

The Trine Trilogy, Book II

BROGAN'S SAGA

Mark Higham

Brogan's Saga: The Trine Trilogy, Book II
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Chapter 1

Brogan stood in his living room, preparing his “son” for school. Their house was a domicile Brogan found comfortable, actually quite similar to the ones he’d known on Trine, but, since he’d been on this planet for a number of years now, a planet he had come to know as Earth, he was having to constantly adjust to the reality of being in a civilization that inwardly disgusted him. They had genders here. And they were all clothes wearers.

“Why do I not have genitalia like the other humans, father?” Early asked Brogan one day just as he’d become old enough to notice.

“Because we are not human, we’re memers from Trine. Since you were born here, you have no knowledge of your origin. Your *ubo* is your pleasure center, and I haven’t taught you about it yet because I feel it may only confuse you. You are an alien here, but you must always understand yourself as a human. Don’t forget to never let anyone see your naked body. There would be chaos. Now, do you understand everything I have taught you about Christianity? What are we again?”

“Fundamentalist Christians.”

“Which is why we go around in plain clothing. Who is Jesus, again?”

“The misunderstood holy man.”

“Very good. Don’t forget to quote him once in awhile just to protect your cover identity.”

Early had inherited all of his father’s genius, and luckily, all of Brogan’s other attributes, making the flat chest much easier to move in society since it would have required a lot of training to get Early to act and move as a woman. Now, at 12, the girls were starting to notice him, and since earth life was all he’d known, Brogan worried about attraction. He was as beautiful as Brogan, and it was, perhaps, the effeminacy of the Portians that only kept the girls away, as it seemed earth women, especially American women, seemed to value a very high level of masculinity for sexual arousal.

Brogan himself was always having to reject advances by women although he had managed to convince a few men to join him in a sexual encounter, always making sure to keep his underwear on while he serviced the phallus, actually a beautiful sexual member, but he constantly bemoaned the absence of InterPathway. He found himself stroking himself a lot and, since this wasn’t something that Trines ever did, he suffered from a

terrible lack of intimacy. But here he was, stuck on this planet, not really knowing what the future held. Besides, he wasn't entirely sure where Earth was in their development although they seemed fairly primitive with their focus on fiscal concerns, especially given their obsession with an economic system known as capitalism. Their civilization was in constant turmoil.

These Earthers were completely immature as a people, preferring rationality, and only compartmentalizing emotional tendencies when they felt safe in their churches or gentlemen's clubs seeking out faceless nameless sexual encounters, something that Brogan didn't really find immoral, just short-sighted. And he missed Langland terribly. He knew his only hope was Langland's genius finding a way to reach him, but as the years passed, his hope began fading more and more. But what Brogan was unaware of was that, the great expanse of space meant time was completely relative. He processed himself as being on Earth for over twelve years, but for Langland and his beloved Trine, barely months had passed since Brogan "fell" to the earth by a method too complicated to adequately process. He just passed the years pining away for his lover, fitting into his earth life, even as he now adjusted his white shirt in order to ready himself for his subway ride to his "job" on Wall Street. It was the only thing he knew how to do, having managed monetary affairs on his home planet, and he was entirely successful. He and Early would never have to face destitution but just wait, wait for Langland to return them to their home planet, and meanwhile, live a comfortable life of suffering in the process.

Chapter 2

Langland looked up at Considine, who had that look in his face again. Langland knew he wanted an egg, but Langland was still hopelessly in love with his former lover whose name rang in his mind constantly, like an out-of-control *ubo* taken to throbbing with desire unstopably. Considine lowered his body over Langland and Langland found himself fighting him off when the InterPathway started coming to that edge of procreation again.

"What?" Considine said, lifting his body up, and trying to seduce his lover with shiny eyes. "Surely you must know that I am the memer for you. I can see the love in your eyes."

"Yes, all true. But I can't..."

“Don’t keep mentioning that name. Surely you must know it’s impossible. You said yourself that you had no way of recovering the wormholes.”

“Yes, but there is that.” Langland gestured to the orb that now sat on a bookshelf, perhaps now useless as a scientific avenue of investigation as a plain stone, but Langland had kept up his spiritual practice, believing inwardly that he could tease out a way to unlock the mystery of the bubble universe he had unintentionally birthed, finding himself stroking it betimes, worrying through the various ways to use it. His complex mind kept shifting through scenarios of the now useless object becoming a tool in the belt of his genius proclivity for solving just about any problem within his purview.

“It’s only good for holding up books now,” Considine said. “Besides, you have been raised to Supreme Ruler now that Trine is united. The Portians even revere you. You must dwell on your responsibilities and give up on idle fantasies.”

This angered Langland. He jumped off the bed and physically pushed Considine so hard that he now lay sprawled on the floor. Considine wasn’t surprised. He knew Langland had developed an abusive side because life had become somewhat meaningless to him despite the turn to spirituality and constant praying.

“The gods of the Pantheon will assist me,” Langland cried, even as Considine began calmly rising to his feet.

“Oh, my beloved Langland. You are so hopelessly deluded. I’ve decided to get an intellectual master to help you with your dilemmas. I think that if we can restore you to your former interests, you may finally find peace within the great confines of that mind of yours. Come on, let me hear it from your lips. I know you want to say it.”

Langland relented after a certain struggle of emotions crossed through his face. “Yes, I love you, Considine. And I appreciate you taking me into your grand home, and loving me back. But still...”

“Shhh,” Considine whispered. “No more talking.” And Considine put his arms around his lover, gently pushing him back onto the bed, making sure his best lovemaking skills would rise to the surface, and a few minutes after intense InterPathway, saw the satisfied look on Langland’s face, and knew that they had yet to produce an egg, but now the possibility was morphing into an inevitability.

Langland and Considine had not moved their offices, but Langland had insisted that Considine occupy his own office, actually only a fiberboard partition just so Langland could have his privacy. Considine understood, waiting for his lover to finally put to rest his thoughts of ever finding Brogan. And there was the entrance to the laboratory, almost a salting of dust on the security controls so long had it been since it had been entered.

Langland was lost in thought now. He had canceled all of his audiences today save one just so he could have time to think. He knew Considine would never fully understand this need of his to lay ensconced in his thoughts, the wheels of his great intellect almost wobbling off their axels so hard was the gray matter pumping out intuitions. His mind kept returning to the orb, in its useless condition, but he knew, he just knew, that there was some mystery there that the gods of the Pantheon would help him unlock.

His lips began silently moving as he lisped a prayer. He wanted to contact the god they called Apollo in a desperate attempt to find that quiescence of mind that would lead him down a primrose path of foolishness. It wasn't wisdom he was after, but folly. He knew that by embracing the absurdity of his situation that he would eventually receive the necessary revelation to lay bare the pattern of the universe, the very blueprint of being, the one true reality of the universe that would shift the thinking of any interested member into an altered state of consciousness, combining his suddenly discovered Law of Simplicity with a Law of Universal Consciousness that would predetermine the destinies of all with its precocious transmogrification. Trines didn't process the idea of transcendence; they just lived in their closeted minds, hoping for the move to utopia to dawn like a sun crowding out the clutter of everyday reality.

And then Langland's eyes grew heavy, finding himself falling into a semi-hypnotic state. In this trance, he saw him, Apollo, and he was hefting a giant ax, so large that it scraped the sky of heaven with its sharpened edge. Apollo lifted his weapon high above his head, his huge biceps striating as he paused at an apex point, until letting the ax fall, Langland now aware that he had been in a kneeling position the whole of his vision. Langland even found himself clasping his hands in propitiation when the blade crushed against his skull, and Langland felt his head split in two. He marveled that he didn't just fall over dead, but the ax had sliced through his entire body, and now he found himself disembodied, looking down on the dead object of his physical self. And he heard Apollo speak.

“Nothing is dead,” Apollo said. “Everything is alive. And you will not find your answer among the living. You will not even find your answer among the dead. There is an in-between place, a place of fear, of danger, and of uncertainty that the truly informed will access once their spiritual preparation is complete. Yours is not yet. But it will take you a thousand lifetimes to reach the answer you need. Remember these words: “Nothing is nothing, and nothing is everything.”

Langland came to, shifting his clasped hands into flat palms pressed together when he raised them in a ceremonial gesture whether to thank Apollo for the inchoate message or to damn him for it, Langland truly didn't know. But there it was. It had suddenly appeared. There was an ax leaning against his desk. He reached for it and found it impossibly heavy. He could barely move it, and his thoughts blackened that perhaps Apollo was trying to get him to understand a new way of death. There had been very few instances of suicide in the entire history of Trine, but Langland stroked the sharp edge of the blade, thinking about the gun in his lockbox in his house, feeling the barrel pressed next to his forehead, and wondered what would happen if he squeezed off a shot. Would it be so horrible to become nothing, as Apollo had reported to him? But then, a face appeared just in front of him and it was nodding no. Langland knew then that he had to think in a different direction. Nothingness evidently didn't mean a stilled brain, but perhaps stilled thoughts, a rejection of consciousness streaming in a certain direction, but left in a state of freeplay where a sort of submission to the Universal Will would cloud the mind in a holy destruction. And then he understood.

Once one dissolved every concept and the existence of every object, the world became like an empty bowl, a curvature of space where only a vacuum could exist because there would be nothing else. Wasn't this the importance of being so distant from other inhabited worlds? Just so they could all eternally avoid each other through the power of nothing, the power of the vacuum, the god created tool of teaching the denizens of the universe the value of nothingness. Most was truly empty space, filled in with the occasional cosmic object, but the sheer paucity of them should have driven home the point. The gods of the Pantheon wanted its universe as empty as possible, hence the unbreathable distances, the time dysfunctions, the rules of physics. Some planets were beginning to understand the ruse, as the quantum level began revealing itself, but they were hopelessly locked in the math, the very language of the universe, actually twisting numbers into mystical entities reporting

more on the content of the Universal Mind than any scientist's speculation, but mortals felt such a need to know like life could never go on as before without that one penetrating solution of the unsolvable mathematical puzzle. Mathematics was wrongly thought of as an invention, when the truth lay in the word "discovery," meaning the latency of an idea autopoietically emerging in the mortal civilizations that focused exclusively on technological achievement over the more enlightened idea that utopias were formed out of advanced behavior, not machines. A truly advanced society would be completely unconcerned about a flying car.

Langland experienced these insights coming in at furious speeds, deepening his mind with the understanding that was not understanding, the inadequacy of words to truly pinpoint a meaning, as meanings were forever escaping back into their impenetrable voids.

Langland thought he felt a sense of approval enter his emotions, and upon feeling this, the ax suddenly grew light, so he hefted it onto his shoulder, this holy object, this gift from a god.

"Do you like my new token?" Langland asked Considine he coming around from his screen to tell Langland something. Langland had taken to calling these "gifts" tokens, and he and Considine would then engage in a conversation of the reality or irreality of the putative object.

"You know I can't see your gifts from the gods," Considine complained. "It makes me wonder if we should ordain you a priest of the Pantheon and let you live out your days a deluded mystic."

"You can't see the ax?" Langland asked, truly perplexed.

"There is nothing in your hands, and we've been over this time and time again. Every time the gods give you a token, you have to remember the symbolism of the thing. You're being incredibly, obtusely literal and it's not like you. Would you shelter your great intellect in the shadow of superstition?"

"Call it what you like," Langland said, feeling a little deflated.

"Well, come on. You're the greatest intellectual in recent history and all you do is solicit tokens from beings who may or may not exist. Does this not affect you at all?"

"You have no understanding of life, Considine. Intellect and emotion are two sides of the same coin. We need both hemispheres of the brain to work together or we will only fall into a hopeless state of rigidity."

“Perhaps true. But does the creative right have to have prevalence for you all of the time?”

“There is no dominance. There is only submission to the Universal Will. If we get caught in trying to dominate our environment, no matter how beneficially, our lives will not improve; we will devolve into degenerate automatons. Why do you think Bramin was experimenting with them? He thought the future was un-meming Trine. I can only imagine that if Portia had won the war, we would now be faced with an entire population of fakes.”

Langland couldn't help notice Considine's face coloring. He wondered what it was about, but then Considine quickly divulged his information. “The dignitary from Mordem is here, Excellency.”

“Oh, yes. I assumed he might be a little angry with me, what with the ruse.”

“Yeah. I think you'll realize how badly you ridiculed yourself before Bramin.”

“What?”

“You'll see.”

Langland sat in a chair in the audience room, a plush back to it making the sitter comfortable even as well-carved legs gave the illusion of grandeur. The dignitary from Mordem entered the room as Langland fell into a state of shock. No one really knew much about the island nation which was why Langland had chosen it in the first place. But the memer who had entered the room was like nothing Langland had ever seen before. He had very dark skin, with long black hair slithering down his back and terminating at the waist. He even had hair on his chest, something also that was completely foreign on Trine, not to mention the beard. Trines weren't usually this hairy, as even the Border People's body hair shone through in a more natural manner with the rind around their bodies making it look less like hair and more like a kind of fur. Langland stared at the dignitary fascinated. Now he knew what Considine had meant about his coming to understand about the failure of his ruse, the capture and the torture, because, evidently, Bramin knew something about Mordem and when “Fortunato” had shown up, the risibility of the plan would be apparent. The dignitary bowed.

“Your Excellency,” he said.

Langland motioned to an equally ornate chair just opposite him. “Please, sit, good sir.”

“Thank you,” the dignitary responded even as Langland heard the gravelly intonation of his words produce a kind of beautiful booming sound that seemed to linger in the room each time he finished a sentence.

“And what can I do for you today?” Langland said, his eyes locked on the dignitary’s blackened skin, almost shining like a jewel, almost as obsidian as the orb in his apartment. “But first, your name.”

“Uh, yes. My name is Bass.”

“Interesting name.”

“Yes, well, we are an island nation, so...”

“Well of course, of course. It only makes sense. My good friend is a Border denizen and his name is Hairy for obvious reasons. Perhaps you have taken the name as a high placed official yourself?”

“No, good sir. It was given me by my grandfather. We don’t usually use names, but when we do, they usually refer to a valued occupation of the leader of the family. I guess you could say that he was a master fisherman and he felt my appearance bore an uncanny resemblance to a fish.” Here he chuckled. “I think he had been considering the name Gill, but, because most of his catch were composed of Bass, he wanted me to remember him that way.”

“Oh, we have so much to learn about your nation, Bass. Resemblance to a fish? Do fish have facial hair?” Langland tried a laugh, but Bass’ face remained placid.

“Excuse me,” Langland said. “I suppose I’m being too familiar.”

“Not at all,” Bass said. “We don’t stand on ceremony in our culture. We live in a classless society, so all are welcome to display their personalities as they wish.” Here Bass smiled, revealing incredibly white teeth, offsetting the darkness of his skin with a beautiful contrast. Langland began feeling an emotion stir within him, and he knew that it was just lust, but still, curiosity was mastering him.

“Well, let me say,” Langland began, “it is an incredible honor to have you here. Please tell me what your needs are and I will answer every one.”

“Thank you for your kindness, Excellency,” Bass said.

“No, no. I don’t stand on ceremony either. Call me Langland.”

“Okay Langland. Would you be so kind as to hear me out?”

“Certainly,” Langland said, leaning forward, catching himself trying to stare into the huge globular eyes of his guest.

“Well, there have been some unsettling developments lately. People are going missing.”

“Going missing?”

“Yes, just disappearing. We have no idea where they’ve gone, and they don’t come back. It appears to be some nefarious plan to kidnap.”

“But why on Trine why?”

“We have yet to settle on a reason. Could we request protection from the InterLand security forces?”

“Yes, yes. You may have any assistance you need. I will begin looking into this immediately.”

“We are just a poor fishing community,” Bass said. “We have nothing that anyone could possibly want.”

Which is precisely the point, Langland thought. His thoughts went dark when he realized that someone was capturing the Mordem for some kind of exploitation. Genetic experimentation? Slavery? Langland vowed to himself that he would stamp this out quickly.

“I will dispatch the armed forces immediately. In fact, I will supervise their deployment myself. I will come to your island nation and discuss with your elders safety measures.”

“Thank you, Excellency. Your kindness is legendary.”

Langland actually blushed. “May I escort you back to your home? It would be my honor to accompany you.”

Bass’ beautiful smile emerged again as he nodded his assent, perhaps unaware that Langland only wanted to spend more time with what he was beginning to hope was a new love interest.

He was standing next to Bass on the prow of a great ship, as the Mordem preferred to travel on the water and not in the air.

Over the past few days of their voyage together, Langland began to understand that these people felt very close to nature and weren’t very interested in technology. They only used it for sonar to locate schools of fish, and even then, they would only take what they needed in order to avoid overfishing.

Once he disembarked onto the sands of the island, he could see how beautiful Bass' home was. It was obvious that they weren't even logging because, as Langland later learned, not only were they concerned about soil erosion, but also they deemed their forests somewhat holy places, worshipping deities all possessed of natural attributes.

Langland would spend several weeks on the island, leaving Considine to the task of governing. He was fascinated not only with Bass, but the whole concept of this maritime culture that seemed to have ascended so close to a center of evolution that the more common ideas of advanced civilization cropping up all over Trine were completely absent here. And then there was the beauty of the people. Their coloring was all different shades of black with some almost a chocolate brown. They actually had some seventy names so multivarious were their mix of what was actually just one color, now diversified into a kaleidoscope of versions of the one.

"We would be honored if you stayed in our hut with my family," Bass told Langland.

"The honor would be all mine."

Langland lay on the bare floor of Bass' hut, his mind working furiously. His attraction to Bass seemed to spread to the whole of the nation for they had been blessed with a beauty gene that Langland had never seen before. Their breasts were quite large and the reason for Bass' long locks lay in their unwillingness to cut their hair very often, as it was a mark of beauty in their culture. But Langland did notice that they didn't openly rub *ubos* so habitually applied almost everywhere else on Trine. Langland wasn't sure whether this was due to modesty or to some kind of austerity lurking in their sense of themselves. They were a very open people, however, as everywhere Langland had walked, they were joking with each other in a dialect that Langland would eventually adjust to, as the words were just curious almost caricatures of what the rest of Trine would normally consider language. But these observations made the darkness of the Mordem's skin almost an invasive light like a moon's halo enclosing its sun reflections around a community of very enlightened people. Langland, who hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep, woke up suddenly when a floorboard squeaked.

"I'm sorry," a memer said in a whisper as his body basked in a moonglow strafing through a nearby window. "I didn't want to disturb you, but Bass asked me to be the one."

"The one what?"

“Oh, he didn’t tell you. It is our custom to make an offer of pleasure to a guest in our house.”

Langland caught on, suddenly wishing it had been Bass himself that had entered. But he knew better than to refuse a gift, especially from someone whose house he now not only inhabited but graced in his decision to leave his lofty palace for the personal care he now was offering. Langland noticed the Mordem standing over him was massaging his own large breasts, his nipples stiffening in such an erotic manner, that Langland was already beginning to feel the climax before their lips even met.

A voice on the phone reported to Considine, “Galaca to speak with you now.”

“Put him through,” Considine said.

Considine began to feel a little nervous shaking in his hand as he waited for the contact to come onto the phone. He wasn’t exactly sure how he got himself into this situation, but being an aristocrat, sometimes this kind of thing just went with the job.

“So is Langland still hopelessly deluded?” Galaca asked.

“Tokens keep appearing from time to time if that’s what you mean,” Considine said with a kind of sigh in his voice.

“It’s quite likely we’ll have to start the destabilization process soon. How come you couldn’t prevent him from going to Mordem, for Trine’s sake?”

“You actually expect me to tell the Supreme Ruler what to do?”

“No matter. It will only be awhile before the coup is done. Just make sure Langland doesn’t discover what’s going on on that damn little island.”

“I won’t have to. Beauty will slay the beast.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ve got things in hand. You and I will both get what we want.”

“You’ll go down with the rest of the regime if things don’t go as planned.”

“Blah, blah, blah. Idle threats. You don’t have to go through with this if you don’t have the stomach for it, Galaca. You Imperians have such delicate palettes anyway. I don’t think a one of you could stand up to a real firefight if you had to.”

“Don’t tell me about moral fiber. You’re the one with the betrayer’s sword in his sheath.”

“Worry, not worry. It won’t affect the outcome. Just don’t blame me if it’s your incompetence at fault. Believe me, I’ve been in the political game far longer than you and my friends’ pockets are far deeper than yours. Now, don’t call me again unless of a real emergency. You are that obtuse? You’d play a spygame without any notion of what the term means? I’ll only contact you from now on. Now, go off and be a good little rebel, will you?”

Considine heard a distinct hrrmph as the line died, and then he turned his thoughts to how he was now supposed to play both sides of the fence, in defense of his lover, and in currying favor with an organization desiring world dominance without any real ability or will to get there. It was up to him. And he began to wonder if the puppet on the string were Langland or himself.

