

Alaska Digital Humanities Series

JULY 2018

\$15.00

SHARED UNIVERSE

SCI-FI ARCHIVES

ARCTIC CITY,
SEWARD'S SUCCESS,
DENALI CITY



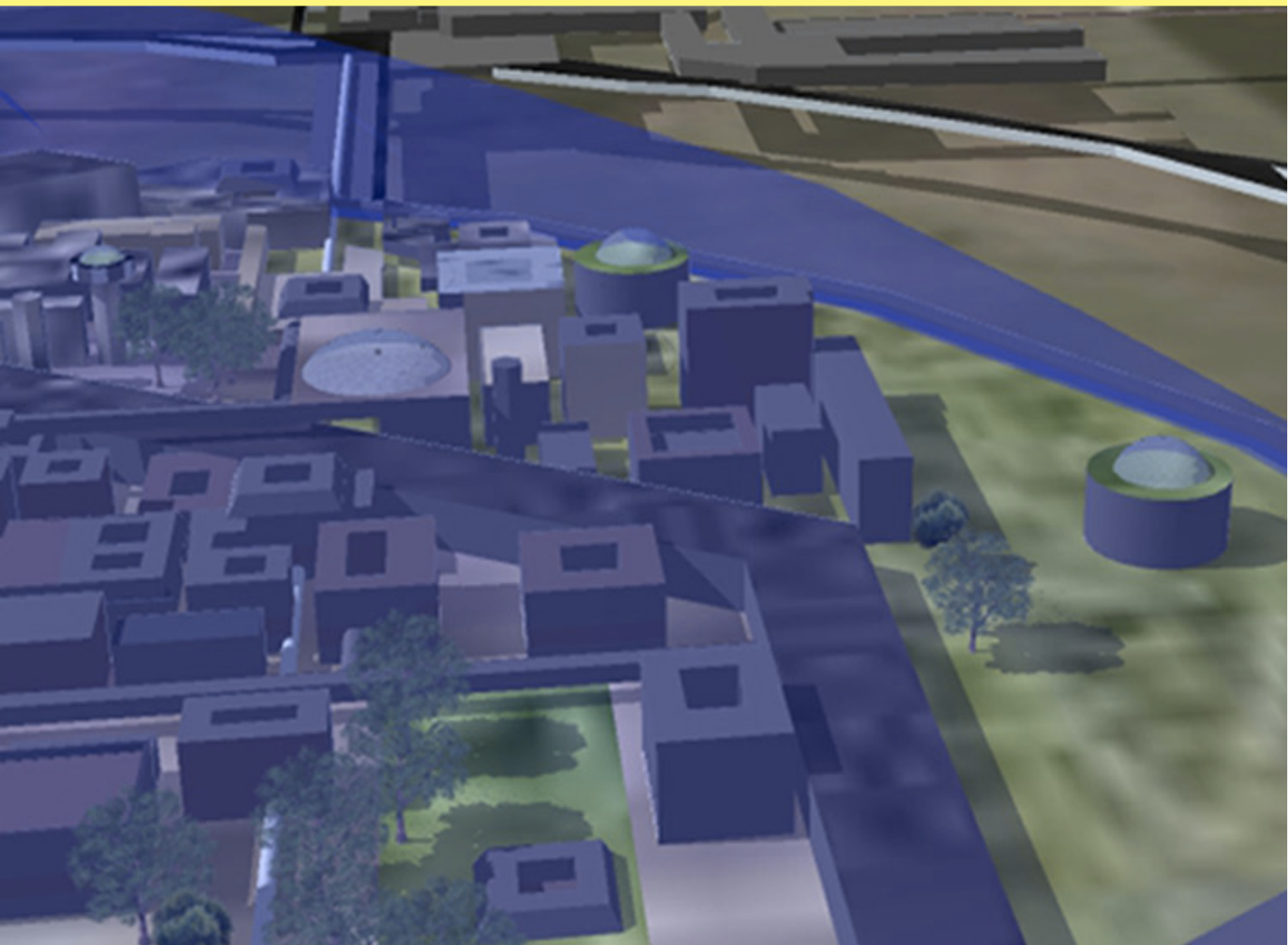
STORIES IN AUGMENTED REALITY!

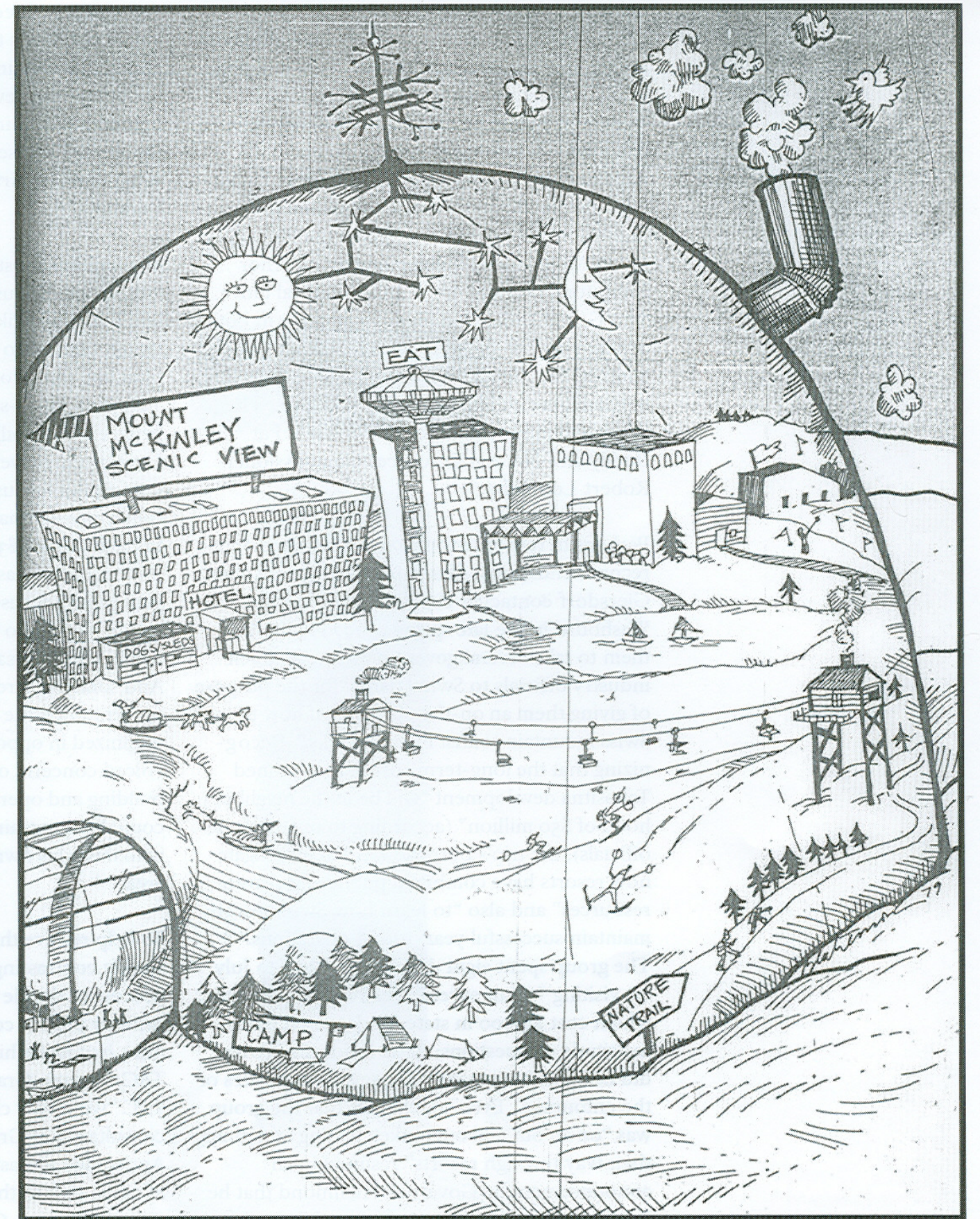
DIRIGIBLES

of Denali

SCIENCE FICTION OMNIBUS

LUCAS ROWLEY | VIVIAN FAITH PRESCOTT | JACLYN BERGAMINO | LESLIE KIMIKO WARD
SKYWALKER PAYNE | NATHAN SHAFER | JOSHUA MEDSKER | PATRICK LICHTY | RICHARD PERRY







Nathan Shafer, Editor
Joshua Medsker, Editor
Patrick Lichty, Editor

ALTERNATE HISTORY SCIENCE FICTION

July-September 2018
Dirigibles of Denali
Volume Two

ALL NEW STORIES

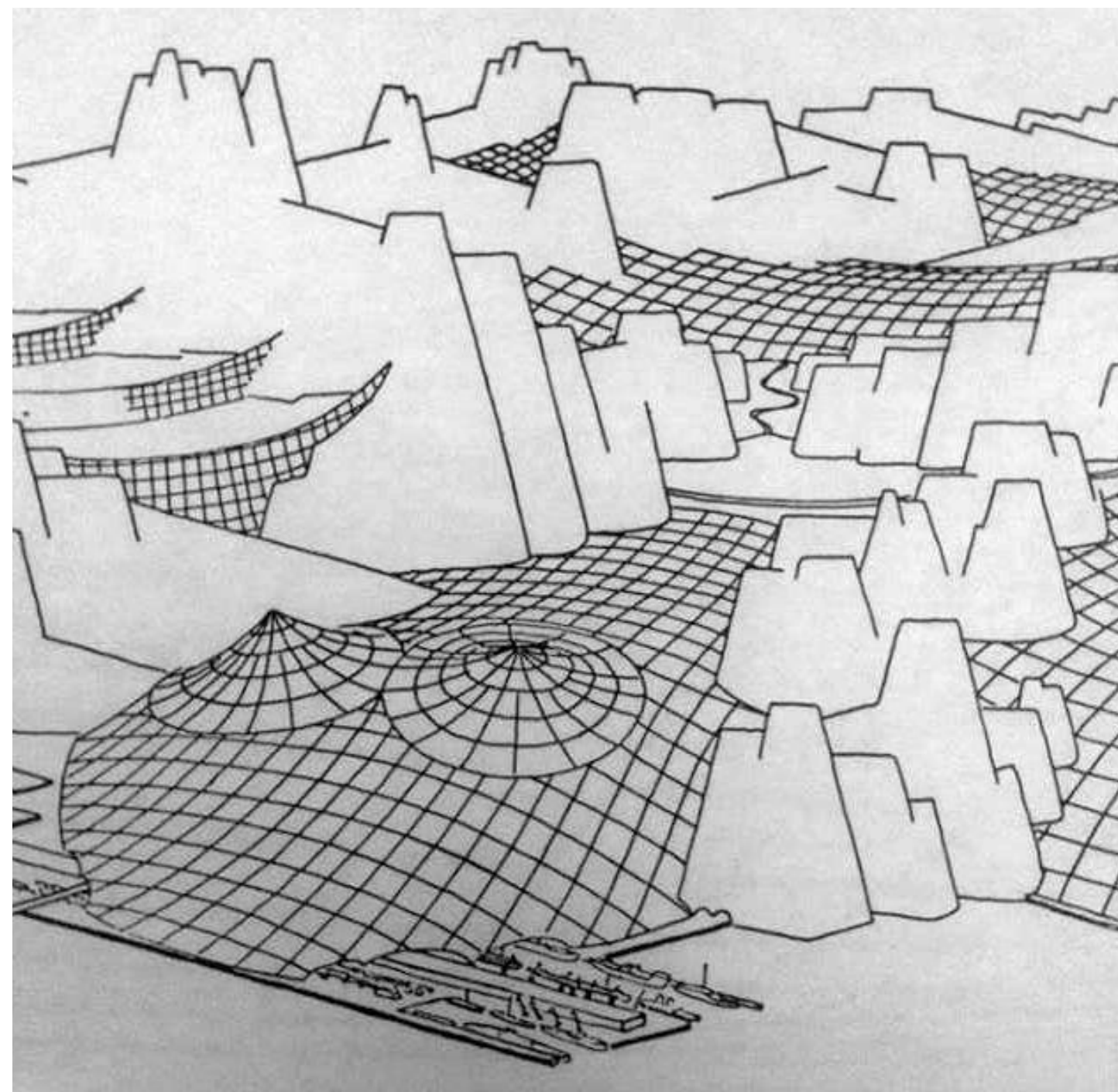
DIRIGIBLES OF DENALI VOLUME TWO: SCIENCE FICTION OMNIBUS

ALASKAN REALITY TELEVISION
DIRIGIBLES OF DENALI, Multiple Players

SEWARD'S SUCCESS
FOX FIRE, Vivian Faith Prescott
A FEW NOTES CONCERNING ALASKAN DEATH METAL, Hannah Faster
RAVENADE, Nathan Shafer

DENALI CITY
PACK MIND, Lucas Rowley
ELEPHANTS OF DENALI, Leslie Kimiko Ward
DENALI CITY AND THE WILD MEN, Richard Perry
STORY SANCTUARY, Skywalker Payne
SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE DENALI DOME, Joshua Medsker

ARCTIC CITY
DISTORTION, Jaclyn Bergamino
THE ARCHIVE: DENALI, Patrick Lichty



DIRIGIBLES of DENALI

Subterfuge

multiple players



DIRIGIBLES of DENALI

Airship Crews

The NELVANA
Captain: Kaolin Andre
Crew: Nine
Model: Aurora B-Class 91+
Mission: Science

The KOLIAK
Captain: Peach McGillis
Crew: Three
Model: Peregrine Air Daddy
Mission: Cargo

The TANERO
Captain: Katie Mosquito
Crew: Twenty
Model: Marmaduke CL-500
Mission: Passenger

The Koliak dipped so that all of the cups and everything not nailed down crashed into the ceiling of the ship. Peach threw a quick smirk at his brother, whose eyes flashed in collusion. Targer spilled coffee all down his shirt, and gripped what he could, looking like he was about to crap his pants.

“What the hell’s going on, Peach?” Drex asked. The altimeter spun down maniacally. An alarmed herd of caribou snorted on the icy ground below, looked up, and then went back to their hunt for food. Talkeenta was coming into view.

“What’s going on?” the producer yelled. He turned to Toots. “Tell your guys to shut that fucking camera off and help me!” Amos Targer’s face turned green, and he vomited his lunch all over the floor of the ship, splashing onto his nice new blue suede Pumas. “McGillis, you get this fucking thing fixed now, or I swear to god...”

“Sorry bud, I can’t hear you over my headphones,” Peach yelled. “Hold on!”

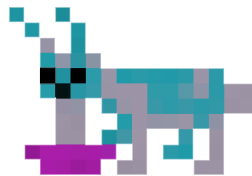
The dirigible lurched and dove like the Hindenburg, minus the scorching fire. Targer’s face near to exploded. “I’m going to punch you in the dick!” He reached out both arms to Peach, falling as he did. He slipped on the vomit and crashed headfirst into the control panel, barely missing the engine gauges, crumpling into the front of the cockpit, where he remained for the duration of the flight.

For a hot second, Peach and Drexel were concerned they might get sued, but they didn’t see any blood and forged ahead, chuckling. They had kept their plans of subterfuge between the two of them and would later blame an act of God. Toots and the crew had not complied with Targer’s order and kept the cameras rolling throughout. There turned out to be some sweet footage—in fact, it ended up being the highest-rated episode of the season. Out of all the episodes, Peach was most proud of this one.

DIRIGIBLES of DENALI

S:5, E:8
“Halloween”

multiple players



Peach, Talkeetna

“They said we were doing a goddamned reality show, not some dumbass soap opera. I ain’t sayin’ that shit. Just turn off the fucking cameras if ya want it. Want to see some flyin’, I gotchoo. If not, diddle off.” This is Peach McGillis, dirigible pilot and one of the stars of National Geographic’s reality television show, *Dirigibles of Denali*.

“Come on Peach! We need to show some of the tension between the brothers during this trip.” This is one of the producers, Amos Targer, not a pilot, “it is just good TV Peach.”

Peach is walking away from Amos, putting his hands in his pockets, looking for his cell phone. “I’ll take Randy and Toots in the sky, but you ain’t coming. And just put me sayin’ that shit out of your goddamn mind dude. We launch in 30.”

