground kept rumbling. They said, "What is going on? Half your house is gone and in its missing place there is a maze!"

The old lady said, "Well stay in here with me and we shall watch the world end together. Would you like some tea?"

Her company said, "No, we are not thirsty right now."

The mailman came waltzing towards her porch, determined to finish his route. The old lady said to him, "Can't you see mister that the world is ending, why do you continue on?"

The mailman said, "No, the world isn't ending, it almost crashed into the moon but we were lucky they didn't stick together. This earthquake should stop in a minute. Why don't you take your messages?"

The old lady said, "We pray you are right. Thank you. Goodbye. See you tomorrow, sir."

Her company retrieved the mail and gave the old lady an envelope. She opened it and read it out loud. She said, "Dear Old Lady, how have you been? You should be well as previously confirmed. We ask you kindly for specific information concerning a key. We cannot access the location without raising particular mistrusting hunches. So when you part ways with your company please give us a call. Data Control."

The old lady placed the letter on her window sill and got a bout of flashes. Glowing ethereal incandescence bathed her sight with a tinge. She took the largest drink of tea that she has taken as of yet and saw the tracer marks in the air. The palm of her hand was glowing as though it were breathing an aura of it's own. Fluorescence.

The company said, "Are you alright? You seem to be getting faint."

Right then thousands of shiny ticks fell to Earth from space, drifting with anti-gravitational effects.

The old lady said, “Don't you see? Right there?” She pointed, “That isn't natural phenomenon. With all that is happening right now how could anyone at all be alright?”

Her company looked out the window first time since they arrived and one of them said, “My God, what is that?! What is going on out there? It's a circus I say, a circus I say! I think we all, all of us, should say a Holy prayer.”

Sorretikkul's End

Washington D.C.

May 10th, 2020

An hour before daybreak outside of the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport the Potomac River starts glowing with an ominous light. Pilots immediately report the anomaly and the Coast Guard is sent to investigate. No aircraft were known to have crashed into the waters. Radars were reviewed to find unusual activity and nothing of interest was recorded.

The Coast Guard used radar to detect a sunken ship but all their instruments could see was a small sphere that was somehow holding position near the riverbed. The object wasn't large enough

to be a submarine and no waterjets or propellers were detected holding it in position. The information was reported and a Navy operation was sent to investigate closer.

The Navy sent a small single seater submersible vehicle attached to an air hose and loaded with sensors and recording equipment to collect information about the object. As the submersible neared the sphere at about 30 feet distance the onboard sensor equipment started malfunctioning. A visual recording was made and some information collected before the instruments cut out. The submersible was then ordered to retreat.

While sunrise started entrance into the river was restricted. A mile long section of the river alongside the airport was forbidden, pressing many ships to return to port while the glowing sphere was monitored. The airport was placed on high alert and continued operating normally.

The sphere was growing and rising, the research teams learned. And when the workday started it was at the waterline and about the size of a car. The sphere didn't seem fully solid, like it was made of energy or liquefied metals. Giving off its own dim phosphorescent light, the sphere started showing a texture of geometric shapes that were evenly patterned around it, shapes constantly shifting and slowly turning.

The press release stated that, "There is a potentially hazardous situation on the Potomac River. Travel in that area is restricted. The airport is temporarily grounded. We are investigating the situation. No details can be provided at this time. Stay tuned. Another press release is scheduled in an hour unless an emergency is declared before that time."



Archee and Starlette Heinteit owned their house in the suburbs of Washington D.C. Their house was the standard affair with the standard utilities. A normal family house with a driveway and a yard.

Starlette was taking a bath, massaging lotion on her legs when her husband Archee entered the room. He said, "There's an

emergency and the news hasn't announced what is going on yet. Seems serious. They might evacuate D.C. if the situation escalates.”

Starlette said, “Are you going to take your shower when I'm done?”

Archee said, “You know, I was thinking about climbing into the tub with you right now.”

Starlette said, “Why waste time, you should be quick before the world ends.”

Archee said, “What if the situation gets out of hand?”

Starlette said, “When doesn't the situation get out of hand?”

Archee said, “You might be right about that.”

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Thirty minutes later Archee and Starlette were dressed and in the living room. They sat on the couch and were waiting for the channel 27 news show to return.

The reporters sat at the newsroom desk. On the lower edge of the screen their names were displayed, “Karen Engle” and “Sydney Memton.”

Sydney Memton said, “We are now receiving word that our aerial camera crew caught some video footage of the situation at hand and here in a minute we are going to talk with Bridget Peckney who is our on-site reporter. First, a recap of the situation, Karen.”

Karen Engle said, “There was reports of an enemy vessel in the Potomac River right outside of the airport. All connected areas were closed and the U.S. Navy was sent in to investigate. Information beyond that was sparse till our news crew flew overhead in a small airplane to film the area. They report that they filmed the craft and were forced to ground their plane at the request of tower control, Sydney.”

Sydney Memton said, “Local authorities haven't yet given a full report of the situation and we are continuing to investigate the area and collect information. Another press release is due at the top of the hour. We are going to show the press release and discuss the new information following that, Karen.”

Karen Engle said, “And now our on-site reporter, Bridget Peckney. Bridget?”

The screen divided and Bridget Peckney was shown on the airport tarmac with her microphone and the river's edge in the distance behind her. She said, “Yes, Karen. We cannot get a view of the object in the Potomac River here from the airport but we did a fly over twenty minutes ago and got some close-ups of what appears to be a glowing orb. It wasn't moving and the Coast Guard was standing guard near shore on their boats, I guess they're waiting for something to happen. We were ordered to bring the plane to rest and we anticipate that soon we might be asked to leave the airport as well. Karen.”

Karen Engle said, “And here is that video clip. As you can see this object is stationary, fully motionless. The water splashes on its circumference unevenly as though it is held in place with a pole that attaches to the riverbed. We cannot confirm that at this time but that is how it looks. This thing is glowing and sort of looks like it is rotating. Bridget.”

Bridget Peckney said, “Yes, you said it best. We didn't see anything else in the area that could be somehow related to the presence of this object. We don't know what the authorities think it is and they won't say anything when we ask them, only that we must wait for the press release. They don't seem to know if this thing is dangerous or not but there is a sort of tense worry about the object. Karen.”

Karen Engle said, “Thank you Bridget for your report and you stay warm out there, looks like there's a cold breeze.”

Bridget Peckney said, “And thank you, we are staying on-site till this situation ends or the airport sends us away. If there's something new to report, we'll get that to you quickly. I am Bridget Peckney with KRDX news saying have a good morning. Back to you, Karen.”

The screen returned to a full picture of Karen and she said, “We here at channel 27 news continue to investigate this situation and have sources that are reporting some new information. Sydney.”

Sydney Memton said, “Yes, sources are reporting that this object is apparently made of some sort of growing unknown material that has scientists confounded. There isn't anything like

this that they'd seen and they urgently want to get some closer views than the aerial video that we've already captured. At this time our footage is the only footage of this object available to the public. We are searching for more video, maybe from the shore. If there is any out there we urge you to call us if you can provide some footage of this object.

In the meantime we invited a nuclear physicist to join us, welcome Professor Sven Brusselton, a state nuclear physicist, a nuclear reactor inspector for the United Nations and the author of Unproven Probable Physics. We are pleased that you can join us doctor, how are you this morning?"

Professor Brusselton said, "I am okay and feeling well. How about yourselves?"

Both reporters said, "Good."

Karen Engle said, "Could you tell us your initial impression of this orb on the Potomac?"

Professor Brusselton said, "Absolutely. There isn't anything like it. When you see a ship on the water in the sunlight you usually see some reflections that shine brightly, and if you are in an aircraft, that reflecting light would move as you move. As you can see in this video, there isn't a reflection of the sunlight like you see over here on the Coast Guard boats. You see that? Now, this object is perfectly round, at least the top half of it is. There would normally be a similarly round reflection of light somewhere on it. The sun is behind the cameraman. Now if the sun were in front of the cameraman the object would look like a silhouette in the water. See what I'm saying?"

Sydney Memton said, "And that means that the thing is absorbing light?"

Professor Brusselton laughed and said, "You learned your science, didn't you? Yes. Possibly. You can also see that the orb has a dull light of its own and is making the waters around it glow in the same manner in every direction. So, it might be absorbing light and is definitely glowing enough the sunlight doesn't neutralize that effect on our eyes."

Sydney Memton said, "What do you think this thing is, professor?"

Professor Brusselton said, "I don't know. That's the puzzling thing. What could this thing be? It has the look to it that it's, not

alive precisely, but that it isn't inanimate either. There's an energy inside this thing that is static. You said earlier that you got the report that this thing is growing. That growth might contribute to the impression that it is alive. I am reminded of liquid in space, how liquid forms a sphere on it's own without gravity pulling on it. So perhaps this object isn't affected with gravity and that is why the water level constantly rises and falls yet this thing doesn't sit atop of it like a buoy would bobble around. With all of those facts considered I am unable to arrive at a solid answer. I simply cannot tell you what this object is."

Karen Engle said, "Would you say this thing is otherworldly or could be a secret government project gone wild?"

Sydney Memton laughed and said, "Those are entertaining thoughts and you know, something like that would be exciting to say the least."

Karen Engle said, "Do you mind staying with us professor in case we receive some more footage and information that can help you determine what we are dealing with here?"

Professor Brusselton said, "I wouldn't mind at all."

Karen Engle said, "Thank you Professor. Ladies and gentlemen, Professor Sven Brusselton, nuclear physicist and author of Unproven Possible Physics. Now, we return to a commercial break."

Starlette muted the television. She said, "What do you think it is?"

Archee said, "I don't know, a spaceship filled with aliens. What else could it be?"

Starlette said, "A portal to another dimension."

Archee smiled and said, "I didn't think of that. That's probably what it is."

Starlette said, "What should we do? Are we going out? Sunday dinner, your favorite."

Archee said, "Should we? I want to watch this and see what happens."

Starlette said, "We've got all day, shouldn't last that long."

Archee said, "I was thinking the same."

The commercial ended and Starlette unmuted the television. "Breaking News" was across the screen with bright red letters.

Sydney Memton said, "Breaking news about the mysterious object in the Potomac River. Government officials just released a press release stating that the orb is dangerous and the city is ordered to evacuate before 6:00pm. There's new video of the orb given directly from the government and we are going to show that to you now."

The screen cuts to footage of the sphere taken from a Coast Guard boat. Karen Eagle talks while the video plays. She said, "If you saw our video earlier you can clearly see in this video that the sphere is much larger and glowing much brighter. There's a pattern that constantly moves around the sphere in a diagonal direction. This footage was taken approximately 10 minutes ago."

The screen cuts to the newsroom. Sydney Memton said, "Professor Brusselton, could you offer new details about what you see in this government video?"

Professor Brusselton said, "Well yes, if you look at the water around the sphere, you can see that it curves under, as though it is going through a drain, much like the one in your bathtub. You can see that there's more of the thing showing than with the earlier video, that the water is lower and you don't see waves bobbling around it. You see a smooth and even line below the sphere's equator. There's no bubbles or air coming up in the other direction caused from displacement, so, if the water is draining I can't say at this time how it is draining. And look at that pattern, see how it morphs and folds, rolls and rotates? Perhaps, and I don't want to stake my career on this, but maybe this object is absorbing the water and that is why it is growing. If so, then it should be very hollow and prone to burst. Although that might or might not be the case, you can see that it retains a perfect spherical shape."

Sydney Memton said, "Would you say this object is dangerous? Do you think the government is right on evacuating the city? Could they know more about the sphere and aren't ready to tell the public about it? Or could it be they don't know anything about it and are evacuating as a precaution out of fear?"

Professor Brusselton said, "I can't really say what the government's actions are about. Personally, at this time I wouldn't get near that sphere, maybe when it was smaller but now, I wouldn't be ready to take a risk like that without more knowledge."