Chapter 3

Brogan sat at his desk surrounded as it was by windows. Evidently, having the corner office was a mark of success here, and the jealousy would begin immediately. Brogan, of course, had had to fake a number of documents, but it was just too hard to fake a bar exam pass, so he just inserted a lot of classes in law into his transcripts claiming to be from New York University, having already caught on that a background in law would be a huge help to having what people here called a “career.” And indeed, he had ascended the corporate ladder so well, he had recently been made head of the legal department, causing a lot of stares from the actual lawyers who still languished in the positions years before Brogan ever arrived. But Brogan spread a rumor that his position was name-only and that he wasn’t making anymore money than them, untrue of course, but they bought it. In this topsy-turvy society, the lawyers were now looking down on him for being unable to maneuver the proper compensation package he was due, as if that made him a little stupid in their eyes. Someone walked by him one day and called him a Forrest Gump and he had no idea what he meant. But then Gerry slid into his office, plopping his flabby body on a couch.

“You’re not fooling anyone, you know,” Gerry said.

“What?” Brogan said, alarm freezing his downward striking hand, meant to affix a seal to a document.

“We all know what you’re up to.”

“And what am I up to?” Brogan said, unconsciously letting the stamp clink onto the mahogany of his desk, falling to the ground, where it seemed to quiver on the carpet in tune to his own emotions.

“Nobody does something for nothing.”

Brogan relaxed. Office politics. “Oh?”

“Yeah. You’ve taken the lower salary to ingratiate yourself to the suits upstairs just so the promotions will lead you straight to the CEO’s office. Come on, you can tell me. Most of the office thinks you’re a fool, but I don’t see an ounce of credulity in you. I spent three years as an FBI profiler. You’re making every brilliant move in the book. There’s something different about you I can’t put my finger on, but I’ll figure it out someday. Where did you say you got that accent again?”

“I moved around a lot as a kid. What you’re hearing is a mix of perhaps a dozen different language influences in my speech. I once thought about just telling people I’m from France, but, then again, I really don’t sound French, do I?”

“No, you don’t,” Gerry said, “no you don’t. I’ve got my eye on you. Maybe we’ll have to talk about some coattails someday.”

“Coattails?”

“Sorry. English idiom. When someone gets successful through someone else, we call it riding on their coattails.”

“Oh, I get it. Is it supposed to be funny?”

“Not really. And neither am I. You’re hiding something. And I’ll find out what. Believe me, it’s either coattails or blackmail, so pick your poison. Oh, sorry. ‘Nother English idiom. But actually, I’m not being funny. I read people for a living, and I know at least twenty ways to tell what’s going on in someone’s mind just by looking at their face. Keep it in mind, Brogan,” Gerry said as he slipped out into the hallway.

Brogan shuddered. He had noticed early on that people on this planet were users so having real intimacy in even a friendly relationship could be complicated. But perhaps that was part of his loneliness. Not only could he never reveal his truly beautiful body on this planet, but he also had to banish trust to a very incidental position. So, he just threw himself

into his work, tried hard to ignore the jealousy and this now open threat, until one day, a new woman showed up at work.

She became the topic of conversations quickly. She was very beautiful, always wearing somewhat revealing clothing, with short skirts showing long, lovely legs and plunging necklines, making her cleavage voluptuous. Even Brogan was taken in. From the moment he first saw her, he began comparing his perceptions of the human male beauty with the human female beauty, and where before he found no difference, now he was starting to feel an attraction to the sex that was perhaps closer to his.

Cynthia was fresh out of law school, and he discovered something of her personality when he caught snippets of a conversation she was having with some of the other men in the office. He heard her say, “Yep. Plan to sleep my way straight to the top. Think I’ve got the goods?” And then he heard a very girlish laugh emerge from her tremendously full lips.

The men just dumbly nodded, perhaps not wanting to dim their bulbs in front of this obvious force of nature. Brogan walked up then and said, “That’s a lot of beds to jump in and out of. Why not just shoot one poison arrow and take out the whole lot?” Brogan’s smile had always been captivating, but the other men instantly began disbanding once they saw the look on Cynthia’s face.

“You’ve got an interesting accent,” She said to Brogan. “Where are you from originally?”

Brogan was disarmed momentarily. “Trine.”

“Trine?”

“Uh, sorry. I moved around a lot as a child, so I just insert whatever city I was last in kind of unconsciously.”

“Oh, a real citizen of the earth. I don’t suppose I could compete with you by telling you I studied abroad in France.”

“”Fraid not. I’ve been places you never dreamed existed.”

“Doubt it. There aren’t any places we don’t know about anymore. Go on. Try me. Give me some cities, and see if you can find my ignorance.”

“Okay,” Brogan said, stroking his eternally hairless chin, “how about Portia?”

“Oh, too easy. South of France.”

“Google it, and let’s see.” He led her into his office even as she whistled. “This is yours?” she said.

“Shhh, don’t tell anyone.”

“Oh, so you’re the guy.”

“The guy?”

“You’re the talk of the town. The one who outmaneuvered everyone, all the Harvard trained lawyers. You’re the boy genius.”

Brogan colored at the word “genius.” An image of Langland popped into his head.

“No, just the only one who can do his job right.”

Cynthia punched him in the arm. “Is that vitriol I here?”

“No, more like resignation.” And his face fell for a moment.

“Lonely at the top, huh?” Cynthia said.

“You have no idea. Now, go ahead. There’s the computer. It’s spelled P-O-R-T-I-A.”

He looked on as she got frustrated when the program kept suggesting “Porsche.”

“Oh come on,” she complained. “You’re tricking me, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, kind of. To use a metaphor, it would take a rocket scientist to get you there.”

“And are you a rocket scientist?” Cynthia asked.

Brogan laughed loud and long. “Not even close. But I know one.”

“Who doesn’t? Come on. Tell me. How many countries have you lived in?”

“More than twenty,” Brogan lied.

“And where did you get your degree?”

“New York University.”

“Got you. You had to stay in one place for at least four years.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.”

“Don’t try to be enigmatic with me. Are you the dark and mysterious man my mother warned me about?”

“Do I look dark?”

“Your blonde hair isn’t any realer than mine. I would have gone platinum, but I thought that’d be pushing it. Who wants to look like Tippi Hedren?”

“Who?”

“Not into old movies, I see. Well, I’ll school you. How about Friday night? I’ll bring the popcorn. You bring that beautiful body. What do you say? Shall we slay the corporate world together?”

Brogan felt uncomfortable. She was becoming familiar way too fast. But his attraction was there too. He felt a throb in his *ubo*. Hesitantly, he said, "Fine."

"Great, my good Portian friend. Till then." And she slapped his butt as she exited his office.

Brogan brooded on his exchange with Cynthia the rest of the week. They wouldn't speak again, but whenever they locked eyes, she would wink at him, and he found this infinitely pleasurable. And then he got frightened. Knowing what he did about relationships on this planet, keeping his underwear on with her would be an almost impossible challenge. So he spent mental energy trying to find a way of wriggling out of the "date." But he was so betwixt with emotions he found it impossible to reach a firm course of action. Friday was the next day, and he ran into Cynthia again.

"I've thought of the perfect nickname for you, Brogan. What do you think? Apollo?"

Brogan had never heard anything so absurd.

Brogan cracked the door of Early's bedroom, peeking in as every parent does just in case, just in case that chest isn't lifting and falling properly, just in case the room should happen to be empty and now with panic, have to run out into the night in search of a person who has reduced down into a needle in a haystack, a miniature sliver of humanity in a sea of it forever unable of retrieval because the small has reduced into the infinitely smaller and now any hope of being found has found a wormhole successfully guarding against any attempt at pulling beingness back into a properly fitted shape to bring back from an actually dead state. This was Brogan's dark brooding whenever he managed the archetypal ritual, whenever he pushed the darkness back once he saw Early softly snoring in a gentle sleep. But his habit had an origin story.

After Brogan had been scared into hiding by Langland, whose incredible cruelty left a burning sensation in his brain, he had immediately fled to the border of InterLand. And whom should he meet at the transport station but Langland's assistant, Considine. Brogan still remembered the leathery look on Considine's face when they met at the turnstile.

"I knew you'd come here," Considine had said, as if Considine had some sort of second sight for the scenario now unfolding. "Come with me quickly."

Brogan, seemingly seconds later, found himself in Langland's office, facing the entrance to the lab.

“It’s all been arranged, all taken care of,” Considine had claimed. “This is your wanted destination all along.”

Brogan found himself not trusting his lover’s trusted companion then. Why hadn’t Langland been more forthcoming if he had wanted him in InterLand if such was the case? Did Langland simply mean to dispose of him? As he stood there in the office, he caught a snippet of a conversation between Considine and some subordinate.

“Yes, it’s confirmed,” the subordinate had said. He remembered Considine’s eyes widening. “This could ruin him, I know it.” And it seemed that Considine had been talking to himself. Then he had heard something about an egg, and it dawned on him. His InterPathway with Langland had reached that procreative point, and Brogan was now impregnated. It should have filled him with joy, but, given the circumstances, and Considine’s strange behavior, all he had felt was overwhelmed. Somehow they had obtained a DNA sample, and that had been enough to set in motion what happened next. Brogan remembered Considine barking instructions almost randomly, until turning to Brogan saying, “For your safety,” and the opened door of the lab became like a tunnel into a bottomless prison. He had felt Considine’s hand on his chest and the shove backwards, until Brogan was on the floor of the lab looking at the laser mountings on the ceiling.

And then it happened. There were endless energy forces swirling around in compact and bounded spaces, and they were moving in such rapid fashion and filled the room so utterly, that there was no escape for Brogan now. He had been caught up in one of the vortices, spinning like a child’s spinner that would go round and round for hours in the inventor’s clever suspension of gravity. And it seemed to take just as long for Brogan’s body to be thrown around the room in what should have been certain death being dashed against circuit boards, but the furious activity of the wormholes were relentless. They just kept him in an almost disembodied state as he felt his body actually dissolving. Considine! he shouted to himself. You have killed me. You have killed your boss’ lover. But death wasn’t his fate, although what he was experiencing now was a kind of a death, a suspension from the very springs of reality, expanding and contracting from the weight of his fading existence until there was a roaring noise, no, more like a bang, a big bang, and Brogan felt the very cells of his body undergo a change.

Now he wasn’t exploding, but imploding. And the last thing he remembered about the experience was the sudden funneling of energy squashing his very being into an

infinitely small particle, and then there it was, space, outer (?) inner (?) he really had no way of knowing. But whatever was happening he was being sucked into something, and the next thing he knew, he was he, himself again, entirely whole, entirely his own personality, his own body, without alteration or change, laying on a ground he had never known before, looking up into a sky he had never seen before. The contradictions of imploding/exploding were not lost on him. He had entered a singularity and been birthed into a whole new world. A world that was both entirely new and entirely old, the paradox of being alternate.

Brogan vouchsafed this memory once he heard the doorbell. It would be she, Cynthia. And he shook bodily, a momentary attack of vertigo, knowing he was embarking on a dangerous path, but it was a path of destiny, just like meeting Considine at the station, the unintentional intention of the Universal Will to lay the planks for a walk down a path of delirium. And he was at the gates.

“Coming,” Brogan called in the drawling English diction that had become his new native tongue. He swept down the steps and found his fingers closing around the doorknob, almost snapping it open, half-expecting Langland to be standing there, a piece of drool hanging from the fang that had fatally bitten him, sending him to his doom. But, there on the stoop, was Cynthia, face broadening into a smile, holding up a bottle of champagne and a DVD in the other hand.

“I hope I’m not being presumptuous,” Cynthia began, nodding at the champagne bottle. “But I thought, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. But that’s a line from a movie we’re not seeing tonight. Look, I brought a documentary on the Berlin Injunction. I wasn’t sure of your knowledge on history, so I took a chance and thought to teach you something.”

“Very wise, indeed,” Brogan said, “since I must admit my ignorance. But please, do come in.”

Cynthia swept past Brogan, leaving a scent trail that brought on an animal emotion inside him. Oh no, he thought. She’s primed. The female is in estrus already, and I’ve no proper defense against it. But the magical smell worked its magic, and he closed the door behind her, his mind blank except for the nagging reminder, this is going to end badly, this is going to end badly. And somehow, he didn’t care.

“Did you never hear of this important point in history?” Cynthia queried Brogan who was barely watching the movie. His arm was around her shoulders and he found his nose

buried in her scent, smothering him with its incredible tactility, pursuing every romantic emotion in him down to his *ubo* itself, which seemed to be waiting, just waiting for the certain shock of her finger penetrating its soft flesh.

“Uh, no, really, I haven’t,” Brogan said. “I guess I’ve lived a sheltered life.”

“Oh, that’s a good one. The boy wonder claiming he’s never heard of only the most important event in human history. Really, Brogan, it’s no wonder they’re thinking you’re some kind of idiot savant when you seem to know everything about everything except stuff that everybody knows. Hmmm. Maybe there’s something to that. I’ll give you a copy of *Stranger in a Strange Land* by John Updike, only our most important science fiction writer. You do like science fiction, don’t you?”

“Ever since I realized I don’t really exist here, yeah.”

“Oh, so you think you’ve cornered the market already. Very clever. Quick quiz. What was Elizabeth Taylor’s first movie? Give up, give up? *Gone With the Wind*, 1927. Right after Richard Nixon ended WWI. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of Richard Nixon?” She glanced at Brogan’s blank face. “Really? Tricky Dicky? Rings no bells? Well, on that note, here’s to hoping you ring mine later on tonight.” And she lifted the champagne bottle, intentionally knocking it against Brogan’s head. “That’s your cue, honey, she said. Glasses. We need glasses.”

Brogan fled into the kitchen and fished out what weren’t actually champagne glasses since he didn’t know what they were, but what he did bring into the living room were a couple of tumblers. Cynthia looked at him oddly. “You really aren’t from around here are you?” Brogan just shrugged. “Well, then another toast. Here’s to slumming it. Wait,” she corrected herself quickly. “I didn’t mean that. Just because you’re a little under the weather culturally doesn’t make you unsophisticated after all, does it?” And Brogan could see real regret in Cynthia’s eyes, but Brogan had no context for this.

“The world shall inherit the meek.”

“No, no. The meek shall inherit the earth. Oy, do I have some training to do. His execution was on TV just last week. Oh, no. Don’t tell me. You’re a Christian.”

Brogan nodded, adding, “But not a true believer. I just like the wardrobe.”

Cynthia burst out laughing. “Yeah, there isn’t a sign of Gucci on you. You’re not exactly a clotheshorse. But what of clothes? Don’t they just cover up our true beauty? I think that might have what got Jesus convicted in the first place. He didn’t understand his

severity was making everyone too conscious of his own shame. Who wants to walk around guilty all the time? But it seems like we feel it all the time anyway since we constantly hide; hide in our wardrobe, hide our thoughts away from others, even hide the fact we all want tons of Lincolns. Who ever had the idea of putting the most honest man in history on the most corrupt piece of currency we have, the hundred-dollar bill, I'll have no idea. I'm sorry, am I getting too poetic for you? Wait, look." And she gestured to the TV. "Here's Hitler winning the Noble Prize for foiling Himmler's plot against Germany. That was only twenty years ago. Can you believe it's 1975 already? What the hell will we do when we get to the 21st century? My guess? Right back to the Stone Ages. Hey, I'm dominating the conversation. Why don't you tell me about your travels?"

"It's a horror story."

"I like them. Quentin Tarantino's last Saw was amazing. Tell it like that."

"Oh, you see though, I'm kind of a private person."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. You've got yourself convinced you don't really exist. See if this helps." Cynthia reached over and pulled Brogan's mouth towards hers. They began kissing until she paused to make a comment.

"My God, but you are a good kisser. You seem to know just how a woman likes it. I did detect a little effeminacy in you. A lot of women like that, you know. There's this myth we all like bulls, just balls out sex. But you'd be surprised how many women prefer a tongue to a dick. Give me your tongue again."

Brogan leaned in for another kiss, but as he began to pull away, Cynthia let out a little grunt of protest, and they lingered in each other's mouths for a long time until Brogan found his hands on Cynthia's suddenly exposed breasts, massaging her nipples expertly, and she finally broke contact with his mouth to let out sighs of ecstasy. And that's when he saw her start reaching for his groin. He instantly grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

"Wait," he whispered, and he undressed her slowly kissing every part of her body, until reaching her vagina, where he began exploring this foreign body part, his teeth slightly tugging on the labia, his lips and tongue working on her clitoris until she actually screamed in her climax.

"My God," she said. "You know how to blow the top of a girl's head off. My turn."

Brogan knew he should resist, but he felt powerless. He felt her unbuttoning his grey trousers, feeling them around his ankles, and then her inevitable tug to his underwear, just waiting for the scream, the scream that never came.

“Oh,” Cynthia said, raising her head. “You’ve had the surgery. Why didn’t you tell me...”

“Tell you?”

“You know. That you’re a tranny. Sorry, I mean a transsexual. No wonder you know what women like. You have a woman’s brain. But you’re body part...it looks different. Let me go in for a closer look.”

Brogan knew he should stop her, but he also realized it was now too late.

As she stroked the circle of skin that was his *ubo*, he began to feel huge glancing feelings of pleasure fill him, until she lifted her head again and said, “This is the strangest vagina I’ve ever seen. I can’t find an opening or any other recognizable body parts. Did you not have the full surgery?”

“It’s a little hard to explain,” Brogan said, suddenly filling with mirth that she thought she knew what it was when it would be impossible for her to ever know.

“But it seems like it’s always been there. I don’t know. It doesn’t look surgically inserted, but kind of like it grew in this way. Is this some sort of experimental thing? Something you picked up in France?”

Brogan laughed out loud. “What do you think?”

“I think I want to know how it makes you feel. How do you feel when I do this?” And she thrust out her tongue, slowly at first licking his *ubo*, and then plunging her tongue in to the softer areas. He saw her glance up at his eyes as she continued. “Hey,” she said. “You’re practically out of your mind already. How many orgasms can you have with this thing?” she asked.

“Many,” Brogan was barely able to get out.

“Oh, in that case,” and Cynthia began really working on the *ubo*, fingers and tongue working so generously and passionately that Brogan began to fade into a kind of trance state. It seemed that Cynthia noticed.

“My God,” she said. “You’re out of your fucking gourd. Wow, I want one of these.”

Brogan had to finally calm her lovemaking since she couldn't realize that Trines had limits. He had already been overpowered with multiple orgasms, so he had to use a little effort to get out the next words.

"Cynthia," he said.

"Yes," she said, giving him one final pat on his *ubo* when he captured her wrist.

"What if I were to tell you that there's nothing like this on earth, can't be anything like this on earth. What if I were to tell you I was from another planet?"

"Oh, come on," Cynthia said chuckling. "You're just going to have to give me the name of the doctor who gave you this corrective surgery. I can tell from the look on your face that this is a much better solution to having sex."

"It's called InterPathway where I come from."

"Inter what?"

"The way we make love. You see, I came to your planet through a wormhole from a planet called Trine."

"You're keeping that up?"

"Cynthia, I'm telling you the truth. I'm a Portian from Trine."

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"Actually, no. I'm hoping you'll run out of here screaming that I'm some sort of madman."

"You're no madman. And that," here she pointed to his *ubo*, "does not seem possible by today's technology. Should I Google Trine or turn you into the men in black?"

"Men in black?"

"Sorry, bad joke. You know, talking about this now, I remember when I visited a small museum in Nice, and they had a 13th century painting of what appeared to be a spaceship, complete with men inside. Now how could they have thought of that so long ago? I wondered. A lot of people talk about seeing UFO's and so forth. People called the visitors, the kinds of phenomena that gives us clues we're not alone in the universe. But if I were to photograph that thing in between your legs, I might win a Pulitzer Prize."

"You mean you believe me?"

"Well, let's just say I have an open mind."

"Obviously."

“You might not be mad, but you are out of your mind now. I’m going to leave you now, and let you experience whatever you’re experiencing. Let me think about this out of this world business.”

Detached, Brogan watched as Cynthia snaked back into her clothes and wink as she disappeared out of the door. Now he knew he should be on guard, but it turned out that Cynthia was more perplexed than scared and more willing to entertain the truth about what he had just told her. He should have felt a sense of doom, but all he felt was an onrush of intimacy, a feeling for this earther that he hadn’t felt for so long that it came to resemble a form of love. And then he heard stirring behind him. It was Early.

“How long have you been there?” Brogan asked.

“Long enough. So that’s what it’s for. You never told me how good it would feel.”

“You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“And you weren’t supposed to let her see it.”

“So I intuited she might be different.”

“Doubtful. It was an accident. So when can I have my own female?”

“Early!”

“You saw how she reacted. They won’t understand. I’ve already got a girl making eyes at me father. Let me show her.”

“No, Early, you mustn’t. They won’t understand. She was different.”

“There are a great deal of differences in the sexual diversity continuum here, father. Trust me if I tell you this one will understand too.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“I’ve been on a fishing expedition. Searching for the open minds. You accidentally found yours, but I’ve chosen mine. You’re just going to have to trust me. Need I remind you of our intelligence difference?”

“Oh Christ, and all the arrogance too.”