This is the Fifth season of *Dirigibles of Denali*, a show that has a slightly larger viewership than both **Alaska State Troopers** and **Deadliest Catch**, but still one of a hundred Alaskan reality shows on TV. When they were six episodes deep into season five, Peach and his brother, Drexel, got into a fistfight at the Molly O’Flannery Memorial Ice Rink and Bowling Alley in Denali City. Drexel is a pilot too, but with another dirigible line, Helios. Peach flies with Purdy Skies, founded by Jack Purdy, a legendary jackass cum politician in the Interior Domes, who was mayor of Balto City for 15 years, until it ghosted, then he moved out to

Arctic City, where Purdy Skies runs its main office and the Nelvana airship dock, where the world famous Nelvana crew flies. But that is not Peach’s crew. His crew is the Koliak.

The contract for *Dirigibles of Denali* is with Purdy Skies, not Helios, so Drexel is only on the show for dramatic twists as Peach’s brother, which the producers are constantly enflaming. Currently, Amos wants Peach to sit for a confessional, to talk about the fight with his brother. It is also Halloween and Amos wants Peach to dress up in a Halloween costume for the bit, Frankenstein’s Monster or Count Dracula. Peach has said no to both. Drexel has already recorded one in a fairy princess outfit, to try and get Peach worked up, as Peach is quite a bit smaller and less stereotypically masculine than Drexel, plus he is the only straight man on his crew, which he personally handpicked. Through the whole confessional Drexel was flourishing his fairy princess wand, ironically decreeing things like “I am going to turn you into a wee frog Peach! Poof!”

It is this episode’s director, Toots, job at the moment to convince Peach to watch Drexel’s confessional in mid-flight, and record the reaction while he is piloting. It is not going well. He will probably just play it when he is flying anyway, see what happens.

“This ain’t fucking Duck die-nasty Toots. We fly airships between the domes,” they are prep-

ping the bay for a flight to Arctic City in the Koliak..

“What you got to understand man is that just watching all of you fly around isn’t dramatic enough—“

“Imma gonna stop you there. Y’all get enough of the drama on the tourist floats, what with the crazy passengers mouthin’ off every couple of minutes. Or them pretty scientists runnin’ those save the planet missions in the Nelvana and all. I’m the workin’ man in the show. Nuts and bolts.”

“There are about a hundred blimps that could do this Peach. You boys just had the right look. Just handsome enough, not going bald, right amount of twang in your talk. People want to see something interesting that they kind of already know. And they know brothers fighting.”

“Yeah man, come on,” Randy said in the background.

Peach cuts him a look that puts Randy right back to coiling electric cables.

“Look. I understand, and I truly do appreciate what y’all are doin’. But you’re just always windin’ Drex up, and you know he would literally do anythin’ you guys suggest. He just wants to be on the show all the time. Would like it if it were his show. It’s plain embarrassin’ sometimes.”

“Well, I fucking watched it Peach.” This is Sammy, Peach’s cousin and co-pilot, “they are playing up that homophobic shit again.”

Peach to Toots, “what the fuck is wrong with you people?”

Toots has nothing.

“You are the goddamned National Geographic. You are supposed to be better than this. Have some self-respect. Day-umm. You guys lettin’ Drex do all your writin’ for ya?”

Sammy to Toots, “You guys know what it is you’re doing. It’s the same thing all over again. Playing that note too much, tryin’ ta get me defensive, right? Oooohh,” Peach holds his crew’s uniqueness as a personal point of pride, to which Drexel gives him total shit for every chance he can. It was the reason for the fisticuffs in episode six, “Peach and Drexel Get Into a Fistfight”. It didn’t help that a couple crew members off the Nelvana where in the bar dancing, getting b-roll when it went down.

“This is just going to be another episode

where we got to bleep out every other word you say, while you are going on and on about homophobia. As a gay man, I am tired of hearing you spout on and on about it Peach. It isn’t an issue, nobody, and I mean noboday, is bringing it up but you,” Amos explains.

“You motherfuckers can grump a jam!” Sammy advised Amos.

“Shout it loud Samwise!” Reggie added, while loading crate with a dolly.

“Ain’t no thing, I done told you dummies we ain’t talkin’ like that, so just forget it!”

“We need something Peach. Anything, really.”

“I ain’t doin’ another confessional where I say shit like, ‘I don’t like hearin’ about all the gay stuff, runnin’ my crew down’ or ‘why don’t y’all just let it be.’ Done with it is what I am. Done.” He looks over at Sammy, “I want to be out of Talkeetna in 25. Maybe we can get into Arctic City in enough time to get us some burgers.”

Peach, Arctic City

The crew is eating hamburgers at the Sky Captain’s Burgers of Tomorrow in Arctic City, looking out over the artificial waterway that intersects the dome, keeping the city on one side and the farmlands on the other. There is an air tram running from the top of the Transportation Center down into the farmlands, which the crew is watching while they eat.

Male narrator, deep, soothing voice, “The crew of the Koliak has been experiencing turbulence in more than just the air. It has been two weeks since Drexel and Peach got into that fistfight in Denali City. The crew has decided to get some hamburgers in their favorite spot in Arctic City, after they delivered their payload, some much needed medical supplies to Arctic City General. Tension has arisen because Peach is refusing to speak with his brother, and make amends. Drexel has sent word that he is sorry, but Peach doesn’t want to hear it.”

“Tell you what guys, I am crashin’ hard after we finish up here,” Peach says, setting his burger down and taking a swig of beer, “feels like forever since I got a good nights sleep.”

Theme music plays, as a montage of scenes

of blimps docking at the Transportation Center, the docks of which are connected to the top of the dome, as they mix with scenes of the ravens playing in the snow and garbage dump outside of the dome. A long shot of the nuclear generator a mile from the city, with huge plumes of smoke meeting the frigid air of the Arctic. A caribou herd out in the distance, and a scene of a guy on a snow machine.

Cut to Reggie’s confessional scene, “We were running some medicine and stuff up to the hospital in Arctic City. They were running low. Without the airships to get the supplies there, they would have to wait or go without. Just glad we could help out and make sure people up in the dome can stay healthy and happy. It’s our job.”

Sammy’s confessional, “We try and stay focused on what it is we are doing. Today, we were running medicine. But sometimes all this extra stuff just keeps bogging us down,” he touches the brim of his baseball hat, pushing it down and then up, “I could tell Peach was having a hard time. Couldn’t stay focused out there in the sky. His mind kept drifting. Probably still thinking about that fight with Drex.”

Cut to a scene of Peach looking forlorn as he is piloting.

Sammy’s confessional continues, “He hasn’t slept much over the last couple of weeks,” Sammy’s voice continues on, but the scene has cut to one of Peach napping in the cockpit, with his baseball hat down over his face, “I don’t know what to do to help him out. I don’t want the stress of it to take him down. We have to stay focused while these things are in the air.”

Cut to a scene of Peach, playing ping pong in the Talkeetna dirigible garage with Reggie, as Sammy looks on, eating sunflower seeds. Sammy’s voiceover, “we try and do stuff to keep his mind preoccupied, but it is always there, that knowledge that his house is broken, that he needs to find a way to make it right with his brother, and also to get his brother to understand the way things are. Who he is, what he stands for, how he is what he does.” On screen, Peach throws his hands up in celebration after a particularly spectacular slam, winning him the game.

With theme music, it fades back into the scene at Sky Captain, Sammy says to Peach, “aren’t these burgers just the best Peach? Aren’t they? So

juicy! So great!” He takes a big bite. Peach is just looking at his food now, watching condensation roll down his glass.

Cut to a scene of the condensation rolling down his glass.

“Yeah. The best,” he says and dips a French fry in ketchup.

DIRIGIBLES of DENALI

S:5, E:9

White Asparagus

multiple players

Peach, Denali City

The crew of the Koliak is sitting around in a break room drinking coffee and eating bagels, waiting to meet with two producers and a director about plans for closing out the season.

There has been no reconciliation, as the film crew spent the last few days shooting scenes of Drexel trying to apologize, bringing flowers and pizza to Peach’s place, knocking on the door, putting his cupped ear to it, leering into the keyhole, getting nowhere. They spliced all of the failed attempts together into a bunch of scenes played fast-forward with Benny Hill-like music. Stop-motion coffin chase too.

Mandy Gage, a director for the show, has convinced Peach to read one of his poems for the next episode, in lieu of continuing the brotherly ennui storyline—a way to leave an open wound in the show, that they can feed, a sourdough starter.

Peach writes sparse and dramatic free verse usually employing comic book characters as metaphors. Most of it is atrocious, but Peach has the soul of a poet and always finds the time to write poetry while docking for the weekends in Denali City, where his apartment is and when

the show follows the Koliak crew around collecting b-roll and confessionals. Reggie and Sammy will be going to a couple of the large holiday craft shows in Denali City, where the food truck scene is legendary. “Sammy and Reggie’s Epicurean Adventures”, mixes with Sam walking his dog, Reggie reading on his couch under a mannered, but still quite erotic painting set outside somewhere. Shots of them eating Tom Kah and the infamous Blue Dogs, which are locally sourced blue corn dogs grown at Seward’s Success outside and bright yellow curry hot dogs, colored with turmeric and lemon peel, inside. Reggie likes to describe the food they are eating in a manner very similar to culinary travel shows, which serves as comic relief on *Dirigibles*. Sammy just nods and purses his lips in agreement, whatever Reggie says. Sometimes offering a yep.

“This is the world famous blue corndog of Alaska. There is a nice crunch on it, that blue corn exploding with fresh action flavor. Perfectly paired with the spicy, savory dog nestled right there in the middle of all that sweetness, that lemon peel shining through at the end. I’m going to dip it in both the ketchup and the mustard, bring everyone



to the party. Kind of like us, huh Sammy”
“Yep.”
In the break room, Mandy is holding a stack of paper, covered in red ink notes, “I want to use the White Asparagus poem Peach. It’s prefect,” putting her perfectly combed hair behind her left ear.
“Why can’t we use the one about Deadpool, I like that one!” Peach offers.
“No. White Asparagus. I got an idea. Gonna be good, don’t want to make right with Drex, fine by me. We can just employ the auteur.” She of course is speaking of herself. Her poetry montages go viral every time they air, “plus we have used Deadpool as a poetic tool too many times already, the licensing fees are killing us. White Asparagus. Fox is sick of us breaking the fourth wall with that nightmare anyways.”
“Fuckin’ fine. But I ain’t reading that shit in my undies back at the apartment. We do it here.”
“But it is always so much better when we see the poet in his natural habitat.” Mandy knows how to coax a performance out of Peach.
“Here.”
“Fine, but you are going to read it as a voice over while we shoot you writing it on the toilet. We are going to go total Jarmusch on this one.”
“The apartment is fine.”
“No. I like this new idea better.”
“Awe fuck.”

Episode Nine, “White Asparagus”
Mandy is laughing while setting up a scene in the men’s room at Purdy Skies, trying to get the bathroom lighting just right, making sure everything is rugged without being gross. “Ready Peach?”
“Why the hell not? You know this one is about how much I love my mother, right?”
“We all know you love your Momma Peach,” Mandy says.
Amos adds, “never been a better son than you Peach!”
“You people are twisted. Let’s just do this shit, then I can go home and watch anything but this shitshow on TV.”
A deep breath and it goes from color to sepia.
The regular scene change, white letters,

black background turning into an establishing shot of the Denali City’s skyline in winter, the words “A Poem by Peach” appear. Seconds later, “White Asparagus” fades in underneath.
Shot of Peach looking in the bathroom mirror, like he is having a dialogue with himself, pausing to look at little items left about the bathroom. An interpretive performance, a dance without music, looking for who he used to be in the reflection of a face that he knows is his, but he doesn’t recognize anymore. Tongue out, looking deep into his stare. Après vous. Like watching a silent movie, “Euereka!” He has an idea. Pointer finger, raised at the ceiling, voice over begins:

A baby universe
Experienced periodically
In the moments
I was home sick

Scenes of the brothers as young kids taken from home movies, mixed with cellphone video shot by Reggie of the two brothers bowling, giving each other high-fives, playing Cloudberry on an old Xbox in the break room, watching Dark Star for the thousandth time. The show’s background music in a somber and slow remix; Peach’s voice over nowhere near his regular accent, a separate personality for reading his poems, more maudlin and epic, almost Jim Morrison. The words of the poem are being spelled out in real time over the montage, as he reads them.

And you watched me
And made sure I ate
Grilled cheese sandwiches
With three pickle chips
And Pringles Cheese-ums

The two brothers are walking in a dirigible airport, in a domed city, pointing at things and laughing. Dogs chasing Frisbees, scenes of blimps, snowy Alaskan landscapes, long shots of domed cities, ice fields, glaciers. An unkindness of ravens bouncing around with each other, square dancing. Peach taking a breath and continuing, words appearing on the screen:

There were soap operas
From the Brown Lands

And weird game shows
And people talking about
“Forgiveness” and
“Who is the father?”

Shots of the brothers eating a Thanksgiving meal with their mother back at her home in Seward—out on a halibut charter, reeling in a big one; slow motion as they are bringing it onboard, bonking, slicing its gills, fish blood flavoring the broth, shoving the fish into the flip box underfoot to finish bleeding out and expire alone in the dark, their screams of joy silent as the voice over continues.

I watched you from under that
Flayed quilt, stained with ketchup

Drex laughing with Peach’s crew, breaking into a touching moment, hugging their mother goodbye after Thanksgiving. Exaggerated body language, hand movements making it obvious how full they are, how good it was. Slow pan out of Drex in a bar, drinking alone. Kids out tricking-or-treating in Denali City’s Winter Wonderland district; people waving at each other. One a fairy princess, the other: Count Dracula. A previously unused scene shot months earlier of Peach at home in his underwear reading poetry, pacing around his apartment. No sounds but background music, getting softer, Peach continuing:

My skin the color
Of never being outside
Made perfect by God
And glorified in the dark

Peach on a toilet in the men’s room at Purdy Skies reading from his little moleskine notebook, pen in hand, in his mouth, a silent movie star speaking dialogue into the void. Working up to the big finish. Blurred home footage, a female form, laughing children, kids on trampolines, a trailer park, people standing around, an old man cutting a look, eventually grinning. Another intake of breath, Peach pauses.

Me, your little

Shot of Drex picking up a girl at the bar,

arm around her as they leave. Two blimps flying away from each other over Denali City, midnight sun, sandhill cranes. Stop-motion time-lapse of white asparagus growing under black tarp, subtly suggestive the way they writhe, mushrooms growing on a tree stump, sped up. Shot of Peach, in the Purdy Skies men’s room, reaching for the toilet paper, and finding none, silent movie speaking for a little help, into the sky.

White asparagus

Episode Fifteen, “Fur Rendezvous”
Peach is pointing with a dry erase marker at Reggie, who is stuffing Planters Cheez Balls into his mouth, “we are goin’ to fuckin’ win the race this year Reg. I can feel it.” He turns and starts writing things on the board behind him, brainstorming for the special “Great Blimp Race” episode Nat Geo throws together every year during **Fur Rendezvous**.
“We are never going to beat the Nelvana. Those women are straight up nerds,” Sam informs them, “plus they have the power of science on their side.”
For the annual Great Blimp Race episode, the show becomes a reality style treasure hunt across Alaska, with stops throughout the state. The three Purdy Skies airships on the show (the Nelvana, the Koliak and the Tanero) as well as a guest airship from a rival dirigible airline are the racers. This year, the guest racer is the Yaw Dog crew from Petrel Air Services. There are going to be five stops: Denali City, Seward’s Success, Point Hope, Arctic City, and ending in the Redoubt City (also known as KBD, or the Kachemak Bay Dome on the Aleutian Range side of K-Bay). The blimp race from season two was the one that introduced the crew of the Koliak to *Dirigibles of Denali*, and the fans loved how dysfunctional and weird they were, leading Nat Geo to eventually bring them on the show full time.
“That is not the right attitude Sam. Defeat is not a guarantee. Plus, though they may be smart, we got more heart!” Peach is hamming it a little for the show and as a personal favor to Toots.
The crew of the Nelvana is more than twice as large as the Koliak, and every crewmember has

an advanced degree: three biologists, two physi-cists, an engineer, a climatologist and an astron-omer. They have a highly competitive internship program with the University of Alaska. The Nelvana is faster, more efficient and tests better with television audiences. The crew is better looking, funnier and more interesting on screen. The Nelvana and its crew are really the reason *Dirigibles of Denali* is even a show on National Geographic channel at all. In fact, the original name for the show was Nelvana of the Northern Lights, but Nat Geo couldn't secure the right, so changed it. They run scientific missions for Purdy Skies, mostly nanomapping and climate reconstitution, and compromise the company's research and develop-ment group. Their airship was designed in collab-oration with engineers from Kodiak Space. They always win the annual Great Blimp Race.