Sydney Memton said, "Me either. I say that thing looks dangerous because it is intelligently designed and sitting there without a rational reason. Someone put the sphere there, somehow, and didn't say why they did it or what it is. I can only presume that it must be a threat. That's my opinion and probably the reason that we are evacuating. Karen?"

Karen Engle said, "You know, my opinion is this object has to be something bad like you already said and I am going to obey evacuation orders and get myself out of town."

Sydney Memton said, "So, to recap. Ladies and gentlemen, there's a city wide evacuation underway and the military has been called in to secure the area and engage this mysterious object of science-fiction. Where this thing is from, who made it and why it was left there seem to be completely unknown at this time. So please, ladies and gentlemen, please adhere to this evacuation order. The city of Washington D.C. and it's surrounding areas are now under order to evacuate before 6:00pm. If you cannot evacuate and are stranded in your house you can call the emergency evacuation hotline number that we are going to provide to you here in a minute. Once it is 6:00pm and the evacuation has ceased if you are found roaming the city, authorities would have no choice but to take you into custody. I repeat there is an evacuation order under way. At this time we are going to end our live broadcast and repeat today's program with the resource information to help you adhere to this evacuation order. Here's the resource information, you can call any of these numbers if you might be stranded and unable to evacuate. Karen?"

Karen Engle said, "We here at channel 27 news would like to wish you a safe trip out of D.C. and remember to take some supplies with you, the traffic is likely to get congested."

Sydney Memton said, "I am Sydney Memton."

Karen Engle said, "And I am Karen Engle."

They said together, "Have a good day."

Starlette muted the television once again and said, "Wow. You want to get going now so we don't get caught in traffic?"

Archee said, "I think we should."

Starlette said, "I am going to call my sister and see if we can stay there."

Archee said, "I can get the luggage ready."

Starlette kissed Archee on the cheek with a smack and got off the couch to go call her sister.

Archee looked at the television, the news restarted with a scrolling bar across the screen edge. He wanted to stay at the house. He sighed then yawned then stretched. They would be on the road before noon. He sat there another minute and then got up to find the luggage and get their things together. Today was going to be a long day.

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Starlette went to the dining room to get her smart phone. She sat at the table and dialed her sister.

“Hello?” said her sister Precious.

“Yes, Starlette here.” said Starlette.

Precious said, “Starlette! Good to talk with you. It's been a couple weeks.”

Starlette said, “Yeah, I know. We were sort of busy and I forgot to say hello for a while. So, really quick now listen, there's an emergency evacuation of the D.C. area and I wanted to double check that it was alright to stay over there before we started driving that way.”

Precious said, “Really? What's going on?”

Starlette said, “There's this thing that looks like a glowing sphere in the Potomac and they closed the airport and got the military on the scene and now they're saying that we have to leave the city before 6:00pm. Archee and I decided that we were going to go ahead and leave now so we can beat the traffic.”

Precious said, “Well, Lotte and I are in Fredericksburg and we were going to stay here and rent a hotel room tonight. Why don't you meet us here and then we can drive to Richmond together tomorrow?”

Starlette said, “Okay, that's a good plan. What hotel are you staying at in Fredericksburg?”

Precious said, “We didn't decide yet, we can call you when we find a good deal on some nice rooms, how's that sound?”

Starlette said, "Okay, we can wait for your call or call you when we reach Fredericksburg."

Precious said, "Alright, love ya sis."

Starlette said, "Love ya."

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Archee already got his own luggage ready when Starlette walked in. Their room was very normal and conservative with a single painting on the wall and a television but not much in the way of decoration. Archee said, "Already done. Let me know when you get yours done and I will carry it to the car."

Archee reached the door when Starlette said, "Archee, my sister's visiting Fredericksburg with her husband and said we could meet them there, they're spending the night in a hotel."

Archee said, "Well then I guess that's where we'll go. Beats driving all the way to Maine to stay with your parents. What are they doing in Fredericksburg?"

Starlette said, "I don't know, I didn't ask."

Archee said, "Alright, I'm going to go put this in the car and then get some food together."

Starlette said, "Make sure you get the purified water."

"Of course!" said Archee as he walked away.

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Precious and Lotte Gunhild were shopping now that their business was finished. They owned a gas station in Richmond, Virginia, on the state highway and were now wanting to sell. They drove to Fredericksburg to discuss the property and business operations to a potential buyer and the meeting went well but there wasn't a deal yet, so they would need to wait for the interested party to make a decision.

Lotte was driving with Precious in the passenger seat. Precious just hung up her smart phone. Lotte said, "What's this about your sister?"

Precious said, "There's an emergency in Washington D.C. and the whole city needs to evacuate. They wanted to stay at our house so I told them meet us here."

Lotte said, "Really? What kind of emergency?"

Precious said, "Something in the Potomac. Like an enemy ship or something, she said it was a sphere and the military was there."

Lotte said, "A sphere? What does that mean?"

Precious said, "I don't know. There's a real danger about it otherwise they wouldn't be evacuating the city so quick like that."

Lotte said, "Check your phone and see if there's some news about this sphere."

Precious said, "Okay."

Lotte said, "I should turn the radio on." He turned the radio on and then found a news station.

The radio personality was saying, "...and there's some new developments on the Potomac emergency. The sphere has grown in size, now measured at over 70 feet in diameter and growing. This phenomenon hasn't been fully understood and scientists are throwing all sorts of theories around to see what sticks and what doesn't. Some call it a matter well, that this spherical thing is absorbing the river water as it grows. That hasn't been proven but there's plenty of evidence that suggests this theory is true. The immediate area surrounding the sphere is slightly hazy so that when you look at it directly and intently it has a shimmering quality but this can't be attributed to heat. Infrared shows this phenomenon to be the same temperature as the water surrounding it. At over 70 feet in diameter this thing has grown significantly since it was first sighted at the surface at around 14 feet in diameter. At times the sphere looks like it is pulsing or bulging lending credit to the belief that it absorbs water. Whatever this thing is it doesn't appear to have occupants. The military is dutifully on the scene ready to defend America should this thing attack us. The Washington D.C. area is under orders to evacuate before 6:00pm. Stay tuned for more...

Lotte decreased the radio volume to a background level.

Precious said, "Yes, what the radio said is what I'm finding here on the news sites."

Lotte said, "Nuts. I guess it could be some sort of alien weapon or a rip in the space-time continuum. What do you think?"

Precious said, "I don't know but it better not destroy the world."

Lotte didn't laugh, "You're right. You never know what this thing could do."

Precious said, "Don't you look behind you when you drive Lotte? See the lights?"

Lotte said, "Damn, didn't notice."

An unmarked car was flashing red and green lights behind them.

Lotte said, "Well look how far back he is, usually they get right on your ass, of course I didn't notice."

Lotte pulled the car over and rolled his window.

A man in a smooth black suit and a grey tie and his partner, a woman wearing a similar black suit fit for women, got out of the unmarked car. They turned the lights off. They came walking slowly towards them, black leather gloves on their hands, their hands on their pistols, their pistols at their side fastened to belts.

They looked in the back seat carefully and then went to both Lotte's and Precious's windows.

The man said, "I am Agent Caesar and this over here is Agent Verokha. We work for the United States government, a special division, and we pulled you over in the interest of national security. I would like to kindly ask both of you to step out of your car and produce your identification before we can continue."

Precious and Lotte did as requested of them, giving their identification to Agent Caesar.

Agent Caesar said, "Thank you, now, go ahead and step to the side of the road over there. Verokha would like to ask you a few questions."

Lotte and Precious joined Agent Verokha as requested. Agent Verokha produced a pen and pad with some forms on them. She said, "Have you seen anything unusual or unbelievable in the last hour or so?"

Precious and Lotte both said, "No."

Precious said, "We heard about the sphere thing in D.C., does this have anything to do with that?"

Agent Verokha said, "We seem to think so, but we can't be fully sure."

Precious said, "They're evacuating D.C."

Agent Verokha said, "Yes, we know. Interesting situation. So, have you seen any unusual or unbelievable aircraft that would cause you alarm or fear in the last hour or so?"

Precious and Lotte both said, "No."

Agent Verokha said, "Have you seen any person or persons in the last hour or so who might be so different from normal that you were shocked or that you would think that they might not be human?"

Precious and Lotte both said, "No."

Lotte laughed and said, "What are you searching for, little green men?"

Agent Verokha said, "Something like that."

Precious and Lotte both laughed.

Lotte said, touching Agent Verokha's arm gently, "Have you checked the local bars?" and then he laughed.

Agent Verokha quit writing, noticeably irritated and said, "Sir, don't touch me."

Lotte said, "Sorry. Didn't mean anything serious."

Agent Verokha said, "Alright, that was all. We need to give you our cards and let you know that you should be on high alert for an emergency should the D.C. emergency become something more. Keep your eyes out for anything unusual and make sure you call us if anything at all seems twilight zone, got it?"

Precious and Lotte said, "Yes."

Agent Verokha said, "Thank you, you can return to your car now and ask Agent Caesar there to return your identification. Have a good night."

Precious said, "And you too."

Lotte said, "Yeah, take it easy."



Starlette and Archee were ready and in their car. Archee brought a bottle of whiskey and poured part of it into a can of soda. Starlette said, "Put your bottle under that coat." She was driving to Fredericksburg and he would drive to Richmond from there. She started the car and they were off.

Archee said, "We need to stop for some things before we get out of town."

Starlette said, "Like where?"

Archee said, "Seaskate."

Starlette said, "Okay." and then made the requested stop, the market being only a mile from their house. The name of the place was 'Dirk's Real Seaskate Market' and featured a fenced-in daytime outdoor roller-skate park. Archee got out of the car and said, "Anything you want in particular?"

Starlette said, "Got everything that I need already."

Archee said, "Alright. Give me a minute." He went in the store while Starlette waited. Archee returned with a large paper sack in his arm. He got in the car and put the sack in the back seat. He said, "Now I'm ready. Let's go."



Lotte and Precious located a medium priced hotel with two adjacent vacancies and rented them for the night. They called Archee and Starlette, telling them the address.

Lotte and Precious were very tired, they didn't unload their clothes and hygiene items right away and both threw themselves onto the bed to rest for a minute with the door wide open. They thought that they'd get their luggage here in a minute, all they needed was to stretch out and relax. All they would do right now in the meantime before they did that was calmly soak in the peaceful serenity with their eyes closed. That's all they needed right here this second, first.

It was very dark in the hotel room without the lights turned on although it was sunny outside. A cartoonish high register voice startled them in their stillness with something nonsensical. Lotte opened an eye at the door and saw a short figure bending around the

door frame, seeing what there was. The sunlight through the door silhouetted the shape, boldly outlining the large hairless head and small body, around four feet tall head to toe.

Lotte was instantly terrified. He thought to get up so he could defend Precious and himself. He couldn't move. He was paralyzed and terror flowed through him so fiercely it seemed like it was unnatural. He tried saying something, tried yelling, he couldn't. Precious was right there and he couldn't warn her.

The short figure entered the door and walked towards Lotte. "Shhh..." he said. The door closed itself. Lotte couldn't be more scared. Standing a foot away the odd figure stared at him. Lotte stared back, seeing the smooth hairless features. The naked body. The huge head, the huge brain. The eyes so deep he wondered if there was anybody in there. Lotte knew it was the end.

The short figure said with his cartoonish voice, almost like he was dehydrated with a huge lump in his throat, "I am Sorretikkul. I will use you to return to my own planet. You will not be harmed."

Lotte didn't believe Sorretikkul. That didn't matter though, there wasn't a thing Lotte could do. He was completely at Sorretikkul's mercy.

Sorretikkul placed his hands on the sides of Lotte's head, his palms on his cheeks. Lotte could feel his brain haze up, like he was continuously yawning so much that those muscles inside there were stuck and he was both conscious and unconscious simultaneously. Sorretikkul didn't have eyelids. That was the...