“I also have other things to discuss with you, father. Things I think you intuit, but I have actual theories in mind. And here’s the first one.”

“Yes?”

“We’re still on Trine.”

Chapter 4

Langland sat on a rock across from Solver, the village holy man, on the other side of the island where the beaches were more rocky than sandy. Solver was absent minded mending a fishing net by hand, and it would seem to an outsider that he was almost unaware of Langland's presence when it was just the habit of the Mordem to engage in an activity while they conversed. It was a mark of respect for the recipient of an elder's advice to patiently tolerate the pauses in conversation, and these pauses could last for lengthy periods of time, as time as a concept just wasn't processed very well by the Mordem. Langland had been on the island for three weeks now, and unfortunately had to send the security forces home because they had just succeeded in unnerving the Mordem, so it had been decided that Langland's insights would have to be sufficient for the investigation into the disappearances and he was getting nowhere. Whoever was pulling off this stunt was entirely clever, and the disappearances were becoming more frequent, and without extra pairs of eyes, Langland despaired that his wish to be quick in his task would prove retrograde.

"Growin' a gill are ya? The elder asked him finally. Langland understood this to be dialect for getting frustrated.

"Let's just say I know the outer bloomers of the issue, but getting to the crux is going to take some real ratiocination."

"Outer bloomers said ye?" The elder said. "Ya catchin' with your teeth. They's did say ya was swift in the fruit basket, taking to our dialect so quick. I want to ask ye some questions of my own before we go further, devilish enough?"

"Devilish."

"I'll switch to regular speech so's we can be clear." Langland nodded. "You realize that spiritual warfare is afoot here."

"I would like to disagree, elder. I think this can all be chalked up to a simple matter of science gone wrong."

"Ah, science is a great nothing. There isn't anything that can't be shown to have two faces. You think science and magic are that far apart after all, do ye?"

"Well, I am a man of science, but I'm also a man of faith. I don't think the two are incompatible."

“Ah, compatibility is it? You think things have rivers running through them?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Great gulfs. Like cave walls with bat shit and everything.” A booming laugh emerged. “I’m leading you on. What I mean is that a canyon always has only one river that carved it. The two sides of the walls aren’t two things just because they have been divided. Remember that they were one thing once, so is it the river that made them two are have they been one thing all along?”

“Why must you speak in riddles?” Langland asked, used to this, but really wanting to get at what seemed like important information for him to have.

“Riddles, huh? One wisdom or two, what do you think?”

“The universe isn’t built on one thing exactly I guess, but, ultimately, all thoughts come from the same source.”

“Yet yours is Apa, Apollo, and mine is Ama. Who is going to rule or must they InterPathway to have the oneness you seek?”

“Please,” Langland pleaded. “May you try to meet me in my cultural context?”

“Yours, huh? You think it belongs to you?”

“Well, I don’t think it is exactly right to base the nature of a people on a notion of possession.”

“Ah, spoken rightly so. Would ya go diving down the reef?”

“I thought we were going to avoid dialects.”

“Sorry. Habit. Would you chase the thing you think is real or go find the thing that is real.”

“I’m afraid you’re still being cryptic.”

“I guess you would think so. Let me ask you a question. What’s the difference between a word and an emotion?”

“Perhaps in the fact that an emotion can’t be translated into a word all of the time.”

“Exactly. So, have you figured it out yet?”

“I’m supposed to know now?”

“Right in the teeth.”

“I’m hopelessly without a clue. I thought I had an idea when Bass first came to me, but now I’m not so sure. I’m not sure that the kind of thing I was thinking of can be accomplished given the current state of our civilization.”

“Oh, is that what this is? A civilization? And here me was thinkin’ it’s all just crab soup?”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s a lot in crab soup. A lot of ingredients indeed. But not everybody likes it. Too much in it, some say. They want something simpler, something easier to digest.”

Understanding began to dawn on Langland then. “So you think this has something to do with things seeming to be two things when they’re actually one.”

“Angler’s pride.” This meant “you’ve got it.” “Someone doesn’t like crab soup.”

Langland paused with his mouth open about to respond when he noticed that the elder had returned to his mending task. Langland thought for a moment when he realized he was encountering an intuitive level of thinking that swerved away from an emphasis on the actual details of what was happening to the people when, for the elder, the more important intuition was the more universal ideal being expressed in their current predicament. Elders tended to be better at teasing out trends in thinking than pinning down actual details, but Langland wasn’t sure he should trust a primitive understanding of the world. Just then the elder looked Langland in the eye.

“Trust you ought,” he said, “or else not devilish enough.” It had been like Solver had been reading his mind. Langland cupped his belly in his palm, letting out a loud belch, a joke true but also a sign of understanding on a visceral level for the Mordem. “Ah, seeing true, are we now?” the elder asked.

Langland simply said, “Devilish.” The elder smiled.

Langland woke up one morning, finding a boiled egg and a fish head sitting next to his mat, ready for eating. He found it hard to tear himself away from Mordem. It was like they wanted to adopt him as an honorary citizen and now he was extending his time more and more. Bass’ Ama and Apa had taken a real liking to Langland and he felt like perhaps they were grooming him as a mate for Bass. He had tried, uselessly, to convince them that he was already partnered but they refused to believe that a Supreme Ruler would only settle for one mate. It wasn’t like he and Considine should be considered exclusive, but then, Langland’s proclivity for partnering had never been polygamous, something he was steadily rethinking now.

He and Bass were becoming quite fond of each other, and now Langland understood their reticence to stroke *ubos* openly since they had their own understanding about InterPathway that took the notion of affection down a different path than most Trines. They believed that there should be a certain responsibility, a certain integrity to the way one celebrated one's sensuality, so they wouldn't stroke *ubos* unless the two memers already possessed a certain level of connection that suggested an elevated level of intimacy. Apa and Ama had not let Langland and Bass InterPathway until they felt within themselves that mating was a right course of action.

Langland dwelt on the night of their first time, Langland first the submissive, while that beautiful dark body lowered itself over him, and then the undulations of hips, lips on nipples, fingers seeking every available inch of skin, and Langland, afterwards, filled with a new passion, only new because it had successfully pushed out an old one and where before he could only hear the name in the cold halls of his brain, he now began to pulse his emotions in a rhythm that returned a sense of sanity to something he had not even known was twisting in a state of torment, his own interiority.

Langland brought himself out of this reverie for a moment while he reached for the radio receiver to make his check in with Considine.

"Yes?" came Considine's seemingly always bored response.

"And yet we still have no enthusiasm."

"Huh. Wonder why."

"Not buying it."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you always scheme, lover, and I mean always."

Considine had to pause for a moment, wondering if the isolation on Mordem wasn't being as effective as he'd anticipated.

"Maybe you're just getting a scent of the cesspool," Considine said.

"If only it were the smell of shit I was tracking down. I can't seem to get a handle on when or how they strike, whoever is doing this. But, I do have a feeling that the disappearances will stop soon."

"What makes you think that?" Considine couldn't stop the sound of shock in his voice.

"It's the logic of every plan to reach its fruition just before the grand reveal happens."

“Grand reveal?”

“Have I taught you nothing? If someone is going to the trouble of stealing actual memers, then there is going to be an endgame. I’ve decided that this kidnapping of the Mordem is probably part of a greater ruse. Perhaps they didn’t count on the Mordem actually bothering to inform us of the disappearances, but that only shows operational immaturity. They want something, and the Mordem are probably only one small part of it. I’ve often wondered if, what with the dispatching of Bramin, that some tin pan leader might think himself equally easily elevated.”

There was a long silence.

“Hello?” Langland called. “Hello? Are you there?”

“I was only ruminating on how to tell you that everything’s just fine here in real civilization. Worry not, oh Supreme Ruler, your Considine has everything in hand.”

“Not one instance of a problem, at all?”

“Okay. Signing off.” And as Langland put the receiver back on its cradle, he began to wonder why Considine was openly lying.

Chapter 5

Considine found that his hands were shaking. It was that extra question, that probing insightful Langland mind intuiting or knowing something, he really wasn’t quite sure, that had made him edgy. The Imperians, being Imperians, were after bloodless revolutions, something Considine didn’t mind, but it was a tactic so subtle, so far having produced only two regime changes, that made Considine nervous that Galaca didn’t truly understand the notion of a coup. His desire to set up puppet governors who would ultimately disobey the Supreme Ruler didn’t seem a bold enough maneuver to unseat the center of power and give Galaca his wanted position, but then again, Considine was kind of hoping for a little incompetence in his approach just so he could upend the power structure of Trine without an assassination plot of Langland emerging. So far, the rebels were still afraid of Langland though they thought him mentally imbalanced and unable to wrangle his great skills before the sacking of Portia.

Considine cursed himself for letting ambition get the better of him, but the aristocracy had been mumbling for decades about the possible leveling of society, and Considine couldn't disagree that inequalities had a function of motivating progress. The whole debate seemed to hinge on whether this should be a conversation within the confines of economics or moral progress generally, but Considine was now the man in the middle. Perhaps he shouldn't have let himself get attached to Langland, but the emotion of love had always been the strongest drives among memers, making them a gentle people by nature, somewhat softening what would otherwise be a world like many Langland had observed through his viewing globe, thrust into constant cycles of destruction and rebirth. But the real issue Considine had to deal with was the thing that someone in Imperia had been engaging in a method of social engineering that was being allowed on Considine's consent, since he didn't process it as a moral wrong. He had an insight then that his self-interest was the crippling factor in his own psychology, something without which he wouldn't have his high position in the government, but also, might be less corrupt as well. Langland had always been thought to be the savior, but the mantle was now all his.

Someone burst into his office with Considine's assistant uselessly trailing behind him. It was Galaca.

"Considine!" Galaca shouted. The assistant just shrugged his shoulders. "You coward. You think you can protect your position this way?"

"What are you doing in my office, and what are you accusing me of? Don't you know how dangerous it is to meet this way?"

"I thought it necessary," Galaca said, becoming cowed by Considine's pushback.

"My spies report that Portia isn't responding to our meddling," Galaca began, "saying that they can't shake their allegiance to Langland. The governor he put in place needs removing, now!"

"Galaca, you fool," Considine said. "You really think you should be trying to topple Portia's new regime this soon? I already suspected you were being too subtle to start with, and now that you're targeting Portia this way, it's time I started revealing to you my hand."

"And just what have you been doing?" Galaca demanded, leaning back in his chair where he had flopped upon entering.

"It's been three weeks, Galaca, three weeks that I've managed to keep Langland distracted on Mordem, and still you've shown no idea what to do."

“You’ve allowed the regime changes. I thought you’d be impressed by now.”

“Subtlety isn’t preferred, but it will bide the time before my plans emerge.”

“I’m still waiting.”

Considine pulled open a drawer, fishing in it for a while before producing a gun, which he aimed right at Galaca’s head.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Galaca said, obvious panic blossoming. “What the hell are you doing?”

“A ruse.” And the gun went off.

Langland sat on a lobster trap while he waited for the ship to empty of passengers until the member he had been waiting for walked passed him, dropping off the canvas case next to where Langland was sitting. He casually picked up the case and walked back to his hut, where, upon entering, he laid it down on a table and unzipped it. He picked up the two devices secreted inside and laid them down side-by-side. One was the tracking device he then switched on, seeing the light blinking, waiting to be convinced it was working until he picked up the other device, the monitor, with its small screen giving little pinging sounds of echolocation. He switched this off as well. His next task was just to wait.

Chapter 6

“What exactly do you mean that we’re still on Trine?” Brogan questioned his son, feeling a sense of anxiety come over him that perhaps there was more to this greater drama of being on earth than originally met his eye.

“I began discovering things about this world we’ve taken to calling earth.”

“Taken to calling earth?”

“Let me explain, Dad.”

Brogan folded his arms in front of him, tapping his foot with a little annoyance emerging. He didn’t always like getting into intellectual discussions with his son because of that biological inheritance that postured Early’s intelligence just that many more degrees greater than his own. He should feel proud, but it brought up uncomfortable memories of

his own feelings of inferiority in Langland's presence. He relaxed his worries, telling his son, "Go on."

"Well, when we were at the observatory, I happened to lag back from the group and I got into a laboratory where I found a photon emitter."

"Yes?"

"I discovered that the researcher was getting all kinds of bad results when I examined his notes, so I ran an experiment of my own, duplicating his findings when I knew the results had to be wrong."

"And why is that?"

"There should be an observable wave collapse within a probability field, but the results won't come out that way. It seemed to baffle the scientist too until I figured it out. They don't know how to adjust for gravity. And that's because there really is no gravity here, just quantum fields that stabilize the quotients. And that explained to me the presence of the other mind."

"The other mind?"

"Yeah. Every time I ran into a difficulty with my equations, I found I had another storehouse of other memories to draw on. It led to only one conclusion."

"Oh yeah, what is that?"

"There is another me out there in the universe I can attune to."

"That's like suggesting action at a distance, something we still think impossible not to mention how another you got into the universe in the first place."

"Well, that's just it. We're not in the same universe. I think there was some kind of creation event that put us here, not the travel through a wormhole you think got us here."

"But how is that possible? If we were created here, how could an alternate self, your self, be duplicated on another planet?"

"Well, this part I admit is kind of mystical. But it seems that if we are both material substances and minds, then a birth event would naturally create a double on a different scale because the integrity of that material being was established in a natural universe first. Then we could make a possible realities argument for the necessity of twinning the substance prime. That would account for two me's. Following so far?"

Brogan nodded slowly, really pretending he understood while he hoped his son might make things clearer.

“Since matter can neither be created nor destroyed,” Early continued, “the laws of thermodynamics suggest that conservation would preserve our essences in a double movement, one towards the alternate world that twinned itself independently of the creation event of the original world. This was probably due to some sort of superposition of one universe upon another one.”

“But why would that constitute a creation event?” Brogan asked, losing faith that this would actually come clearer.

“It’s because of conservation. Our energy would be dispersed, collected, and reassembled in its most basic state, which for us is the state we originated from. The movement comes from the necessity of balancing forces, the need of the universe to coordinate the probabilities of possible realities in order to maintain the conditions for life, or at least I think so or else the physical constants wouldn’t be exact enough. The universe needs a little disorder to keep it flexible enough to combat solar radiation and avoid high entropy.”

“So your saying that if twin movements didn’t happen, life wouldn’t be possible at all? Like there needs to be antimatter and dark energy?” Brogan winced at the complexity. But he was willing to give his son as much tether as he needed to get his insights to coalesce into a fruitful insight.

“In a way. We usually think of balance and harmony as things which only exist at the human level, that as individuals we needed stability for a negotiable society, but I’m introducing the idea as a staple of cosmogony. That in order to have life in one quadrant of the universe, other conditions must be satisfied. I mean, perhaps I’m giving too much power to Newton’s law of motion that says for every action, there must be an equal an opposite reaction. But I have to think flexibly here, or else none of what happened to us makes sense.”

“And what does make sense to you?”

“It’s just that the positing of a world in a universe used to consistency would mean that opposites, even as the result of natural reactions, can sometimes be damaging.”

“Go on.” Brogan was beginning to get a clearer idea now. It seemed that Early was depending on natural laws of science that also grafted in a certain amount of philosophical freedom to arrive at a conclusion to explain the unexplainable. And their situation did seem unexplainable.

“It would seem that all origin points create the conditions for an almost infinite number of duplicate origin points. Remember what I said about material substances and minds. If there is some sort of protomental aspect to all of matter, then it seems possible to suggest that the idea of panpsychism might be a more dominant concept after all. Thinking doesn’t just define our existence. Thinking is our existence. In a corollary with gravity, there could be both expulsive and repulsive kinds, and when coordinated together, we have that double movement creating origin points and opposites that terminate in sometimes unhealthy creations. It’s like pulling a rubber band too hard so that it can’t come back to its original shape. ”

“And what happens when that happens?”

“Then everything else in the space/time continuum would try to readjust, possibly creating ripples in the harmonic resonance of what we think of as order so strong that the superposing universe threatens to collapse inward upon its other, forcing wholesale destruction of both universes.”

“I’m still not sure I’m following.”

“Well, to boil it down. Twinning just seems to be a natural property of the universe. Even though my theory included that we inhabit a particular sort of bubble universe on Trine, it stands to reason that almost every substance in the universe would have a twin counterpart in some other dimension. We don’t come in one’s. We come in two’s. I know it sounds like a stretch, but the notion of the divine in the universe entails this double movement that sometimes operates like a threat. Immortality may not be based on the notion of an indestructible soul, but on identity theory, making any fluctuations in the stream of consciousness a potential for the balance to upend, causing perfectible substances to spawn imperfect copies that have no order of magnitude for progress. This would create a kind of mirror effect, making the copies actually tokens with an aspiration. Only, in never being able to realize a fully worked out path into order, the potential for disorder to become the most viable expansion of law formation becomes a burden echoing throughout dimensional space infinitely. Bad for the universe. But when we penetrate to the other of our own conscious awareness, we will experience a merger with this other mind which, when we encounter it, becomes the holistic coordination of all that we are, thus making us essentially whole or one with thought, the desired condition and also the most elusive.”

“That explanation isn’t much simpler.”

“Well. Let me make it as simple as possible. Langland created some condition that put us here, in an alternate world, in a way that also put us on what I’ll call earth prime.”

Brogan shook his head. “So. If you’re to be believed, if Langland is looking for us, he’s probably looking in the wrong place.”

“Right. Even though I have my alternate self on earth prime, my consciousness is wholly my own here. So, even if Langland rescues my alternate, I’ll still be stuck with my own existential situation.”

“So what’s the solution?”

“We have to destroy this world.”

Brogan just stared at his son. “Destroy this world? How and why would we want to do that?”

“Since this world is an alternate, a deficient alternate, a wholly inauthentic copy, we literally do not exist here. Once destroyed, our consciousness will revert to its natural state. We will become our other selves.”

“But what about the people on this earth?”

“They aren’t real, I tell you, Dad. They don’t have alternates because they are the deficient products of this world. They’re just shadows.”

“Still seems like genocide to me.”

“Seems like, seems like. Remember that phrase.”

“I’ll need to think about this, Early.”

“Do as you like, but our course is determined.”

“You little shit!” Brogan menaced. “This might be easier for you in making your abstraction real. But some of us live in the real world.” Early didn’t speak and Brogan pushed his fingers through his hair, as he sat back down from his leap towards his son. “But that’s just it, isn’t it? This isn’t the real world. In fact, it’s not even a fair copy. Why do I suddenly feel like that holy man they just executed? Jesus wanted to be both God and man, and in being forced to choose, he chose the death of a man. Now I’m in a position to lord the powers of a God, decide who lives or dies, and my only subjects of contemplation are we. Everyone else has to die to save us, to save us. Just because they aren’t real, does that make their fictionality any less important?”

“You have to answer yes to that question. Think of it like awakening from a dream, realizing that those people you experienced are just parts of a shadow world with no

independent existence at all. You wouldn't intentionally keep yourself in a dream just to keep those dream characters actual. It would damn you to a false reality based on a false ontology. This is the same situation. You can mourn them more here because they seem so real."

"Okay, Early. But you have to find some way to make me perceive them as they really are. Otherwise, I'm not sure I can accept I'm not destroying actually innocent people."

"I'll work on it, Dad. Just prepare yourself. It needs to be done. If you want to know the truth, this world is a kind of an abomination. Its existence has the potential to introduce chaos into the order of the universe that could imperil the very Real itself."

Brogan thought this an amazingly chauvinist thing to say. To think one has the grasp of a god to locate the ultimately real way to be, the highest level of existence possible, seemed an incredible level of hubris to Brogan. Memers and lower mortals were supposed to live in constant ambiguity. It made the possibility of progress a reality. But what if his son were correct? Then a feeling of fear gripped him. He would have to find a way to make Cynthia real. Even as he got excited about the possibility of saving someone, he knew it could probably never happen, and he began to feel the grief occur already. Apparently, this was his world, Langland's world, and together they had created the monstrosity that would have to be elided from the equation of possible worlds, like erasing a chalkboard, and with no duplicate copy in a higher realm, only dispersion into the nonexistent. But could anything really cease existing after being created? Where does its essence go ultimately? Perhaps no good answers were present. Hence the need to become what to him would feel like a mass murderer.

Chapter 7

Langland would not have to wait long for his expectation to reach fruition. That night they came. They were dressed in wet suits, and with the darkness of night this night especially clouding the moon, the men had to use flashlights to maneuver within the hut. Since Langland and Bass didn't sleep in the same room, the men just walked past Langland he able to watch the interrupting streak of light from their flashlights head into Bass' room.

They briefly scanned Langland's room as they passed, but he managed to roll away from detection at just the last second. He crawled on all fours as he watched the men pull a cloth out of some bag, which they placed over Bass' mouth, making him come to for an instant before his struggle could begin as he just passed out. One of the men lifted Bass' body onto his shoulders and they quickly exited the hut while Langland, scooping up his equipment, lumbered after them only able to see what they saw, only able to trace their steps as the absence of light made him little better than a blind man. But he had been right after all. Bass was the prize, and now Langland had to rob them of it.