"This year, the race begins in Denali City," as Peach draws a snow globe shape on the board, in its approximate location on a crudely drawn map of the state of Alaska.

"Now, we don't know what other cities we will have to stop in. It will probably involve An-chorage and Seward's Success, possibly Fairbanks and Arctic City too."

"You think we are going to have to do the dome on Savoonga this year again Peach?" Sam asks.

"Probably the Pribilof Islands too, I would guess. Definitely Dome at the Top of the World though."

This is one of the scripted conversations, composed by writers for the show in collaboration with producers, then staged on the show as if it is totally natural, 'reality acting'. Cut to scenes from Fur Rondy, people walking around with crazy taxi-dermy hats, running of the reindeer, blanket toss-es, dog sled teams moving through the city streets, waving at on-lookers.

Shot of the northern lights for a few sec-onds, fading into the red stars of brake lights on the backsides of hundreds of cars driving into An-chorage from the Valley at dusk, sea otter breath turning to steam in an icy bay, while they chew on a shell, pawing it masterfully.

Kaolin Andre, the pilot of the Nelvana, in confessional talking about how they have been able to start a climate reconstitution initiative in south central Alaska, which has brought back

the preindustrial snow levels Alaska used to get, thus keeping the Iditarod Race's ceremonial start in downtown Anchorage, near the air tram to Seward's Success. The Nelvana, and its crew, are international heroes and superstars.

"It has also just started to really help with glacial retreat, keeping the cryosphere permanent, staying a dynamic and protective element of our natural environment," Kaolin says into the cam-era, scratching her arm just high enough so her ice worm tattoo shows through. Cuts a smile of ac-complishment to herself.

The Nelvana has been helping set up a new GPS system with Kodiak Space and the Teslasphere Project with the United Nations. They are plan-ning on making the entire planet wi-fi accessible without problematizing the EMS or space weath-er, integrated with the biological world, "salmon fisheries are important too. It is vital for us to be able to help maintain sustainable salmon harvests every year, especially the upriver kings. The Nelvana has helped restore numbers in the historical king salmon runs. The YK is doing much better today, I think about that every time we are flying over those rivers."

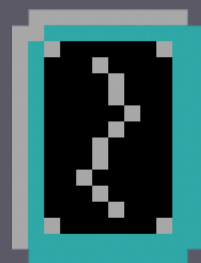
Almost every kid in Alaska has the official poster of the Nelvana crew, three of the women holding their young daughters on their shoul-ders, hung up in their rooms at home or lockers at school. There is no official poster for the Ko-liak crew. The "A Poem by Peach" meme is quite popular online though. Some people see the epi-sodes since the Koliak have joined the show to be a dumbing down of the series, "going from digital to steam powered seemingly overnight," as one critic put it.

"Indicative of the this new era, a dying breath of the baby boomer generation, both po-litically and economically. And not just in the media arts, but everywhere, attempting to spread an infestation of mediocrity permanently. A new standard low, ensuring that anything the least bit culturally viable would be made ultimately un-available to anyone else after they are dead," an-other noted.

"A blithe in the golden age of television."

"Why I went back to **Ancient Aliens** on the History Channel and cried when I realized it had been cancelled."

SEWARD'S Success





Fox Fire

vivian faith prescott

High above the earth, high above the Alaskan domed city, 90 million miles away, a solar flare...

People watched Ada build fires. People watched her cut the flesh off a reindeer hind quarter. People watch her stuff grass in her boots. She was used to it. The flames from the small outdoor fire caught the small sticks, and then the larger wood on fire. Soon she would have enough heat to cook a small stew for lunch.

Ada raised her head. Someone stood off to the side of the moving pathway that led around the inner dome of Habitat. The blue light of late morning shaded him in shadows. This was not the first time she’d seen him observing her. Over the last six months she’d seen him about a dozen times. She usually ignored the observers. But she recognized the purple parka. Purple was not usually a color seen in New Seward. The pathway around the inner dome had been adjusted now to winter. It would stay that way to give the Domers a good sense of winter. People who walked this way were bundled up and their breath plumed behind them, then up and out in the filter systems so as not to condensate the outer dome.

The smoke fire swirled around her, the wafts settling on her reindeer parka. She paused: Imagine the solar wind, charged particles flowing like a river past the Earth.

Outside, though, in the real outside, it was much colder. Too cold. Sometimes, though, it was hot. Too hot, in fact. And then there was the rainy season, when the flooding came. Never just right. Extremes. But in New Seward the weather was whatever the CEA, the Community for Ecological Advancement decided. And they liked seasons.

If Ada wanted to she could get up and wander over across the small snowy field, past the reindeer pawing

through the snow, to stand face to face with whoever was watching her. She’d thought of that, but she hadn’t done it. She was much too aware that she was hyper aware and this caused her a lot of anxiety. And lately, it seemed that something she sensed, but yet didn’t have a name for, was entering the atmosphere in the Habitat.

Momma they’re watching me. She recalled her first awareness; that she was not alone, but existed in the Reindeer Habitat for others. They were one of the most popular human Habitats. She was seven years old before she realized that everyone else did not live like this: observed. There were four other Sámi families switching on and off, living weeks at a time in the Habitat domes. One dome for each Habitat. There were various Alaska Native Habitats: several Athabascan Habitats, an Inupiaq Habitat, and others. There was a Pioneer Habitat too. The Habitats were located at various parts of the city that was once called Seward’s Success, and now called New Seward. About 50,000 people lived in the climate controlled city, originally founded 150 years ago and linked by hovers, dirigible type crafts, to Anchorage.

Ada stood up from the fire and pretended to walk toward the deer, and when she passed it she stroked its head. The deer looked up at her, its eyes now winter blue, reflecting the northern lights, her mother had told her. Like your eyes, too, Ada.

The inner dome and the wall of the outer dome distorted the person standing there; the morning sunlight surrounded him with a full-bodied aura. New Seward was originally not a domed city, but after dramatic environmental collapse, extreme climate changes, floods, droughts, the large dome was constructed over Seward’s Success with smaller domes beneath it. The new domed city was renamed New Seward. It was only two miles northeast of

Anchorage’s old Government Hill area, but it might as well have been hundreds of unwalkable miles.

Ada slid slightly on the packed snow, and righted herself. Her mother’s storyteller voice whispered in her head:

Fox ran along the snow just like foxes like to do when he slid into a snowbank.

Her shoe ribbons loosed on her right boot, and one red ribbon hung down onto the snow. She quickly tied it, wrapping it around tighter. When she looked up the stranger was gone. She sighed. There was an empty space there, and a sense of emptiness around her. And then at once the dome closed in on her, her breath caught in her throat and she turned to run back to the tent. Her children would be finishing their schoolwork.

Her three children had known the same sense of captivity. Their eldest daughter, Lotta, had already left home; her husband Paul was still reeling, still trying to figure out how to send for her in Anchorage, how to cut her off from any help she might ask for to survive outside the dome. He had plans for his children: They were to love the Lord, reject worldliness, and continue living their lives and their children’s lives in the Habitat. Nice and orderly and observed. Every year their health was studied measured prodded, poked, taken. They were especially curious of her babies. Especially since there wasn’t a Sámi male for her to marry from the other families at the time. And where would they find a Sámi? Maybe there were Sámi living in Anchorage or the few villages in Alaska. The CEA was already in everyone’s business all the time, dictating who to marry and when. Their dating service was a joke. Most people did what they wanted. Some people were asked to leave the dome, though.

The solar wind is deflected by the Earth’s magnetic field.

Ada’s parents had raised her with many traditional ways of old shamanistic traditions with a mix of Christianity and Buddhism. Her parents still worked a shorter weekly shift in the Habitat. Sometimes the CEA still coordinated their shifts together. Her parents were very open people which was why they didn’t object to Paul and her marrying. But shortly after they married, Paul converted to a radical Christian sect, the Center of Christ, that’d begun taking over New Seward’s committees, placing themselves as policy makers and board presidents. Paul’s need to be in control and his obsession with worldliness made her chest ache and red welts cover her arms.

They’d been married for almost twenty years now. And for fifteen of those years she had planned Lotta’s departure, saving up portions of her own Habitat salary, finding Lotta a place to live in Anchorage. Over the years, a couple of friends and her Auntie Marta had left New Seward and its strict rules: One child. One color. One committee. One religion. The Committee for Reproductive Services encouraged the Habitat families to have more than one child, though, because new human babies always drew

paid observers in and it meant they’d likely be willing to be under contract into their adulthood. They had their ways of convincing.

The fox’s tail swished against the hard snow and the snow particles flew up into the air catching the starlight.

Ada walked to toward the dome, moving her hand along one side. The observers didn’t know there were several emergency doors placed in the dome’s wall. Ada found the thin frame and then the latch and pushed. The air from the mechanism whoosed and the door opened. She reached down to placing small rock to keep the door ajar. She walked about fifty feet to the place where the stranger had stood. At her feet perfect polished stones were arranged to form the word Hello and beside it the shape of a sun with a few wobbly rays. Ada stood looking over the. She started to sweat. Her leggings itched. She wiggled her toes in her moccasins. She brought her hand up to her face and wiped her forehead. Out here they must have decided to dial in summer. She cocked her head. The sun looked like the ones painted on the drum in the corner of the **lavvu**. People of the Sun. She unzipped her parka. She thought of the old remedy for unreciprocated love, how you should secretly give a small amount of blood, skin or sweat to a person to eat to make them fall in love. Her mother had a small book with many of the old folk remedies in it. She was about to walk away when she noticed a line of stones a bit farther from the sun, appeared to be in the shape of an arrow. It pointed to a small bouquet, a handful really, of forget-me-nots, Alaska’s state flower. She knew. He wanted to meet her in the Forget-Me-Not Park.

Ada made her way back inside the dome again, her parka slung on her arm. Her bright blue tunic contrasted against white snow. Ada stood in the field, taking deep breaths now. She heard Paul approach her. “Ready to go. Shift’s over. Emil and Julia are packed up and the Henriksen’s are here.”

After a lifetime, she easily adjusted to this cloistered life back into the glass apartment and back to the Habitat again. But she wanted to live outside the dome. She’d heard stories of Anchorage. No cameras, no climate controls. No glass. No Paul. And lots of choices.

She turned her head and smiled at him. “Yes, sure.” She knew how to pretend that everything he said and did was important, that he was right. Last month he’d caught her telling stories to her other children Emil and Julia about the aurora borealis, how in some of the old countries that don’t even exist anymore, the aurora represented spirits of children, dancing animal spirits, an omen of war, spirits playing games, and dwarfs burning fires in the North. Her people painted the aurora symbols on drums, as the Northern lights are diviners with the power to solve conflicts. There was one on her drum.

She carried the drum home in a reindeer skin sack, lagging way behind, walking on the stone path beside the sidewalk. She liked the way the stones massaged her feet through her skin boots. Julia, nearly 14 didn’t seem to want to be seen with them, staying a few paces behind. Paul

moved forward on the moving walk in front of her, 12 year old Emil walking beside him.

She’d met Paul at the annual meeting CEA meeting and banquet. At the meeting salaries and hours were negotiated. He was a young intern, working for the CEA. Maybe he thought she’d be an easy captive. She was, really. She was so in love, the feeling was so intense. She was 18. He was her first boyfriend. It was only lately, watching Lotta go through her late teen years that she realized how stupid she’d been.

The disturbances on the sun cause a disruption between the solar wind and the earth’s magnetic field.

Ada nodded a hello at a few passersby. The newcomers, not used to seeing people dressed in furs, and bright primary colors. If you were public servant you wore a simple navy colored shirt and slacks. Doctors wore a lighter shade of blue. Restaurant workers wore white. Everyone had a color and it was only one color, a contrast to our vivid red, blue, yellow, green tunics with rickrack. Our lineage from generation back to generation back and back and back to Norway.

Ada hurried to catch up with Paul and Emil. After they were married and she’d gone to church with him, the small church on the far end of the dome, she didn’t ask what they believed in. They are Christians, they said. She’d spent her whole life in a Habitat, so what did she know about what was what. Her parents taught her the science of fire, and told her to listen for the underground people. Her father had his own **noiade drum** and they’d use it to predict the future. He’d handed her some money last week and said it was just because. He knew.

At their apartment, reindeer skins and tunics and boots and warm hats and mittens were unpacked and neatly tucked into a cubby in the hallway. The light on camera over the doorway was yellow, which meant that no one was observing them. The newest observation protocol was to observe the Sámi family while they were off shift. They’d agreed. Paul agreed, rather. It promised a promotion if he was cooperative. And he had nothing to hide. There was the quiet room, though, which was camera free as was the bathroom and bedrooms. Ada and her children spent most of her time in the quiet room. She had long been fantasizing about the unobserved life she could have. Her savings was slowly gaining and she pretended to mourn Lotta’s leaving. The frosty snow sparked and whirled and twirled and became the northern lights.

Ada, Paul, and her children would have two weeks off now. The children were homeschooled of course. Paul had claimed any kind of public school influence during their two weeks in the apartments would not be of the Lord. Science is of the devil, he’d claim. Science will lead you away from the Lord. It’s all just theories. Lately he’d admonished her parents about teaching them traditional beliefs. He’d told the kids, in front of them, that their ancestors were not walking the northern lights. They didn’t have to fear talking out loud when the lights were dancing over the dome.

Never say anything bad about the northern lights.

After dinner Ada told Paul she was going to the night market. Paul looked up from his book “Take Julia with you.” Ada clenched her teeth. She didn’t need to be observed by her teenager. Paul didn’t trust her she supposed. “Okay, we’re going to stay for the Aurora after they dim the sun.”

Paul didn’t say no. He could though. She was supposed to ask to do something like shopping. Sometimes he did exercise his right, the one their church said he had. The man is the head of the household he’d remind her.

Everything was recorded and filmed. Cameras were first hidden but then people wanted to know. They wanted information. The citizens could tap into most any camera at any time and watch. Ada knew people had watched her sleep in the zoo. Everyone else had privacy in their homes. Their habitat’s camera did not film everything. The bathroom in the Reindeer Habitat was behind a simulated old cache, you could disappear as if you were going to get dried berries.

The northern lights are the eyes of our ancestors, always watching us.

It was a short walk to the Forget-me-Not Park and as usual Ada walked. She wasn’t really going to the market of course. The CEA usually stocked their apartment with enough supplies for the first two days of adjustment back home. Julia took the walkway. “Meet me at the totem in one hour before they dim the sun. I don’t want to lose you.” Julie flapped her hand in a limp wave.

At the park, Ada found a small wood bench. Two elderly woman at a nearby small table stared at her. Ada tried not to make eye contact. She did not want to engage in a conversation. Strangers were so used to her it was as if no one thought they were a stranger to me. She often pretended she knew them when in fact she did not. But they had observed her holding her first baby. They had witnessed their sacred naming ritual. They had observed her first attempt at breastfeeding.

Around the sidewalk moved beyond the green, the hum of air and a few birds flitted here and there. The totem pole stood tall, casting the evening shadow across the tables in the park. Ada sensed his presence walking down toward her before he even sat down. She looked up from her book. She was dressed in the same shade of green as she was. The woman was muscular, tall, with light brown skin, her dark hair cut short. Her eyes were as green as her shirt. Ada’s breath caught in her throat. Her face heated up. Hello, the woman said, “I’m Giselle.”

For several days the solar wind had been streaming away from the sun, surging toward her at one million miles per hour.

Giselle sat down beside her, leaving a foot or more of space. Ada was used to space and boundaries, glass and plastic.

“I work at Habitat,” she said, lifting the green fabric on the thigh between her fingers. “Hence the green.” She laughed. She tapped her finger toward her. “I like you in furs better.”

Ada was caught off guard and laughed out loud too. “I haven’t seen you there before. Well, I mean I’ve seen you there lots but...”

Ada laughed. “I was expecting...I saw you there.” “I get that a lot,” Giselle said. “I think it’s my shoes.” She kicked out her feet. They were the same issue as everyone else in New Seward: Black.

Giselle leaned back against the bench and stretched her long legs out. “I live in Anchorage. I come and go.”

Ada was silent. Was she studying me? As if Giselle read her mind. “Oh, not you. I’m not studying you. I’m an arcologist. I study architecture and ecology.”

“Oh, good. I thought you wanted to take a blood sample or something,” Ada quipped.

“I imagine you get enough of that. I work for what’s left of the city, trying to make it more habitable. The last exodus was about twenty years ago. Left us with a little more population than you Domers. Sometimes we slang it to Dumbers. No offence. It’s endearing. We wonder why you even live here.”