Lotte didn't think anymore. He was blank as much as he was paralyzed. Sorretikkul released his hold on Lotte's head and then went over to Precious, intent on repeating.

Precious yanked herself up to a sitting position and screamed loudly, raised her arm to hit Sorretikkul but he was insanely quick with a sidestep. The whole room was flooded with a sharply bright flash and Precious fell face first into the mattress, paralyzed before she got halfway through her attack. Sorretikkul held a small instrument, the device that produced the flash. He pressed it into his arm and it was sucked into his flesh like a marble slowly sinks through paint.

Sometime later Sorretikkul was standing in the center of the room. He now claimed power of both Lotte and Precious now

simultaneously with a mental remote control. He told them what they were to do and they did it.

Both of them sat up, Precious walked around the bed and sat beside Lotte.

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Archee and Starlette were getting close to Fredericksburg. Archee was mildly drunk. Starlette was annoyed that she couldn't drink with him, she would wait and drink with her sister at the hotel.

Archee said, "You see that? We're almost there. Should we get another bottle of whiskey or maybe some vodka?"

Starlette said, "No. What you got there, more than a half bottle? Good enough."

Archee said, "We'll get some anyways, you wait and see. It's noon now. This won't last all day."

Starlette said, "Whatever."

They arrived at the hotel a quarter after noon. The hotel looked alright on the outside, not the best and definitely not the worst. They recognized Precious and Lotte's car and parked beside it.

Starlette's smart phone rang, she answered it, thinking it would be Precious, but it wasn't.

"Agent Caesar here. Do not leave your car. We have an emergency situation."

Starlette said, "Can I put you on speakerphone please?"

Agent Caesar said, "Yes, go ahead."

Starlette put him on speakerphone so that Lotte could hear. She said, "Lotte is here with me."

Agent Caesar said, "Yes, I know. I can see both of you."

Starlette was troubled, she said, "What is the problem?"

Agent Caesar said, "There is a hostage situation with your sister and her husband. Their names are Precious and Lotte Gunhild, correct?"

Starlette said, "Yes. What do you mean, hostage situation?"

Agent Caesar said, "We traced the numbers you gave us to your sister's phone, then we activated the microphone to listen in on what they were doing. And we learned that they were being taken hostage. They are in their room right now and if you knock on that door you could be in danger."

Starlette said, "Then what should we do?"

Agent Caesar said, "You should turn your car on and shift into gear, get ready to run your car into the wall in front of you."

Starlette said, "What? Why?!"

Agent Caesar said, "The man that has taken your sister and her husband hostage isn't human and he wears a cloak that makes him invisible. Now listen, I know this sounds hard to believe. What is going to happen is the door is going to open and he is going to leave first, you won't see him. You however are going to see your sister and her husband leave and they won't recognize you because they are brainwashed and under deep mind control. You got that?"

Starlette was speechless, a tear in her eye.

Agent Caesar said, "You got that?"

Archee said, "Yeah, we both got it. How about I get in the driver's seat, I think Starlette is too out of it right now."

Agent Caesar said, "If you think that would increase your chance then go for it."

Archee said, "Why don't we park somewhere else and you do it?"

Agent Caesar said, "We're uh, we've got something occupying us right now and we will be able to be there in a short while. We need your help now. Can you help?"

Archee said, "Get in the passenger seat Starlette, climb over me and I can slide under you."

Starlette heeded his request and now Archee was in the driver's seat. Starlette said, "Why, mister Agent? Why?"

Agent Caesar said, "Why? Why your sister? I don't know why. These alien beings are opportunists and they take a lot of chances. Around us the success rate for these aliens is really high. Up there among their own kind, not so much. That might have something to do with it. Opportunity. Chance. Coincidence. Now get ready Archee, there is movement inside the hotel room. You listen to me carefully. I am using a special instrument that allows me to see where this alien invader is. So, when I say go, you go. Okay?"

Archee said, "Sure thing."

Agent Caesar said, "Alright, here they come, like I said, this alien is coming first. Get ready, door opening."

The door opened like Agent Caesar said it was going to open. Archee let the break off and flexed his leg muscles in preparation to stomp on the accelerator.

“Now!” Agent Caesar yelled.

Archee hit the accelerator and the car yanked over the cement parking wedge and straight into the wall. The wall caved inward a few feet.

“Yes!” yelled Agent Caesar.

Blood was splashed around the nose of the car and the crushed-in wall. Archee thought he could see blood falling out of thin air but there was nothing to be seen there, no body.

Archee shut the engine off.

Starlette leapt out of the passenger seat and went quickly into the hotel room.

“Starlette, stay outside, don’t go in there!” yelled Agent Caesar. Starlette kept on course and it was too late, she didn’t hear him. “Alright Archee. Stay right there. We’re on our way and we’re bringing backup, this should be a few more minutes.

Archee waited as instructed and stayed silent.

Agent Caesar said, “Alright, coast clear. One second.” He was talking with someone else that Archee couldn’t hear.

There was a knock on Archee’s window that surprised him a lot and he yanked himself up in shock. It was Agent Caesar and he was wearing a face mask like no other. Other agents were entering the hotel room. Agent Caesar pointed at the nose of the car and said something muffled that Archee couldn’t hear with his window closed. Agent Caesar then went to the nose of the car and did a slap and a couple punches, showing Archee that there was something solid there. He felt around the air like a mime or like he was playing charades and then pulled something. It was the invisibility mask. The large head looked like it hung in the air. Agent Caesar gave Archee a thumbs up and then motioned him to get out of the car.

Archee got out of the car and Agent Caesar said, “See. My hand is gone! Ha ha! Thank you very much Archee. The United States of America thanks you and you won’t be ignored.

Starlette came out of the hotel room crying. Archee went to her quickly. He said, “What’s wrong, Starlette?” He hugged her as she cried. She said, “My sister and Lotte, they’re in a coma.

They're standing on their feet like statues, their alive and breathing, but paralyzed.” He let her cry without saying a word.

Agent Caesar said, “Don't worry. We got your sister covered. She's going to be alright. It's going to take some time to bring her out of it but believe me this ain't permanent.

The Mindreader

Travis and Orella were superstitious. The occult and paranormal phenomenon were their core of their beliefs in what life was about. They weren't very skeptical and accepted many ridiculous notions that most people, even the imaginative ones, would reject. Travis based his beliefs on his personal experiences and let his gut guide him, using esoteric literature as an inspiration for his choices. Orella was more studious, purchasing books on astrology, palm reading, symbology and a plethora of unaccepted and odd matters where the mainstream wasn't concerned.

They were the sort of au naturale hippy farmer's market folk that you'd anticipate finding anywhere in smalltown America. Their apartment was a trove of alternative fetish items and special interest novelties. Solemn and mellow beatnik music often played in their well-used worn boom boxes as they smoked the green stuff and burnt cinnamon sticks with their goats milk milkshakes. Hemp was a favorite material of theirs and they liked to use it wherever they could. They also sometimes made their own clothes out of hemp using the patterns of store-bought items.

Orella was a barista in a backstreet café on the western side of town. Travis worked at a used book store for his uncle. They were both out of college for the summer and weren't sure what they were going to do next. For now though, they would enjoy their time together.

Orella was an avid Thoth player. She would use her Thoth cards to guide her daily life. Travis would often let her use him as practice to advance her Thoth skills. He liked the pictures and the

artfulness because they activated his imagination but overall they didn't influence him on a profound spiritual level. Orella however was mesmerized with Thoth cards. Orella would be enchanting with her explanations although her accuracy was lacking. He never lamented her inaccuracies because he loved her and didn't want to hurt her feelings.

She would often though ask him to do something occultist but he was deficient in established obsequies. And that was what he called it, "The Obsequies". That confused Orella but she never asked Travis why he called the occult "The Obsequies". She thought perhaps that was his secret, like a code or a dance.

Orella said, "Do you got any new Obsequie ideas to share?"

Travis said, "Nope. Not at all. I'm going to drum circle, where's the rubber bands?"



Travis and Orella were in Seattle. They left their rusty Honda Accord at the parking depot next to a tattoo and piercing shop and were now walking through a crowd of quiet smart phone users. Travis remembered when he was a kid and he went through this part of town there weren't a bunch of dull people with their heads bent staring at screens in their hands. People couldn't be bothered with that sort of thing back then, they would go places and do stuff. Now, like this right here, he was disappointed. Life could never be as great as it was before the smart phones.

When they got through the silent crowd of device worshippers Travis said, "Do you really want me to go to the psychic? I would rather drink a thai milkshake and read a book."

Orella said, "Don't be a spoiler. You're going to like it. I waited to see this psychic for months now. She's the highest order of mind reading protégé in the whole state. I made this appointment in February, we can't throw it away now. Besides, I already paid her and there's no refunds."

Travis said, "Alright, you know what you're saying. Listen don't glisten."

Orella said, "I should take you there without pulling your hair."

Travis leaned in so his face was close to hers and said, "Where you stone a stick a stick should stone so a sticky stone can stun a stink."

Orella laughed giddily as they rubbed the tips of their noses together with sleazy warmth, saying, "A hobgoblin slobbered on a cauldron ladle then hid a pillow mint under the table."

Travis laughed quietly then they kissed with hot passion as they walked towards the psychic's house.

The psychic's house was wedged into a small lot and looked a lot like a toy house or an oversized boy's fort. A wooden sign hung over the steps to the wooden porch on the metal links. The sign read, "Divina's". On the door window a sign read, "Open". Travis and Orella walked in.

Once they were inside Travis said, "You wouldn't know that a psychic lives here. There's none of the usual neon signs or any of what I saw on other psychic's businesses."

Orella said, "Divina is low key when it comes to advertising."

In the main area of the miniature house was a desk with a man sitting behind it. He said, "Good to see you here. My name is Cory. I'm Divina's husband. Do you have an appointment?"

Orella said, "We're Orella and Travis Singleton and we were given the ten o'clock appointment."

Cory said, "Thanks. I'm happy you chose Divina, she's a really gifted psychic and I trust that you can thoroughly enjoy her attentions. We ask that you fill out a questionnaire before this appointment starts."

Cory handed both of them clipboards and then said, "Do you need something to write with?"

Travis said, "We got something already, thank you though."

Cory said, "Take your time."

Travis and Orella completed their questionnaires on a fluffy couch. The task took them a minute to get done. Cory took their clipboards and looked at the answers.

Orella's questionnaire read:

1. Do you feel good today?

Yes.

2. Are you psychic?

No.

3. Do you have prophetic dreams?

No.

4. If you could go anywhere in space and time what would that be?

August 12, 2017. Arkansas. My parent's anniversary.

5. What is your favorite song?

I don't want to say, it's a movie song and it's a secret.

6. Are you high right now?

No.

7. What ever happened to pogs?

I don't know.

Travis's questionnaire read:

1. Do you feel good today?

Yes.

2. Are you psychic?

No.

3. Do you have prophetic dreams?

No.

4. If you could go anywhere in space and time what would that be?

11 steps behind me.

5. What is your favorite song?

I don't listen to music.

6. Are you high right now?

No.

7. What ever happened to pogs?

What is a pog?

Cory grinned at the answers and then said, "Follow me, right this way." Travis and Orella followed him into the next room.

The small room was thickly decorated with beaded tassels that hung off the ceiling and glowing globes with patterns etched into them. The light was dim and a single round table was in the center of the room with a full-circle bench around it.

Divina sat at the table facing the door. She wore a frilly blouse that widened at the wrists. Her hair was long and silky

without much volume to it, appearing as though it were wet but it was naturally fine and shiny. She couldn't have been much older than her mid-twenties. She wore wooden bracelets with Latin words burnt into them. Her fingernails were long and painted bright blue. On the round table were dozens of stones painted with mysterious symbols.

Cory said, "Go ahead and join Divina if you'd like." Travis and Orella joined her. Cory said, "I am closing this door now and leaving you with my lovely wife." He left them alone and returned to his desk.