Langland tracked them to the beach where he saw the two men put on goggles, flippers, and then oxygen tanks. Underwater, Langland breathed to himself. That's how they've been doing it. But how could they make their escape? Then it occurred to him. Someone must have invented some kind of underwater ship. But it would have shown up in the intelligence reports. Considine! Langland would not have thought him capable of this level of deception no matter how strongly identified he felt with his own aristocratic class. It then occurred to Langland that he hadn't been as good at reading people as he thought. But no time to ruminate on the failures of his intellect. The men were wading into the ocean with Langland silently trailing one step behind.

As Langland gulped his breath of air, he used the methods of circular breathing while he followed the divers in their underwater escape route. They had put a tank on Bass, having to wake him up, using a menacing knife to soundlessly gesture their intentions for him. They eventually swam in range of the underwater ship, its hull coming together like a knife wedge, a turret of sorts poking up from the main body of the ship, Langland guessed for surfacing. The divers, as they neared their destination, were just completely unaware of Langland's presence, for who could believe that someone had learned to hold one's breath for over thirty minutes?

Just as they came to an entrance portal, Langland sped up his motions, reaching out for the hose connected to the diver's tank, yanking it, and then kicking him in the stomach, making little bubbles froth from his mouth, and with the expelled breath, his oxygen loss made his drowning very fast. The other diver came at Langland with knife drawn, but Langland simply wrested it out of his hand with one sweeping motion pushing the blade into his facemask, the knife penetrating his skull, killing him instantly. Langland already had gestured for Bass to swim away. He craned his neck to see Bass treading water just off

the hull. Langland gestured his finger upward. Bass nodded. Langland dipped into the bag he had tied around his waist, pushing the sensor onto the hull of the ship, careful to place it somewhere not too obvious. Then he chased after Bass who was swimming toward the surface.

After they dragged themselves onto the beach, Bass looked at Langland with the help of streaks of light emitting from suddenly appearing gaps in the nighttime clouds. Langland had to swallow a long, slow lungful of air to recover his senses.

“How did you know?” Bass asked Langland, who felt tingling in his toes and fingers while he pulled out his tracker, switching it on.

“The others have some sort of experimental purpose, I presume,” Langland said. “But your abduction was more of a statement. They’ve been working in the dark, the ship in the dark of the waters, and their men on the surface capturing and dragging Mordem to this new kind of ship at night. There may be collaborators among us, but I think they are not too helpful, or else they would have known of our living situation. I guess money can only buy you so much, ey?”

“So what are they doing with us?”

“That I’m not sure about yet. But, let me just check to make sure this thing is working.” Langland flipped a switch, noticing the pinging sound start immediately.

“How do you know they won’t just come looking for their missing divers?” Bass asked.

“Too risky. They’ll just assume they failed and move on.”

Indeed, the blinking dot on the screen began to move into a neighboring quadrant on the tracking device.

“They’re already on the move,” Langland said. “Come on. I need to get to the map.”

He grabbed Bass by the hand and they quickly moved, heading back to their hut. Once there, Langland grabbed off some parchments off of a desk, laying his device next to it while he switched on a lamp. The two of them looked as the dot meandered in a certain direction, continuing its path across the screen for a shorter time than Langland expected. But it did reach a coordinate point eventually. Langland wrote down the coordinates on a slip of paper and compared it to his map.

“Ah,” he said. “They’ve stopped right here.” And he pointed to a place on the map that matched the latitude and longitude the device had reported. “Imperia. My God. They’ve

gone to Imperia. That has to be the place they've been securing their captives. I would never have guessed Galaca was behind this. And there's worse news yet."

"What is it?" Bass asked after Langland paused to stroke his chin with a baffled look on his face.

"It's Considine. They're both members of the aristocracy. They must know each other being such a tight knit group. My intuition of Considine's lying behavior appears to be correct."

"Your own partner is involved in this?" Bass reacted in horror. "How could you get involved with such a person?"

Langland just shrugged. "People aren't always what they seem."

"And are you?"

Langland reached out and let a finger trace the length of Bass' jaw.

"If this casts doubt about me for you, then I will fully understand."

Bass' face fell. It appeared that he just might have to think about this situation. His was a simple culture. People usually always were what they appeared to be, and with this complication uncovered in his lover, it seemed to upend his world. Of course, Langland could understand Bass just being unnerved, experiencing a state of shock for being almost a victim himself. But Langland couldn't expect an almost native mentality to completely wrap its head around the kind of world Langland came from being so appositely designed from Bass' that he could lift his powers of understanding to the level of appreciating a culture so faulted that character issues might not be so neatly divided.

Langland watched as Bass turned away from him, tracing a path through the sand as he left the hut, into the dawning sun, muttering. The very act of turning one's back on his lover was very consequential for the Mordem. It signaled an existential crisis that needed resolving in the emotions, a kind of focused concentration that would divulge the future for the thinker in all of its foreseeable consequences. Langland started walking forward too, staying far behind Bass, another signal of the junction point that needed a resolution that should not be forced but flow from the deeper wisdom the Mordem believed they all possessed, especially accessible at times of crises. This was not a simple matter of guilt by association for them, but a full examination and self-examination of just what bothering aspect about the situation needed sustained focus until the inevitable dénouement, perhaps a few days hence, would give the thinker his answer.

Langland was already beginning to feel that this would turn out badly for him, but after a moment's sadness, he realized a higher truth triumphing, that given his superior understanding of the corruptible influences of global politics and relationship strife in the more sophisticated countries, his breakup with Bass would not be a debacle. In looking back, Langland began to realize, he would experience the memory of being on Mordem as perhaps a direction the gods of the Pantheon wanted him to have, to find that in between place as dangerous as it was enlightening, and the fact of Bass' love for him during this special rift in time during his life's path, would balance out the future memory like an ornamental bangle whose purpose was to catch the inward eye with that special moment of pleasure besides the other associations of unpain.

But now Langland had to start building a plan for how to handle this situation with Imperia. Again his name came, Considine. He felt it happen then. He felt love die.

Chapter 8

Brogan rubbed his eyes while he sat at his desk in his office at work. Early had concocted some kind of psychotropic drug in order to change Brogan's sensory information from a perception of reality as a stable collocation of events to an almost barren landscape of stick figure people and rusted, grayed, clay seeming structures that perhaps needed a severe case of renewal to even last in the cauldron of time one more year. The drug had not only robbed Brogan of the joie de vivre of life, but gave him sleep deprivation, and color loss in his vision, so now it felt like Brogan was trapped in a newspaper structured world where the black and white flatness of the columns could only hold interest in the content for the form of this prison was much more than verbal but painted a dull picturesque sky of banality that made of Brogan a kind of blotched figure in a landscape where all would be contained in the eye of the beholder blemished so far from beauty that only deathly hollowed out forms could exist. But it was the sleeping problems, as a side affect that really bothered Brogan.

He was finding it hard to concentrate on anything for any length of time, making his work suffer. He had already received two reprimands this week for some rather large

mistakes. He had let a merger fall through with his inattention to deadlines, and he had also made a significant enough mistake in the language of a contract that a fine had been handed down from the court. Now his job was in jeopardy, although it seemed his superiors, so happy with his work previously, were more predisposed to simply lightening his load, one supervisor actually dispatched to discuss whether Brogan was having any personal problems. But his contacts with Cynthia, though somewhat strained, were positive even as he noticed her own growing concern over his apparent breakdown. Brogan couldn't remember when he had told Cynthia about Gerry's threat, but she had been keeping an eye on things, until this particular day when she slipped into Brogan's office without knocking, tossing a file folder on his desk, and saying, "There's something we need to discuss."

"You have no idea," Brogan responded. But Cynthia gestured to the file.

"I took it off Gerry's desk. He's done digging into your background. See this?" She held up a device of some kind.

Brogan nodded.

"Well, I bugged his office. Don't ask me why I feel so inclined to help you. I assure you it isn't pity. But when I saw this." She gestured to the file again. "I knew there was something tremendously interesting here, like something out of a picaresque tale. Go ahead. Open it."

Brogan picked up the file folder, letting his fingers stroke the edges. There was something about the heft of it that should bother him, he knew, but he couldn't process the apparent significance of its feeling for him. Cynthia said that there was something inside of it that contained a terrible truth, not her words, a "picaresque tale" she had said, as if that would have any meaning for him. He let his eyes float up to hers, drinking in their beauty now filled with concern. He paused to let his knuckles dig into his sockets, hoping the movement would produce some wanted clarity, but all he felt was blank. Cynthia picked up on this and used two fingers to drag the file across Brogan's desk, using her other hand to flip the folder open. Stuck in a metal clip at the top were the words, "Suspicious." Brogan leaned in for a closer look.

"You see," Cynthia began, "Gerry's already got you earmarked for possible undesirable behavior. You haven't kept a low enough profile for a spy, if that's what you are."

"Spy?" Brogan repeated.

“What else could it mean? The paper trail you’ve compiled for yourself only goes back twelve years. You’d think a spy would cover his tracks better than that.”

“I’m still not following,” Brogan said, wishing Cynthia would just go away and leave him to his delusions of despair.

Cynthia undid the metal hinge at the top and pulled out the papers clasped fast.

“Look, another note.”

Brogan looked down at a piece of paper with statements on it. “No trace of a birth certificate. Son, Early, also showing no records.”

“How old are you and Early really?” Cynthia asked.

“Are you taking sides with Gerry?” Brogan responded.

“His research is extensive and compelling,” Cynthia said. “I don’t know what other conclusion to come to except Gerry’s. That you flashed into existence twelve years ago and weren’t even adept enough to shuffle in evidence of having been anywhere else than New York City? If you’re really the world traveler you claim to be, then how come there’s no mention of having lived in other places?”

“That’s because I haven’t lived in any other places, that is, except Trine.”

“You’re keeping that up are you?”

“Listen, there’s really no need for me to respond to this,” Brogan said, but he could see in Cynthia’s face that there was no getting beyond the accusations she seemed to accept as a kind of truth.

“Well, then,” Cynthia said. “Why don’t you just tell me what the truth is? Why you’ve suddenly grown a dysfunctional personality, why your file is suspiciously thin. Why you seem suspicious as hell.”

“The truth? The truth?” Brogan found himself starting to lose it.

“The truth is that I came into existence at the exact instance your world did. This earth you believe you live on is no more real than a unicorn in flight. There. You have it. That’s the truth, and you nor Gerry’s prying is ever going to change that.”

Cynthia stared at Brogan with darts for eyes. “Not even a good liar. You keep on coming up with the most outlandish reasons for things I’ve ever heard. Now, listen. I could become your confederate or I could jump to Gerry’s end and help him bring you down. The choice is yours. But you’re going to have to come up with a more reasonable explanation than space alien or a world that began when you entered it.”

Brogan felt his hands shaking. It seemed that Cynthia had already become his confederate by keeping tabs on Gerry's actions. But she really seemed to crave an explanation that would refute the seeming mountain of evidence, or rather lack of it, that seemed to be piling up. Brogan had an idea. He pulled all of the papers out of the file and began moving them around as if he were handling playing cards like a magician about to do an interesting trick. He would have to show Cynthia visually that the groups of documents actually told her tale in exactly the way Brogan described, using the evidence against him to paint a picture putting everything in their proper perspective, his own annotations becoming the solution to a code only Brogan knew existed.

"This paper. See the heading? 'Identity Papers.' Note the date. 1963. No doubt you have a memory for what happened on that day. But do you have a memory for the day preceding that one, and that one, and that one, on into infinity?"

"Well, silly. We can't have memories that track back infinitely."

"So finitely. What were you doing the day the world was born?"

"That's funny. I seem to have trouble pinpointing exactly what happened. I have a vague sense I was just getting out of high school, but there's nothing really concrete. So what? Don't a lot of people not remember their childhoods?"

"Think, Cynthia, really think. Try to go back in time, try to recall everything you can about your life. First, start breathing deeply, this a trick I picked up from a friend, and as you breathe, start to place your memories in two boxes, one in a box marked "Real" and one in a box marked "Inconclusive." See if you can divide up what actually has happened to you and what is only a shadowy trick of the mind."

"Are you trying to pull something like that Amazing Kreskin or something? You know I've seen his show," Cynthia said, lazily opening one eye.

"Just close your eyes and keep breathing. Good. Now, imagine yourself back in time, as far as you can go."

Cynthia's eyelids fluttered. "My God. I'm in my mother's belly." She shifted in the chair a little.

"That's good. Now experience yourself as the fetus. What are you doing?"

"Wow, I'm really breathing water. It's coming in and out of my nose and mouth so easily. I'm stretching out my hand. I feel something squishy. I think it's my mother's belly! I've touched my mother from inside the womb for the first time."

“Good. You are the perceiving child and the observing adult. Now, picture yourself in the next moment. What is happening now?”

“But...but, something is really weird. I’m in the middle of particles. It’s like atoms all colliding into each other. And then I’m just there. What? This can’t be. How is someone just there?”

“Your first memory.”

“But where is the childhood, the awkward adolescence? It’s just like I popped into existence.”

“This is what really happened to you. Do you see it now?”

“Yes. Oh my God. I can’t do this. Something is horribly wrong.”

“It’s okay. You’re safe in my office. Come back.” And Brogan clapped his hands.

Cynthia opened her eyes. “If this isn’t some kind of black magic,” she said. “Do you do past life regression too?”

“Past life what?”

“You know, putting people back into former lives.”

“Cynthia. There are no former lives. There isn’t even this life.”

Cynthia started breathing heavily, and in being unable to stop, alarmed Brogan even as she put her head in between her legs, gasping for air.

“This is not funny,” Cynthia said from her bowed over position.

“This is no trick. This is actually how you came to be.”

“No. You’ve done something to my mind.”

“See the truth.”

“And it will set me free?” She sat bolt upright. “I feel like my body isn’t even real. Your attitude is like an infection. I need out of here. Now!”

“No Cynthia,” Brogan began, but it was too late. She leapt out of her chair and ran for the door, connecting with the doorframe, slinking to the ground, unconscious. Brogan panicked for a moment, but he could only see a grayed shadow slumped on the floor. He took out his medication, placing one of Early’s medicine tabs into her mouth, under her tongue. The poison Word. Logos they called it here. The irrational aspect to rationality that would chemically alter her brain patterns in tune to Brogan’s. He felt like he not only wanted her to understand but to convert her in a way. Convert her to the truth. Perhaps give her back her missing existence, heal the rift between what she always took for granted, now

exploded into a deadly revelation of Being, of being a Being that did not exist. He began to feel tears track down his cheeks, now wondering what he was going to do with an unconscious female in his office, one who now knew what he and his son already did. They were folds in time, blasphemous companions to a universe indifferent to the suffering of the ultimately unreal. He was no different from her except in the other mind waiting in another universe for the wanted reunion, two consciousnesses joined into one, a destruction event that not only healed the flesh but the entire interdimensional order that this world threatened.

He suddenly had a vision of himself floating in a common wooden boat, the sun scraping his closed eyelids for a sudden moment of blindness should he let himself see. Let those who have eyes to see, see. To see upon a sea of rotating illusions deepening every moment one rejected the truth. But what was that except a poor commentary on speculations, things themselves unreal until one brought them forth into a parade within a consciousness overwhelmed by the movement of tides and currents positioning the perceiver to accept the unacceptable, to extinguish like a candle blowing out from a sudden gust of wind, with just that curl of smoke the only evidence life ever existed there in the first place.

Brogan kneeled down, scooping up Cynthia's body while he nudged open the door, momentarily blinded by the setting sun coming from the grand window of the office. People just seemed to look on while he carried her into the outer hallway, waiting for the elevator to arrive. She would awaken into a new world, a world that actually wasn't. Hadn't he killed his first victim? He watched her chest rise and fall while her head lolled within his grasp, hearing the ding of the elevator which he entered, hearing the soft woosh of the doors close behind him, all the time wondering, what are we going to do now? And the tears just kept coming.

Chapter 9

Early walked in the door of the apartment while Brogan was using a newspaper to fan the sleeping Cynthia, stretched across the couch, her blonde hair radiating outward, spilling

upon the cushions, nose drinking in the air as if it were a kind of balm for her dented consciousness, now so ensconced in a state of alteration that the affliction of permanency would affect her now. A successful soul killing. Early seemed to sense the dark thoughts occupying Brogan's mind.

"I suppose you did that?" Early asked, gesturing to the woman sprawled upon the couch.

"Well, I didn't actually do that. Just something I'll never forgive myself for."

"Why the conscience? Oh, I get it. You're in love with that thing aren't you?"

"Please, Early. We must have compassion for these poor souls. Besides, you haven't told me how, exactly, we're supposed to do away with this world."

"I'm formulating a plan. Oh, by the way. Meet Darla." Early stepped aside while his female friend revealed herself. She was a tall, skinny girl, gorgeous black hair terminating at the waist, her face painted white, punctuated with very red lips, complete with a piercing in her nose, a nose with a slightly flattened bridge, her bangs cut in an even line across her forehead, almond eyes reporting her ethnicity, Asian.

"I'd say nice to meet you," Brogan began to say to Darla, "but I'm afraid we aren't in the best of circumstances. I don't suppose you know..."

"Oh, I know all right," Darla said. "Don't we lover?" She winked at Early. He flushed slightly.

"So I suppose it's to that already then."

"Fraid so, sir," Darla said. "But I'm no doubter. I might be a couple of years older than this genius here, but intelligence so turns me on."

"Uh, yes, of course. I know the feeling, believe it or not."

"Oh, dear," Darla said, noticing the prostrate woman on the couch. "Let me get in there. You're doing it very badly, uh, I mean, let me see what I can do." She swept past Brogan, sort of knocking the newspaper out his hands, shunting his body aside. Darla leaned over Cynthia, pushing her hands into her chest, massaging the area she connected with. Gradually she made wider and wider circles until moving her fingers up to massage Cynthia's temples. Eventually, with a few repetitions, Cynthia's eyes finally opened. But they seemed to stare blankly up at the ceiling.

"Take your hands off my breasts, young lady," Cynthia said, sitting up suddenly.

“So I copped a feel,” Darla joked. “I was bringing you back to consciousness, silly. Now just relax and recover your senses.”

“Well, I suppose thanks are in order,” Brogan tried to interject, feeling a little stupid.

“My eyes. There’s something wrong with my eyes.”

“Dad,” Early said, “you didn’t give her one of your pills, did you?”

Brogan shrugged. “I panicked.”

“No, no, no. I’ve designed a different one for them.”

“For them?”

“The one’s we’re saving. I have a theory.”

“Yes?” Brogan sighed.

“If they can impregnate us, it may just be possible to get them through the interdimensional gate.”

“The what?”

“Well, if they make a double of themselves by giving us an egg, it may just have a reverse effect of making them just as real as the thing inside of us.”

“Early, I really think you’ve gone way too far with this.”

“No, listen. But there’s a lot we have to do.”

“Like?”

“Well, we’ve got to go see the guy who’s still in prison.”

“And that would be?”

“The guy still waiting his execution date. The one who can fill in some of the gaps in my understanding.”

“And that would be?”

“John the Baptist.”

Brogan scratched his head. Darla had moved to a standing position, her eyes looking down on Cynthia, who was moaning slightly, her small fists coming up to rub her eyes.

“It will wear off in a couple of hours,” Early said to her. “The effects of the drug I’m talking about. Then I’ll give you the other one.”

Darla reached inside her pants pocket, holding up a vial. “Like these,” she said.

“What the fuck is going on?” Cynthia complained, in between moans.

“Uh, Early,” Brogan said, “I haven’t convinced her all the way yet.”

“She’ll get it. But we can’t let her leave now. She has to stay with us.”

“For obvious reasons,” Darla chimed in, her sentence soaked with sexual innuendo.

“Oh God,” Brogan said.

“Necessity in science is a driving principle,” Early said. Brogan shot him a look, quieting his son. But Darla kept right on.

“You two have to get us pregnant, you know,” she said.

“No,” Early said in a subdued tone, “You have to get the two of us pregnant.”

“Oh God,” Brogan repeated. “Go on, Early. Tell me more of this scheme of yours.”

“Yeah, about that. It’ll be easy to get into see the baptizer ‘cause you already registered us as Christians. They’re letting loads of them see him. We’ll just get into the prison under that pretense.”

“But why?” Brogan continued.

“Because I think the Jesus of this earth let himself get executed just to get back to the other universe.”

“But he doesn’t exist in this time frame in the other universe, you’ve told me.” Brogan eyed his son suspiciously, giving him a look that implied he thought his son insane.

“No. It isn’t an issue of time. Jesus, thinking he was God, who knows, maybe having something to do with the divine itself, would respond to this world like it were hell to him, a kind of prison, since his consciousness being caged here, would keep him in a divided state, perhaps a real form of suffering for a God.”

“You mean you think he really is God?”

“Not exactly. I mean, if he does have something to do with the divine principle, being in a state of division would be a really daunting thing.”

“You don’t say...” Brogan trailed off, being intentionally ironic.

“This isn’t funny, Dad. I’m serious.”