“We wonder why you live there.” The sunlight dimmed noticeably and the night bird’s songs began. Giselle looked up at the dome’s ceiling. Ada followed her gaze. Nothing seemed to be happening, but yet everything was.

Electrons encountered oxygen and nitrogen atoms. “Can you stay for the Aurora,” Ada asked.

“Sure. Where’s the best place to watch?” “Everywhere. It’s a hologram. The whole dome sky fills with it. It’s quite beautiful.”

Giselle Stood up. “In Anchorage a bunch of us go out into a field, there used to be a bunch of buildings there and now we even set up concession tents and chairs and blankets. Sometimes its too cold to go though. But it’s awesome. Kids running around clapping their hands and screaming.

“We don’t scream. Or clap.” “Come on,” Giselle said. She held her hand out to Ada. Ada took it and stood up. Ada was short stature, but tall for a Sámi, really. Giselle was tall. Ada had the sudden urge to lean into Giselle, to rest her head against her chest. She hadn’t felt that sensation since she was 18. But she was 38 now. And she’d never felt that urge with a woman before.

Ada pointed to the teenager sitting with her back against the totem, earbuds in her ear listening to music. “She’s with me.”

Giselle laughed. “Bring her. Let’s go before they turn down the sun, as you Sewardians say.”

Julia led them past the first section of glass apartment, past a bookstore and coffee shop, to a small school. The green perfect lawn spread out with shadows darkening even further by the minute. A few small Sitka Spruce and a few alder were scattered across the lawn. There were about forty people already siting here and there on the lawn

and on the playground equipment. As they walked across the field the sundown tune played and the sky darkened. Ada stopped. Giselle grabbed her hand. Julia bumped into them.

There is energy in the collision and chaos. “Geeze it’s dark,” Julia whispered. Their eyes adjusted as the small streetlamps beyond the parking area slowly lit.

They sat down on the grassy turf near one of the smaller spruce trees. Giselle leaned against it and Ada bent her knees tucking her arms around them. Julia walked away from them to a patch of shadows and laid down spread out beneath the dark sky. The sky’s stars started to twinkle. A shooting star streaked across the dome.

“What’s Anchorage like?” “You’ve never been. No.”

“Really, well it’s got seasons. Three of them. Winter and Summer. Hot, hot summers and cold cold winters. And about 75,000 people. Roads are crappy. We don’t have all this foo-foo stuff like you guys do.”

“Foo-foo” “Yeah, an old term my grandmother used to use. It means...ah, fancy.” “Oh.”

Giselle nodded her head sideways, and then patted the ground next to her. “It’s getting chilly.”

Ada had sensed it too; the temperature dropped a few degrees with the nightfall to a perfect evening temperature. He ancestors had probably observed the lights in 20 below zero and even colder. Ada scooted over toward the tree and leaned against it.

Giselle reached for her hand and kept talking. “Like you have moving sidewalks. We have lots and lots of hover cars. Honking, noise things that are usually breaking down. So I walk and dodge hovers. Most people live in the city center where the resources are. Similar to Domers.” Electrons transfer energy to the atmosphere, exciting atom and molecules to higher energy states.

Ada wiggled her fingers against Giselle’s. If Ada raised their enclosed hands in the air she might feel the electrons, swish them across the sky with their hands.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” Giselle said, lowering her voice.

Ada stared up at the starry dome. Another comet streaked across. “I hardly think your life is similar to mine.” As soon as she said those words she imagined herself sitting beside Emil and Julia, riding the hover across the old broken highway, across the deadfall, the dried inlet toward Anchorage. And not wanting to look behind her, but daring to do so, wonder at what she was witnessing.

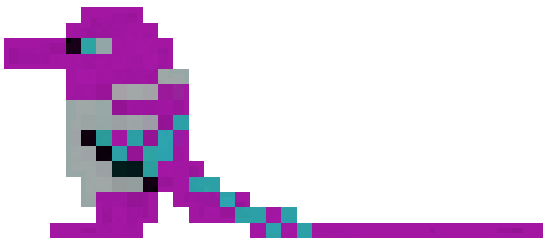
“That’s true,” Giselle said. “Well, we do get the ozone zap and the brown water and the stinky toilets. But we have good food. Best Tai food ever. Best pizza. Best library. Our library is the size of a small town. It’s contained in three buildings.”

Ada loved books. One of the best things about living in the Reindeer Habitat was living with less technology; or rather the technology was hidden. “Our libraries are small. With limited space, we use screens. Easier to get a book



A Few Notes Concerning Alaskan Death Metal

(seven things you didn't know about alaskan death metal)



hannah faster

DEVIL'S horns and noses in the air lekkies, we are discussing **Alaskan Death Metal**. I know, I know—quelle surprise, I write about it all the time; but this one might actually be my literal treatise on the subject. Plus, it will be das brutal, promise. To get in the mood, I suggest, the third track on the **Dumpster Ravens** first studio album, *Slight Beast in Cyberia*, “Dorset Fingerprints on the Motherboard Find Love”. Cue it up, blast that mad, trembling audio aspic for a moment, breath with it. Roll your eyes as her voice erupts from a whispering hiss. Switch off the soft convulsions in your elbow as she grunts. Wiggle your fingers. Remember your best friend in middle school saying, “Comprehending the lyr-

ics is like learning to read graffiti.” Wait for the lip balm effervesced spit from right behind your front teeth to hit the back of your throat, ooze into the primordial acidscape of your alimentary canal, then zombie crawl back up and you can't speak anymore except in harmonic growls. I'm waiting...ready? Here we go.

I: Almost every lead singer is female and they all incorporate the death growl.

II: Of the 20 or so well-known Alaskan Death Metal bands, 16 of them sing the bulk of their songs in an Indigenous language, the most popu-

lar being Yup'ik, Tlingit, Gwich'in, and Iñupiaq. The **Dumpster Ravens** lead singer, Xiole Belle Cupun, grew up in Kotzebue and Arctic City speaking Iñupiaq. She sings mostly in her native tongue, but will also sing in Yup'ik or Haida. She particularly likes singing in Haida because it doesn't sound like any other language and produces a truly unique effect when done with the proper death growl. She does not speak Haida or Yup'ik fluently, just incorporates some of the words, phrasings, stories and structures that she picked up from being around others. A lot of the kids are doing it.

III: The mega-diverse death metal culture in the urban areas (Anchorage, Mat-Success, The Kenai Corridor, Arctic City, Fairbanks, Denali City, etc.) has taken a keen interest in obscure artistic practices from around the world and from many different time periods, which they fuse together with their contemporary Alaskan identities, creating some wonderfully unique forms. Most of the obscure artistic practices the youth are interested in incorporate some aspect of a retro-classical anti-aesthetic: noises, irrationality, found things, nonsense, and an obsession with the undead.

One of the bands, **Battle for Everything**, combines elements of the 20th century revolutionary group the Situationist International with traditional, pre-contact Unangan war armor. They occupied an uninhabited island near Adak as a social protest and broadcast themselves playing around a campfire in full regalia. They create band personas based on a fusion of legendary figures from Northwestern storytelling traditions and revolutionary figures from the past. Their lead singer goes by Sedna Goldman (half mother of the sea mammals and half Emma Goldman, anarchist). Other members include Tootootch Guevera, Blackskin X, Salmonboy the Uprising and Bear Mother Jones.

The band **Kinnikinnik** is fronted by Hmong woman named Su Ler, whose stage name is Bim Bom Bam. To pronounce her name correctly, you have to say it really fast, almost missing some of the consonants. They blend radical politics from around the world, folktales of cultures dispossessed from their homelands and a special hybrid of street noise, hip hop and old school

shoegaze grindcore. Their latest album ‘Resistance Feet’ is highly regarded for its innovative combination of yodeling and the recreated stories of the Hmong crossing the Mekong to Alaska.

IV: They are not using the term ‘death metal’ out of context or disingenuously. They are sincerely interested in the sound structure and expressive potential of death metal's atonality, rapid key changes, rhythm, tremolo and tempo. The singers are using vocalizations to get at deep, subconscious, untapped forms of humanity, some of the first singers in the sub-genre where activists artistically tackling serious women's issues in Alaska, which at the time had one of the highest rates of sexual abuse in the United States.

The sound itself, evolved out of a case of artistic empowerment for the community, adding a uniquely female tone to a musical genre that has almost exclusively been a male dominated sound from its inception, not to mention completely negating some of the white nationalist parts of death metal's Scandinavian roots. The local flooding of the field by female vocalists has also fostered an inclusive nature taken from so many other cultures and formats. Many of the bands get accused of cultural appropriation by special interest groups and dome archivists, who are not seeing the simple genius of this music – most bands respond to accusations of cultural appropriation with the sharpest of all the conjunctions, “and?”

It can't go unsaid that they are also really into loud, distortion-laden heavy metal because it just plain rules. The reason they are using such an old structure of music making (we are talking about classic death metal, pre-rebirth here) is they see it as one of the more authentic pan-arctic or sub-arctic art forms, with its expansive sub-genres all over Greenland, Sámpí, Iceland, Siberia and Canada, even if it is from many, many generations ago, before the internet even.

V: They treat the death growl like a classical singing style synonymous with operatic singing, but mostly they see it as an extension of the traditional Inuit throat singing technique, which is sometimes called Inuk throat singing, or locally, the Tikahtnu growl even though Inuk throat sing-

ing is not a well-confirmed Athabascan cultural tradition. People argue.

Inuit throat singing is called many different things regionally, but it probably originated in what we call Nunavut today. It is a highly creative and improvisational musical style of singing that can be both voiced and unvoiced, incorporating sounds from a myriad of sources, and it is performed by women. It can be a competitive duet or a singing game, seeing who can outlast the other in the will to sing. Sometimes the women hold arms and dance as they competitively sing in patterns and tones, imitating then outdoing each other. Sometimes they will make animal-nature noises, or explore large emotional tones and forms in the continuous stream of vocal sounds.

In some places the women would sing so close to each others' faces that they would be using the other's lips and mouth cavities as a vocal resonators, amplifying and modulating their songs.

One of the origin stories is that Inuit throat singing came about as a game that women would play while the men were out whaling. There is no real consensus on that, but it is definitely a female vocal form, no doubt about it. Sometimes it comes across like a fun singing game. Sometimes it has a very sexual feel to the performances or vocalizations. Sometimes, when it is performed by a vocalist singing alone, it can be emotionally dynamic and full of speech patterns or the sounds of people trying to communicate with each other. In civilized Alaskan death metal circles, Inuk throat singing is regarded as one of the most original and important art forms ever created by the denizens of the north.

Alaskan death metal bands will often feature two female lead singers, and it is not uncommon for lead singers to break into minutes long throat singing breakdowns. The singing style is called the Tikahtnu growl, but dome archivists refer to it as the death whispers or curdling, some people give it the term yakkeling and treat it like an Internet meme, with rigid, ludicrous structures. The lead singers Tisha Provetchka and Saline Chulyin of the band **Panderworld** will break into a beat-boxing throat singing competitive duet several times during a set.

There are a couple bands that have incorporated the use of European classical instrumentation as well. Nip Sarcophagus of the band **Extra**

Lives of the Epicmiut plays the contrabassoon on most tracks. Nip Sarcophagus is a lifelong Alaskan, whose ancestors came to Alaska from South Sudan during the civil war of the early 21st century. **Extra Lives of the Epicmiut** moved to Portland and then to Seattle trying to get a record deal, and are one of the more successful Alaskan death metal bands (some say because they are one of the few that has a white male for a lead singer, B4 Man, but most kids are quick to point out that he was born a female and considers himself Denisovan, so it isn't that much of a thing). ELoTEM still travel back to Anchorage every summer and record tracks with local bands, catch fish and pick wild berries. They are one of seven Alaskan death metal bands to have toured Europe.

VI:

One of the most prevalent lyrical topics are the reconstructed or deconstructed stories from the circumpolar north. They are especially fond of the scary stories. Some of Xiolle Belle Cupun's favorite stories are the Haida tales of boogeymen with coal for hands, the people who turn into sea monsters at night and ghost stories associated with the hairy men or the kushtakas.

VII:

The silkscreened images of logos for Alaskan death metal bands has become part and parcel with the city. They are everywhere, and it would be freaking the old folks and official harbingers of dome culture out more, if their approach were not so historically adept. It is hard to be angry with a punk kid for having beaded eyebrow rings and a gross image on their t-shirt if they are referencing Kristeva and Baba while discussing the finer points of traditional craft in the Creative Commons and the interplanetary media ecology in reference to indigenous representation. When realizing this, some old folks have simply held their hands aloft in the devil horns, wishing the children of Anchorage peaceful journeys and much festive rocking, to which most of the kids would of course gag.

Most of the locus of Alaskan death metal is in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Anchorage, Spenard. For many years after its founding by the lumberman Joe Spenard, it had been a bustling town in its own right, especially when Anchorage was just a squalid little tent city down on Ship

Creek. It is a wonder that the city, when it finally amalgamated, chose the name Anchorage over Spenard. They even voted to name it Alaska City, but alas it was too late, the Post Office had already named it the Knik Anchorage, and we have been doomed to live with the moniker ever since. More and more bands however are starting to spring up in Mountain View and the other north Anchorage neighborhoods where the air tram to Seward's Success originates.

There are a few clubs in Spenard that host death metal wakes, as they are called (an odd nod to Athabascan bluegrass and the old Irish in Alaska): The Spenard Recreational Death Metal Center (housed in an old abandoned strip club), The Back Pain Specialists (they kept the previous name and sign of the business that went under at the building they bought) and Potlatch Projects (a homier death metal experience in an anarchist flop-house where the price of entry is a homemade dish to share). There is also one in Ship Creek called Quonset Ninety in one of the old Quonset huts down on the river. It is for the well-to-do metalhead and features a smoothie bar with fresh, organic produce grown in Seward's Success, with unhealthy sounding beverage names like unbri-dled ogre breath (featuring fresh garlic and kale) or blood ground conspiracy (with beets and varietal grape purees).

'Blood Ground Conspiracy' became the name of an album by the **Dumpster Ravens** three years after the beverage gained the mysterious aura of an urban legend involving a mining supply company, human organ trafficking and police complicity in the home death of a state official.

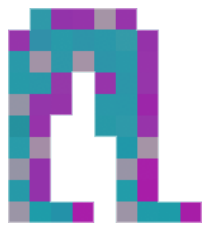
The Alaskan death metal kids can usually be seen about town in big pants that have an excessive assortment of buckles, straps and zippers. They will also wear stylish and tasteful gaspeqs in the traditional manner, with floral patterns and solid trim. Xiolle Belle Cupun is known to wear very beautiful gaspeqs on stage – a picture of her wearing the one her mother gave her as a birthday present at the Girdwood Forest Fair last year made the cover of the international rock publication, Witching Ours, doing a special issue on Alaskan death metal.

The lead guitarist for **Dumpster Ravens** had popularized the birch bark hats from the Inside Passage, in the Anchorage scene a few short

years ago. **Dumpster Ravens** fans have been dutifully wearing the style ever since, regardless of its cultural misappropriation. Many kids will also wear the bent wood hats and incorporate beadwork into their leather jackets, usually elaborate and intricate floral patterns, with dangling beads and brightly colored porcupine quills. Some of the young ladies into the death metal scene will spend months beading the perfect winter outerwear, with the frolicking ornate beadwork that moves in plastic waves around their bodies. Some of the kids have taken to integrating ubiquitous computing into the beadwork, using smart beads that levitate or magnetize, or record data or house LED displays. Those little huckleberry tau computers are everywhere anyways.

The traditional beaded look on a leather jacket with the old school cut out punk t-shirt design safety pinned to it is the most popular by far though. One would have to go to a wake in Spenard to catch a glimpse of a kid in skull print gaspeg wearing a birch bark hat with an integrated open-source sound system, or some hardcore gutter punk wearing smart snow goggles at night. The metal kids wearing clothes with beautiful Dena'ina style forget-me-not patterns that can be seen in any convenience store or mall across Anchorage are the face of the scene to the rest of the city, but that sub-genre of the tech savvy kids is starting to peak through, and pretty soon the dome will know this too, so be sure to catch the **Dumpster Ravens** this Friday night in the Camperdown District, then Sunday at the Denali City Lights Performing Arts Center with special guests **Camp Robbers, Kuhchashga** and **Bone Eating Snot Flower**. Be sure to hit me up on Gaiastan for the Lil' Lambda, and let me know what you think you think, blehk-ugh-kaugghh!