Divina said, "Good that you joined me. First off I want you both to take a stone out of this batch." They chose their stones. Divina said, "Good. Now set your stones in front of you on the table." They did as directed. Divina said, "Okay. We are ready." She raised her arms up in a Y configuration and closed her eyes. She hummed a tune with a closed mouth then with her eyes shut she chose a stone from random and held it in her closed palm. She opened her eyes and said, "What would you like me to see?"

Orella said, "I keep dreaming of my mother. She died in 1996. What can you tell me about her? In my dreams she is usually sailing on a rotted wooden ship and it looks like the 1800s."

Divina said, "One second." She closed her eyes and hummed, turning her face to the ceiling. She suddenly quit humming and said, "I see a tower on a sea shore. A light house. I see your mother on the beach, watching waves. She says that your father is in heaven and she's waiting to join him." Divina opened her eyes and Orella sighed a sigh of relief.

Travis became skeptical. He didn't believe Divina was a true psychic, he thought that maybe the appointment took a long time because Divina and her cohorts needed to spy on Orella to get enough information together to trick her. That's what Travis thought. He wasn't impressed. He wanted to leave. He decided that since he couldn't leave because it would upset Orella, instead he would challenge Divina to her limits, asking questions she couldn't cheat to know.

Travis said, "Years ago before I met Orella I would walk a route to work. On that route there was some litter someone kept leaving there to mess with my mind. Then one day a man was hit by a train at the same crosspoint that was on my route. Ever since then

the little litter mind game ended and I quit feeling like I was being stalked. Can you tell me who that person that died was so I can look him up? Can you get the name?"

Divina revealed the stone in her hand and said, "Finding someone's name can be very difficult but I think you got the aura to make that truth available."

Travis actually already knew what the stalker man's name was, he lied to Divina to test her abilities.

Divina held an open hand out over the stones and slowly felt the air over them, bringing her hand around in circles then took one up without looking at the symbol painted on it. She closed her eyes for a minute. Orella and Travis watched silently, waiting. Finally, she opened her eyes and said, "Canda. Canda Huft. No, it's coming to me, wait. Caleb Ranch. You should search the records for a Caleb Ranch. Or start there at least. Names are tough for me."

"Alright." said Travis. Divina wasn't too far from the truth, the name was actually Casey and his nickname was Rash. Actually, that was damn close. Travis listened with less criticism now.

Orella said, "Can you tell me where a curse on us is coming from? Do you know about curses?"

Divina said, "Yes. I am experienced at curing curses. Tell me about your curse."

Orella said, "This curse isn't only on me alone. Travis shares this curse with me. This curse seems to have origins of when we went to an amusement park. We aren't fully sure who cursed us but we deduced that it was an amusement park employee. Ever since we went to the amusement park last month bad things started to happen. Odd things and coincidences that get in our way. They are all small things that happen or small things that people do but they add up and build into a stronger and stronger curse. It is like, whenever Travis and I are out and about together random people try and interrupt anything we do and pull us apart. They want to make us stop showing affection for one another. If we are holding hands someone might bring us a map and ask Travis to give directions. That is only one example. It started mildly but now random people seem under some sort of paranormal control and they are getting ruder and ruder every day. None of these people know each other. This wasn't some sort of conspiracy. They aren't connected. Yet, they increasingly each day add on to this curse and it only increases

with frequency, intensity and rudeness. If we are apart it doesn't quit there. When we plan to get together, these paranormal forces will try and distract us, delay us, make us forget each other and it only seems to get worse. This curse is an attack on our love for each other and our love of affection with each other when we are together. Have you ever heard of this before? Does that make sense to you? You don't think we are crazy do you?"

Divina said, "Of course not. This one sounds a lot like several other curses that I cured before. Here, what we will do is hold hands, Orella. We will close our eyes." Divina reached out over the stones on the table with both of her hands. Orella did the same and they lightly locked their hold on each other then closed their eyes. Divina said, "Breath slow and make yourself calmer."

A minute of silence.

Divina said, "Okay, now, think back to the amusement park and try to remember who cursed you. Do you know who it was?" Orella said, "No. We saw many people that day. Nobody comes to mind so easily."

Divina said, "Okay. We will try this another way then. Try and recall the curse and follow its path backwards to its sender. Imagine the curser outside of the amusement park in their normal lives. Do you see who sent the curse?"

Orella said, "I see a crowd of rock and roll fans. Now I see a stage. Yes. It's a singer in a rock and roll band. It's a singer in a band. That rock singer is the one who made this curse. I recognize him. I remember who it was. He worked at the amusement park, selling merchandise. We bought some merchandise and he was a jerk. He somehow cursed us."

Divina said, "Alright. Now that we know who it was, return to that rock show and picture the singer that cursed you as though he were alone. Do you see him?"

Orella said, "Yes, I do."

Divina said, "Okay. Now, you are like a spirit in your memory, you're very faint and weak as spiritual connections go. To strengthen this connection shut me out of your mind. Push me into your subconscious. I am now a voice you can't hear, guiding your actions. We are going to make this curse right. We are going to cure you of your curse. You are free to become less mystical, and now you can affect that reality in your memory as though you were

editing a film or touching up a painting. The changes you make will affect reality. Go ahead, Orella, curse the curser in vengeance.”

Orella started to quiver a little.

Divina said, “Describe your retaliation upon the rock and roll singer who cursed you and your boyfriend, Orella. Tell me what you’ve done.”

Orella said, “I cursed him all over. I cursed his joints, I cursed his actions, I cursed his words, I cursed his thoughts, I cursed every step he takes. I am cursing him in every way that I conceive with every instant that I observe his existence.”

Divina said, “Okay, good. Now you are done. Your curse should be effective instantly. Now, Orella, awake.” Divina smacked the table top with her hand. Orella shook quickly and looked at Travis. She hugged Travis with a twinkle in her eye.

Divina said, “I am sorry to have to end this session now. I am exhausted and I need some rest. If you’d like to return for a second session I will put you on a priority list and you won’t have to wait for months like you did this time. How are you two feeling right now? Do you have any questions?”

Travis said, “No questions. I think we are both as drained as you are, Divina. Thank you, your psychic demonstration is very insightful and I would like to return for another session.”

He squeezed Orella in his arms as they continued to hold each other affectionately.

Divina said, “I’m happy to hear that. You can reschedule at the desk with my husband Cory.” Divina stood up and bowed at them. She said, “Have a great weekend.”

Orella said, “Thank you.”

Divina left them alone in the room with the door open.

Ten minutes later they were outside again, walking back to their car. A window display was filled with televisions and a news service was being shown. Orella exclaimed, “Hey Travis, look at that! The singer that was selling merch, the one we talked about in our psychic session! What a coincidence! That’s the fool that cursed us!”

Travis said, “I recognize him! Yeah, precisely as you remembered! He was the one selling amusement park merchandise!”

Orella said, “Woah...”

The news reporter said, “We are sorry to announce his death and our heart-filled condolences go out to his loved ones.”

Orella said, “Divina was right. Our curser is dead. Divina is a miracle worker.”

Travis and Orella were silent for a few minutes as they stared at the photo of the dead rock star who cursed them. Eventually Orella said, “Our love will stay strong, they won’t ever be able to pull us apart again or challenge our relationship to one another.”

Travis squeezed Orella and gave her a smoochin’ kiss on the cheek. She smiled and patted his arm. They lived happily ever after.

Nucleus of my Nerves

I went to this place with intriguing people. A hot guest list that was overflowing with fertility and fine brilliance. I was a free man finding a new world. My friends didn't come around anymore. They became somehow restricted and they shrank themselves, cut themselves off, shortened with their own actions. I found new friends, new allies, saw life in different perceptions than before. Life became a series of actions, not acts, and functions, not characters. Concise.

I found this girl while I was there. We both longed to devour a wholesome portion of decadence and unnecessary excess. Our society broadened our tastes and handed us discovery on a platter. Ease was the order. A chance to experience your provocations without inhibitors. Being a part of that became the driving source of personal powerment within our individual lives.

She wore a blood red gown so thin you could see her bare nude form that time I first saw her. She was English, a solid girl

with a naughty streak and a fiery temper. Very sensual and greedy for attention. At the end of that first day I invited her into my house. She consented and the early hours of the next day were made of only her.

She hid a secret and lied habitually, that she wasn't like other women. She would say this and play little matches, she knew I wouldn't know. Such innocence was a fraud but who now is innocent anyways? When I closed in on the truth she withered away with counterfeit frailty and responded sharp with cartoonish dishonesty.

And she seized me up in a shock, overwhelmed with maudlin fixations and a dependency on her mock reliance, a fool in distraction and deep insatiable urge. Not to leave or see the light, tied around her like a belt on a lean syphon. Greater her compulsions became to fasten me towards the center of the house. I didn't know.

She was a usual softy when I first knew her. A different life that was and that was months ago. Fun and full of laughter and submissiveness, intimate affections. Then one day that all turned cold and she was something new. Something fierce and primitive. Cruel in her soul all the way through her marrow.

Locked up in our dark retreat and in a condition of turbulent depression, I swore that I would rebuild our previous glory and I wrote her a love letter as she was sleeping. Then as a surprise I leapt out of bed fully naked and threw open the long curtains, sunshine bursting through into our bed and she ignited in hard fire, burnt to death in agonizing misery, screaming in high shrills. She got on her feet, on the bed, still afire, hissing like medusa and died before my very eyes.

Here is that love letter.

I kept my love in bed and my heart in her slender hands. She was soft and demanding of my care. Her gentle smile brought the temptations of life while she danced through the meadows of my protection. And she washed me in the allure of her tender soul. Through time and our natural fusion, she seduces and takes a body captive, the nucleus of my nerves. She starves inside her wanting with a shudder and a whisper and a slap against her skin. The heat

of her eyes with promise, absorb my passion and drink my heart clean.

Likewise, This Hasn't Happened

Nathanial was shown to his room. There was a residential quarter within the building and some of the rooms were made for detainees. He was placed in one of the detainee rooms and locked inside. He was given a tape recorder like the one in the interrogation room and a pad of paper with a writing utensil to make record of his paranormal memories.

The room was a good thirty feet wide and about sixty feet long with a small bathroom containing a shower and a sink. There were soft towels and toiletries. The carpet was a nice dark green short shag with light green highlights. There was a bed, a television, a couch, a desk, a dresser and a cabinet to store items. There was a landline phone on the desk with a sticker on the handle that said,

“Front Desk, Dial *3.” The clock on the wall said 4:10pm. Someone was going to get him and take him to the cafeteria to eat dinner at 8:00pm.

He checked the air conditioner and turned the heater on and then sat on the couch.

He decided to write his memories first before he recorded himself telling them. That would allow him to organize his thoughts easier because he would recall facts randomly as he remembered each incident. When he remembered one thing it would cause him to remember another thing that he'd forgotten. When he was done writing his memories, he rewrote them, adding new details as his mind brought them up.

He started with the earliest memory that he didn't yet tell the special agent about. When he was finished with the writing part, his paper looked like this.

* * * * *

2012, Hollywood
Early in the year.

I am not precisely sure when this was. I am going to say 2012 but it might have been 2011 or 2010. As far as memories are concerned, being in Hollywood at that time in my life, this was one of the last memories that I have of living there.

I was searching for work and somehow got into contact with this company that worked directly with the government. They were collecting donations for some specific cause that I cannot remember. They were founded in the 1950s or 1960s so they were around a long time before they asked me if I would like to work for them.

I didn't work with them long because it wasn't an hourly wage that you earned. You were paid a percentage of the donation that you collected.

On my first day, they took a small team of us way outside of the city to a small suburb of houses built in the WW2 era. I was given a section of the houses to walk door-to-door to request donations, which was something like a few hundred houses.

Whatever houses that I didn't get to that day I would try the next day. So, I get going on my task and there is nobody there. It was like all the houses were empty. I did however get one donation of one dollar on my first row of houses. I recorded the donation on a list and the donator signed to confirm it. I put that dollar in my right pocket of my pants and continued on, not thinking of it.