“Okay, let’s say you’re correct. How exactly is John the Baptist supposed to help us?”

“Because of his conversations with Jesus. He’d have insight into what I think is actually going on with this world. Come to think of it, he may have some ideas about how this earth may threaten the entire structure of reality.”

“But reality isn’t real here, you’ve already said.”

“Yes, but it subsists in the broader dimensional timescale of all reality.”

“Ah-hah! So you admit this earth is real.”

“Limitedly, Dad. It’s a deformed copy, something on the order of a blasphemy. It introduces something hurtful to the entire universe of really existing things.”

Brogan stroked his chin. “But if what you say is true, there could be other copies with other abnormally twinned consciousnesses on other worlds that also may be kinds of cosmic accidents. Are we supposed to go around the universe deleting bad copies everywhere we go?”

“Now, I hadn’t thought of that.”

Cynthia stirred from her position on the couch. “This is all too weird for me. I’m getting the hell out of here.” She started to swing her legs off the couch, but Darla leaned over her, catching her knees with her hands.

“No you don’t,” Darla said.

“Get off of me, bitch,” Cynthia said, but Darla stayed where she was.

“If you go out that door now, lady, you’ll be going into oblivion.”

“You can’t hold me against my will,” Cynthia said back, trying to stand.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to stay,” Brogan said to Cynthia. “I know you don’t like this. Believe me, I don’t either. But I’m afraid Early is right. If I’m to save you, you’ve got stay with us.”

“Save me from your own insanity first,” Cynthia snapped back.

“I know it sounds that way now, but you’ll understand in time. I promise.”

Cynthia leaned back into the couch, as Darla released her knees, swinging her legs back into a prone position.

“All right, all right,” she said. “But it’s only because I may be a little in love with you Brogan, or with all your ignoring of me, have you not even seen that?”

“I thought you were ignoring me.”

“Shit. Just like a man. But you aren’t really a man. Just what are you again?”

“A Portian...”

“From Trine,” Cynthia finished for him. “I know, I know. You’ve told me. So this is the way you see the world. No wonder you’ve been dodgy. All I see are grayed over shapes, like I’ve become a dog that can only see in black and white.”

Brogan shrugged when both Early and Darla shot glances at him.

“I know, I know,” Brogan said. “I told you. I panicked.”

“He’s not as smart as your other Dad, is he?” Darla said to Early.

“No one is as smart as his other Dad.” Brogan said.

“God,” Cynthia interrupted. “Can we just get on with this John the Baptist thing?”

“Just get me into to see him, Dad,” Early said, “and I’ll do the rest.”

Brogan just had to make one phone call to a pastor friend of his. The wheels of necessity were being set in motion.

Chapter 10

Langland was staring at Bass’ back, seeing it recede farther and farther away from him, speeding up his steps somewhat thinking that perhaps he shouldn’t be completely out of contact with Bass, but despairing that perhaps the long time of holding his breath underwater had weakened him, as he just couldn’t keep pace with Bass, until he suddenly realized, it wasn’t just physical distance he was experiencing, but Langland began to sense his eyelids getting heavier. Finally, he slumped upon the sand, cast into an unconscious state.

Langland fluttered his eyes open, seeing he lay sprawled on the ground, around him rows of trees, underneath him, a feeling of grass lightly holding up his body. Now Langland felt alarmed. There should be sand, shouldn’t there be? He scrambled to his feet, seeing a faint glow ahead of him, piling through the vegetation until happening upon an embankment, in front of him his God, Apollo, holding a bendy reed, stretched out in front of him with a kind of silvery thread dipping down into what wasn’t actually a river, but some kind of glowing energy stream, brightly lit, but the stream held strands seemingly revolving around each other. Langland scratched his head, perplexed.

“Oh, it’s you,” Apollo said, craning his head to catch a glimpse of his disciple.

“And why have you brought me here?” Langland asked, searching questions occupying his gaze.

“Ah, but there is more than one question within your question,” Apollo responded, chuckling a little. Langland had never heard him laugh, let alone address him informally.

“Was there something I can do for you?” Apollo said, chuckling again at the confused look on Langland’s face.

“So it wasn’t you that summoned me,” Langland said.

“Oh, there are various ways to contact a god, don’t you think?” Apollo said.

“Am I supposed to guess why I’m here?” Langland said, feeling a little annoyed even as he took a seat next to his god.

“There are various ways to be anywhere. Among those, which do you think is you?”

“Riddles? Seriously?”

“I thought you’d be used to them by now.”

“Not really,” Langland admitted. And then it dawned on him that perhaps his stay in Mordem had done more to his consciousness than he thought.

“Have I done anything displeasing to the gods?” Langland thought to ask, just wanting to get going what was evidently going to be a conversation and not just a few insights tossed his direction for him to ponder on later.

“Oh, mortals are always displeasing to the gods, but otherwise they wouldn’t be mortals, would they?”

“The imperfections of the flesh are multiple,” Langland replied. “But how are we to recover our perfection when evils impinge everywhere?”

“Ah, but such a deficient concept, this evil you speak of. What is mortal failure except success in disguise?”

“It certainly hadn’t been understood among us until Bramin revealed a level of treachery that hadn’t been seen in a generation.”

“And yet it continues, as it will, on and on into the centuries, spiraling into and out of control illimitably.” Apollo’s voice seemed almost sing songy in his delivery. Langland felt out of his depth.

“Have I moved somewhere upon the path of spiritual readiness?”

“Readiness. Readiness for what?”

“You told me I had to find a place of danger and uncertainty, that my answers would not be found among the living or the dead.”

“Yes, but I lied to you.” Langland grew a shocked look on his face. “It won’t take you a thousand lifetimes as I told you. In fact, there is nowhere to go and nothing for you to do because everything has been as is being done simultaneously.”

“What do you mean?” Langland thought to persevere, just as he’d done with Solver on many occasions.

“Behold the nature of time,” Apollo said, gesturing to the energy streams below him.

Langland looked down at the crawling mass of lights. They seemed to be describing circular arcs, but also bending into helical structures, intersecting at points, then flying off wildly into other directions, joining the melee of moving and colliding energies in yet another event of intertwining until uncoupling into yet another flight of fancy, or at least that was the only way Langland could describe it.

“This is what time is actually like?” Langland said, hearing the amazement in his voice.

“That’s right. But what you see here is but a sorry commentary on the actual nature of how the energy arcs interact.”

“It seems pretty incredible to me.”

“Yes, you would think so, but I’m afraid what you’re privileged to see now no one can truly apprehend. Think of these energies as little life forms so discretely packaged that the chaotic motion you see is where all order in the universe comes from.”

“Are we seeing the reality of the quantum level?”

“Oh, even that being described is but a mark of ignorance. No, this far surpasses anything anyone can dissect, study, or put mathematics to. In fact, what you think you see goes on in complete indifference to any labeling method, any science.”

“Then what am I seeing?” Langland paused to scratch an itch appearing on his face.

“This flow of time can only be grasped in a moment’s instance of clarity, an insight revealing the entire function of its patterns, and yet it is patternless, it brings only the bitter truth of everything always together, always separated but never separate.”

“It is mysticism then,” Langland responded, unclear why this was being shown to him if there was really nothing about it that made sense.

“Ah, yes, that word. Well, even the cleverest scientist has to admit a limit to what he can investigate. But the obfuscations of the natural world lie upon the very things he cannot have access to. The very thing which governs everything but nothing at the same time. It is this inability to get beyond the deprivations of reason as hinging upon the temple walls of a scientific explanation that has thrust worlds into chaos and barbarity, destruction and reformation. The unreadiness to bravely face the unexplainable leads to division and chaos. Things are not this way. They simply are. That is the hardest truth to grasp. That is the true nature of the energies, the true nature of time.”

“Then what are we to do if things are happening together all the time, all at once, as you seem to imply.”

“That is something mortals cannot comprehend. The duplication of the present, past, and future upon each other just doesn’t fit well with mortal perception.”

“But do you see it?” Langland said, surprised at himself for questioning a god about a limitation he might have?

“No, I’m sorry to say. I am in that mass of confusions just as much as you are.”

Langland took one last look at the furious intersections of the energies. “Then how are we to become like you if even you are stuck like we are?”

“Oh, I didn’t say stuck. I’m just as much a captive of the unseen as you are, but that doesn’t mean I’m stuck. What else have I to do than contemplate the perplexities of my own existence? And in my creativity, I understand that all creation is procreation. Everything has an Ama, but the twinning of Ama with Apa makes them only distinguishable in their separate roles. They are actually one.”

“So, dialectics may just be as primitive as the ways we come to understand them.”

“So it is, so it is.”

“I feel like you haven’t taught me anything.” Langland reached up to scratch a spot on his forehead.

“If you are ready for the greater ocean, if you have become concerned your little eddy has become too restrictive for you, then I will send you on an adventure of tremendous importance.”

“Yes,” Langland readily assented. “I am ready. I am willing.”

Apollo waved his hand. “So say they all. But your future is right there, among those strands. Can you see it?”

“Of course not,” Langland responded.

“Exactly. Because it isn’t really a future. It’s happening even as it has happened. This is the thought no mortal can have and the thing that separates me from you. I have cognitive access to things that only occur to you in dreams. Thus can you reach spiritual improvement, but if what I’ve just said is true, haven’t you already?”

“That is too deep for me to understand.”

“Exactly. By the way, how does a memmer conceal a weapon?”

“How?”

“In his wardrobe.” Apollo began laughing.

“I take your pun to refer to our lack of clothes wearing and a place of storage.”

“Therein lies our difference. I can appreciate it as a joke, and you must dissect it into parts. Parts versus wholes. What worse a dialectic to have than that? Behold the beauty of a sphere!”

Langland shook his head, becoming aware of coming to upon the sand he had fallen on, now aware of someone cradling his head. He understood the person to be Bass.

“What has happened?” Bass said to Langland, looking down into Langland’s face, real concern furrowing his brows.

“I’m afraid something a little beyond me. Perhaps meant to be. I have a feeling there is much I have to do before I leave the prison of my own understanding.”

“I am not following you,” Bass said. Fear replaced the worry on his face, causing him to stand.

Langland had noticed the change in emotion. “Yes, Bass. I’m afraid it is true. It is probably best if we part ways. What I must do, where I must go, you cannot follow.”

Bass seemed to acknowledge the play on words meaning to convey to him something of prodigious importance.

“I’m sorry these things happened to you and your people, Bass. It is all a piece of my own guilt.”

“And you, in your unique abilities,” Bass responded, “condemn yourself to a loneliness no one can possibly know, isn’t that right.”

“Devilish,” Langland said.

Bass laughed. “Someday you will experience the wonder of the universe in a way you haven’t imagined before. I hope that someday will come soon to you.”

Langland watched as Bass navigated the sand, walking away from him. It occurred to Langland that, according to Apollo, it already had.

Chapter 11

Brogan followed the guard escorting them to a room where he and his son and the two women would be meeting with John the Baptist. He jostled the visitor's badge hanging on his chest, aware that the gray walls they walked within were no longer a product of his drug soaked vision, as Cynthia had convinced him to stop taking Early's medical "solution." That night, Brogan and Cynthia had faced each other with the intimacy of Cynthia's gaze penetrating Brogan's heart. He realized the look of love in her eyes held subtle implications as a mirror for his own affections in an emotional entanglement he had never experienced before. It didn't seem based on the uniqueness of this interspecies relationship. Brogan had already intuited that earther DNA and memer DNA were not all that far apart, as if Trine were some cast off civilization with an origin point deep in the furnaces of time accounting for both worlds' appearance in the universe. He had tried to start a conversation about the possibility of twin worlds with Cynthia, but the depth of her afterglow seemed to extend beyond her self, when his *ubo* had palpitated, reached that point of procreative preparation, and now Brogan felt the subtle onrush of hormones reporting to him the event of his own impregnation.

He hadn't had the heart to fill Early in on the moment of Interpathway he needed to attend to, but Brogan had communicated more with body language than anything he could have verbally, and upon this day, recognized his son also carrying a life within him. Brogan could only hope that Early's intuitions proved correct, and that these two women had secured their passageway into a sounder reality. It no longer seemed like a ridiculous idea to Brogan anymore, especially since he began feeling the presence of that other mind.

Last night, when Cynthia and he had their Interpathway, it was like they had transformed into beings of pure energy, seeming to resolve the dilemma of exchanging genetic material within the plane of imagination, somehow becoming a conduit for realizations to dawn, as if the other mind had fashioned a focal point that, if Brogan attended to, he could feel the problem already worked out. It was as if that other being, waiting for its wanted reunion, had compelled a reality to form made of the stuff of dreams, but it was in that ethereal environment that things were more real, held the physical and the mental in some sort of greater drama that made the two realms all of a piece of one. Brogan supposed it wasn't so easy to generate the proper behavior necessary for the impregnation,

but somehow it had happened, suggesting to Brogan that no matter how difficult a problem seemed in its presentation, a solution always presented itself, making nothing irresolvable just upon the universe wired to work the way it did, a thought growing so deep that Brogan stopped pursuing to conclusions, content to live within the aura of mystery that maybe Langland himself could explain to him someday. Huh, Langland, Brogan thought. If he really loved me, wouldn't he have found me by now? But this too wormed down a hole too constrictive for his intelligence, just leaving Brogan to his perplexities, but perhaps it was in that where natural conditions formed, human or member assumptions coalesced, dissolved, then reassembled into a destiny that couldn't ever be adequately processed through Brogan's or anyone's sustained probing.

"Names, please," a man said, dressed in a gray uniform, and wielding a pen.

"Uh, yes. Brogan, Early, Cynthia, and Darla," Brogan replied to the man in as deadpan a tone as he could muster. It didn't seem wise to start off fueling suspicion when his little group might be discussing sedition with a man condemned to death.

"Got it," the guard said, finding the names. "You Christians are a funny bunch. Wouldn't it be very sad to speak to a man just before he's to be executed?"

"Yes, wouldn't it," Brogan just echoed.

They were shown through an iron gate, until yet another guard escorted them into a kind of meeting room with a number of tables spread around. John the Baptist was seated at one. Brogan and his entourage took seats opposite the Baptist with Brogan knowing he should break the ice, lead the conversation, but just batted his eyes at the man in the orange jumpsuit, his face hidden in a black, dark beard, his large body frame almost occupying two seats. The Baptist nodded at Brogan.

"You are true believers, are you?" the Baptist flatly said.

"Well, there's something we'd really like to talk to you about," Brogan managed to get out, glancing at his son, kind of hoping Early would break in with something sounding remotely intelligent.

"Hey," the Baptist snorted suddenly. He actually stood from his seat. "There's something off about you."

"What do you mean?" Brogan hurried out, his mind racing for the best way to calm this giant of a man.

"I can see it in your bone structure. You're not exactly human. Oh, I get it." The Baptist calmed himself, sinking down back to table level. "Don't tell me. You're just visitors here. And I don't mean to the prison. So what is it? What's brought you to a backwater of a world?"

"Then you know, don't you?" Early broke in.

"If you mean that this world is not what it seems, then yes. But that doesn't explain your presence. Give me a good reason not to cry out to the guards."

"No, no, don't do that," Brogan said.

"Come then," the Baptist said. "Out with it. What are space aliens doing on a world that actually isn't?"

Cynthia had her mouth open. Brogan intuited that she had not expected this kind of confirmation. Darla looked unfazed. But then she was very young, and probably had read enough science fiction to actually think it real on some level.

"It's because we very well may be responsible for all of this," Early said directly.

"You?" the Baptist said. "Responsible? And just how did you happen upon a creation event, young man, if you are a man."

"It's not clear to me just yet," Early said, a serious look holding onto his face.

"And what is clear to you?"

"Have you not thought about the idea of the bubble universe?" Early continued. Brogan perceived his son was being very brave, but then again, what had they to lose?

"Ah yes, now I see. Your method of transport. Care to explain to me how exactly that happened?"

"I only have the memory of it," Brogan said. "To me, it seemed like I traveled through some sort of wormhole, but my son has suggested that my recollection isn't quite right."

"Right. Wrong. Human perception or whatever it is for you. Do you realize what you've done?"

"Well I didn't do it!" Brogan couldn't help himself exclaiming.

The Baptist held up his hand. "Just testing for sincerity. Calm down, calm down."

"Then can you tell us what we're supposed to know?" Early asked the man with a chest spread so wide it seemed his ribs might crack out.

"Ah, it is to private communication now, is it? And what do you think I would know, especially given my association with Jesus, that you do not?"

“Don’t you see the horrible consequences for the continuation of this world?” Early’s voice broke a little in his passion.

“So, you’ve guessed I would know how to rectify things based on what Jesus and I have perhaps talked about?”

“You’ve put it better than I could,” Early said.

“And you two?” The Baptist had aimed his question at Cynthia and Darla.

“He knocked me out!” Cynthia kind of blurted out.

The Baptist shot a look at Brogan.

“Long story,” Brogan said, lifting his arm. He softly nudged his son’s shoulder.

“So,” the Baptist began, “you’re going about saving a few, I take it?”

Brogan marveled at the Baptist’s insight.

“It will work, won’t it?” Darla answered shyly.

“Ferrying the unreal into the unreal. Yeah, it might. But...”

“But what?” Early said, impatiently.

“But, who’s to say what is supposed to and not supposed to exist?”

“I feel like there’s something important you’re supposed to say to me,” Early said, measuring his words as if they were ingredients in a formula.

“Yes. Jesus told me there might just be more to this story than the both of us thought.”

“And what did you think?” Early again.

“That adventurers would cross our borders. People meant for a grand assignment. Saviors of worlds. Did you really think there would be just the one?”

“My Dad had the same thought.”

“Did he now? I don’t suppose you know how to end a world after you’ve started it?”

“Well, actually, my other Dad started it.”

“Of course he did. Let’s just say that burdens are not so easily taken on.”

“Then how do we do it?” Early pressed home his question, thinking this to be the one the Baptist could most help them with.

“There will be thousands standing in the rain on that day. There will be blood spilled on the occasion of someone’s sacrifice. Are you prepared to take up your cross and follow him?”

“Cross?” Early echoed uncomprehendingly.

"Pull down the levers of civilization and what do you have beneath it?" The Baptist's eyes seemed to fasten into bolts tightening around an answer not so easily yielded. "Earth prime, Jesus called it. The one place in the universe just cruel enough to kill its god."

"So, is it a question of morality then?" Early asked, getting more confused.

"Oh, it's a question of survival, young man. But perhaps not yours."

"What do you mean?" Brogan interjected, alarmed.

"Danger is as danger does. There is only so much brute matter in the universe. The rest thinks for itself. What do we do with a universe bent on deciding the issue for itself?"

"You've lost me," Early said.

"Because it isn't a question of science or religion. It's a question of what truly matters in the midst of so much that doesn't."

"Your obfuscating responses are too much for me to comprehend."

"Langland will tell you."

"What?" Brogan almost yelled. "What do you know of Langland?"

"The true nature of time. If all is really contained in the mental, then what have you to do except accept your fate?"

"But what do we do?" Early continued. "How do we end this earth?"

"Jesus told me that would be your most pressing question. The answer is nothing."

"And be bound to a planet that has no right being in the universe?" Early started shaking his head.

"Forces are in motion beyond your ken, young man. My best advice...Follow the North Star. Look for signs. Things end even as they began. The mantle of liberation is not on your shoulders. The rest is up to God."

Just then, the guards crowded into the room, lifting the Baptist from his seat, and as they roughly led him out, he said over his shoulder, "On that day, look for the signs. Look for the signs." And then he was gone.

"Well, he was hardly helpful," Cynthia said as they left the prison.

"Perhaps he was," Early said in a kind of whisper.

"And just how is that possible?" Cynthia said. "You heard him. He was more than just a little mad."

“No, he’s a prophet. That’s the way they communicate. Allow me a few days to meditate on the conversation. We can hardly expect a mouthpiece of the divine to speak entirely directly.”

“Then you’re as batty as him,” Cynthia said.

“Oh, perhaps not,” Brogan said. “He mentioned Langland. There’s no way he could repeat that name without some kind of second sight.”

Cynthia just shrugged her shoulders as the four of them boarded a bus that would whisk them back to the apartment.

Chapter 12

Considine held the smoking gun, peering into the face of Galaca, terrorized into silence. “I could have put one right in your chest. Do you see what I’m capable of now?”

Galaca slowly nodded.

Pounding on the door of the office began, probably Considine’s assistant. Considine moved quickly to it, cracking it open, delivering clipped commands to the member on the other side.

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll have to play dead now, Galaca,” Considine said. “Feel lucky my anger stayed itself from actually doing away with you.”

With a quivering lip, Galaca said, “What have you done?”

“I told you. A ruse. With you out of the way, in which direction do you think leadership will flow?”