Hannah Faster is a life-long Alaskan, journalist and radio personality who splits her time between Denali City and Seward's Success. She can be found at Hairy Beast or any given coffee shop from Metlakatla to Utqiagvik.

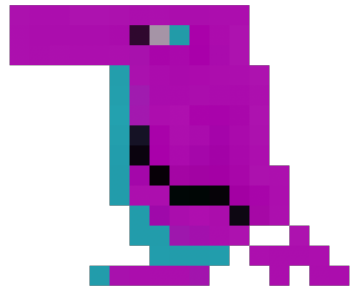


Ravenade

nathan shafer

Carbonated plumes of off-brand Denali Dew escape every time her mother opens the door to say it's time for church. Church. On Wednesday night, even though Kaolin is in the middle of her favorite level in the best videogame in the distinguishable multiverse, Cloudberry: Helm of Awe, the main character of which Kaolin has a semi-secret tattoo of on her upper right arm, which she thinks her mother knows nothing about. It's about the size of her open hand, a stylized Cyberingian rendition of the superheroine Cloudberry, wearing her famous dirigible parka and holding up a quantum fish slime 256 crystal in a victorious thrust, like some fur girdled beefcake on the covers of dusty old fantasy novels. You can almost hear the sounds of magical arrows unquivering and screaming through the rolling hills of some berry-filled tundra just looking at it. A green helm of awe stave is tattooed directly above Cloudberry's navel, visible through a curiously strategic opening in the parka. Tattoo of a tattoo inside a tattoo, the 'pataphysical nature of which is not lost on Kaolin, who is waiting for her 18th birthday this winter, when she will

have finished the afterschool classes necessary for enough credits to graduate high school a semester early, before breaking the news to her mother, who is still going to freak out. But she will get over it. Probably. Maybe. Kaolin will be 18. There is a lot of aesthetic complexity in the tattoo. Currently however, videogame Cloudberry is traveling through a small, northern Icelandic village trying to find a villager willing to let her make necropants out of the lower half of their body after they die. The only problem is that the time continuum has been disrupted, so whenever she approaches a villager to ask them, it is impossible to tell if they are going to be from an era okay with the notion of necropants, but you can usually tell by the kind of clothes the villagers are sporting. Funny thing is that whatever villager eventually agrees to it, no matter what the year is in the game, it is always some hard-swallowing scalawag who doesn't blink much and thinks he is going to come out on top in the deal. "No matter how many coins appear in a dead man's scrotum, it is not enough to weather the wear," her Auntie Tilly would tell



her, "that is why they never got popular. That and they are super gross."

As it so happens, a version of printed spandex necropants is quite fashionable at the moment with a certain sub-set of kids in Seward's Success and Anchorage. There is even a small coin purse there, for money, presumably in jest. Of course it had to be the version of the necropants from the 1980s, where everything is in 8-bit graphics, so it is damn near impossible to tell whether it is a grown man's lower portions or neo-Tolkien dwarves eating crackers in a shady meadow. Could be any number of things, and the kids squint really hard to see the unfathomable 'it'. Some even pretend they do, like Kaolin told her younger sisters, "it's more fun to choose to see it inventively, rather than intentionally." (There is a lot of time travel drama and pixel innuendo in the game.) Anvilicious's online description of the pants refers to it as an "interpretive necrotic codpiece with quantum coin feature". "Pardon me sir, but I was wondering if you would be willing to let me use the lower half of your skin to make necropants? At the time of your natural death of course."

To which the videogame villager says in a predetermined textbox, "No thanks, I have already promised my lower skins to another," each letter typing out in rhythm to the videogame's mix of medieval white noise and technical background music.

"Well thanks anyways!"

"Sure thing ma'am, good luck with your quest and look out for troll cats and milk rabbits north of the village, they say a thirsty old witch lives there still!"

"Kayo! Time for church kiddo!"

"Gah, I am coming!"

Hush and fumble, still playing the game while holding her breath and pushing the buttons a little softer.

"Well, thanks for the advice mister," humming something gruesome, she digs out a dress from the mound on the floor and pulls it over her t-shirt and jeans, "ready!"

In the family van, they drive by the north side of a dilapidated theme park on Knik-Goose Bay Road their church just acquired. At one time Ravenworld was a popular destination, where folks would play mini-golf and drink beers at each of the Arctic cultural pavilions stationed around a reconstruction of the North Pole in the middle. They say it drew as much foot traffic as the Alaska State Fair a couple

of towns over, back in the day. It has also been 9 months since Disney released Fog Woman, a controversial retelling of the classic Tlingit story, in a long chain of movies that were dead focused on rebirthing some cultural relevance into the struggling Disney canon. Truthfully, it wasn't the worst movie ever, and there were some really emotional moments, especially the songs, and they did cast mostly Tlingits to do the voice-overs, and a bunch of the dialogue was actually in Tlingit, but it was still a little too cute, and it wasn't Disney's story to tell, and there were issues with the incorporation of formline into the overall design of the movie. All of the talking animals were cool though, and every Alaskan secretly liked seeing them.

The family's church, Lady of the Terminal Moraine Amalgamated Fellowship, purchased the leftovers of Ravenworld, and surrounding grounds, hoping to cash in on the recent ravenade brought on by Fog Woman's popularity. Overgrowth and decades of winterkill have returned much of the park to forest: spruces and cottonwood have taken the walkways and fireweed, the lower signage. As the van roared past, Kaolin caught a glimpse of a group of bead-clad metalheads, standing in the parking lot, smoking pot and cigarettes, generally cavorting, as the 'no loitering' sign was lost somewhere in the thick fireweed. It was uncertain what the young people would have done if the sign had been visible, but it probably would have looked quite similar. That thought made Kaolin smile, as she brushed her black hair from her face, and gave a look to her little sister who gave it right back, making them both giggle. Kaolin's mother, Cassie, quietly mused to their father about what intentions the church may have with the theme park, their four daughters sitting in the backseats pretending not to eavesdrop. "Your father would flip out if he knew they bought it honey," they could hear him whisper back.

"Well..."

Their grandfather grew up in a tiny cabin without running water in the Mat-Su Valley during the Great Depression and was part of the conglomerate that built Ravenworld, back in the 1970s. Ravenworld was his idea.

That side of the family is not generally talked about, but when they are, it is with a dash of bourgeois pith and interstitial terror, like gossiping about people who might literally eat you, perhaps

wear you as a festive hat. For example: going back several generations, the family had a tradition of fourth names they used with each other, bestowed by the family’s Reindeer Seer during puberty in a blood and tongue ceremony. Kaolin’s grandfather took the agnomen of ‘Laser Tube’ at the advent of his pubescence, which was the same year he started wearing his signature dark green cloak and reindeer bone nose ring. From that moment in time, he preferred that everyone address him as Laser Tube. The tradition was said to have started in the early 1900s, when the Verde-Vert families first arrived in Alaska to trade furs, and eventually married their children off to the ‘entrepreneurial spirits of the forest’: two daughters to innovative business models from the land and the two sons in corporate mergers with air and water, respectively, as they say.

“He had to know that someone would eventually buy the damn place,” she continued. Apart from the muffled sounds of the youngest sister listening to ADM on her Walkman, the van had been silent for several minutes by the time they arrived at their church, located just past Point MacKenzie, a couple miles outside of the city limits of Seward’s Success, and everyone was there, including a couple congregants being interviewed by a local news crew. Word must have gotten out. “Well, it is hard to say what is going to come of the old place. It was a local treasure. When I was growing up, everyone loved it. I think we just want to see it brought back to its former glory.” He was dressed in his Wednesday-best and a little nervous about being on live television for the first time in his life.

“There you have it folks. Lady of the Terminal Moraine Amalgamated Fellowship has purchased the historic Ravenworld theme park, built during the construction of Seward’s Success back in the 1970s. We will have to wait and see what happens next. For KTVA Anchorage, this is Diana Wilson. Back to you Tim.”

Service that evening included kids singing the songs of Raffi, starting with an inspired arrangement of “Baby Beluga” and ending with a very thoughtful take on the lesser known “First Peoples” from his infamous Bananaphone album written in collaboration with Michael Creber. The main portion of the service was Minister Hartness telling a biblical story about the raven from Noah’s

Ark, which kept making Kaolin tilt her head sideways and sniff inquisitively. Everyone was blinking more than normal. In fact, there was enough perplexed simultaneous blinking in the congregation that it made butterfly sounds, which reverberated like a whispering dial tone.

“We all know the story of Noah’s Ark, right? You see it had been 40 days and 40 nights, since the flood had enveloped the world. It was not yet the 40 days and 40 nights we all remember from the normal Christian story, but 40 days and 40 nights, like the day before, in a more Talmudic tradition. So, there were creatures on the ark, creatures that were not following God’s commandment about not fornicating while on the ark, because of space, I believe, or something like that, you know. Back then the animals could talk too. Did you know that? The animals were regularly talking with Noah and his family. That is probably how they got them on the ark, just asked them, right? Anyways, God said there should ‘be not procreation’ on the ark. That would all come after. If animals were reproducing on the ark, eventually it would be overrun, you see. Well, the ravens were just such a pair who continued this sin of attempting to reproduce while aboard the ark. There were the clean animals and the impure ones. And not following God’s law, that’s a big no-no.”

This got the congregation laughing.

He continued, “As punishment, God told Noah to send the male raven out to look for dry land, at the end of the 40 days. After a week, the raven had not returned. Just flying in circles, or something. The next day, Noah sent out a dove, and the dove came back with an olive branch, and we all know that story too. That’s the 40 days and 40 nights. Well, you folks see, to my thinking, this is when raven went traveling, when he came to the Pacific Northwest and became the trickster, the Haida say he opened the giant clam and let them out, Tlingits say he turned on the lights, lots of stories from lots of different traditions, he stole the sun, and made the rivers, and rose the land. When he drank the seawater and vomited it back out, stuff like that. It is all part of one long tradition. Right? All the time frames line up for this. Raven got in his adventures around the same time as the great flood...”

Minister Hartness’s story went on for a while like that, with more increasingly bizarre connections made between all of the world’s storytelling tra-

ditions involving ravens. About how the Vikings were lead into the Faroe Islands by a magical raven. There were stories involving Odin’s two ravens (Huginn and Muninn), the Siberian Kutkh spirit, Celtic, Egyptian, German, Roman, Serbian, Australian, Hawaiian, and several more connections to ravens in all of the traditions of the Pacific Northwest: trickster, deity, good, bad, chaotic neutral, scavenger, forager, shit eater, consumer of death, ancient ancestor, whatever. It reminded Kaolin of the shape-shifting birds from the Cloudberry games. When Cloudberry is walking through villages, sometimes people turn into birds and fly away, and sometimes groups of ravens or magpies will turn into people and give you stuff or tell you to go places. Sometimes they will give you a whole bunch of cow parsnips and tell you they are young and edible, but it eventually drains your life force and causes skin rashes, stomach pains. Sometimes it is a five-course meal served in a fairy ring, with puffins roasting over a pit fire and sea otters blowing smoke rings into camp from the shore. Every once in a great while they lead to a portal to the secret town of Unkindness, Cyberingia, where all the townies are ravens standing on top of each other, wearing oversized parkas and pretending to be people. It changes every time one plays the game. There are a couple levels when ravens or magpies will travel with you and help you out with your quest by stealing stuff from other camps or acting as an interpreter for you to various creatures in the wilderness. You have to use magpies to get through some levels, where items are totally out of reach or off screen.

Wednesday service is a potluck night at Lady of the Terminal Moraine. After services, the congregation gathered in the basement, setting up tables with food and drinks. Kaolin’s family had brought roasted chicken and green beans, which the two middle girls took to the basement before the start of services. Now, the four of them are hanging out at one of the back tables, with some of the other girls their age, mostly out-of-sight because of the stacks of extra chairs and retractable wall dividers being crunched up on the wall next to them. Kaolin is showing some of the girls her new tattoo, regaling them with a made-up tale of how she got it. It was really her cousin’s friend who did it, because she was building a portfolio to take with her to Portland, but Kaolin told the other girls that she

had gone to that crazy tattoo parlor in Seward’s Success, near Metamucil Podesta Field and the Nordvisk Partnership Limited, with the cubist-style Jetsons statue out front. The one where it looks like it is on fire and underwater at the same time, and every one of their eyes does that deep space hologram thing. There were many oohs and ahs.

“What does the 256 mean?” one girl with pigtails asked Kaolin, pointing to the crystal Cloudberry was holding above her head.

“256, is the number of the Ancient Glitch. When items from ancient times reach a level of complexity big enough that they have 256 bits, or a byte, they glitch out and become crystals, or ingots. You collect them in the Chrono-Sink Interstices, buried in the living rock, or floating in the air, because they are unaffected by gravity. They are like the ingots of pure time that way.” Kaolin was explaining the videogame to kids who weren’t allowed to play it. Way too suggestive, and there is a lot of inappropriate stuff in there, like the necropants, which of course makes it all the more attractive to kids, who pretend to like it even if they don’t understand it.

The videogame incarnation of necropants first appeared as a hammerspace item called ‘dead man’s pants’ in Cheechako Wizard Suicide Runners, the racing/combat fishing game where ice wizards rally after work one fine summer day from Seward’s Success, so they can drive to the Kenai Peninsula to dipnet their limit of red salmon and then drive back home before work starts the next day. That activity is referred to as a ‘suicide run’ in the Anchorage Bowl. Cloudberry was one of the roadside characters the wizards had to battle in that game, but players really liked her and eventually they spun off a whole new game, but not before several Cheechako Wizard titles were developed. There was Cheechako Wizard Berry Quest, Cheechako Wizard Scry Fishing, Cheechako Wizard Halibut Charters and even Cheechako Wizard Werewolf Mushers.

Helm of Awe is the third in the Cloudberry game series. It started with Cloudberry: Bridge to Nowhere, a platform adventure game connected to the Cheechako Wizard games. Its sequel was Cloudberry in Cyberingia: Place of the Plural Objects, a role-playing/first-person goddess game, where players create entire civilizations on the expansive

pixelated ice fields of Cyberingia using a space elevator to haul extraterrestrial goods down to the planet surface and fight the corporate Cheechako Wizards, who are awaking after millions of years of frozen slumber beneath the great ice sheets of the circumpolar north. All of these games are wildly popular with kids in Alaska and every Alaskan shop in the state sells a wide-range of tchotchkes and clothing with imagery from these videogames on them. Kaolin has been working at the new Anvilicious store at the Camperdown Folly Mall in Seward's Success, where they sell all of the Cloudberry and Cheechako Wizard merchandise.

As adults would glance over or walk by, Kaolin would pull her sleeve down over the tattoo and all of the kids would pretend to be eating, and unambiguously talking about other things, trying not to laugh or appear too anxious. She can't keep this shit up. Best to fess up and come out of the closet as a total badass sooner, rather than later. People are starting to suspect it anyways.

"Do you think Stiye' and Stsucde are going to come back, now that they are rebuilding the park?" Halloy, the second oldest sister asked later that night when all the sisters were playing the original Cheechako Wizard Suicide Runners racing game together in the family game room, which seconds as their mother's beading room.

"Maybe," Yensis, the youngest says in a death growl, to which her older sister, Varve, curdles out a, "Nah," imitating the ADM singing technique based on the sounds ravens make during breakup. It is common for the girls to speak in ADM while they are playing videogames together.

"I don't know. That would be awesome though," Kaolin said in a regular voice, until she said 'though' which she growled most fearsomely.

Stiye' and Stsucde (Ahtna for Grandpa and Grandma) had been living down in Seattle for the last few years, and they only see them every other summer, or the occasional Christmas. Grandpa Laser Tube would always insist that they eat at the Princess Pizza Palace of Palmer, when they were in town, which the girls were not fond of at all. The last visit there ended quite dramatically during the employee birthday sing-a-long, where Kaolin screamed a profanity and Grandpa Laser Tube used his walking stick to curse all of the claw machines in a fifty-mile radius. There was also a small amount of nose blood that got on another patron's

pizza. Princess Pizza has not been mentioned in their home since.

Yensis, still in full growl, "I will not wear your paper crown. This house is haunted from the ceiling to the ground," lyrics from one of her favorite songs, Panderworld's 1995 release "Kingdom Hall of the Homunculus Witnesses" from their album Cold Yoga Bear.