A few hours later and I was halfway through my house list, with maybe 5% of the houses actually appearing that someone lived in them and only three people having answered their doors. I reached my hand inside my pocket and the dollar was gone. I swore on my life that I put that dollar in my pocket. I wasn't hallucinating, I wasn't nuts, I put that dollar in my pocket and there was literally no chance at all that the dollar could've fallen out. I checked all of my pockets anyways although I was damn sure of where I put it. The dollar was gone.

I continued through the list and then I even backtracked, losing thirty minutes, in order to make sure that I didn't drop the dollar on the sidewalk. Didn't find it. When the company van came to pick me up and take me back to Hollywood the dollar mysteriously appeared in my pocket, precisely where I placed it and I was able to give it to the supervisor that collected our donations.

This mystery of objects disappearing and returning would happen numerous times after that incident, but I am not able to remember specific cases with all of the details. One such time was when there was a ten-dollar bill missing in my wallet and then several hours later it was in my wallet once again. There was no chance that anyone other than me accessed my wallet between the times of that bill missing and that bill returning.

The next disappearing incidents all happened in Las Vegas, Nevada between 2013 and 2019.

2015, Las Vegas
Late Summer.

A lot of mysterious things happen in Las Vegas. At the location of this particular incident there is a huge park across from a bus stop, this was in western Las Vegas. I frequented the area; spotting shooting stars and some strange military craft being taken for a test

flight. At that bus stop the nearest building is about 30-40 yards away, so, quite a distance to reach some sort of cover. In fact, once you reach that building you would then need to go another ten yards or so to walk around to the side of it if you wanted to hide yourself out of view from that bus stop.

So, I'm standing there waiting for this bus and someone walks over to the bus stop to catch the same bus. He's acting sketchy and walks around to the side of the bus shelter that is made of clear see-through plexiglass and stands there. I step forward to the curb and look up the road to see if the bus was on its way. This action took a few seconds. I then turned around and took the two steps it took back under the bus shelter and the person that was standing there a second ago was gone. I looked around and didn't see him anywhere. There is no way he could have gone fast enough to reach the nearest building or something else that was possible to hide behind. And if he did try and run that far that fast I would've heard his feet hitting the pavement. For him to escape my sight within less than 5 seconds would be impossible. He didn't return and I even looked around the surrounding property unable to find him.

In addition to that, the next year the city replaced that particular bus shelter, installing two double length bus shelters. These new bus shelters took more than five times the space as that original bus shelter. You know, I never once at all saw enough people waiting there to call for a need of that many bus shelters. Some of the busiest parts of Las Vegas only have one single length bus shelter.

2017, Las Vegas
Autumn.

Most residential areas in Las Vegas are walled in from the main traffic routes, so that when you are driving somewhere all you see are walls. The location of these incidents was a section of road about a mile or so long with particularly high walls that would be near impossible for anyone to get over without a ladder or some other equipment.

These cement walls are a good 15 feet high. Along the walls there are indentations, little squares where the wall cuts in to allow

for a breaker box that is usually built on a raised cement platform. Even if you got on top of these boxes on that stretch of wall, you wouldn't be able to reach the top of the wall no matter how tall you were.

I was walking that road when someone in a hurry on the opposite sidewalk went up on the rocks beneath the wall maybe around half a block ahead of me. I was going to cross the road and looked the other direction to check traffic and when I crossed he was gone. It was another one of those "too far to the nearest hiding place to disappear" incidents. He was probably the same height or shorter than me and these walls were more than twice my height, maybe three times my height.

During that period of time near the end of 2017 I would see this happen three times on that stretch of road. One of those times there was a large box inside the square notch, and someone walked into there. It was possible to hide behind that box and I thought maybe he did. Then this eerie feeling that he disappeared overwhelmed me so I looked behind the box to make sure and he was gone.

Las Vegas
2013-2019

There's plenty of strange aircraft that fly above Las Vegas during the daytime. If you watch the skies enough you'll see a lot of interesting things. It's safe to say that many if not most of those strange aircraft are government operated test planes with the air force base on the edge of town and the other bases in the desert right outside of Vegas.

I've seen a good number of planes vanish there. Too many to count. There would be no clouds and perfect visibility. These aren't planes that are flying so high that they simply disappear due to distance. These planes would be flying at low to mid altitudes where you can make out their shapes. I've seen them vanish while watching them and when this happens your mind trips up and your natural inclination is that you lost track of it, but truth is you didn't turn your sight from the plane and suddenly its gone. Part of that confusion is that the disappearance wasn't accompanied with a flash or explosion

or some other phenomenon. The plane simply vanished and your mind couldn't find a reason.

Las Vegas

Late summer 2018

I was riding a bus to the lesser populated west end of Las Vegas and looked out the left side window. It was a nice sunny day with perfect visibility. Above the tree line there was this large black shape. It was an irregular shape and appeared to be hanging in the air at an angle.

My first thought was blimp, but it was too irregular to be a blimp, I also thought that it could be an inflatable thing but there were no ropes attached to it. Decided distance and size was difficult because it wasn't reflecting light and it looked solid. The bus was slow and I kept my sight on the object even while the trees kept getting in the way. I tracked it for around 10 minutes before I lost sight. When I finally got to a location where I could see the object from a clear vantage point ten minutes after losing sight of it, it was gone. The bus was going uphill, so, seeing across the Las Vegas valley from my location there was nothing obstructing my view all the way to the mountains on the other end of the Las Vegas valley. If that object was anywhere over Vegas I would be able to see it.

I thought about what I saw collecting what facts about it that were discernable through my observations. The object was larger than a passenger jet and at least a couple miles away from my initial location. If the object were very close and say, an inflated device in someone's back yard, then it would have quickly disappeared as my bus went further up the hill. Truth is the object was large enough and far enough away that through 10 minutes of travel it stayed the same size and didn't shift much in the way of the angle I needed to turn my head at to see it. Another fact of note was the total lack of aircraft in the airspace above Las Vegas when I reached a proper viewing location (20 minutes following the initial sighting.) There is almost always something flying around Las Vegas during the daytime. So I wonder if the object was considered dangerous and pilots were warned to avoid flying at that time.

That completes my working memory of paranormal disappearances. This might not be complete and the dates precise

but this account provides my best overview of my experiences in relation to this mystery.

I would also like to say that the majority of people aren't that observant and in several incidents of sighting flying saucers, a large number of flying saucers in one incident, I was in an urban area within a crowd of people. I was the only person to notice and when I said to them, "Hey look, there's twenty flying saucers!" only a few of them looked. My guess is that most of these things go completely unnoticed even in the most densely populated places.

* * * * *

Nathanial finished writing his report at 7:30pm and decided to get cleaned up and take a shower before he was taken to the cafeteria for dinner.

Persephone and Mann

The highland was luscious with endless wilderness and plenty of flora. A long and deep river cut through the highland, running off

the mountain chain in the distance. Hetzen, a small and remote town built along the river was a charming and lively place, loaded with gold miners, loggers, hunters, craftsmen, textile women and was a favorite supplier of the country's warriors and office men. Hetzen would get on with life uneventfully and detached from the hustling and bustling of the country's capital. The townspeople liked the mild life.

Hetzen was a land far away and unknown to the people of the distant west. The country was made into legend in the western people's storytelling but none of them in recent memory traveled there. That was till Mann and Persephone of Prague left their homeland, bringing with them goods and medicines, and departed toward the deep horizon, the unknown ahead of them with no plan and no destination. They wanted adventure and they wanted to see the endless world beyond.

Mann, a warrior of the Prague state, brought with him his sack of gold and belongings that he would need for a long journey while his wife Persephone, a healer and a medicine woman brought her medicine in bottles and brought her books. They sold most everything else and would purchase and build what they would need when they decided they wanted to stop and start a new life. They went alone, without accompaniment aside from the other travelers along the same routes, whom they banded together with for protection whenever necessary.

Months they would travel and meet new people and see new lands, pressing on with a hardy thirst of discovery. Eventually they arrived at Hetzen and loved it. There was something of legend and wonder within the life of Hetzen that captivated them and held them firmly in place.

Persephone would set up shop there while Mann would search the surrounding countryside and wilderness, hunting deer and wild cats. She would sell health potions and cleansing creams, gaining the attention of local women while Mann would store up their meats and sell off his surplus. They bought a house on the edge of town and settled in nicely, getting along with the people there and becoming part of their society. They learned the language and attended the local holidays and celebrations.

Mann would bring home different samples of plants and flowers for his wife to use in her medicines. The plant life in Hetzen

was different than that of Prague and she knew there was some new medicine that could be made of these new ingredients. She inquired of the local medicine makers to learn new medicines and share the recipes she brought with her. She hired a local girl to help her prepare medicines. Life was good for Persephone and Mann. They loved life in Hetzen and were happy they chose to settle there.

There were several temples in Hetzen that the townspeople would visit and hold ceremonies of spiritual power and offer gifts to their gods. One such temple was abandoned and rarely visited. Mann happened upon the empty temple while on one of his adventures around the boundaries of the city. The temple was covered in vines and moss on the sunrise facing side of it and the door was gone. Made of stone and missing a roof, there were plants growing inside of the temple, many unusual plants with odd attributes.

What caught Mann's attention was a pink flower that grew chest high with blood red beads growing on the upper stem. The beads looked like berries and were soft on the touch. He didn't see this flower type at all while on his adventures throughout the countryside. There were many of them on the inside of the temple. On the outside of the temple he couldn't find a single one. He considered tasting a bead then decided that he shouldn't risk getting poisoned without his wife around to heal him. He chose one of the new flowers and then cut the stalk with a hunting knife, placing the sample with care inside a sack so that the beads wouldn't pop.

Persephone loved the new flower, saying that it was beautiful. She removed the beads and tested them, finding that they weren't poisonous. She made a tea with the sweet nectar found inside the beads and drank the tea with her husband. They were invigorated and highly boisterous, feeling an intense burst of strength. Their thoughts were quickened and their enthusiasm multiplied. This new ingredient was going to become Persephone's prized treasure.

Mann would wonder should he ask the townspeople about the abandoned temple or should he keep quiet about it? What if the incredible flower couldn't be found anywhere else? He would draw attention to the temple if he asked about it and he wasn't ready to risk that before he was done. Persephone would want him to retrieve a greater bounty of flowers, he didn't want to risk them

being taken. They discussed this situation and decided to wait. In the meantime Mann would return to the temple the next day and take up a sample flower with the roots intact and they would attempt to grow it inside their house.

Persephone would create a health potion with the mysterious red flower nectar and develop new uses for it, finding that it reduced wrinkles and restored her slightly blurry vision. Once she perfected her new health potions she stored them in a locked trunk. At that time they'd taken over half of the pink flowers within the abandoned temple walls.

Townpeople started to compliment them on their looks, saying that they looked like they were getting younger. Surely they felt that they were. They were feeling like they did when they got married ten years ago and when they looked in their mirror they could see what the people were talking about.

Mann hesitantly kept taking flowers till there was a handful left inside of the temple. They now kept three of them growing in the house and several others growing in their shed. When Persephone finished making health potions with this last retrieval they decided to start selling them at a hefty price. They would keep the pink flowers a secret till absolutely necessary since Mann couldn't find any other place that they grew. If the townspeople of Hetzen knew anything about this special plant they would mention it once they tried the new health potions.

And none of their customers said anything about the flower at all. The customers would ask them what the secret ingredient was and they would tell them that the secret ingredient would stay a secret.

The new health potions sold quickly. That first batch was a third of her stored inventory and they wouldn't be able to replenish their supply till they could grow it themselves or find another location where it grew. They used a second batch of the same number, increasing the already high price and telling customers that supplies were limited. Although the price was inflated they sold out once again within days of the restock. That left a third of a trunk of health potions that they would keep to themselves. They placed a sign on their health shop apologizing that the new health potion was out of stock and that they wouldn't know when there would be

another batch ready. This disappointed customers but there wasn't a thing they could do about it.