“If you think you can take over my empire,” Galaca began but cowed under Considine’s withering look. Considine raised the butt of the gun, coming down right across Galaca’s nose, blood splashing everywhere. Galaca moved to grab his injury, but Considine produced a syringe, injecting Galaca with a paralytic. Considine pulled a sheet out of a storage closet dropping the cloth over Galaca’s now prostrate body, its shaking calming as the drug took effect. The place where Galaca’s face should be had a bright crimson spot on it, blood spreading as it soaked the sheet. Security guards burst into the office, perceiving the body on the ground, quickly hoisting it onto a gurney that suddenly appeared until the

office fell into a moment of quiescence with the apparently dead man whisked to a pre-designated place for the internment of a not actually dead body.

“Is everything prepared as I asked?” Considine questioned his assistant, who nodded in compliance. “Good,” Considine responded. “Raise the head of the Imperian armed forces immediately. I only want to talk to the commander. No subordinates. Now that’s very important. And issue a press release that Galaca, the Imperian president, suffered from an accidental shooting, or else spin it as a suicide attempt, I really don’t care.”

“As you say, sir.”

The assistant left the office, leaving Considine to his thoughts over how he had just taken personal charge of the coup but felt he still needed more leverage to really be accepted as the head of the Imperian movement to place the known world under an iron thumb. He never fully intended to make that iron glove come out of its box, just a little menacing to force people into the kind of social change he and his cronies had been discussing for years, the need for a ruling class. For too long, the aristocrats had taken a back seat while the leveling of Trine society continued unabated. The people needed to feel the force of a menace fiercely enough to convince them to bow their knees to those in a better position to protect them. Selling evil on Trine has always been tough, but with recent events in Portia, taken care of by Langland, raising consciousness about the function of evil was now an easier task. If Considine examined his conscience more closely, he might detect both jealousy and relief at Langland’s bravery in bringing down Bramin’s wanted supremacy, something having proven to be the final barrier to keeping a populace in thrall to a menace that could always be propagandized into perpetual realization, as if a society needed betters to the masses to protect them from imminently appearing evil. Langland’s decisions recently performed paved the way for his aristocratic class to take their place in society. Considine had simply manipulated the situation by using the usually gentle Imperians to take the first measures he could then put the finishing touches on.

The phone rang. “Yes?” Considine said, picking up the receiver.

“Supreme Commander of the Imperian army on the line for you sir.”

Considine started the conversation telling the Imperian that his president had come to his office very distraught, and in not being able to calm down, witnessed him taking a gun to his own face. The leader gave the usual reaction of being aghast, and then Considine revealed his gambit.

“I think it best if I take charge of military matters for the time being,” Considine told the Supreme Commander.

“Yes, Excellency. I concur. We really have no replacement for Galaca, and with you having Langland’s ear, I think we could do no worse.”

“Very good. I’ll be in touch soon.”

“Well, we have a kind of emergency matter in a recent plot that’s been discovered,” the commander began, but Considine cut him off.

“I am fully aware of what’s going on, legal or illegal. There’s a reason for these things that will be revealed to the populace in due course.”

“Yes, Excellency. We trust you fully.”

Considine rang off ruminating on how fully opposite the commander’s attitude should be.

Chapter 13

Langland sat upon a crate, the only thing available on a cargo ship. He had taken a freighter instead of a passenger ship or plane for the reason his next mission required he be incognito. Luckily, the ship’s captain was actually a Portian whom he had dealings with previously, readily agreeing to mask the Supreme Leader of Trine’s actual identity. The captain wanted to know if Langland wished for some form of support from the Portian military, but Langland told him no. This, as in the last time with Portia as the enemy, was something Langland needed to do alone. Bass had not been incorrect that Langland’s loneliness would be a weight upon his shoulders not easily removed. But he had no time for personal reflection with his mind in high gear and his target a place circled on a map, somewhere within the borders of Imperia.

A crewmember stealthed into view, the one tasked for providing Langland with meals. Langland nodded at Krases, who passed a bowl of fish soup and a hunk of bread to Langland, hovering for a moment, as if wanting to say something. Langland nodded at him, seeming to confer consent.

“Good sir,” Krases began, “should I be concerned about the future of our world? Some of us have been talking and we fear that bad tidings are in store.”

“Well, thanks to you and your crewmembers, I’ve become aware of developments. It appears that Trine is in crisis. My desire is to make things right once again.”

“Your intelligence is well known,” Krases continued. “Surely you are the one who can save us from disaster.”

“Ah, yes, there is that. But I have yet to get a full measure of the threat.”

“But you’ve heard about the regimes who’ve turned against you?”

“Yes. But there is often a gap between governments and popular opinion. My task is to get a sense of what kind of threats exist. Then I will be able to correct things. I believe once the truth is known, stability will come. It is unfortunate that opinions about me personally seem involved in putting things back in place.”

“But why has it been lately that things are so unsettled?”

“How old are you, Krases?”

“18.”

“So it hasn’t been long since you were a hatchling.”

Krases just blushed.

“No, what I mean is,” Langland, thinking he might have offended Krases, pursued in earnest, “that my seniority makes me able to perceive things your young eyes might have missed. There is always the possibility that things go awry, as it’s just the nature of the world to rotate upon the principle of change, to go from bad times to good times. We just need to be prepared for whatever situation the times’ bring our way.”

“Let me just say,” Krases said, beginning to pull away from Langland, “that I wrote a paper in school on your Law of Simplicity.”

“Oh, yes?” Langland said, surprised. “And what did you think?”

“It’s an elegant solution. But I was wondering...”

“Yes?”

“Have you never worried about oversimplification?”

“Actually, I have. But I think we need not worry about that so long as the science of our day has enough bandwidth to balance the conditions of religiosity.”

“I cannot believe in things I cannot see.”

“Ah, but what if these unseen things one day revealed themselves to you?” Langland had a bemused look on his face.

Krases seemed to fall into thought for a moment. “Then I might become so frightened I’d run into the sea, ready to drown myself.”

“Ah,” Langland said, inclining his head, “that is precisely the problem. And the issue my Law of Simplicity looks to address. Fear comes to us so easily. Once we muster courage to embrace whatever life reveals, then are we not members of courage?”

“For what might be required in that case, sir,” Krases said, “I might just prefer to live in ignorance.”

“Ah yes, the bliss of knowing nothing. But if a greater reality is thrust upon you, what can you do but follow your path?”

“I pray no day such as that comes along.”

As Krases returned to his crewmember duties, Langland thought that he was so far beyond Krases’ fear, he had no choice but to follow that path, pursue his apparent destiny, one that was currently so changeable, but according to Apollo, also imminently arising, there was nothing to do but bow in the face of fate. It was true that Trines were not known for their courage, and yet, for Langland, this was a trait he not only embraced but, should he concentrate long enough, might just be the guiding star of his illumined path. He decided to go up to the surface of the ship, suddenly hungering to explore the sky.

As Langland stood on the deck, conscious of having to let his legs move in synch with the swaying of the ship, he looked up at the canopy of the night sky, dotted with flickers of light, seemingly embedded in an inverted disc, giving Langland a moment of astonishment. Space was curved. The idea that the sphere of his planet mirrored the curvature of the sky itself made him wonder about the place of his spatiotemporal location in the broader universe the most of which would be inaccessible to anyone’s random star gazing. He wondered about a twin of himself on some other world having the exact same thought he was experiencing now. Through his viewing globe, he had discovered the heat signatures of others on planets much different from his own, perhaps a mere scientific practice of discovering life on other worlds. But he had no idea what these other people might think, how they established the reality of their existence. He had an uncanny feeling then, like there was nothing in his own mind that someone else could not duplicate in some other cognitive context, feeling the borders of its environment as if all possibilities within any

speculation were floating around like so much detritus on an ocean of consciousness no one could make real without impacting everything else within the stream of becoming what it was meant to become, what it couldn't help but become, serving as a dedicated switch making everything potential actual in a universal insistence to electrify reality with a charge with zero chance of avoidance.

Langland had a moment of vertigo. He felt his legs unhinging from their rooting on the wood planks of the ship, his body turning into a tuning fork attracting phenomena of ultimate power just beyond the limit of his imagination. He just managed to lean on the railing as the contents of his stomach splattered out of his throat, joining with the ocean waves below. A nearby crewmember noticed his moment of regurgitation and rushed over to aid Langland. Langland grabbed onto the crewmember's forearm, feeling a strong pulse there within the veining of the arm he touched. He realized the vitality of life even as he experienced the crewmember waving over another member to assist them. The two members hauled Langland off the railing, slowly guiding his body to the deck. One seemed to automatically wipe spittle away from Langland's mouth. Langland's wooziness seemed to extend beyond the clouds within his brain, the assaults within his stomach. He had the fear that he had just disconfirmed his own existence in contemplating on the significance of another's. What had the right to exist? The sad truth was that everything stemmed from one source, making the mirror reflection of any singularly existing thing a double of its own source, which hovered beyond the mirror, inhabiting a universe of space and time where things curved in inward arcs of connection and separation that made the usefulness of personal identity obsolete. Just before he lost consciousness in his illness, he had the absurd thought, I am not really alive except as a thought in an immortal's mind. Astonished, as he sank further into the recesses of his unconscious, he thought he caught a glimpse of golden locks of hair, but they were decorating a face so round it almost curved back on itself, producing the illusion of doubled features, flickers within the inner universe of that creature until he heard again the last words of Apollo to him, Behold the beauty of a sphere! He thought he could see that face in curvature within the confines of the orb in his apartment, giving him an instant's insight. He was inside and outside that universe at the same time. He was not really himself. No one was. And then his mind faded into the darkness of becoming unconscious.

Langland found himself in the Captain's bed, the close confines of the cabin giving him very little reassurance. But the Captain himself sat in a chair next to his bed, the rises and falls of the ship creating the boundaries of the conversation they were about to have.

"I'm afraid the crewmembers are quite upset with your collapse," the Captain said to Langland. "They're not exactly staunch in the face of the unknown. They're thinking this an omen of some kind."

"Yes," Langland said. "I suppose the Supreme Leader of Trine collapsing on the deck of a ship doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

"Yes, I'm afraid your presence here has spread farther than I'd hoped. If there should be spies aboard..."

Langland lifted his hand, stopping the Captain's words. "It is no matter. Am I correct that we are nearly at port?"

"Yes," the Captain said.

"Then I will be picked up by the Imperian immigration officials. It doesn't matter if my original plans were interrupted."

"Why is that?" the Captain asked.

"Because it's very probable that whatever powers are now in charge there, my best chance of success is just walking in the front door."

"But isn't secrecy so much better a strategy?"

"I thought so at first. But why flirt with burning your fingers just out of reach of the burning fire when you know you must throw yourself into the furnace eventually?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the Captain said, leaning in as if closing the distance between their two bodies would somehow produce a greater exchange of information.

"Let's just say that I'm heading into a collision with a leviathan who may be just as indomitable as I."

"So you think you should just butt heads directly, like the rams on the mountain terrains?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I can tell you this much. This monster you will face, from what I've heard, rivals you in many ways. I would be cautious if I were you."

"The time for caution has passed. This has become a time for the bold."

“I hope you are right.” The Captain quaffed from a beer mug he had been cradling the whole time.

“I need not be right, just determined.”

“Ah, we should see more memers like you. Have you not any progeny to pass your greatness on to?”

“Ah, you flatter me. But no. I am without hatchlings. My children are the people of Trine. It has always been so with me.”

“I don’t know,” the Captain responded, smiling. “Someone like you may need sharing among the worlds themselves.”

“Well that’s a curious thing to say.”

“I don’t know where it came from. It’s just like it were something to be said.”

“Then you have truly understood something beyond you. Perhaps the beginning of an authentic insight. You are nothing like the memers who serve you.”

The Captain raised his mug. “Here’s to journeys,” he said. “May they never end.”

“Here, here,” Langland said, making the motion of draining a cup himself. “I thank you Captain for your exceptional kindness. May it not come back to haunt you.”

“Ah, sailors are always haunted, Supreme Leader. We just give in to the impulse and do everything we can to avoid the Evil Eye.”

“The Evil Eye?”

“See? I know something you don’t. The Evil Eye is the personification of curses moving among us. But we beat it back with every successful voyage.”

“Ah, you defeat evil by keeping it from spying on you.”

“That’s right. The old wagging tongues of the magicians can’t catch us so long as we stay out of their reach.”

“Good advice indeed. I think it is very good advice. I will think on it often, Captain. You are wiser than you know.”

“So are you, Langland, so are you.”

The sun was beginning to rise then, pushing the crewmembers to their duties, and putting Langland in preparation for his imminent arrest. But then, more and more, the imminence of all events being arranged to occur just as they did was becoming a more readily accepted idea. Langland prepared himself to dance with strange emanations whose reality only fostered more confusion.

Chapter 14

Early had been lost in thought a lot since they had visited the Baptist. Brogan thought it best just to leave him alone, meaning he would have to let Darla have his ear much of the time. She was an incredible chatterbox. Even Cynthia would find an excuse to leave the room once Darla got going on one of her sprees. It was as if words were a kind of device for tunneling through the dense brush of meaning which cleared very little of the vegetation containing the structures of adolescent speech, leaving in its wake speculations and intimations that only clung more tightly to the marching bodies in a jungle of possibilities that never quite released its captives.

“Don’t you think so, Brogan?” Darla said, nudging Brogan out of a reverie even as he realized he hadn’t been listening closely enough to follow her point.

“Uh, yes. I think you’re onto something there,” he said dully.

“Oh, you don’t fool me,” Darla said. “You haven’t been listening to a thing I’ve been saying. Just repeat back to me something I’ve just said.”

“Come now, Darla, my dear,” Brogan said softly. “You know you ought to speak to your elders better than that.”

“So you think I’m being disrespectful just in my wanting you to actually listen to me?”

“Darla,” Cynthia began. Brogan hadn’t realized she’d been in the room. He guessed he was gaining the ability to shut off his mind when his environment ceased to interest him.

“Yes?” Darla answered with a sigh.

“There’s an old saying. Silence is golden.”

Darla opened her mouth as if to speak but settled down in a sudden removal of verbal power.

“That’s better, my dear,” Cynthia said. “Now, let’s hear from Brogan. What is the next move in our playbook?”

“Well,” Brogan said, drawing out his word just to give him more time to generate a response. “I think it may be up to our boy genius. But I have to say, the Baptist coming up with the name of my former lover...”

“You’re sure he’s so former are you?” Cynthia intruded.

“Wait a minute,” Brogan said. “There’s no need for jealousy.”

“Oh, is that what this is. You’d presume to tell me what I’m feeling?”

Brogan caught himself before he started rolling his eyes. “It’s just that I have you now. We memers aren’t very good at sectioning off our emotions to just one person. It’s not like we’re polygamous. We’re just not used to cutting off all romantic attachments in favor of just one.”

“Cultural relativity falderal. You’re on earth now, Mr. Spaceman. So I suggest you go along with the context you find yourself in. If you had to choose...”

“Don’t make me do that.” Brogan discovered he was becoming irritated.

“I’m not letting you worm out of this,” Cynthia said.

“Well,” Darla said. “You can’t really make him do something he doesn’t want to do.”

“Shush your mouth, little one,” Cynthia responded with real venom. “You’re in no position to add your two cents. Brogan and I have an origin experience, meaning he made me confront a truth too cruel to press upon anyone. If you’d experienced what I did, you might be wanting a little reassurance too.”

Brogan noticed with surprise that there were tears in Cynthia’s eyes.

“What I saw in his office, what I now know, that this earth we’ve been living on is no more real than a three dollar bill, then you’d know. I actually saw myself forming out of a collection of atoms. I wasn’t born. I was made. The same goes for everything here. We’re all, including the planet, only twelve-years-old. Everything else has been implanted in a perverse attempt to make us believe something that’s actually false. Tell me, Brogan. Tell me there’s really a God watching out for us. Then why would he let this happen?”

“I lived comfortably. I never really thought about such things. I always thought such speculations were for those in crisis.”

“Well there’s a woman who’s in crisis right before you now, Brogan.”

Cynthia sat up from where she was laying on the couch, circling her arms around until her elbows found her knees, cupping her chin in her palms. It struck Brogan then how awful it must be for her, to suddenly understand the truly inauthentic nature of her condition. The shock of knowing you weren’t what you had always taken yourself to be ought to be a huge burden, Brogan realized. He took a seat next to Cynthia, tangling his fingers in her hair.

“Langland once said something interesting to me. He said that we only see the sun as a great ball of fire in the sky. But it has an exact distance from the planet. Too far away and

we'd freeze. Too close and we'd melt down. Surely there must be some sort of agency maintaining it."

"There you've gone and mentioned his name again," Cynthia cried.

Brogan felt unable to calm her like anything he said would further wound her soul.

"What would you have me do?" Brogan said, feeling anguish.

"Just kiss me?" Cynthia looked up into his eyes.

Brogan leaned into Cynthia, his lips finding hers, softly pressing in trying to convey all of the love he had for her in the act.

"You two are being entirely too mushy for me," Darla said.

"Go fuck yourself," Cynthia said, yanking her head away from Brogan who was suddenly feeling impotent.

"You've got to watch your tongue, lady," Darla shot back. "I'm in this just as much as you are."

"And yet all you do is talk about the most trivial of things," Cynthia said.

"I'm going to get Early," Darla said. "He'll have something to say to you. To the both of you. For the way you're treating me." Her lip was slightly quivering as she spoke.

"Listen..." Brogan began, but then they noticed Early in the room.

"We've got to talk," Early said.

"Go on," Brogan said, feeling relief for his son's interruption.

"The Baptist said 'Look for the signs.'"

"Yes?" Brogan tried to prompt Early.

"Look out the window."

They all went to the window, noticing that a small crowd had gathered on the street.

"What are they doing there?" Darla said.

"Exactly," Early said. "That's just it. I've been noticing for days that crowds have been spontaneously gathering. I think this may be one of the signs the Baptist was talking about."

"What does it mean?" Brogan asked.

Early turned away from the window. "Insurrection."

Chapter 15

The boat had docked into port. Langland walked the length of the creaky plank joining to the shore. The feeling of the slatted wood of the dock underneath his feet gave him a feeling of vertigo, like he wanted to succumb to the sickness he felt before on the boat when he matched his view of the stars with a thought that seemed to plunge him into an unthinkable void. But he recovered his strength even as he fell into a line bunching before the immigration officials, certain that he was about to be accosted.

As the line moved forward, he saw a look of recognition in the official he faced.

“Ah, what an unexpected surprise,” the official said. “The Supreme Leader has graced us with his presence.”

Langland checked his speech for signs of irony but didn’t find any.

“So you have recognized me,” Langland said, flatly.

“Oh, but of course, of course. Come with me, and we’ll process you as quickly as we can.”

Langland dully followed the official. They walked passed the line of memers, gracefully sliding into a side door, entering a gray walled room, a single buzzing light swinging slightly from a housing on the ceiling. The official gestured. Langland took a seat, still waiting for that other feather to brush the broken wing.

“So, Supreme Leader,” the official drawled, “why, it appears you’ve taken to riding in a cargo ship to visit our beautiful Imperia.”

Langland shrugged. “It was simply the best transport available, especially coming from an island nation.”

“So you’ve come from Mordem then?” the official continued.

Langland shook his head inwardly, wondering why the questions when his mischief should be perfectly obvious, but outwardly, responded, “That’s correct.”

But before the official could launch into another question, the door of the room suddenly banged open, two memers with black armbands and holding handguns appearing. The official who had been speaking opened his eyes wide, his mouth following, until the handguns spat, brass clinking on the floor. Langland noticed with indifference that the official had taken four rounds to his chest, falling to the floor dead, the barrel-set silencers snapping the scene into a clutching sense of darkness.

The two arm-banded memers waved their guns at Langland while he stood, allowing them to each wrap a palm around his bicep. He considered for a moment the idea that he could easily disarm them but felt more like the condemned walking to the killing room. He was resolved just to let them lead him to wherever the ultimate meeting place was.

But the farther away they moved from the place of his first interrogation, smoothly eluding other memers darkened in their official tasks until discovering a portal of exit, leaving behind the immigration building, coming closer to a transport that he had never seen before. Its great hull seemed to levitate on the arcing axels of four huge tires. Special shock absorbers pinwheeled out in a seeming attempt to buffer the vehicle from some treacherous destination of rocky environs where the specially molded tires could find footing in a forbidding terrain. Although Langland had already made up his mind about the inevitability of the coming meeting with someone he assumed would be impatient to confront him, something inside his heart nudged against a lighted place in his brain. The signal was for one of movement. Attack now, it seemed to be saying. These men don't have the fate in mind for you you assume. After all, why have a confrontation at all when a simple double tap to the head would be done with him? He did it then. Just as the men had laid down their guns to place restraints on Langland's wrists, Langland immediately shifted into action. He used his shoulder to rock into the memer next to him, spilling him to the ground while he used his right leg to sweep the legs of the memer to the other side of him. This paused his arresting interlopers just long enough for Langland to bound into a small group of memers who seemed content to crowd together for some kind of informal chat. There were surprised looks on their faces as Langland dove into a roll, taking his body through them whereupon he righted himself to run down a suddenly appearing alleyway, his mind working furiously for how best to escape. Perhaps he needed an ally. But, with no disguise, how could he convince someone to help a fleeing Supreme Leader? What need did a Supreme Leader have for fleeing anyone?