In the videogame, Halloy's racer just ran over one of the shape-shifting birds not far outside of the Russian River pull-off, a magpie turning into Nevada Smith, one of the Cheechako Wizard Elders, transforming every sister's individual screens into super retro 2D green outline on black background. They have to keep racing in this environment for five minutes, as it counts down in the upper right corner, without crashing before it will revert back, so they all stop talking to concentrate for the next 300 seconds, as it is quite challenging. Crash once at you go all the way back to the start screen.

Not long after, the events of 9/11 in New York stifled the excitement of revitalizing Ravenworld for several months, going well into the next year, with church members relegating themselves to cleaning buildings and hauling out trash, always listening for news in the background. Newspaper, TV, radio. Take a break from it and go back. Think of other things. Every Sunday after church, a group of boys would dig out the holes in the snow and play some winter mini-golf.

The girls helped their mother plant some of the perennial flower gardens at Ravenworld the next spring and enjoyed watching the congregation eventually fix up the old rollercoasters with the help of a local engineering firm, putting retractable draped Teflon coverings over them, so that they could run all winter safely, just like they did with the architectural outfits in Denali City. Raven's Clam was her favorite ride, a sit down launch coaster in the shape of a clamshell with an articulate metal raven affixed to the roof, imitating the Haida story of Raven opening a humungous clamshell to bring humans into the world.

That fall, Koalin's sisters would come over to her loft in Seward's Success every Friday night to watch Firefly on television and play videogames until they fell asleep early the next morning. Some nights they didn't sleep, just dragged themselves back to their parents' house, crashing until dinner-time. Kaylee was everyone's favorite crewmember,

followed in close second by Zoe. They were devastated when Firefly was cancelled, and only slightly appeased when the unaired pilot and remaining episodes were finally played later that next year. Ravenworld reopened to the public the same summer that Serenity, the movie based on the show, was released. The family took their Stiye' and Stsucde to see it at the Matanuska Commons Theatre, near the Alaska Petroleum Center. Their grandfather screamed and chuckled at an embarrassingly loud volume through most of the movie, and literally spit popcorn out of his mouth at two points, which would make the reindeer bone nose ring he still wore produce a little wheezy rattling sound.

The grandparents had been back in the Valley since March to see the Iditarod and help out with the final touches before Ravenworld reopened. Mostly it involved their Stiye' walking around the park reminiscing and occasionally yelling pretend magic incantations in locations that he claimed had a dire need, due to supernatural disturbances, "Boomba bamba, icht bin leeto! This concession stand will now be safe from ghosts. You are most welcome!"

He mostly did this to get Gwennie and Kaolin laughing, as they were the only ones who found him funny. He would knowingly wink at them every time they did, relishing the attention.

Laser Tube insisted that his magical incantations be preserved in the form of placards around the park, with audio features, where visitors could hear the safety spells he cast for them when they pressed a button. Kaolin took it upon herself to make them. She even recorded her Stsucde chuckling and saying, "Anthony, you are so silly," on one of the more bizarre castings. Gwennie was the one person in the world who addressed him by his first name, rather than his fourth, and he never corrected her, just always kissed her cheek, and whispered something in her ear. Kaolin made several additional informational placards in the park outlining the cultural significances of the raven stories in the pavilions. Laser Tube really wanted to be the mascot for the park, and was constantly suggesting that they film him in full regalia for TV spots, "we can use some of that growler music you kids like Kayo! They are always wailing about ravens. You should go ask them to make a song for the park. Maybe we should start a band, I am very

good at screaming, and have natural rhythm." Kaolin would just laugh, but Laser Tube was dead serious, "I am serious kid. Foo-mackah xi ja za! That spell just made me a metal star! I will go get some back up dancers now. Where do we keep them?"

Barely able to speak through the belly laughs, Kaolin said, "Yukon Pavilion," but pointing at the Jotunheim Pavilion, a pavilion made in honor of the homeland of the mythological Arctic Giants.

"Aha! Correct! I needed to go exorcise door handles around that area of those pesky dark matter pigeons anyways. Get your camera, we are making another public service announcement!" as he extended her his elbow to help him walk to Jotunheim.

"Grandpa, what was your favorite ride in the park, back when you guys opened it?"

They could see her mother, Auntie Tilly and Grandma Gwennie at the Athabaskan Pavilion, working on the crafting area. The church had opted to not sell alcohol in every pavilion, the way it was in the 70s. There was a tented off beer garden in the Scandinavian sector. Rather than just one Alaskan pavilion, like it was in the original Ravenworld, they broke Alaska down into its major Indigenous groups, who each got their own pavilion. Every one a living museum of cultural objects and stories. Alaska Native craft persons were going to be able to sell work at the co-ops there.

"Well, I like that pavilion Kayo!" as he pointed at his wife and daughters, "The Athabaskan Pavilion! Grandma Gwennie is Ahtna, and so are Tilly and Cassie, your mother and auntie, and so are you! And I like you wonderful women the best. I also like Norway, because that is where my people originally came from. And we Norwegians are pretty good at magic, obviously," hugging Kaolin a bit, then kissing the top of her head, "now, lets go send those damn dark matter pigeons back to the nightmare lands from whence they came!"

"That's nice, but I was talking about the rides! What was your favorite ride?"

"Oh. I see," he put his eyes in the air thinking, "I liked the air gondola. We called it the Magpie Brothers Air Service. It was a big loop around the whole park. You guys didn't rebuild it. Air gondolas are my favorite ride."

"We should have!"

"I know. I can still imagine it is there though. Truth

be told, it was kind of scary, and creaked a lot, and not in a good way.”

The sisters worked tickets, at the rollercoasters that summer, riding them every chance they got. They all agreed that designing rollercoasters for a living would be the best job in the world; Halloy and Varve even began designing some of their own together, pretending that they were part of the Ravenworld experience.

Lady of the Terminal Moraine never went with the idea of using Laser Tube as a mascot for the park, but Kaolin did help him make a couple of videos that they ended up putting on a new video-sharing website called YouTube in 2006. It was mostly him casting pretend spells and walking around the park talking about what was there, what used to be there, the differences between them, good and bad. He was a bit of an underground Internet phenomenon that way. The videos were hilarious to the early YouTube audience, especially the ones where random park visitors would get moderately freaked out with his performances. The one with the most views was shot on a very snowy winter night, the northern lights visible in the sky. Laser Tube was asking a small group of people to hold hands around a bubbling cauldron, having each of them recite a portion of a spell, while doing something very much like break dancing as he put various portions of root vegetables in the cauldron, giving specific measurements as he did. They used crude special effects cartoons to imitate magic smoke every time he added ingredients. It also had semi-humorous captions, like it was a cooking show.

Lines from this spell were used in a single that Björk recorded with the Dumpster Ravens the next year for an indie movie about a boy and his goat who get lost at sea. Mentions of these spells appeared in a few other places as well, like the short-format Cloudberry anime, which was on Adult Swim at the time.

Soon after, it was announced that a Cloudberry game would be coming out with the release of the new Mengloth Incorporated Game System brought about to compete with the success of Wii. It was called Pantagruel (Mengloth’s 16-bit system was called Gargantua because it was really large and the opening sounds of the system when it was being turned on was a French Renaissance choir singing drinking songs from Rabelais’s nov-

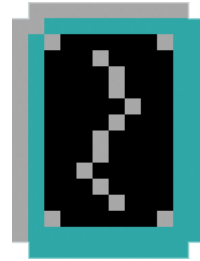
els, featuring the word ‘merde’ quite liberally. The Pantagruel system was a touch smaller, and had more features, like connecting to the Internet and playing CDs/DVDs). Rumor was that the game was going to be set in Ravenworld, with one of the characters based on the videos of her Grandfather pretending to put magic spells all over the park.

Kaolin and her family had been sworn to secrecy on the project. Developers from Mengloth had contacted representatives for the park several months earlier about the idea, and went through all of the proper channels to get the rights to depict Ravenworld. By then, Lady of the Terminal Moraine had transferred the day to day running of the park to Denaliwood Entertainment out of Denali City, who were the ones that got Mengloth into the idea of setting a Cloudberry game in the park, due in no small part to the immense popularity of Mengloth’s games in Alaska.

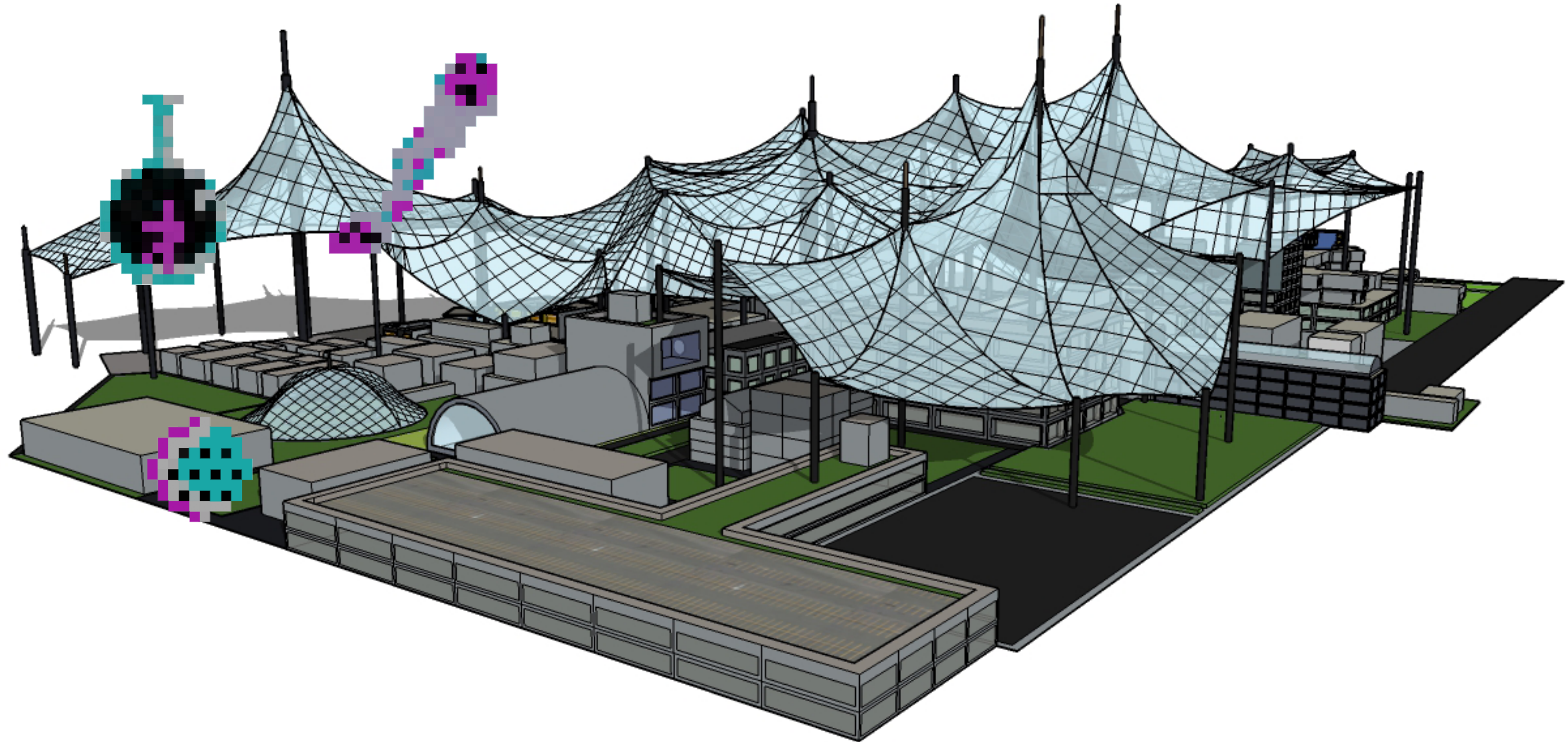
The game itself was called Cloudberry: Under the Ravenworld and featured a series of songs commissioned for it by actual Alaskan Death Metal bands like Battle For Everything and Extra Lives of the Epicmiut, who had written songs for Mengloth games before. Under the Ravenworld was based on the actual Ravenworld theme park, with a few artistic flourishes and magical embellishments peppering it here and there, including a pavilion for the fictional country Cloudberry comes from, Cyberingia. That pavilion is where the game begins. It is a first-person shooter game, with the exception that an undead apocalypse is underway due to a spell cast by time-traveling warlock who never wears clothes, and would appear completely naked out of the blue during gameplay to recite what could best be described as a mix between the poetry of Robert Service and the Black Speech from Lord of the Rings. This is the character based on Laser Tube, supposedly. (His name is ‘Lord Kevin the Uncanny’ in the game.) Their grandfather lived just long enough to see his granddaughters play it, laughing with approval every time Lord Kevin the Uncanny would appear, reciting a version of “The Ballad of Sam McGee” in Orkish, “that is just like in real life. Just like what I sound like. Perfect!”

With throngs of undead tourists circumambulating Ravenworld, Cloudberry collects dirigible pilot bread, chocolate lilies and fireweed, while going about her quest to find all of the lost ingots of pure time, by entering doorways at each of the Arctic

pavilions acting as enchanted portals to a series of multiple realities that would change the fundamental laws of nature in the park when the level was completed and Cloudberry reemerged with the lost ingots, the goal is to bring Ravenworld back to the way it was. Keeping in line with the controversial and vulgar nature of the games, Cloudberry has the option to use an oosik (walrus baculum) to bash in brains. She can also craft necropants out of undead bottoms if she was able to speak to the person before they turned, which is part of the whole time-travel shtick in the game. (The undead assume she is one of them while she dons zombified necropants and ignore her.) Raven is a chaotic neutral character in gameplay, perpetuating ridiculous tricks on any and every character, including letting himself get eaten by the undead horde, only to come out of the other end of their collective digestive tracts and reassemble himself, declaring that that was the best ride in his theme park.



DENALI City



Pack Mind

lucas rowley

Derek looked out over the expanse of frosted tundra, attempting to warm his hands with a cigarette and ignoring the beeping alarm that signaled ‘no smoking.’ The thin Plexiglas window did little to insulate the cabin of the old automated airship. He was surprised the thing still flew. It reminded him of a giant marshmallow with a small saucer strapped to it’s bottom half.

“Approaching destination sir, landing in three minutes.” He ignored the cracked, faded voice of the console and put his gloves back on and eyed his gear, crushing the cigarette on the deck and eliciting a warning beep.

The green landscape was painted with fiery red and orange hues the leaves of berry bushes and shrubs announced that winter was near. Jagged mountains arose from seemingly flat ground thousands of feet in the air, and in-between them was a giant marshland peppered with small lakes. Here the tundra gave way to the color of straw due to the dry, dead vegetation. The sunlight peaked over the Eastern range, attempting to slowly warm the valley.

The airship touched down on the once soft tundra with a clumsy ‘thunk,’ and Derek winced at the pain in his knees.

“Tangle Lakes Camp sir. Please connect the recharging coupling so I can take off shortly.”

He exited the creaking plywood door and dragged his wet-bags and rifle scabbard onto the hard mossy muskeg, also helping himself to two

drone packs.

“Those drones are for this airships navigation and emergency procedures sir.”

“Keeping them. I may need them.”

The silence made Derek chuckle. He guessed the automaton didn’t feel like arguing and declined any more comments before gently lifting back off after the coupling was removed.

Derek attached the bags to one of the parked wheelers and with some effort started the old gas engine. Five minutes later he was at Smitty’s shack.

The old Sourdough was waiting at the door, a beer in his hand and a smirk on his face.

“Ha! Derek Larson. Denali City’s finest.”

“Smitty.”

The deep lines in the leathery face of the grey haired man formed into a large grin as he grabbed each of Derek’s bags and hoisted them with ease, walking into the cabin. The mans red mustache was lined with grey, and his old sourdough hat gave him a comical appearance, like a cowboy hat turned sideways and smashed.

The strong smell of bacon hit Derek first as he entered the small wooden structure. In two apoposing corners was a wood stove and an oil heater, and between the two they kept the cabin warm like a relaxing sauna. An icebox sat in another corner and tools, food and clothing were strewn around the enclosure. A table, desk and small benches were placed around the walls, all matching in the



weathered plywood. A blinking computer console sat on the desk, it’s hardrive making struggling sounds, in contrast to the dingy environment.

Smitty walked to the woodstove and flipped the bacon, spattering grease all around with an eruption of smoke from the hot surface. He picked a kettle off the stove and poured two cups of lethal looking black coffee into the old ceramic mugs on the table.

“So how’d they get you this time? Deputize you as a wildlife trooper?”

“Nope,” Derek said. “I’ve got a contract with Fish and Game.”