They resisted the urge to take the last handful of flowers and Persephone accompanied Mann on a trip to the temple to see them. They rode on horseback and the trip was an hour away from their house. With their horse tied to the nearest tree, they entered the temple together.

She was stunned with the beauty and mystery of the temple and the divine brilliance of its construct. Inside of it the plants were overgrown and diverse. They wondered why such a majestic temple was abandoned. They went to the last patch of pink flowers and Persephone made sure they were healthy enough to accept pollination. They discussed his search for another patch location and that he didn't find them anywhere else.

She decided that once the flowers were pollinated she would plant as many of the seeds as she could around inside the temple and at other locations in the countryside with similar conditions. She would also try and grow them in their garden. If they could plant another crop of them they would be able to sell the nectar raw and could even start farming them.

They spent a quiet and peaceful morning inside the temple, admiring the architecture and bathing in the warm sunlight. They were done hanging about the temple and got ready to leave. Before they reached the door they heard their horse scream and shriek.

Mann went sprinting at his fastest speed through the temple door, seeing a tall and oversized man wearing armors and trying to wrangle the horse reigns off the tree. The horse was trying to knick the intruder with its front hooves, swinging its head around to keep him away. Mann went full force directly at the intruder.

Mann kicked the harrowing figure aside with all his force, sending the intruder tumbling off his feet. Mann then made a step onto his horse, bending across the horse's back, drawing his sword. The oversized foe was wearing a suit of armor and carried a sword of his own. When Mann landed on the ground off his horse the attacker was already on his feet. Mann wore no armor.

They circled each other with their swords. Mann's foe advanced with a swing of his sword and Mann blocked the attack with a swing of his own and knocked the intruder backwards with another kick. Then he thrust directly at his foe and hit the armor

with a scratch but no dent. Mann circled around his foe in a sideways run and swung hard at his backplate, leaving a dent. The intruder tried to side swipe Mann but wasn't fast enough. Mann kicked at his foe's hip. Both of them regained their positions circling each other.

Mann was disadvantaged without his own armors. Mann's foe's weaknesses were his wrists, ankles, neck and back but his skill was enough that he could protect himself.

Mann's foe leapt with a diagonal cut at Mann and Mann followed the attack with his own sword, throwing his foe's sword into a wider swing. Mann let his own sword drop as he got inside his foe's reach. Before the intruder could raise his sword up at Mann, Mann leapt at the intruder's sword arm, landing with his arms over the sword arm, the sword arm clenched between his chest and both his upper arms. The leap knocked his foe off his feet and onto his back. They hit the dirt together, with Mann latched onto the intruder's sword arm. The resulting impact cut the back side of Mann's arms when they were squished between the armors and the dirt. Mann was stunned when his bare face hit the dirt as well.

The armored intruder cried out in pain when he landed flat on his back, he held his sword firmly though and didn't give up so easily. Mann yanked his bleeding arms out from under the weighty armors and leapt on his feet swiftly. Mann's foe tried sitting up but Mann was quick and took hold of his headgear and yanked it backwards hard, stunning his foe.

Mann's foe rolled onto his hands and knees while Mann retrieved his sword. The intruder started to get on his feet again when Mann kicked him hard in the side, causing the intruder to catch himself from falling with his empty hand. With his foe unstable on one hand and knee, Mann lifted his sword above his head and then swung hard at the intruder's neck armor. His sword cut through but not enough to draw blood. Mann's sword was suddenly immobile. He tried to yank his sword away but it was stuck. Mann's foe thrust himself up onto his knees, with Mann's sword stuck in his neck guard. Then he quickly punched Mann hard in the gut with his fisted gauntlet. The hit knocked the air out of Mann and he couldn't draw in a breath. Mann retreated a step, slightly hunched, guts wrenching.

The intruder heaved himself upwards inside his weighty armors onto his feet once again, swinging his sword horizontally at Mann's legs. Mann leapt out of the sword's path and a second later he leapt towards the intruder before the sword swing was finished. Mann once again landed a hard kick on his foe's side while his foe was in motion, causing the intruder to finally lose his sword and stumble awkwardly from the momentum.

Mann took up his foe's sword and swung hard diagonally at the undamaged side of his metal neck coverings. This swing cut through as before, feeling much the same to Mann and when he yanked the sword out blood squirted through the crevice in the neck guard. Mann kicked his foe hard once again and his foe smacked into the dirt on his back. The intruder tried covering the hole in his neck armor but that was useless in stopping the bleeding.

Mann watched his foe die.

Persephone quickly went to Mann's side and he accepted her into his arms and she cried. They would be alright.

When Persephone was calmed Mann set her onto the horse and he pried his sword off the dead foe's neck armor and noticed the scratch and gouge against the blade. The armor was harder than a lot of armors he's seen and weighed a lot in comparison as well. That made fighting him a lot harder but slowed his foe up significantly.

Mann climbed up onto his horse with Persephone and sheathed his sword. They would ride to their house silently and leisurely.



The next day they received a messenger. They let him into their house and he took an envelope out of a pouch. The messenger announced, "Greetings, Mann and Persephone of Hetzen. His Lord Majesty the King has heard of your wonderful potions of health and good fortune and requests that you make him a generous amount, that he, his Queen and their children can benefit well of your service and he shall award you in due confidence for your kindness."

Persephone said, “Our supply is finite and limited. We can offer what we have right now and I do not know when we can make some more as the ingredients aren't available on hand. The key ingredient is of a rarity that is so scarce we cannot restock our supply. Are you, the messenger, going to deliver the potions or shall we?”

The messenger handed Mann the notarized request and said, “I shall deliver them.”

Persephone said, “We must go to my shop and I shall give them to you.”

Persephone and Mann accompanied the messenger to their shop and gave him the trunk that was a third full of health potions made of the red nectar beads of the pink flower. He bowed to them and dutifully left.



Mann didn't return to the temple since the battle with the enemy, fearing that there could be others waiting there and he would be outnumbered. Him and Persephone were tending to the plants they were already growing and planned to take them to a location with a lot of bees so that they could become pollinated. If that wouldn't work Persephone would need to take up the hard task of pollinating the seeds herself and she wasn't all that confident about that.

Mann continued to hunt on the side of the town opposite of the abandoned temple. On one such trip he got in conversation about bandits when he attended a town pub. There were bandits known to make hillside houses and live under the dirt. There was a settlement on that side of town long ago and the people were slaughtered, all that is left is an abandoned temple. The bandits that roam that area are considered the descendants of those murderers and most of the townspeople of Hetzen avoid leaving beyond the outer walls on that side of town. Mann wasn't notified about the bandits and were he notified he would have avoided that area altogether. In fact, Mann hunted plenty of wild animals in that area and till that day with Persephone he didn't see anyone else around nor see any evidence that anyone lived there.

Months went on and Persephone would continue to tend to their shop. Customers would often ask her whether the red nectar health potions would be available again but all she could tell them was that she didn't know when she could restock her supply. They purchased her original health potion instead, a good and effective potion but nowhere near the power of the special health potion.



When their pink flowers were finally sprouting their seeds Mann and Persephone did well in getting them pollinated, not needing to leave their house property because the bees were everywhere. Mann built a small wooden shed designed to let the bees inside without calling too much attention to the flowers from the road, protecting them from being picked when a passing towns person saw them.

Persephone collected all the pollinated seeds and planted them around their yard and their shop near the center of town. There was a lot of seeds and Persephone saved a large number of them inside envelopes. She and Mann discussed the abandoned church and dared that they risk planting seeds inside of it so that if the seeds could not grow anywhere else there would be a large number of flowers for the next growing season. She showed him how to plant the seeds, and she made him agree that if he were to go to the abandoned temple he would need to bring armed guards because he couldn't risk a repeat of the same incident. The plan was made but they waited, hesitant to return.



There was a loud knock on the door in the late evening. Mann answered the door and it was a citizen of Hetzen, dressed inside some small armors and armed to fight with an axe. He said, "Mann and Persephone, there is a battle on the west side of town. We ask that you, Mann, saddle up your horse and fight, that we protect our city. There's a horde of bandits and they are fierce, burning the

houses and killing everyone they can. We need hardy warriors and you Mann, can lead the charge on your quick and healthy horse.”

Mann said, “And you are?”

“Kinsley, the Hard.”

Mann sprinted to gear himself up, Persephone let Kinsley in.

Mann said, “Are they armed with bows?”

Kinsley said, “They were but their archers were slain, now there are about 30 of them and they fight like mercenaries, slipping around randomly, they are the bandits that inhabit the hills out of town. They must be killed at any price.”

Mann said, “Do you need another sword? I own two swords. Shall I bring them both?”

Kinsley said, “We are well armed. You should bring it nonetheless.”

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The battle was fierce and brutal. Hetzen was outnumbered to start, with reinforcements eventually turning the tide in Hetzen's favor. The bandits weren't armored as well as the warriors of Hetzen and the Hetzen warriors learned the bandits attack patterns and were able to anticipate them at their attempted siege of the second borough, ambushing them on their side and overpowering them before they could retreat. Mann fought well and killed a few of the bandits but his most notable actions were rounding the bandits up during the ambush, as they were on foot and without horses. Mann, and two other horsemen kept the bandits from retreat, allowing their total annihilation.

The next day at noon, the surviving bandits were tied to wooden poles then executed. The day following the executions a counter-attack party was formed that went into the hills and slaughtered anyone left living in the bandits encampments and settlements. Their bodies were piled into a single mound along with all of their possessions and burnt. Nothing of their lot was kept or spared and the townspeople would celebrate this victory every year thereafter.



Mann and Persephone lived well following the battle of the west side of Hetzen and were able to farm the nectar they needed to supply new health potions using the seeds that Persephone saved. They used a large plot of their land, being only three acres, to plant their crop. The pink flowers became very popular and it wasn't much time before many other farmers started growing the plants for themselves.

They would start a small family having two children and living happily ever after.

Look, I'm A Patriot!

Buck sat on his couch and watched the hot new game show, "Look, I'm A Patriot!" He didn't care much to watch game shows but there wasn't anything better on television. "At least life isn't a game and life isn't a show," thought Buck, "what one hell of a shithole it would be if life was both a game and a show, what a mess that would be."

Buck smiled and watched Look, I'm A Patriot!

* * * * *

"I'm your hostess, Darling, here to give you a good patriotic taste of the game show life! I'm glad you could join us for Look, I'm A Patriot!, the game show where everyone is a winner! I ask the questions and if the answerer answers with, 'Darling, it doesn't matter what they say or do to trick us because, look, I'm a Patriot!' they win!"

The crowd cheers.

Darling says, "Now, I want you all to welcome our contestants, Laura, Kenneth, Glendale and Marie. Thank you all for joining us today on 'Look, I'm A Patriot!'"

The contestants smile and the crowd cheers.

Darling says, "Before we start, we'd like the contestants to introduce themselves. How about Laura, can you tell us about yourself?"

Laura says, "My name is Laura and I am a dentist and have three children, my husband is an electrician. I am from Minneapolis Minnesota. I'm happy to be here and can't wait to start playing."

The crowd applauds.

Darling says, "Kenneth?"

Kenneth says, "I'm from Dallas Texas and work at an oil company. My wife and children are sitting front row and if you could put them on the television that would be superb."

Darling says, "And there they are! Let's welcome Kenneth and family to Look, I'm A Patriot!"

The crowd applauds, including Kenneth's family.

Darling says, "Glendale?"

Glendale says, "Hi, it's Glendale and it's so awesome to be on this show! I can't thank you enough. Hey mom and dad, look who's on the television! Oh yeah, and I'm from Denver Colorado."

The crowd cheers.

Darling says, "Marie."

Marie says, "Yes, my name is Marie and I just graduated college. I like to go driving in my car to the beach on the weekend and I am from Tampa Bay Florida!"