Langland soon discovered that his running away landed him in the middle of a street flanked by rows of canopied shops, each of them hawking some form of seafood. He stood as straight as he could, ceasing his churning legs for a calmer stride, hoping to lope through until he reached the other end of the harbor where he could be assured of a smoother route into the city. His mind worked quickly, spinning various scenarios in his head, realizing that a certain despair threatened to break through once he realized he had not planned for this

chain of events. His legs began to seize up, his mind wanting to give in to a sudden whorl of opacity. Just as he wanted to sink into a ball of immovable flesh, he felt the presence of someone next to him. He swiveled his head, catching sight of the face. It was Krases!

“Follow me,” Krases said into his ear.

“So it was you who was the informer all along,” Langland breathed out.

“It’s not what you think,” Krases quickly shot back. “They have control of my family. We emigrated to Imperia years ago, and with my low position on the freighter, they knew I would probably escape suspicion, so they’ve made me their spy for a deal longer now. I never lied to you in our conversation. I am no one of courage, and now my own cowardice haunts me.”

“Powerful men finding your weakness only reveals the weakness in them,” Langland said.

“Thank you for saying so,” Krases said. “But here. We must hurry. They will be right behind us.”

“Where will you take me?” Langland said.

“You noticed their transport?” Krases asked. Langland nodded. “It is built for the special contours of my own tribal home far up in the mountains. I know who you’ve come for, and I know how to get you there.”

Langland nodded. His captivity felt like a sudden dilation had just affixed a special causeway allowing him to put trust in this memer able to admit his deviancy, and in doing so, had just done something heroic.

Krases and Langland moved through the streets, pursuing a path that led Langland into further convulsions of confusion. He was beginning to think that his recent emotional entanglements were not only weakening him, but placing before him something of such unutterable import that he could hardly process the true meaning, finding himself reflecting on the nature of the memer condition, as if some sort of operative principle lay just out of reach, and in his inability to bring it into consciousness, punished his soul with a continued softening of his confidence to a point of inactivity. Even as Krases led him to a transport that would place them at the foot of Krases’ mountain home, Langland felt the cold fingers of some hollowed out form squeeze his inner sanctum as if his heart wanted to burst for want of a spike to staunch a bleeding heart.

As they journeyed, Krases explained to Langland about the nature of the tribal society his family had joined. Usually, Krases reported, such societies as these were generally ignored by central government powers. But rising among their number had been this prodigy, unusually named a shaman. Langland confessed his unfamiliarity with this vocabulary. Krases said it wasn't unusual. Wisdom often sprang up among the elders in more primitive societies, not unlike Solver of Mordem. But the crucial division point for a shaman arrived in a perceived tight connection between worldly and otherworldly power, and not just in an enhanced ability to employ magical power. Rather, shamans of the type Krases was describing were entirely harrowing with a belief among the people for whom fear became a radically decimating reality. This was perhaps where Krases' hesitancy about supernatural phenomena stemmed. He had spent a great many years exposed to the superstitions of those in his tribe who ascribed transcendent abilities to an individual who at least gave the appearance of possessing great magical power. So feared had this Odos become that even government agents feared to tread too near their land. From Krases' descriptions, Langland began to smell a charlatan, but then how could Langland dismiss the fear entering his heart upon contemplating facing him? Everything that used to be calm and confident to the point of causing intimidation in others himself felt as if it were draining away along with a pool of silt muddying the tidewaters of his psyche as if some greater purpose for his continually weakening state were trying to burst through his very ribcage itself, preying upon a deepening torpor Langland felt helpless to combat. Krases seemed to notice like the wheels in Langland's mind were suddenly slipping traction, something anyone could discern through looking at the fading light in his eyes.

"They say he is powerful, you know," Krases said. "It would be best if you found the steel in your backbone as soon as possible."

Langland facilely regarded low buildings flashing by as they rode the transport toward the tribal regions. There were many of them, but Krases' crèche was the most influential among them.

"There is something affecting me to my very soul," Langland admitted. "I'm afraid when the time is right, it may have to be you who implements my plan."

"So you have one then. A plan I mean," Krases said.

"Not in the least. But I will continue to shift scenarios until I reach a good course of action."

Langland had just lied to himself and to Krases. The more they passed into the outer reaches of Imperia, the more he felt his consciousness freeze into a blood coagulating sluggishness he feared meant to finally drive home an overmastering fear revealing his mortality to himself. It was completely unknown to him why this weakening event had set upon him, but it seemed to have started when his eyes took to the stars, and in discovering his ultimate unimportance as a tiny being in a massive universe, cured any doubts that nothing in the world preserved life in the way it ought to. To the contrary, life itself was made of smaller contractions of fate, leaving not only individuals but also whole worlds to the cruelty of divine suffering. This idea prompted his sudden realization of the imposition of suffering as the heinous yet necessary *modus operandi* of a dysfunctional universe. Langland thought bitterly on how the true nature of intertwined destinies utterly elided creativity from any possible use. But then again, perhaps Apollo had lied once again. What was to stop an omnipotent being from toying with his creations until they felt exhausted by the merry-go-round of possibilities in a limitless universe? Langland decided he not only had to do battle with the memers he would confront, but with the very principles of the divine, to preserve the memer ability to choose, to not be captives of fate. It was up to Langland to defeat the brushstrokes of the divine meaning to visit destruction as well as the superstitions of the memers who felt that magic could fill an illimitable space. Boundaries were only markers. Anyone could go beyond them once the recognition of their mere utility was grasped. So why did Langland feel like his head wanted to split in two, just as it did when he had that vision of Apollo bringing down the cleaving axe? He remembered that he had not died. It occurred to him that perhaps death too was just a tool to tutor the prepared for higher understanding. But since these thoughts were exhausting him, he fell into a light sleep, gently snoring, never knowing that Krases had leaned in to kiss his cheek, saying, "I might have been able to betray you if we'd never had that conversation. But now I know. Courage really is the virtue that saves us. If I am to save myself, I must save you, even if it means I have to kill you."

Langland, if he'd been awake, would have felt his blood curdle.

Chapter 16

Brogan's eyes were wide.

"Insurrection?"

"Maybe not the best choice of words," Early admitted. "But while you guys have been out here arguing, I've been noticing things. These crowds have been forming just below our building. This phenomenon has been happening everywhere."

"How do you know?" Brogan asked.

"Uh, there's this little invention called a TV. When I want rest from my thinking, I've seen things on it."

Brogan sniffed the air like a bad odor had just arisen. "You know we rely on you for solutions," he said to his son.

"Well," Early replied, "perhaps as it should be. But here. I have a disc of some of the newscasts reporting on it."

He walked over to the plasma screen hanging on the wall, deftly touching the on switch while it drifted into a picture, even as he placed the disk into the DVD player.

Two people sat behind a desk with a view of the city artificially produced behind them. One of them was a man with a stern chin, short-cropped hair, and an attractive face, staring into a void ahead of him. The other was a woman with long flowing hair, attractive breasts packed tight into a red dress. It appeared as if they had just enjoyed a joke while the image focused, showing their faces settling into a more serious look.

"And that isn't the half of it, Phil," the woman said. "And they say I'm too charming for my own good."

"Well, you are."

They both chuckled again.

Darla and Cynthia exchanged glances, a trace of a grin on their faces, as if they were entirely familiar with these people. Brogan gave a questioning look to Cynthia.

"Oh," she said. "This is the Phil and Wendy Show. They're very clever."

"So it would appear," Brogan said.

The pair on the screen continued in some aside banter. Then a picture appeared to the right of where they were seated. It showed a scene of some people throwing things on a

fire. Flames dominated the image even as the people there broke into some kind of chanting in a foreign language.

“That’s right, folks,” Phil said. “These are just some more of the images we’ve been showing you. What do you think, Wendy? Are they trying to reenact a scene from Quest for Fire?”

“Oh no. That didn’t have any dialog. These people are practically witty compared to those savages.”

“It’s true, people,” Phil said into the camera. “These spontaneous demonstrations have been breaking out all over the world. This is a scene being acted out in Sumatra. To help us understand what’s been going on, we have with us today a scientist from the Santa Fe Institute, Dr. Orlak. Good to have you with us today, professor. Can you shed some light on what our viewers are seeing?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Dr. Orlak began. “I’d be happy to. I’ve been investigating the phenomenon of spontaneous gathering for years. It’s a little recognized religious ritual.”

Religious ritual?” Wendy repeated.

“Yes, that’s correct. When things in society become too unstable, people need an outlet to help them cope.”

“But what are they coping with?” Phil said. “Being afraid of the dark?”

“Believe it or not, you’ve actually hit on something.”

“Care to elaborate?” Phil said.

“Yes, well, um, since early times people would huddle together at times of stress. Being in physical proximity with others is very calming.”

“But why like this? Why are they getting together? Is this some kind of love-in?”

Dr. Orlak chuckled.

“Not exactly,” he said. “What we are seeing is a global movement caused by people overly consumed with anxiety. The source of this anxiety is precisely the fear of darkness, but not just the physical kind prompted by absence of light. They are concerned that things are coming to an end, and darkness is just a universal fear that thrusts people into action against it.”

“But what is there to be afraid of, exactly?” Phil asked.

“At the Institute, we’ve been monitoring global consciousness. Our machines can detect the overall feelings of people in the world. It’s unfortunate that this particular one has taken hold and spread much like a virus.”

“So what are we talking about, professor?” Wendy asked.

“It appears that some primal memory of sorts is surfacing. People are becoming concerned that any meaning they thought they had for their lives is being sucked out by the recognition of a time limit.”

“My God,” Wendy said, “it sounds like you’re talking about a bomb.”

“I am.”

When both journalists’ mouths dropped open for a moment, the image faded into the expression of a different newscast. Early pressed pause for a moment.

“The important thing the professor just said,” Early began, “is the notion of people becoming conscious of a time limit.”

“Yes,” Darla said. “The professor confirmed it’s like talking about a bomb.”

“The other thing,” Early continued, “is this idea of primal memory.”

“And what does all this mean?” Brogan said.

“Well, what do you think would happen on a world where a primal memory wants to manifest itself globally, only there really isn’t any?”

“People might actually start intuiting the limited nature of their lives,” Brogan said almost in a whisper.

“Right. Unable to really understand what’s actually happening to them, they revert to the idea of the gathering, strength in numbers.”

“So, what’s going to happen?”

“Let’s watch this next clip,” Early said. “Then perhaps you’ll have a better idea.”

He pushed the play button, beginning the next newscast.

“Welcome to Public Square, ladies and gentleman,” a man in a bowtie said, “where the important issues of our day are discussed. Today, we’re going to get into the idea of primal memory, and with us are some important theologians of our day. From the Christian side, Pastor Henry Oaks. From the World Unity Religion, Pastor Eleanor Faulkner. And from the Eastern Perspective, Dallas Olds. Welcome to you all. Everyone ready for a lively discussion?”

All the panel members seemed to nod their heads in unison.

"I thought the Eastern Perspective might have an Asian," Brogan said to Darla.

"No, it's not that. Eastern Perspective is just the name of the religion. Sure, some of the ideas come from Asia, but not everything."

"Shhh," Cynthia said.

The roundtable was getting underway.

"So, first to the Christians. Pastor Oaks, can you describe your view of reality? Especially since there seems to be a movement going on of some kind."

"Well," Pastor Oaks began, "of course a lot of the followers want to attribute what's happening to the death of Jesus, but we aren't completely convinced it was for this that his death was meant."

"So what of his death?" the moderator pressed.

"He wanted to show us that the divine is already among us, that the world we think we are on is just a temporary stage upon a grander scale."

The Eastern Perspective preacher, Olds, seem to roll his shoulders with skepticism. "You've just proven our point," he said with some aggression in his voice. "We've always said that we should not take the concreteness of this world as the full reality."

"Yes," Oaks returned, "that's true. But then you confuse people with saying there is no God watching out for us. You turn to what you assume are universal principles."

"Well, would it make sense that the divine would choose to incarnate, meaninglessly I might add? He did nothing to calm fears. Just look around you, they're already stoked."

Pastor Oaks looked poised to respond, but the third member, responding to a look given her by the moderator, said, "We are the ones who've been spreading the message of universal love as the truly significant substance we have to attend to. Both of your perspectives reduce everything down to a muddle. You stand upon righteousness, but only as its made of appearances, but we are the only perspective to rely upon true universals. While you wile away time with relativist arguments, you mislead the people. You substitute their bread for casks of water. We provide the only nourishing diet there is."

"Now," the moderator interrupted, "we don't want to get in who has the best religion. This debate is supposed to be about the social movement that's going on. Others are linking it to this issue of primal memory. Can we get onto that topic?"

"Uh, yes," Pastor Oaks said, trying to calm a vein thumping in his forehead. "I don't think sectarian arguments are wanted anymore. I think you can see that we entirely

disagree too much. There is a fundamental question lurking at the bottom of the spontaneous gathering phenomenon.”

“That’s right,” Faulkner added, “whether or not we truly do have a stable existence or not seems to be fueling the people’s anxieties.”

“So what do you think, Pastor Oaks?”

“I think the fact that we just killed a holy man has everything to do with our current situation, but not necessarily in the way Jesus’ followers think.”

“And?” the moderator prompted.

“Well, I’ve had time to speak with the Baptist. His execution is coming up very soon. He and I have come to the conclusion that the heightened anxiety we’re seeing has something to do with how memory collates and stores experiences. We think that no matter how much any kind of primal memory wants to push through, it will only mean a sense of damnation following.”

“Oh don’t tell me you’re getting into that heaven/hell thing again,” Pastor Olds said, hitting a note of hysteria.

“Not in the least,” Pastor Oaks replied. “We’ve been working with neurotheologians, and we’ve come to some interesting findings.”

“Go on.” The moderator again.

“We’ve found that pain and suffering play a huge role in the way we process our sense of ourselves. It appears that the boundaries of a truly implanted experience of suffering come undone upon the recall, spreading associations that can’t be controlled. It appears as if locked in the brains of the people we’ve studied is some kind of primal event, which we can’t discern, yet has the power to overspread society with the notion of an ending. We’ve yet to conclude whether this is something hallucinated or has some real bearing on the physical reality of the world. We can only perceive the mechanism happening. We don’t know enough to predict from it yet.”

“I’ve seen the studies,” Faulkner said, “and I concur. If something were going to break through, it would be on the order of shared suffering. We’ve postulated that something happened at the origin of the world that has made conditions fluctuate upon the notion of people becoming aware of some primordial fault. Only on our assumption, the fault need not be actual. People simply believing in it may produce end conditions, much like starting the countdown on a bomb.”

“So are we in agreement that something is ending? Do we know what? Our society? Our world?”

All three of the pastors simply shrugged their shoulders, suggesting it was a little beyond them, perhaps in wanting to make a speculation, actually seeing the horizon of their limitations. Eleanor Faulkner grabbed her head, her mouth opening, a sigh of some kind breaking free.

“I feel it,” she said. “My sensitivity to all things spiritual gives me these headaches. I fear they won’t stop until the music winds down.”

The moderator had a perplexed look on his face. The two other pastors, all in knowing each other in their many interactions, looked upon Eleanor with Oaks providing the explanation, “She’s talking about a grand reveal. When the music winds down, there won’t be enough chairs for anyone. In fact, the game might not have any chairs at all.”

Early leaned over and stopped the video.

“This discussion,” Early began, “made me realize the presence of a third element at play in the world. The concern driving them is the issue of illusion versus reality, but, especially in the Unity Church, we have the idea of the universal.”

“You mean like Carl Jung and his mandala,” Cynthia said.

“Yes,” Early said. “The idea of the universal is to ground facts about the world in something that need only exist in the mind but pushes ahead a stability that only has worth as a premonition. While the Unitarians believe this somehow confirms reality, it really reveals the negative side, that illusion I talked about that the universal hopes to balance. We brought something into the world with us when we arrived here. We established a harmony that would disconfirm its own existence.”

“What do you mean?” Brogan asked.

“A time limit. Something on the order of an impending end that won’t fully realize itself until the people begin to feel the illusory nature of their reality. If this were a regular world, it would only be belief interacting with physical law. But here, it means that once the illusion is comprehended, the shared experience of inauthenticity would also impact the entire conditions of experience. And upon this shared, global consciousness realizing its ultimate truth, the defective nature of itself being confirmed, then everything in the world, whether it is brute matter or thinking beings, would bring that ‘fault’ they talked about into

such clarity that people would actually *think* into existence the circumstances of their own demise.”

“So everyone is the ticking time bomb, you’re saying?” Darla asked.

“Right. When enough people think something, it becomes real.”

“So, what kind of plan have you formed with this assumption in mind,” Brogan said.

“It’s going to be...”

Just then knocking started on the door. It continued for a few beats, stopped, and then started up again, harder than before.

“I know you’re in there,” a voice said. “You’d better open up.”

Brogan and Cynthia exchanged looks. They recognized the voice. It was Gerry’s.

Chapter 17

Krases had awakened Langland having completed their transport ride to the foothills of a mountainous region. Arid desert spread out before them, in the distance, the appearance of hills revealing their ancient nature in the rounded tops, peaks too flat, almost a thousand plateaus inhabiting the sky. Langland broke off his thoughts from a clutching dream, one in which Trine had become plunged into darkness, and the only light was a little flickering flame Langland tried to carry with him until he realized the futility, watching it wink out just as he awakened. Krases grabbed his hand, pulling him to one of the same vehicles that Langland had noticed before when the memers had accosted him.

“Don’t worry,” Krases said into his ear. “I’ve piloted these for much of my life, until I turned to the sea. Let’s see if my skills still hold!”

Langland wasn’t much heartened by this. But, as they left large pitted tracks behind them as they drove on, Langland felt much calmer.

“Now,” Krases said over the roar of the engines, “eventually we’re going to get into rockier terrain. Hold on tight.”

Langland nodded, feeling like he could perceive the darkness of his dream hovering just above the mountain plateaus in the distance. It curiously twinned with his own

emotions, making him feel again the shattered condition of his soul, broken to pieces, never to be made whole again.

Langland had his arms wrapped around Krases' torso as the huge tires climbed over stones, some sliding when the wheels hit, causing the DustTreader to lurch but Krases always corrected. After they gingerly picked their way through areas full of rocks that the DustTreader was able to maneuver, Krases parked the special vehicle to one side, before them a short trail abutted by large scale rocks, beyond that a cliff that wasn't as sheer as it appeared from this distance. Krases climbed from the DustTreader, motioning for Langland to do the same.

"It's walking from here, I'm afraid," Krases said.

"I haven't detected any villages around," Langland said, not meaning to be suspicious.

"That's because Odos lives far from the main parts of civilization. Where we have to go, you will not detect much life, not even vegetable."

"Not very heartening," Langland said.

Krases said nothing, just taking a large pack from the back of the DustTreader which he strapped on, checking a small container for the sound of water sloshing within.

"It's really not that far," Krases said. "But we have to have supplies, in case. Sandstorms and the like."

Langland nodded, following Krases as he entered onto the trail, the stones like brackets to a sentence in partial relevance, the way lain out with its terminus at the point of a sharp climb up the rock face of the cliff.

Krases and Langland were not set upon by sandstorms, but they had to pause often for water. The hours went by with their legs like metronomes pacing out the arc of the sun going across the sky. Langland felt his body melting from the heat, his mind clouding with each little dust devil swirling in front of their marching figures until spinning off into a wisp of dust like a small explosion. The trail began to incline. Langland watched, as the base of the cliff seemed to pull out of a mirage, revealing the place where the climbing would have to reach a point of real concentration. Langland felt rather blank as if the conditions of his outer environment were inscribing a pattern on his inner world. All he could see was a blank space like a paper forever unwritten on, resisting the intrusion of sense as if it

portended an absence of creativity so profound that no one would be able to frame anything of substance. He vaguely wondered if this were a piece of recognizing the role of suffering, something apparently suppressed by the very beings purporting to help him. He began to feel like a special sort of rebel then. Even though he clearly remembered his assent to a mission Apollo wished to embark him on, he knew he would be a kind of double agent, working for the freedom of mortals while in turn, aiding the gods of the Pantheon in whatever their agenda might be.

But he had to steel himself for the confrontation with Odos. Krases began filling him in on this master personality about the time the climb became harder, the need for grasping at handholds in order to pull a resistant body to a level where they could soldier on. But there was hardly a cadre on hand to assist them. Langland felt his loneliness swell within in his breast. And that deadening sense of relinquished power affected him with every unnerving step and every heave of breath he took.

“So, if you expect to counter his power with science alone, I don’t think you will be successful,” Krases prattled on. It hardly mattered to Langland now what sort of opponent Odos was. The necessity of striking to the heart of the matter loomed no matter how diminished or how unprepared he might be. The notion of improvising a scheme, rolling one out as the situation demanded, fell upon his shoulders with an almost audible thud. But he continued listening to Krases.

“It’s best if you make him think you’re weak at first,” Krases continued. “A surprise attack is often effective, wouldn’t you say?”