“Jesus. The State must really be desperate.”

“You know why I’m here, Smitty.”

Smitty paused before pouring two shots of a pale, stale looking substance that Derek guessed was whiskey into a pair of dingy glasses. Smitty downed the liquid before speaking.

“So, you’re here to hunt some dogs, are you?” Smitty asked with a slight hiss in his voice.

“I hear there’s trouble with the predators here,” Derek said. “I’m good with predators. What can you tell me?”

“Not much,” Smitty said. “Just a couple stories from some homesteaders. Said that the wolves are getting all weird and smart. Picking the herd off one by one.”

“What about the tribe?” Derek asked.

“What about them?” Smitty said. “They’ve got enough problems of their own just trying to manage the State and the Feds. Their not talking to anyone. They’ll probably be happy for the help, though. Specially considering you’re kin and all. That why they send you? A token injun?”

“Watch it Smitty.” Derek glared at the old man who gave an apologetic smile and shrugged. “Where’s the hotspot?”

“All the trouble is down in the Archeological District,” Smitty said.

“Well that’s where I’m going then,” Derek said, wincing as he downed the shot. Definitely not whiskey.

“Not alone you’re not,” Smitty said.

The men both quietly loaded their frame packs with supplies and loaded their weapons. Derek shook his head at Smitty who brandished his ancient World War II rifle and pistol with pride.

“You need to get some new guns Smitty.”

“These will be around long after I’m gone, Derek, and you know it.”

The men each strapped a frame pack onto their respective ATV racks and put the rifles in the large plastic scabbards attached to the sides of the vehicles.

“You think it’s going to snow this week?” Derek asked, sliding a leg over the seat to mount the machine.

“Shit, I don’t know,” Derek said. “Could be any day now. Could be three weeks.”

Each man hit the ignition switches and the vehicles reluctantly sputtered to life. They took off straight West, on what was once known as the great Denali Highway.

Derek cursed the rocky, overgrown path as his ATV hobbled over it, then thought again and curse the airships. With the popularity of airship travel and the ability to access more rural land, the State no longer wanted to maintain the highway, and let the pot-holes grow along with the brush, and the bridges wash out. What should have taken 10 minutes took almost an hour as they wound around the pitted rocky landscape and walked the vehicles through creek crossings.

The archeological district was an ancient hunting ground. Caribou had trampled through the mountains and valleys for ten thousand years, shaping every gully and crevice. Even the dirt smelled of caribou. It was permeating. The site of the series of valleys on the south side of the once-highway brought back warm and ancient memories. Derek had hunted here since the age of ten, and his ancestors had for who knows how many millennia.

They stopped at the last valley entrance before reaching McClaren summit, a mountain that slowly rose in height to dwarf it’s companions, and ended the small range. Both men were very familiar with every landmark of the thirty square-mile area. The first thing they noticed was the tribal ATV parked at the entrance.

“Looks like we’ll have company,” Derek said.

Smitty grunted and they wasted no time throwing on their packs and slinging their rifles. Derek strapped a gleaming stainless Ruger Redhawk to his chest in a weathered leather holster, extra 44 mag shells inserted bandito style along the straps. Smitty had a side holster with an old

beat up Government 1911 45.

They set down the old game trail, and Derek sighed with relief that the ground was cold and solid enough that they weren't sloshing through swamp. They heard the first gunshot ten minutes into the hike.

"Shit," Derek said, picking up his pace to a trot. Smitty struggled to keep up. They followed the trail through the valley then up the Western slope until it evened out into brushy badlands. They glassed the fields with their binoculars, and it didn't take long for them to find their man. He was a half mile away, hunkered down behind a jutting piece of rocky earth, surrounded by shrubs.

"Who the hell is he shooting at?" Smitty spat a large wad of chew onto the ground. The pair made their way slowly towards the man. Crouching and rifles at the ready, stopping every ten yards to wave at him in hopes to catch his attention. Their trepidation was understandable, as every few minutes the man would fire his rifle in a new direction at an invisible adversary, all around him.

By the time they were four hundred yards away the man spotted them. He stopped shooting and frantically waved them to come closer. They edged cautiously closer until they met him under the overhang, staying low at his request. Both men set their rifles down.

The man wore a Dine' Tribal cop uniform, crusted with mud and blood. As was his dark face and long hair. His eyes were wild with fear and it made Derek's hair stand on end.

"Jesus Christ Bernard, what are you doing?" Derek said, inspecting the man's bleeding head.

"What does it look like," he said gritting his teeth, "I'm trying to survive."

"What are you talking about?" Smitty asked. "Who are you shooting at?"

As if to answer his question and object came flying from their left and smashed into the side of Smitty's head, chipping apart and dropping the man to the ground. Derek looked down at Smitty unbelieving before drawing his revolver from the chest holster and firing in the direction of the object. It had been a rock. Someone had threw a rock and knocked Smitty out with it.

"What the fuck is this!" Derek said between

shots. He squeezed six quick ones out in a spread then ducked low to the other men as he reloaded. He couldn't see anyone around them, they must have been hiding behind the clumps of bushes spaced everywhere in the mountainous plain. "Bernard! What the hell is going on? Who's out there?"

The middle aged man paused to catch his breath. He looked to be at the edge of sanity.

"Some kind of monkey-wolves."

"What?"

"You heard me," Derek's old friend said. "Some kind of freak wolves. Like their mixed with monkeys. They can pick up rocks and throw them. Talk to each other. And still rip your face off with their teeth and claws."

"That doesn't make any sense," Derek said, scanning the brush with his Ruger at the ready. "It must be some poachers or something-" Another rock came from their two-o'clock, narrowly missing Derek's chest and smashing into the earth next to him. He saw movement from the direction it came from in the brush and he fired off another series of rounds, eliciting a screech from whoever or whatever he hit. He ducked back down, reloading the pistol.

"I'm telling you," Derek said, "It's a fucking monkey-wolf." He fired off another round from his rifle, making the ringing worse in Derek's ears. Smitty sputtered and came too, sitting up and grabbing his head with a curse. He didn't waste any time in grabbing his pistol and firing in the direction that Derek was.

"What is this?" Smitty yelled.

"He says wolves are throwing rocks at us," Derek said.

"The hell?"

"I'm going to stop this right now," Derek said, dropping his pistol and grabbing for his large, stainless steel rifle. It was a custom 300 Win Mag, fitted with a large, ugly looking box magazine and extra rounds stuck into pockets along the stock and sling. On top of it sat a large long distance scope. Flicking the safety off Derek pointed the rifle in the area of movement and scanned with the glass. His eyes widened and his throat clenched.

A clear picture was framed in the round picture. A grey, hairy beast with an elongated head of a wolf and what appeared to be on a bipedal body. Snarling at him with hate, and appearing to gesture to-

wards companions.

His hunter's instincts kicked in and without a thought he squeezed the trigger on the large magnum rifle and watched the bonded bullet blow a large hole in the chest of the monstrosity and drop it. A split second later he had another round racked in the chamber and was scanning for another target. It didn't present a clear picture through the bushes but he knew something was there. Another deafening shot range out and the howling cries that rose from the bush confirmed he hit his target. He did it nine more times until the magazine was empty and they thought to hear the adversaries retreating.

"You alright?" Derek asked Smitty as he popped the magazine out to reload.

"Forget about me," Smitty said. "Look at Bernard. He's worse off than me."

"We have to get back to the ATV's," Bernard said. "The VHF is there."

"Did you bring a radio Smitty?" Derek asked.

"Of course not. And neither did you."

"Shit," Derek said. "We can't go through the valley, it's too thick. They'd eat us for lunch. We're going to have to pop over this ridge and go down. Think you can make it Bernard?"

"I'll make it," Bernard said. "Let's just go."

The ascent up to the ridge began directly behind them towards the North, and the two men helped Bernard up who was wincing with every hobbled step, before cautiously peering around the outcropping and heading upward.

There was no sign of the animals, but Derek swore he heard a howling snarl every few minutes. The higher they got Derek was hoping to see the creatures with the vantage, but they were obviously too smart and staying out of the open areas. Smitty pointed out one running towards their left several hundred yards down the face.

"They're trying to flank us, God damn it!"

It was only 600 yards to the top of the ridge, but with the uneven terrain and Derek's condition it took the men over an hour to reach it. The ridge was so wide they lost all visibility of either face. They stopped to catch their breath and take a few gulps of water from their canteens.

"We're still going to have to go through thick brush," Derek said. "Once we get to the bottom on the other side there's a good patch of it."

Derek pulled one of the drone packs out of his

frame pack. Within a minute he had the small quad-copter assembled and lifted it off with the remote control unit.

"I want to get another look at those things," Derek said. Smitty looked over his shoulder intently at the eight-inch screen being streamed from the drone.

It didn't take long for the quad-copter to find the animals, and they were surprisingly close, only five hundred yards from the men, spread out and moving around their prey. Derek was mesmerized with disbelief, thumbing the controls of the craft to zoom in on the beasts.

Crouching, running, and signing to each other they moved as a unit. When running, they went on all four appendages, otherwise they seemed to prefer standing upright in a crouching fashion.

"What the hell are they holding? Weapons?" Smitty asked, startled.

"It looks like it," Derek said. He eased the craft closer and brought the picture in on a few of the creatures. They were acutely aware of the drone, all heads upward and snarling at the craft.

He zoomed the image in on the creatures. They were all grey colored, though some had patches of brown and black. Some of them had the long wolf-like snouts, while some had shorter, ape like faces. All had grotesque fangs protruding from their mouths, and large claws jetting from the ends of their muscular appendages.

"Mother of God," Smitty said, fingering his old .45 pistol. "Who the hell created those things?"

"Our corporation," Bernard said. "Trying to get another military contract. It supposedly started out as a farmed fish project. I don't know how it turned into this. They escaped the facility back by Cantwell and came to this valley."

Derek squinted at the screen, slowly zooming in on the beasts. Some had rudimentary clothing and adornment. Cloth woven into their shaggy manes with beads or bits of shiny metal. They pointed towards the camera, signing and snarling to each other, with startling human-like expressions. The creatures began throwing objects, what appeared to be spears and clubs, and in a few seconds the feed was lost.

"We have to get off this mountain," Smitty said. "Yes," Derek said, "but then we lose the high ground. And they are already trying to flank us. We need to be careful."

“He’s not going to last much longer,” Smitty motioned to Bernard.

The man was dazed and didn’t appear to be fully coherent. Derek patted him down, inspecting the blood soaked injuries around his body.

“He’s not losing a whole lot of blood, but he’s pretty banged up. Probably has some internal damage. Let’s get him down there.”

The two men strapped their rifles to their day packs and had their pistols on the ready. They each grabbed an arm of the injured man and began the decent down the other side of the mountain.

Bernard winced and sometimes cried out with each step on the ever steepening slope. Derek wasn’t worried about alerting the creatures to their presence, he knew they could smell them or sense exactly where they were.

Every few minutes they would hear something or see a bush move and Smitty would loosen a shot off with his .45 in the direction of it. One time they got a howl of pain in return as Smitty found his mark.

“That will keep them from coming to close,” Smitty said.

“Yeah,” Derek said, “but we’re about to enter the brush.”

The men faced a line of thick, ten-foot high alders and willows, interlocked together but passible with the thin game trails weaved throughout creating a maze. The men were fortunate that the leaves had already fallen from the bushes, creating some visibility, however slight.

No longer able to walk side-by-side holding Bernard up, they walked in a straight line, with Derek in the lead, and the injured man’s arms around his shoulders for support. They would take a few steps then Derek would motion for them to stop, and they would listen.

“They’re all around us,” Smitty said. They could here the brush faintly move. “Probably thirty yards away.” The sounds came from all directions. How much ammo you got, Smitty?” Derek asked. “Enough to blow every one to kingdom come,” Smitty said. “I got six mags loaded and a few more boxes in the pack.”

“That’s more than I have,” Derek said. “Just send out one shot if you think you can hit one, otherwise save the ammo for a visual sighting.”

It didn’t take long for the animal’s to begin testing the men as they slowly made their way down

the slope. Smitty would fire a single shot when he heard something too close, and several times got a reaction of pain.

“I’ve probably wounded eight of them,” Smitty said, spitting on the ground as he helped stabilize Bernard from the back.

“You know what they say about a wounded animal in the brush,” Bernard said.

“We’re going to have to be careful,” Derek said.

The group came across an opening of shale, probably fifty yards square, and sat down in the middle to rest.

“I don’t know if I can make it,” Bernard said. They were passing around a twenty ounce bottle of water, greedily gulping it down.

“Man up Bernard,” Smitty said. “I got smacked pretty hard too. We’re getting out of here. All of us.”

The men were startled from the sound of gravel and brush being moved and a shriek rose out as one of the creatures tore from the foliage and sprinted at them on all fours.

Smitty had two shots with his pistol into the creature within a second. It slowed it down, but it kept coming, it’s muscles beneath it’s dirty, grey fur.

It was almost upon them when it dropped from the deafening blast of Derek’s larger, 44 magnum. The large hole had gone through the center of the creatures torso, blowing out it’s spine with a large exit hole. It lay at their feet, twitching.

An angry chorus of howls erupted from all around them. Smitty kicked over the body of the creature, gasping when he saw it’s matted, human-like face, frozen in a snarl.

Before he could comment a barrage of stones, sticks and crude spears rained down upon them. The barrage stopped after Derek sent several large slugs blasting towards the attackers, but not before Smitty got slammed in the shoulder with a spinning wooden club. He fell backward, cursing and gripping his injured shoulder.

“God Damn freaks of nature!” he said, sitting up and picking up his pistol with his good hand.

“How bad is it?” Derek asked.

“Shoulder was bad to begin with. I’ll make it through, but I’ll be feeling it in the morning.”

“Hate to hurt your feelings, buttercup,” Bernard said, “but we have to get moving.”

“Up yours Bernard. You’ll kick the bucket before I do.”

“That’s a hell of a way to talk to your one and only friend,” Derek said.

“I thought we were friends?”

“Were,” Derek said, “Is the operable word there.”

“I hate to break up your lover’s quarrel,” Bernard said, “but we’re going to be losing daylight by the time we get to the bottom of the hill and then Smitty’s cabin.”

Derek couldn’t see the bottom of the hill through the brush, but he knew they would have at least two hours of travel before they reached the 4wheelers, at the rate they were going. He sighed.

“Let’s go.”

It was slightly easier to walk downhill, except for the increased pressure on the knees. They men took solace in the fact that they could fill up their water bottles in the many small streams they encountered on the way.

The pack, as they called it, was constantly circling, waiting for an opportunity to pounce on the vulnerable crew. Two more times they rushed the group, flinging objects and snapping and swiping, only to be beaten down by a hail of bullets, which were diminishing in numbers. By the time they reached the bottom of the hill and could see the ATV’s in the distance the men were all exhausted. “One box of ammo left for the pistol,” Smitty muttered, fumbling as he loaded his magazines. “That’s only five mags.”

Derek looked through his ammo to find he only had several cylinders worth of 44 himself.

“We’ll be down to just the rifles soon,” he said.

“Fine with me,” Smitty said. “They pack more punch anyways.”

“I don’t think I can make it to the wheelers,” Bernard said, breathing heavy. “Leave me here with some guns and drive it over.”

“Not going to happen,” Smitty said.

“He’s right,” Derek said. “We have to stick together. They would pick you off alone.”

Bernard grunted in acknowledgment and the men put their packs back on. The stepped onto the old trail and were able to get on each side of the man, which helped.

With every step they took the light appeared to fade a little. As they were a few hundred yards from the ATV’s Smitty cried out.

“They’re trying to rip up our rides!”

Derek squinted and could see a group of figures around the vehicles. Whatever they were doing

could not be good.

The men quickly dropped their packs and got the rifles out. Derek could make out the creatures clearly in his scope. They were indeed attempted to damage the vehicles. Smart.

He steadied the rifle on the frame pack and squeezed a shot off. The round appeared to miss but it got their attention. The next one didn’t, laying out a creature flat on it’s back and the rest scattered into the brush on each side of the road.

The team tried to speed up their hobbled approach of the vehicles as fast as they could. They approached the scene to take in the damage.

The cargo boxes on both vehicles and been ripped open and contents strewn about. The animals had attempted to damage the vehicles themselves as well.

“They got the gas lines on these two,” Smitty said, “they’re toast. But just the ignition wires on that one. I can have it running soon.”

Derek focused on Bernards vehicle, digging around the compartment until he found what he was looking for. The marine VHF radio. He pulled it out and turned the dial on. Still had some charge.