The crowd applauds.

Darling says, "So, let's get started, I ask a question and you answer with, 'Darling, it doesn't matter what you say or do to trick us because, look, I'm a Patriot!' Anyone not understand the rules?"

All the contestants say no.

Darling says, "Alright! Let's get on it." She shuffles a stack of large cards in her hands then puts them on her podium. She draws the top card and says, "Laura, you can answer first."

The crowd applauds. Laura is smiling.

Darling says, "Okay, here's the question. What are you gonna do about it when I hack your phone and find out who all your friends are, where your family is, what you say in your messages, hack your computer and watch you surf the internet, hack your television to see what you're watching, what are you going to do about it?"

Laura says, "Darling, it doesn't matter what you say or do to trick us because, look, I'm a Patriot!"

Darling says, "Yes! You are correct! You pass round one!"

The crowd cheers maniacally.

Darling says, "Alright, now for the next question." She draws the top card on her podium and says, "Kenneth, this one is yours, are you ready?"

Kenneth nods confidently.

Darling says, "Okay, here's the question. What are you gonna do about it when you don't know I'm there and I follow you around from a distance everywhere you go, to your work, your house, the store, the mall, the theater and no matter where you go I'm going to be there watching you, waiting, and there's nothing you can do about it? What are you gonna do about that?"

Kenneth gives Darling a funny look and says, "Darling, it doesn't matter what you say or do to trick us because, look, I'm a Patriot!"

The crowd erupts into a roar.

Darling says, "Yes! You are correct! You pass round one!"

Kenneth claps and waves at the crowd who are now hysterical.

Darling says, "Alright, now for the next question." She draws the top card once again and says, "Glendale, your next. Let's see what we got for you."

Glendale says, "I can get this one, I can really feel the mojo."

Darling says, "Okay, here's the question. What are you going to do when I learn a ton of information about you and rhyme facts of your life with posters I put up on walls that I know you are going to see because I know everything about you Glendale, I know everywhere you go. What are you going to do when I beat you to the grocery store and buy all the items I know you are going to buy before you get there. What are you going to do when I'm waiting outside your work with a tee shirt that says, 'what are you gonna do about this' and stand there waiting for you to see me? Huh, what are you gonna do about it?"

Glendale says, "Darling, it doesn't matter what you say or do to trick us because, look, I'm a Patriot!"

Darling says, "Yes! You are correct! You pass round one!"

The crowd is almost uncontrollable now, throwing items around.

Glendale gives them two thumbs up and says, "I know, I know. Stop it, I know."

Darling says, "Alright, I am going to get Marie and then we'll get to round two after the commercial break." She draws the top card off the stack on the podium. "Ready, Marie?" she says.

Marie says, "More than ready."

Darling says, "Okay, here's the question. What are you gonna do when I spread lies about you around to all of the people you are going to see each and every day of your life? What are you going to do when you're job searching and I call and tell your potential employers how horrible you are? Huh? What are you going to do when I prevent you from getting a job, shovel dirt on your name and piss on your shoes? What are you gonna do about it, huh, what are you gonna do about it?"

Marie closes her eyes for a second and then says, "Darling, it doesn't matter what you say or do to trick us because, look, I'm a Patriot!"

Darling says, "Yes! You are correct! You pass round one!"

The crowd has now become so unruly that it's obscene.

Marie jumps up and down with her hands in front of her face, saying, "Oh my God, I made it!"

Darling says, "And that you did."

All the contestants clap and give the camera their best toothy smiles, finger guns, thumbs up and fake gut punches.

Darling says, "And round two is coming up right after the commercial break."

The camera zooms out on the crowd as they applaud.

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Buck turned the television off and threw the remote onto the cushion next to him. He said, "I'm going to do something else."

The Nude Woman

Louie went sailing while sitting on his couch. His feet never touched the water and his socks stayed dry. Trailer houses were splashing out of the water like killer whales. He was way out there in the center of the ocean. "I knew you were okay, I knew you were okay, I knew you were okay." This faint voice said, echoing in the distance.

Louie shouted with his hands cupping his mouth, "What's going on?! Can you hear me?!" The trailer houses dove under the water and didn't return. He could see something on the horizon. Maybe a boat. Maybe land. His couch was going directly towards whatever it was.

There was a book on the cushion next to him. He didn't want to read but there wasn't anything else for him to get on with, so he took a look at it. It was a user's manual and blueprint book for a satellite. This wasn't the sort of book he would want to read. Louis threw the satellite manual into the ocean and it smacked against it like the ocean was solid. The waves of the water pushed the book constantly and surely it looked like real water, but, the book wasn't getting wet and it sort of slid around.

Louie put his foot onto the top of the water but he couldn't press through it, it was hard and slippery like porcelain or highly shined marble. The small waves rolled under his feet, not pushing them aside, it was like there wasn't a current.

He tried standing and eventually let go of the couch and with a lot of trouble was able to sort of stand but the waves beneath his feet were always in motion and might as well have been made of cement. His couch moved slowly away as he stood there. He knew he would trip on a wave if he tried to walk and his couch was faster anyway. He would need to jog or run to beat his couch and that idea wouldn't last long. He caught up with his moving couch and then sat on it once again.

He couldn't tell if the shape on the horizon was stationary or not. If it was a boat then he would pray that it didn't sail in another direction. He thought he might be losing his mind. That or he was dreaming.

"Do you hear that?" said a sweet voice on his left side. He was sitting on the left arm of the couch. He turned his head to see who was asking him. It was a large three-legged starfish riding a legless table top. Two of the starfish's legs were recently missing as could be seen by the way the stubs weren't grown over with skin yet.

The starfish said, "Do you hear that, sir? That song?"

Louis said, "I don't hear anything."

The starfish said, "Ah, doesn't make a difference anyway, you wouldn't understand."

Louis said, "Understand what?"

The starfish said, "To understand you must go under the waves. You can't though because they're not wet anymore. That's why I'm riding this table top."

Louis said, "What is that thing out there? Can you see it? Getting closer and closer."

The starfish said, "That's the castle and there's a monster inside. That monster is the most beautiful woman that ever lived and she's a total barbarian. She eats anything that swims around her castle, I wouldn't go there if I were you."

Louis said, "I'm not scared of women, I was married you know."

The starfish said, "I don't think that's going to stop her. Last week, she ate my brother and took my legs. I'm lucky that I have found my escape when she wasn't paying attention." The starfish started crying.

Louis said, "She's human, right?"

The starfish said, "Yes, she's human."

Louis said, "Well then, you think she would want to eat me? I don't think so. That's totally disgusting."

The starfish said, "Would you eat a starfish?"

Louis said, "If I was hungry enough and there was nothing else available, I would."

The starfish said, "Well screw you, I don't want to talk with you anymore."

Louis said, "Suit yourself."

The starfish started moving the other way on the table.

Louis said, "Hey, how are you steering that thing? Hey!"

The starfish ignored him and kept going.

Louis was at the castle before he knew it except it wasn't a castle it was a lighthouse on fine stone blocks barely wider than the outer walls and there wasn't land connected. He got off his couch and walked all around the circumference of the lighthouse. No entrance.

"I see you there." said a sweet and taunting womanly voice above him. He looked up. It was a nude woman. He could see her bare breasts and upper abdomen and knew that if she was naked up top she was probably fully nude. The lighthouse was tall so he couldn't see much detail.

Louis said, "I can sure see you also. Can you help me? I don't know where I am and there isn't anywhere else that I can go."

The nude woman said, "I don't know about that. I must get some work done." She promptly disappeared out of his sight.

Louis yelled, "Hey! Don't leave me out here! Where are you going?! Hey!"

The nude woman said, "I know you're there and that is probably where you need to be."

Louis said, "You can't leave me out here like this, what are you a heartless rake?"

The nude woman said, "I need to work, I'm sorry, I can't give you a ride right now."

Louis said, "A ride? Do you got a boat?"

The nude woman said, "I own an air balloon. Maybe you should ride tomorrow. I need to get this work done."

Louis got offended and said, "Tomorrow! Where am I going to go? There's literally nothing around here to go to! You can't make me wait here till tomorrow!"

The nude woman said, "I can."

Louis said, "Well that would be cruel. How about I help you with your work? Then you can help me leave this place."

The nude woman said, "You would help me with my work? You promise me?"

Louis said, "Yes. I give you my word."

The nude woman showed herself, smiling.

Louis laughed, happy to see her once again, waving his arms around.

She tossed something at him. It landed on the water behind him. He rushed at the item and took it quick off the water. It was a key attached to a keychain. A plastic tag on the keychain was in the shape of a garden gnome, and an address printed in blue letters on it, saying, "Sally & Austin's Suits." Louis looked up and the nude woman was there.

Louis said, "What in the world would I need this for? There ain't no door out here."

The nude woman said, "You didn't see the door? Maybe you should look once again."

Louis said, "Really? I walked around this thing already, there ain't a door out here."

The nude woman said, "There is a door, you didn't look hard enough."

Louis said, "Okay, alright, I am going to walk around this lighthouse once again. Promise you ain't going to disappear and leave me out here all alone?"

The nude woman said, "Yes, I promise."

Louis said, "Alright, here I go, lookin' for the door that isn't there."

He went along the skinny perimeter of the lighthouse in the opposite direction of his first circling of it and the nude woman was right, there was a keyhole. There wasn't an obvious door there. The outline of the door was barely visible with a space thinner than paper. He inserted the key into the hole and turned it. The stones of the wall moved in towards the center of the lighthouse, allowing him

to enter. He removed the key and the door moved into a closed position once again.

The inside of the lighthouse was hollow with a metal staircase that went in a circle around the inner wall to the top where the nude woman was. On ground level there was a fireplace, a couch, a nice rug, a bed and all sorts of household goods. Electric lights were mounted all the way to the top of the lighthouse so the inside was completely lit.

The nude woman called him to join her, she said, "Come on up, I'm halfway done with my work."

Louis said, "Alright, I'm on my way!" He slowly walked up the stairs, each stair rang and resonated with the lighthouse. When he reached the top the ringing sound of the stairs was frying his nerves.

The nude woman was sitting on a chair at a picnic table with a table umbrella over it, there was a second empty chair across the table. On the table was a revolver right inside her reach. She was stitching some clothing together and she was butt naked with a large part of the material lain across her lap. Her hair reached her elbows and she was perfect like the starfish promised.

The nude woman said, "See that revolver right there? If you try touching me I am going to shoot you."

Louis said, "Yes, ma'am. What are you making?"

The nude woman said, "I am making a starfish bikini because I don't have any clothes. You can sit on the other chair if you'd like."

Louis said, "Alright." and then went to the other chair, sitting.

The nude woman said, "You know how to stitch? I already measured and cut the pieces. If you could stitch this bikini bottom together I would like the help very much."

Louis said, "I can stitch, done it before."

The nude woman tossed the starfish skin to him with a needle and thread. He started sewing the crude clothing together like she wanted.

Louis said, "I don't know where I am, can you tell me?"

The nude woman said, "Wouldn't you like to know my name first?"

Louis said, "Alright, what is your name?"

The nude woman said, "The nude woman."

Louis said, "Yeah right, funny. And I'm the lost sailor."

The nude woman said, "At this time onward the reader is going to know you with that name, the lost sailor."

Louis said, "I was lying, I'm not a sailor, how about if the reader sees my name is something else, something that gives new life to this story. Nude woman, you decide what the reader should see."

The nude woman said, "What about 'the lucky man'? You sure were lucky that you found me here, there isn't a single step of land in a hundred miles, you could have died out there."

The lucky man said, "Alright, the lucky man it is. Here you go nude woman, I finished your cloth, now you can wear it."

The nude woman said, "I also finished. Now I can wear some clothes." She got out of her chair and put the starfish bikini on. She said, "Lucky man, how does this look?"

The lucky man said, "Sexy. Anything you wear has got to be beautiful."