“I hardly think he’ll be surprised by anything I could possibly throw at him,” Langland said, actually believing this.

“Yeah, there is that. His powers are enormous. If you think...”

“Really, Krases. If you don’t stop selling his prowess to me, I may just have to stop responding to anything you say.”

“As you say,” Krases said, then apparently nodding at someone just beyond Langland’s shoulder.

That was when he felt the presence of others, one sacking a hood over Langland’s head, forcing him to walk on in silence and deprived of his senses. When they took the hood off, Langland saw that he had been brought inside to a cavern, where, when they removed the hood, Langland found himself facing a giant of a man, fully a head taller than Langland,

a kind of deformity to his face as if some flame had burned one side of it. For some reason, he had drawn or had tattooed upon his face a dark, wide line spanning across his forehead, spreading diagonally across his nose until joining with another horizontal line going the width of his chin. Langland merely registered his features dispassionately as if looking at a figure from another world, on loan from a cosmic zoo able to produce this type of creature. He didn't feel the fear yet, but somehow intuited it coming.

"Odos," Langland said.

"It is I," Odos said. "We have too long delayed our meeting."

"Perhaps a further delay is in order," Langland said slyly. "When you're feeling more yourself."

"Ah, I think now will do. I think now will do very well. May I direct your attention there?" Odos pointed to his left.

Langland did feel a finger of pure fear trace a line of horror down the length of his spine. Stuck fast to the stone walls that were this cave was Considine, bound in chains, unable to move, his head somewhat lolling in its freedom to swing upon his neck, an action only afforded that part of his body, as the rest were pinned to the wall, held fast by manacles and chains rendering his body flat against the surface, no part of him allowed to wriggle at all.

"Unfortunate, isn't it? When he killed Galaca, he thought I wouldn't know. He also seemed completely unaware that Galaca was never in charge."

"What? What?" Langland couldn't get his bearings in this situation. What was meant by this information? Langland couldn't wrap his head around it.

"Confused? Yes, you would be. You'd think someone with your skill would be one step ahead of his enemies, but you've only been the fly in the web the entire time. Irony, did I hear you say? Outmaneuvered by me, a monster to you, a man barely able to muster the same kind of tactics as you, but here I am and there you are." Odos laughed.

Langland was indeed trying to get a read of the man, the situation, any possible advantages that could be had, and found none readily appearing. He decided to get a measure of Odos' need for the Mordem.

"What have you done with them?" Langland pressed.

"Oh, you mean your beloved Mordem. Their unique genetic inheritance was just the thing to bring him out."

“Don’t listen to him,” Considine cried out. He was beating back tears forming in his eyes. “He’s insane.”

“Haven’t great men always been thought so?” Odos calmly responded.

“So what do you mean by bringing him out? What is your endgame?”

“I’ve been trying to make the beast appear. He wouldn’t come unless I sacrificed a great prize to him. Who knew it would be common natives that would work the trick?”

It was then that Langland noticed the oven placed against the back wall. A stovepipe stretched from the body of the oven into the ceiling of the cave, Langland guessed to release the smoke. Then his blood chilled.

“You mean...?”

“Yes,” Odos said with a triumphant air. “I fed them to the iron maiden, happily consuming each offering. Ten subjects were put to the fire. But I think the last key can be found right here.”

Odos raised the orb formerly occupying a space on Langland’s bookcase.

“This is the last thing I need to unlock to make the beast appear.”

Langland intuited that Odos’ world was one of mythical creations. He actually felt that if he coaxed a monster out of the furnaces of his oven that he would be making evil literal in a way; the embodiment of destruction, a wave of disasters he felt he might manipulate to bring Trine completely under his control. But Langland couldn’t quite perceive how he got others to go along with his insanity, what reward could possibly persuade others to follow him. Krases stepped forward then.

“You told me I could have him,” Krases said to Odos.

“Oh yes. An adolescent crush becoming real. You really wish to have this man as your eternal lover?”

“I do,” Krases said, bowing his head before the madman.

“Then here is your eternity,” Odos said.

He strode forward, taking Krases’ head in his hands, slowly crushing his skull. Krases screamed out in pain, but his skull almost splintered into pieces from the pressure. Odos released Krases’ head, the dead body slumping to the floor.

“No!” Langland cried, too late. He had just watched an innocent life snuffed. He decided to plead for Considine.

“You want to know how to access the orb?” Langland said, breathing heavily, taken off guard by the utter evil before him.

“And thus you have teased out your being here.”

“Do you really think that beast will come to you merely by sacrificing living flesh to it alone?”

Langland shuddered at the thought of Odos feeding Mordem bodies to this oven of crenellated portals to some magical realm. Such a thing couldn’t exist, could it? Langland never felt so much doubt about his persuasions in science and religion then.

“If you think your training in science alone is sufficient for ultimate power...” Odos started.

“There is no such thing as ultimate power,” Langland responded, hoping this might cast some doubt into Odos’ afflicted consciousness.

“Only the puny believe such things. But you are not one of those. You have become a legend in your own time. But it is time for a changing of the guard.”

“But first, before I tell you how to unlock the secret of the orb, you have to release Considine,” Langland said, feeling a new confidence possess him. He felt insights flooding into him, all of the times he had met with Apollo filling in his mental landscape so darkened previously, now pulsating with a new light only confronting an enemy could provide as an engine of a new sight.

“Ah, but you should want to punish him. He betrayed you.”

“He didn’t know what he was up against. It’s not his fault.”

“You don’t seriously believe that.”

“Nevertheless, the key. Then I’ll show you about the orb.”

Odos flung a key to Langland. He moved quickly over to where Considine was stuck fast.

“Better to get out and maybe call an airstrike on this place,” Considine breathed into Langland’s ear as he knelt to fit the key into the shackle holding his wrist.

“It’s okay,” Langland whispered. “I know how to handle this. But you won’t see me again. The fate of Trine will be up to you once I do what I must.”

He wiggled the key, unlocking the four restraints in turn. Considine weakly recovered his feet. “You would trust me again?” he said into Langland’s ear.

“Don’t dwell on what was. Take Trine into a new era. Learn from this.”

Considine nodded, hurrying toward the door, where the two guards made way for the escaping figure.

“Now, for your part,” Odos said.

“You believe in the greater magic of the Zodiac Parchment?” Langland said, trying to get a sense for which part of the various myths Odos perhaps believed in.

“Oh, that is still yet a puny instrument indeed. The rotations of the planets are describing arcs of destiny perhaps, but what I want is the Method of the Hexagonal Point, the one point in the universe that breathes ultimate life into all from the furnaces of time itself.”

Langland recognized this doctrine belonging to a more ancient order than the Zodiac Parchment, an order actually dedicated to disorder. Only by dismembering society, it was thought, could one control it upon a principle of ultimate fear. Many had attempted to affix the point and perhaps, Odos, in his madness, believed the orb was exactly that point. Langland also knew that what he was about to do next would take place not in the intellect, but in the imagination, and in its greater reach, have the outcome he couldn’t be certain of, but trusted in his own spiritual practice having just enough of an edge of the superstitions of Odos along with it that, in a turnabout, Odos would become the key but not in the way he thought.

“Now, you are to instruct me about the orb,” Odos said, his words almost a lipsynch sign of how Langland was to manipulate the situation.

“You must concentrate with me,” Langland began. “We must be of one mind for this to work.”

“Oh but we are of one mind. We’ve both plugged into the bastions of ultimate power.”

Langland decided not to keep discouraging the thought of power ever being ultimate. He knew he had to get Odos to see exactly what he would see. They needed to be a folie a deux. A psychosis in real life was an intersection of the divine on the plane of the imagination. Langland noticed that Odos had actually closed his eyes, making Langland lick his lips upon the thought of successfully pulling Odos in range of his own spiritual proclivities, and in his mind’s eye, called upon Apollo, reminding his god of that vision not so long ago when the token appeared. Sure enough, it was there. It was probably so weighty

again that Langland shouldn't have been able to wield it, but in his determination, began to revolve the ax suddenly appearing in his hands.

"Behold the beauty of a sphere!" Langland cried, getting Odos to open his eyes amazed at the sight of the ax coming down on the orb Odos held between his gigantic palms. As the ax met with the sphere, there was an explosion of light, a tunnel of sorts swirling around in a kaleidoscope of colors, but the initial blast sent Odos flying back into the wall, connecting with his head, sliding down the wall with a trail of blood leading down to his now dead body. Just as Langland had supposed, physics had played its role. Since Odos was in contact with the sphere, the portal sprouting open pushed him back with tremendous G-force while its attractive properties pulled Langland into it. The last thought Langland had while he was being pulled into the vibrating space was, Whatever happens, I've got to play the opponent. I am defiant. I will be nobody's puppet. He would never know that his instincts, though noble, had nothing to do with the assignment he had accepted, the confederate he already was, and the ultimate good he would be doing just in the betwixt emotions he had for the divine, his planned insurrection against the gods.

Chapter 18

Brogan froze. Gerry! He should have figured he'd come looking for them. It hadn't even occurred to him to move to a different location. Now they were trapped and at the mercy of someone who believed that plotters, insurrectionists inhabited the room beyond the door Gerry, surely not alone, currently pounded on.

"Open the door. " Gerry's voice came sailing through the air, slightly muffled by the door like a sentinel momentarily keeping the occupants inside safe.

Cynthia looked at Brogan. He nodded to her. They had no choice. Brogan went over to the door and opened it.

Gerry strode through the threshold. Trailing behind him was a man in a suit, sunglasses screening his eyes, a menacing grimace on his face.

"I found the folder in Brogan's office where you left it," Gerry said to Cynthia. "You didn't think I would find out you were spying on me? Spying on the spy, who is in turn spying on that spy."

Gerry was pointing at Brogan.

"Please," Brogan started. "There are things happening here you have no idea about."

"Oh really," Gerry responded. "Explain it to my friend here. This is Doug Martin, FBI agent."

"All you have to do," Agent Martin said, "is come with me. Let's discuss this at the New York Field Office. I'm sure you think you're doing good, as is the case with most terrorists."

"Terrorists?" Cynthia said. "What in God's name makes you think we're that?"

"What other explanation could there be?" Gerry asked. "Fabricated documents. Kidnapping. Come on, Cynthia. I have witnesses that saw Brogan carrying you out of his office unconscious. Just tell me you're not in distress."

Brogan realized how stupid he'd been. He had walked right out of the building carrying Cynthia, neither thinking nor caring what those looking on might think. It had just served to make him look guiltier. The irony dawned on him. He was guiltier than anyone knew. As Early had mentioned, their presence on this world alone created the means of its existence and its destruction at once. They had birthed a fiction, and knew the storyline was now serving up its last plot twist.

"Just get ready to come with me," Agent Martin said. "We can settle this in my office. You two girls will be safe finally, and we can deal with the threat as calmly as we can."

Agent Martin had taken to a subdued tone of voice perhaps on the assumption that compliance with his demands might come easier this way. But Early stepped forward, placing his hands on his hips, a move meant to signify open defiance.

"But you're forgetting something," Early said softly. "If we're terrorists, wouldn't you need to deal with the bomb?"

"Bomb?" Agent Martin said with alarm. "You're telling me you have a bomb?"

"Well don't you feel it?" Early continued taunting. "It's already counting down. How much time do you think you have left? Minutes? Seconds?"

"Tell me where it is," Agent Martin said. "You don't want the blood of innocents on your hands."

Early lifted his arm, extending a finger, pointing at his head. The move alarmed Agent Martin. He immediately unholstered his weapon, aiming it at Early, panicking Brogan.

“It’s right in here,” Early said. “And right in there,” he continued, pointing at Agent Martin’s head.

Brogan realized that if he moved, Agent Martin might squeeze off a shot. So instead, he raised his hands, and said to the FBI agent, “We’re giving up, okay? Everyone raise your hands.”

Cynthia and Darla followed Brogan’s lead, but Early seemed intent on being oppositional.

“What does he mean when he points his finger like that?” Agent Martin directed at Brogan.

“He’s just a confused kid,” Brogan said. “Now, put away your gun. We’re not going to do anything but go out that door now.”

Gerry looked tongue-tied. The scene had a feeling of fate to it. That if anyone did anything against the will of some unseen guiding hand, the situation would completely unravel. And it seemed Early had no interest in his own safety.

“I’m talking about the bomb you’re so sure we have,” Early continued. “We’ve bioengineered a nanobot, placed it in the drinking water, and now, everyone has a little machine in their heads that will explode at any moment.”

“Please,” Brogan pleaded. “He’s just a child. He’s not making any sense. Surely you can see that?”

Agent Martin was staring down the barrel of his gun, his eye starting to twitch, and he darted up his other hand to touch the fold of skin below his eyebrow, just above his sunglasses he now whipped off of his face, letting them fall on the floor.

“You’re telling me he’s crazy?” The agent asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” Brogan said trying to measure his voice, temper it with as much calm as he could.

“I can’t take the chance he’s telling the truth,” the agent said.

“Would it make any difference shooting him if the bomb is really in your head already?”

Agent Martin lowered his weapon a few degrees but didn't stow it away into his holster immediately.

"Just do as Brogan says," Gerry said, real regret pouring through his words as if he hadn't expected a confrontation like this, something that might take away a life.

"But what if there really is a bomb somewhere?" Agent Martin said to no one in particular. Then he directed his words at Early. "Don't give me bullshit about tiny robots in my head. Where is the real bomb?"

Early coldly regarded the FBI agent. Brogan couldn't tell if Early meant to get himself shot or if he was playing a manipulation game, its gambit completely obscure.

"I'll tell you where the bomb is," Early drawled out, still with his hands on his hips, not heeding Brogan's command.

"But you'll have to torture me to get the information."

"We don't torture," Agent Martin said, lifting his gun again so that it leveled off at Early's head.

"And if the terrorist tells you that you only have seconds to live if you don't get the location of the doomsday device? Even then you wouldn't resort to torture?"

"I don't know what you're playing at," Agent Martin said.

Brogan didn't either.

Early held up what looked like a trigger device he'd slipped from his pocket. Brogan knew it couldn't really be what it appeared, but looked fashioned to fool anyone, making Brogan realize that Early had dreamt up a contingency plan. Just in case of this? Brogan thought. He didn't know whether to praise his son or blame him.

"All I have to do," Early began, "is just press this red button."

Agent Martin's gun went off. "I didn't mean to..." he stammered, but Gerry immediately grabbed the agent by the shoulder, meaning to hustle him back out the door.

"We're not here officially, you fool," Gerry said with the two of them scrambling for the door.

Cynthia and Darla seemed to hiss in a breath both at once. Brogan immediately ran to his son's body now slumped on the floor. Blood was pooling on the carpet from a wound in Early's shoulder. The bullet had been sprung from the nervous hand operating the gun, making it miss its mark at the heart, but there was still a lot of blood.

“On the day of someone’s sacrifice,” Early rasped, “it will happen. Do you remember when he said that?”

“Yes,” Brogan said, hiding his emotions, “I remember. But you didn’t have to be so dramatic about the whole thing. There’s always the idea of living to fight another day.”

“No, it had to be me,” Early said, Darla now behind him, holding up his head.

“I can tell by the blood,” Darla said. “The bullet’s collapsed his lung.”

Darla started wailing.

“What do we do?” Brogan said, bowing his head just as tears started dripping from his chin.

“There is no threat to my survival,” Early said. “Remember the other mind.”

“How do you know if you die here, it will not die there?” Brogan managed to say, surprised at his own rationality in the situation.

“Fictions are never quite as unreal as we assume. That’s why the Baptist said to do nothing, but somehow, I knew.”

“What did you know?” Brogan said, still retaining his cool.

“There will be thousands standing in the rain that day. Look out the window and tell me what the weather is doing.”

Brogan swung his head to the window, confirming the pelting sheets hitting it.

“Yes, you’re right. It’s raining, rather heavily.”

“Get to the outside. The storms will do the rest of the work.”

“What work?” Brogan pressed even as he noticed the light leaving his son’s eyes.

“Langland did his part...now...you have to do yours.”

Brogan with Darla cupping Early’s skull then realized that he was gone.

Darla wailed louder. Cynthia was slumped on the couch, her head slightly bowed, her hand covering her face.

Brogan felt a surge of energy, hoping his son had been lucid enough to read the situation, perhaps intuiting what would happen in all its detail. How else did he know to make a mock up of a detonator?

“Let’s get outside,” Brogan said, letting his son’s body sink into the floor, grabbing Darla’s hand, her sobs stifling for the time he led the two women out of the door of the apartment, stumbling out onto the street that seemed dense with bodies, people everywhere, their heads now turned toward the sky, seemingly oblivious to the drenching

rain, but tuned into darker clouds moving swiftly along, bolts of lightning streaking out of the darkened sky, the closer they came to the mass of bodies on the street, the more the energy arcs surged in activity. Once the crowds realized the highly dangerous situation of overactive lightning, people panicked, running in no particular direction, realizing that the crush of bodies restricted movement too much for an actual escape. The lightning became like an out-of-control Tesla coil, the energy arcs becoming so densely populated that they were scooping up bodies by the dozens, seemingly targeting people by the bunches, and in their crackling vanishing, left behind a wake of terror no one seemed able to comprehend.

Brogan, still keeping his thoughts focused, wondered what he was supposed to be looking for, until he detected among the strafing lightning strikes, a chute of colorful lights of a different nature from the disasters happening all around them. “Look for the signs,” echoed in his mind, the Baptist’s words. Brogan knew that his son, mentioning Langland, knew that the anomalous activity Brogan witnessed had to be the “sign” of most importance. He waved to Cynthia and Darla, both faces white with worry, and Brogan pushed against the bodies, scrambling as if everyone were caught in a slow motion riot, legs and arms churning as if sunk in water. It seemed to take hours for them to finally position themselves in the wake of the light tornado. Dozens of people were being swept away by the lightning activity, and Brogan, Cynthia, and Darla were just seconds away from being dragged into the mass of lights. As a group of people next to them became victims of the storm, the light cone moved over their bodies. Brogan saw Cynthia trying to reach out for him while she gripped Darla’s hand. Brogan lost consciousness when the vortex swept them up, the name of his son on his lips, Early.

Brogan found himself on one knee as he swung his attention around a room he was in, apparently a laboratory of some kind. There were machines sitting on tabletops that he had no idea were for. As his vision focused, he saw that Cynthia was crouched next to him.

“You okay?” she asked Brogan.

“I, I guess so,” Brogan responded, entirely confused.

“We thought we lost you there for a minute.”

“The rain, the lights...”

Cynthia craned her head around for a moment. Brogan could see she was looking at Langland!

“Another flashback,” Langland coolly responded.

“You sure you’re okay, Dad?” Early chirped.

“Where are we?” Brogan squeezed out of his clouded brain.

“Silly,” Cynthia said. “You’re in the lab.”

“The lab?”

“You know, scanning for the planets we have to visit.”

“What are you talking about?” Brogan really felt disoriented.

“You talk to him, Langland,” Cynthia said, giving up.

“Just lay back and breathe,” Langland said, coming to kneel next to Brogan.

Brogan complied, finding his eyes scanning the ceiling for some clue about what was going on.

“Did you have another vision of that alternate world?” Langland asked.

Brogan nodded. “Did everyone get through okay?” he asked.

Langland shot a look at Cynthia. She nodded.

“Brogan,” Langland began. “You have to remember that dreams are dreams, no matter how real they might seem.”

“What has the right to exist?” Brogan asked.

Langland looked down into Brogan’s face. Brogan could see the pain inscribed in Langland’s features as if this was a drama he knew all too well.

“Listen,” Langland said. “You’re going to have episodes like this. You’re just going to have to get used to it.”

Brogan looked up at Langland, preparing himself for the wrong answer to his question. “You have no knowledge of an alternate reality, no memory of Trine, nothing at all of who you really are?”

Langland slowly shook his head in seeming pity. Brogan understood then. They were afflicted with amnesia. Just how deep it went, just how much knowledge had been elided, Brogan had to get a sense of. He slowly stood to his feet, suddenly feeling weird, as if his body were not quite his own. He unlatched his pants, pushing them down around his ankles. Darla, inhabiting a chair at a spectrometer, raised her arm, laughing. Brogan looked down at the sexual member between his legs.

“Brogan’s showing his penis,” Darla joked.

Langland reached down to grab up Brogan's trousers. As he helped Brogan do up his pants, he whispered, "Remember."

Brogan felt a rush of emotion, tinged with attributes of vertigo and unpain. But then again, it seemed that on this world, in this timeline, he was still someone else yet. He vowed to himself to help them remember. That was when he saw Langland wink. He wondered, sinking back into the dreams of his former lives, hoping the future was not a thing carved in stone. He would soon learn that everything that has happened will happen today. He felt the motions of eternity intertwine with the limited stamp of his mortality. But it was in the service of something else he felt enlisted. He was soon to learn what roles they were yet to assume, which borders upon which worlds they were meant to cross. He remembered something from another life. "Saviors of worlds," that voice had said. He resumed his station next to Langland. Their hands met, pressing into each other.

End

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