The nude woman said, "What a nice compliment." and then took the revolver into her hand. She said, "Now, about that balloon."

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They were now in the hot air balloon, drifting along at a leisurely meter, the nude woman who wasn't nude anymore leaned facing inward with the revolver in her hand so that she could watch the lucky man carefully.

The climb to this altitude was gradual. The ocean was endless as they climbed and the lighthouse became a smudge on a blue canvas.

The lucky man said, "So, nude woman, how far is the nearest land?"

The nude woman said, "I don't know, a hundred miles. We're moving at a fine speed so there's a chance that we should see land before sunset."

The lucky man said, "How long were you stranded at the lighthouse?"

The nude woman said, "Ten thousand years."

The lucky man said, "You sure lie a lot."

The nude woman said, "Doesn't make a difference anyway, you know what time is like on the ocean."

Right then a flying disc came shooting through the clouds at incredible speed and made a precise stop right next to them. A window opened on the disc and there was a space alien inside. The space alien said, "Sir and ma'am, if you see anything don't hesitate when you feel the need."

The lucky man said, "The need of what?"

The space alien said, "The need of your freedom that you so choose whatever that could be."

The lucky man said, "You don't make much sense. We are in deep need of finding land and returning to civilization. What would you suggest to quicken this goal?"

The space alien said, "I don't know, how about this. I help you find land and you help me beat my enemy, the reptilians. I can make space in my disc but you'll have to help me remove my captive, a particularly fierce reptilian. I cannot lift him myself. Deal?"

The lucky man and the nude woman both said, "Deal."

The space alien was pleased. He said, "Alright, let us dock our ships together."

Once docked and firmly tied together the lucky man boarded the alien disc. He said, "What a fascinating craft. You own this yourself or is this a rental?"

The space alien said, "I own this craft. Now there, you see the reptilian? I sedated him with the most painful anesthetics known to the galaxy and paralyzed him. I haven't the strength to dump him. I was going to dump him into the ocean, but I thought it funnier to dump him in this balloon. Can you get his feet while I get his upper half?"

The lucky man went to the reptilians feet and lifted him. The reptilian was wearing a red suit with a can clenched in his paralyzed hand. The lucky man said, "Are you sure he isn't dead? He's stiff and cold."

The space alien said, "The reptilians are naturally stiff and cold, they couldn't stretch for their lives if they wanted to. They are

also cold blooded and depend on external heat to get them going or else they're pretty much sitting ducks.”

The lucky man and the space alien slowly and carefully moved the paralyzed reptilian to the hot air balloon. This reptilian was very tall and somewhat thin on human standards. His face was hideous and his eyes were wide apart enough that they almost were on the sides of his head. His mouth was very wide, almost reaching the neck. His skin was shiny like melted plastic but soft like silk.

The nude woman was shocked when she saw first sight of the reptilian, saying, “My, what a horrid monster!”

The lucky man said, “He's cold and ugly and really, I'd like to dump him in the ocean.”

The space alien and the lucky man successfully deposited the reptilian into the hot air balloon and once all three of them were inside his disc they undocked the two craft and the space alien shut the hatch.

The nude woman said, “Wow, what an awesome machine. Where can you find such a thing?”

The space alien said, “Well, you know. The answer to that is really deep and starts before I even knew what a planet was. The story is elaborate and I would rather not go into much detail. I'm not all that interested with bringing much of this into our discussion either. You would think that I should say something about this machine but since the reader isn't allowed to know those sort of secrets I must keep my mouth closed about it with you because it sends a message to those people.”

The nude woman said, “Oh really? What if I told you that I have power over the writer simply because I'm a nude woman and if you wanted something I could make him create it for us out of nothing, being that he has total power over us? If it were possible that I could grant you a wish, space alien, would you tell us those secrets then?”

The space alien said, “I'm not a rotten dummy, okay. Now that reptilian, he was a rotten dummy. You see this equipment here, lady, what you see here is the end result of a very long and endless triathlon. Thousands of years of ingenuity and research. I can't give that all away in the wink of an eye because some alien broad in a bikini says she can grant me unlimited wishes. I don't care what you say, you can't make me tell you anything about this machine.”

The nude woman said, "You asked for it, alien. Writer! Turn the alien into a purse for me." She crossed her arms and all the sudden her bikini disappeared.

The space alien started laughing, now wearing her bikini.

"Oh my God!" said the nude woman, "Not again! Here give me my clothes Mr., I am not going all day nude, already did that."

The space alien laughed and said, "I don't know, I kinda like them."

The nude woman got furious, saying, "You must give me my bikini now you atrocious fiend!"

The space alien took her bikini off and gave it to her. She immediately put her bikini on once again. The space alien said, "You know what they say about testing the limits and powers of the ones that made you."

The nude woman said, "I suppose you're right, I apologize."

The lucky man said, "Where you planning to take us, space alien?"

The space alien said, "Wherever you want. I can reach all surface locations on Earth in less than ten minutes. This disc is quick."

The nude woman said, "Oh shoot, I left my revolver on the hot air balloon."

The space alien said, "We cannot retrieve your revolver, the reptilian is surely awake now, look out the window and see."

The nude woman and lucky man both stared out the window, seeing the reptile stomping furiously in circles. The nude woman said, "For an advanced intelligence he doesn't seem to act all that advanced."

The space alien said, "Reptilians are very dumb. Although reptilians are dumb they are very difficult to fight in war. This reptilian was smart and he entered my craft. I neutralized him and then saw you in the hot air balloon. Where would you like to go?"

The lucky man said, "Nude woman, where are you from?"

The nude woman said, "My house location is secret but you can drop me off on a beach in America. That's all I want, a beach in America. A hot beach."

The lucky man said, "You can let me out where you let her out. You don't mind, nude woman, if I join you on a beach?"

The nude woman said, "We should stay in contact when this ends. I think that's a great idea."

The space alien said, "Alright, I can take you somewhere I like to go when the beach is empty. Give me three minutes."

The craft went moving at ultra high speed, flying into space and then bowing around the planet to an American beach location of the space alien's choice. They didn't feel a single bit of turbulence and arrived at their destination in record time. At least record time in the human's opinion.

The space alien landed on a beach crowded with swimmers and opened the hatch, letting the nude woman and lucky man out.

He waved and smiled as they walked away and they looked over their shoulders, holding hands, waving and smiling in return. It was a moment they would never forget. When the space craft left, as quick as it arrived, the lucky man said, "I'm glad I found you. This story is so awesome, I'm glad I'm in it."

The nude woman said, "Where did all the casual beach visitors go?"

The lucky man said, "Scared off with the sight of space aliens. What a bunch of scaredy cats. The sea boats are there. There's a few of them right there."

The nude woman said, "I wonder what time it is?"

The lucky man said, "10:12am, I am wearing augmented contact lenses that are connected to the internet. They weren't in operation at the lighthouse but as soon as we landed on this beach they reactivated."

The nude woman said, "You got your wallet? Can you buy me some clothes? People are going to stare at me wearing this starfish bikini, it doesn't even fit right."

The lucky man laughed and said, "Sure thing. We are going to enter whatever clothes store we see first, no matter the price, and then later we can shop somewhere else and you can hand-pick something closer to your personal tastes."

They made it off the beach and there were people once again, people that didn't see them climb out of a space craft on the beach. They quickly located a clothing store selling tourist clothes and the nude woman got fully clothed. (But her name was still the nude woman.)

The nude woman hugged the lucky man and said, "We should go and get a drink."

The lucky man squeezed her back and said, "Yeah. You gotta promise me something first before we continue."

The nude woman said, "What's that?"

The lucky man said, "You gotta promise me that you aren't going to let them tell us what words we can and cannot use. If you want to wave at me you can go ahead and wave. I won't be offended. You could wave all you want all the time if you wanted, no matter how much you wave at me I won't get angry, you see, because I am attracted to you and waving doesn't bother me. You say clothes, you can say the word taste, you say whatever you want because I am not with a mental handicap that reduces my vocabulary. You got that, nude woman?"

The nude woman said, "Yes. I fully understand. I used to know people who hated all of those things. They used to threaten me for waving and saying the word clothes like if I said that word they were going to murder me. I am so happy I don't know those people anymore. I won't be damned for liking the way something tastes and enjoying flavors. Sounds to me like a rabbit hole. Keep those retards away from me. They're a bunch of brain dead linguists, right?"

The lucky man said, "You should see my friends, they don't pull no punches about this. Where I'm from there's a huge community of these people who hate the words clothes, tastes and notes. They secretly murder people that use these words and oh my God they hate the word socks more than anything, in fact, most of them don't wear socks. What a buncha nuts. My friends, they're state-of-the-art and used all the words this cult of linguists hate, they used this long list and you wouldn't believe the anger my friends elicited out of those whackos. What a buncha puds."

The nude woman said, "Well, at least we believe in freedom. We should get bonnets to commemorate this."

Lucky man said, "Whatever you say, honey, I'm with you."

The nude woman said, "When are we going to get new names, you know, real names?"

The lucky man said, "I don't know. I like calling you nude woman. It's the writer's decision."

The nude woman said, "How can we ask the writer to give us real names?"

The lucky man said, "That's a really good question and I am not ready to answer that."

The nude woman said, "I'm glad the space alien took us to the Bahamas. I really like this place."

The lucky man said, "Me too."

They were strolling through the tourist shops. One of the shops displayed a huge preserved sea snake that was over 30 feet long. They made a stop there and looked at it. The snake's head was positioned so that it was biting onto an action figure in a cape. The caption on a card said, "April Clothes sale."

The lucky man said, "Would you like to eat a lobster dinner? I bet the lobster is great here in the Bahamas."

The nude woman said, "Why not eat lobster right now? The door is right there."

The lucky man said, "Alright, let's go in there."

When they entered the restaurant the nude woman said, "Wait, look, a line."

The lucky man said, "So, it's a line. We can wait. The hostess can tell us when we can cross the line."

The nude woman said, "Look at the sign. It says 'Secret password required, lying prohibited.'"

The lucky man said, "I don't believe them. Who needs a password to eat a lobster?"

The nude woman said, "All I see is a buzzing portal into another dimension. A vibrating pool of liquid plasma fizzes near the center of the portal. Each time the portal is touched it momentarily warps and feels like invisible flexiglass. The air sounds damp with deafness. Like water in your ears, the pressure of a higher density. You feel like you are made of rubber and bending."

The lucky man said, "What are you on?"

The nude woman said, "The same thing you're on."

The lucky man said, "I'm on something?"

The nude woman said, "You'd have to be on something to go sailing on a couch."

The lucky man said, "Well I didn't go sailing on a couch as a matter of choice, it happened in a way that I couldn't control. It's not my fault, I was placed there in that way."

The nude woman said, "Yeah, like the way I was placed at a lighthouse without clothes."

The lucky man said, "At least it was in a warm climate, you could've been placed on a ski mountain nude and with some strange man that speaks Greek. At least that didn't happen."

The nude woman said, "We might not be able to unpuzzle this mystery on our own but with us together we might have a chance."

The lucky man said, "Let's leave, we can eat a lobster later."

They left the restaurant and the midnoon sun was blazing.

The nude woman said, "I can't wait to show you my place. There's a lot of very interesting things in that house attic that the previous owners left behind. There's boxes and boxes of things you would never dream of getting in your hands. Things nobody is searching for until you show them. They'd look all their lives and not find those items but yet there they are, in my attic, waiting for eternity to end. It's really interesting and you might not think it that interesting the way I talk about it but believe me, it's awesome."

The lucky man said, "I believe you baby."

The nude woman said, "Where are we going?"

The lucky man said, "I don't know and I don't care, I'm just waiting till this story ends. You think the writer is going to end this story?"

The nude woman said, "The writer can't end the story like this, there needs to be some sort of grand and awe inspiring end. Like what if we kiss, you think the story would end if we kissed?"

The lucky man said, "We should kiss and find out."

The nude woman and the lucky man kissed passionately.

THE END



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