“Cantwell Base, Cantwell Base. This is Derek Larson. Come in.” Nothing. He repeated the message.

“This is Cantwell. Derek, where is Bernard?”

“He’s here, but he’s hurt. We need an airship. Send one now. We’re ten miles west of Tangle. We will try and work our way to the cabin.”

Pause. “The ship’s headed the other way to the park. Should we call it in toward you?”

“You think?” Derek said. “Yes, we need it now. Tell the guys to come in with guns shooting.”

“Roger that.” Another pause while they contacted the airship. “Ship’s headed your way Derek. We’ve got guys on wheelers too. ETA is an hour and a half. Copy.”

“Copy.”

“An hour and a half,” Bernard said, panting. “I don’t know if I can hold out that long.”

“You can,” Derek said. “Smitty, what all did you have in these boxes?”

Smitty limped over to his ATV and began digging through what was left of the storage compartment.

“Let’s see, they took all my granola bars. My 22 woodsman and my little muzzleloader is missing.”

“What? You think they can figure out how to shoot that thing?”

“I don’t know,” Smitty said. “Still got a can of black powder though. There should be a little tannerite in there too.”

“Let me see that,” Derek said. “We can use that. Get working on the wheeler while I set this up.” Smitty began stripping and splicing wires while Derek began a process of compressing the powders into the can, then siphoning some gasoline out of the remaining ATV’s into a water bottle.

A shot rang off from the south, and Derek smiled, thinking that someone had arrived early to help. The smile vanished when he realized it was a creature shooting at them with Smitty’s 22.

“What the hell?” Smitty said, as they turned to the sound and drew their pistols. “Well, it’s got poor aim.”

Several shots hit the ground ten feet to the right of the party. Smitty and Derek didn’t wait for more and returned fire with their pistols into the brush where the shots came from.

Another shot rang out and Smitty cried out, holding his abdomen.

“They got me! I can’t believe it!” Smitty fell to his knees, dropping his pistol. Derek picked it up and fired with both pistols into the brush. When they were out he flung them down and grabbed Smitty’s old M1 and let a barrage out. The shooting stopped.

“Let me see,” Derek said, grabbing for Smitty.

“It’s just a 22,” Smitty said. “I’ll keep pressure on it, you work on what you were doing.”

Blood was trickling out of the wound in his stomach, and Smitty wouldn’t let Derek pull his hands off of it. Derek cursed and handed the rifle to Bernard and went back to taping the can and bottle together.

When he was done he pulled out the other drone from his pack.

“What the hell are you thinking,” Smitty said.

“You’ll see,” Derek said. He tied the makeshift bomb to the bottom of the drone and scrambled with the controls, starting the quad-copter.

The craft struggled for a second but managed to lift off.

“Now let’s see where you buggers are,” Derek said. It didn’t take long to find the main group of creatures with an eye in the sky.

“There you are,” Derek said, turning to Bernard.

“Can you fly one of these things?”

“Of course.”

Derek handed the controls to Bernard and grabbed his rifle.

“Slowly descend on them,” he said.

Bernard did, thumbing the sticks down gently and watching the creatures get larger on his small screen. Although members were scattered around, the largest group of the pack was sixty yards south of them in the bushes.

The creatures noticed the craft and immediately began flinging objects at it.

“Keep it going,” Derek said, stabilizing his rifle on the handlebars of the ATV and peering through the scope. “I need it right above the top of the bushes over them.”

Bernard nodded and continued to lower the craft. It was twenty feet from the ground, the camera closing in on the snarling beasts when the rock hit it. The copter tipped to the left and began falling. Derek knew he would have one second to make the shot.

The report of the rifle cracked and the can under the copter exploded, raining shrapnel and a fireball down on the group. Snarling and shrieking broke out.

“Yes!” Smitty called. “Take that you abominations.”

“We probably only took out a few,” Derek said, racking his bolt back and then forward again. “Sun’s going down, we need to set up our final defense. We’re not going to make it to the cabin.”

The men pushed the three small vehicles around them in a makeshift circle, and used the remaining gas to light a pile of brush on fire. The set their remaining ammunition in a small pile at their feet. There wasn’t much left.

His adrenalin was kicking so hard Derek didn’t remember much of the next hour. He just remembered shooting until they had no rounds left. And then the beasts slowly closed in, right as the last of the twilight attempted to extinguish itself.

“At least I won’t die in one of those bubbles,” Smitty said. They had him sitting on the ground, his back propped against a tire of a wheeler. “Breathing that artificial air and playing games on a computer or something.”

“No one’s going to die tonight,” Derek said.

Smitty pulled a knife from his boot. “Here,” he said. “It’s a bayonet for the M1. Attach it.”

Derek attached the bayonet and held it stiffly, watching the firelight shimmer and reflect of the

nearby bushes. The leader of the beasts stepped out of the darkness. It’s face a snarling mass of hate, looking down upon them.

“Hate you,” the beast snarled in barely intelligible English.

Derek prepared to charge out at it. He would die knowing he killed the leader, at least.

A light coming from the sky in the east startled all of them. It was a spotlight from an airship.

“Yippee!” Smitty said. “They snuck up on us with the lights out! Hot dog!”

The spotlight moved towards the creatures and the crack of semi auto rifle fire range out from above. They could here the creatures scattering away.

The ship landed and a handful of tribal police stepped out, continuing to fire their rifles into the darkness. They quickly helped load the men in the ship.

“He’s hurt, let’s get on our way and take care of that wound,” Derek said. He recognized most of the men.

As the ship floated West, Derek watched the fire between the ATV’s die out.

“I want to come back with all the men you have tomorrow,” he said. “We’re coming back and we’re killing every one.

The End

Elephants of Denali

leslie kimiko ward



If only we had stopped at one elephant. I mean, Annabelle had been a fluke, an eight-thousand-pound door prize from a toilet tissue marketing contest, one that grocer Jack Snyder could...no...should have refused. Shame on us and our smug complicity, tuning in to our evening telecasts, marveling with child-like wonder at Alaska’s first baby pachyderm. Who could blame us? Those floppy ears? Those wrinkled knees?

Had it not been for Sammy Seawell and her heated backyard horse stables, what would have happened to Jack’s elephant that first winter? I like to think we would have rallied together, found Annabelle a proper home, helped Jack raise money for her transport. (Speaking of which, how in in the world do you even ship an elephant?) Probably we’d have collectively done nothing useful and the poor thing would have died of exposure and maybe we would have talked about it for no more than two weeks, before work meetings, or at a cafe, or wherever it was we discussed such things as frivolous as elephants.

Alaska is no place for elephants. We know that now.

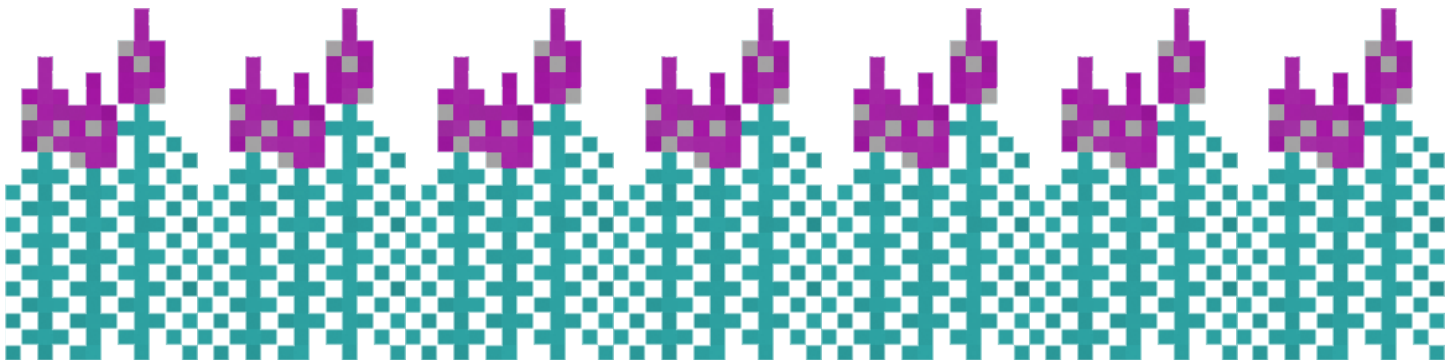
And so it happened that when Denali City announced the addition of a permanent, heated elephant enclosure inside its climate-controlled walls, we imagined this to be a very good thing. Denali City, that domed paradise of box stores, restaurants, a state-of-the-art tramway, a golf course, of course they were building room not

just for one, but two elephants. Finally, Annabelle could have a playmate. How terrible is it that it never even occurred to me elephants might get lonely?

I see now how easily I’d been distracted by a few news clips of playfully swishing elephant tails, of delightfully sparse elephant eyelashes. Forever with those lashes! I recognize how quickly I bought in to an elephant hard luck story, of Annabelle’s new companion, Maggie, whose family was killed in a government mandated culling. There was something so Disney-wonderful about it all. Denali City: the arctic elephant paradise. Alaska: the happily ever after. How many of us could relate? How many of us had left our former lives to make our way in this misfit paradise? These were the symbols of our frontier spirit. We alone were taking responsibility for these oversized orphans. We alone were putting roofs over their enormous heads, building them giant treadmills, convincing ourselves we deserved things like domed cities, like elephants.

* * * *

It’s early and the air is thickly peppered with the harsh and constant beeping of an army of reversing dump trucks. One-by-one, the truck beds lift and deposit huge piles of dark grey sand onto the pavement, scattering them around Denali City’s entrances like so many instant beaches. I watch the mica glinting in the warm May sun-



shine, steam evaporating from the damp piles. Holding open a scratchy blue and yellow plastic bag for Zeb to fill, I pull my lips over my teeth to keep from getting the grit in my mouth.

“Thanks, babe,” Zeb says.

“It’s nothing,” I reply. This is how we talk these days, sparse words and growing silences.

All around us, people are shouting. “Over Here!” “Heads Up!” and “Look Out!” among common refrains. Grunting groups of folks trace zigzagging lines, shuttling metal dollies overflowing with their lumpy, colorful cargo. Chains of shop owners and volunteers stack the heavy bags waist-high in front of doorways.

In the afternoon, Zeb and I move all of our food, pots, utensils, and anything that can be easily unplugged, up from our café’s first floor kitchen to the second story restaurant. I wrap our very first espresso cups in a handful of linens, slipping each thick glass out from its sleek metal handle and base, remembering how excited we were to receive them, shipped all the way up from a Target in the lower forty-eight.

“What should do we do about the downstairs appliances?” I ask.

“Leave them,” Zeb says. “Hope that they’re still here in a week?”

“Do you think they won’t be?”

Zeb takes a deep draw in through his nostrils. He lets it out, slowly, then shrugs. “Guess we’ll find out,” he says.

Like many of the shop owners here in Denali City, we sleep that night inside our café to finish preparing for tomorrow’s evacuation. Surrounded by stacks of boxes we’ve agreed to store for our downstairs neighbors, I spread a few grey wool blankets over a green portable foam futon I’ve had since college. Zeb brushes his teeth in the aluminum utility sink next to the soda machine. When we finally slip under the covers, I scoot myself into the space between Zeb’s armpit and chest, something I haven’t done in years, not since we were first dating. Zeb wraps his hand gingerly around my back. I can feel him holding himself still, afraid of scaring me away. Minutes pass, and I roll off of him onto my side to face the wall. I try to sleep, even as the florescent lights from the outside hall shine in long slivers through the stacks. Fitfully, I dream about nothing I can remember, but wake repeatedly in a panic, my

chest tight as a vice.

We’re both up early and by mid-morning, we’ve officially run out of things to prepare. I check the time. It’s still hours before the predicted rush of water from Tokositna’s latest surge, before the afternoon’s mandatory evacuation. How strange, I think, this waiting for a disaster.

We’ve been through all of this before. These evacuations were terrifying at first, but now, five years in to weathering our ongoing dance with the neighboring glacier, we’ve begun to settle into a manageable, if cumbersome routine. It’s amazing what passes for normal these days.

I remember the first glacial surge, back in the days before scientists learned how to predict these walls of water. Zeb and I were living in Talkeetna then. We’d just taken out the loan for the cafe, securing our coveted spot in Denali city. That first surge had been small, at least by comparison, a successful dress rehearsal of what was to come.

We had a rudimentary warning from the rising waters upstream, enough time to sandbag, trench and evacuate. We tracked the progression of the floodwaters on the news from our friend’s living room in Palmer, listening to the damage as the flood gained strength along the Chulitna, watching helicopter footage as it began to breach the town. Days later, when the water receded, we all saw the same repeating clip of the earth swept out from under the Gold Creek railroad, leaving the tracks dangling like so much broken jewelry. The damage of that first flood had been minimal, the rebuild smooth and efficient. Even if something like this were to happen again, we naively told ourselves it wouldn’t be for a long, long time.

The second flood the following spring was the catalyst for our decision to move to the dome. We could no longer afford to exist in two places at once. Zeb and I sold our winter cabin. We found a new home for Scout, our golden retriever, got rid of nearly all of our furniture, and moved to Denali City, into a cramped 450 foot studio apartment in the dome’s employee high rise.

For Christmas that year, I bought Zeb a coffee table book of tiny houses. We pretended these handcrafted, thoughtful living spaces bore a remote resemblance to our new dome life, when in reality, we were stacked atop our neighbors

like cockroaches. Zeb ordered us a murphy bed. I learned to get along with minimal bath products. We all but stopped having sex.

The shopping plaza begins to buzz with morning activity. We open our café doors and a few of our regulars stop by, shop owners and friends ready for the evacuation, grateful for our company. We serve beer and wine on the house, toasting to the apocalypse. Everyone’s mood is surprisingly light, almost celebratory. Around one o’clock, the siren sounds, a high, ominous whine. We usher everyone out through the glass double doors. Zeb looks around the cafe and I follow his gaze.

It’s the paint I notice first, that ridiculous shade of orange with rubbed out yellow splotches, our failed DIY. This was supposed to look like Italian stucco, at least according to the instructions in the book, but instead we’d created what can only be described as giraffe spots. Oh, how we hated it. Painting was one of the last items on our to do list, and we finished just two nights before we were scheduled to open. There was no time to fix it. We swore we’d repaint that first weekend, but by the end of the week, when customers praised our decor, calling the paint “bright,” and “whimsical,” we decided to stick with it. We began referring to the paint as our happy accident, convincing ourselves it was a sunny omen.

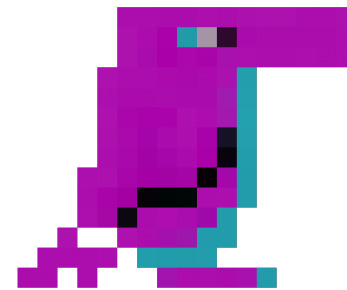
I feel Zeb’s hand rest against my shoulder blade. We look at each other. What we are both thinking, but do not say is, This could be it. I switch off the lights. Goodbye, Grover’s Corners.

It isn’t until several hours into our drive, as we pass a gravel turnout just north of Willow, that I even begin to wonder about the elephants.

Miles behind us, the water has begun to swell. It breaches the drainage system and sends torrents of freezing water rushing through Denali City in raging, unpredictable rivers. A lilliputian gang of exhausted keepers have stayed behind to wrestle against Maggie, desperately urging the once-gentle giant to place foot after agonizing foot along a narrow pathway towards a dry, unfamiliar enclosure. If she makes it, the keepers will lash the elephant to a post and hope for the best.

From the other side of a concrete barrier come the desperate trumpets of Annabelle, Alaska’s first beloved pachyderm. Her enclosure is the first to fill with the churning black surge. Water pressure and racing currents begin to trap and slow her enormous feet.

Annabelle’s keepers are doing everything they can to save her from her own panic, knowing there is little they can do to keep her oversize lungs from filling with the frigid water, to stave off her inevitable, suffocating death. They search in vain for pumps. They cry out for help over the radio. They fight hopelessly against a concrete barrier that separates the elephant’s enclosure from higher ground. Soon, the water will lick at Annabelle’s flapping ears, fill her wrinkled mouth, swallow her bulging eyes. If the keepers do nothing, it is only a matter of time before Annabelle’s trunk is all that will remain above the surface, striking desperately up towards the sky like a hollow reed. Above the impossible din, of evacuation sirens, of rushing water, of a screeching, dying elephant, one heartbroken keeper takes aim and pulls the trigger, praying to God for a clean shot.



Denali and the Wildmen

richard perry

Kate's Returns Home

The silence was heavy. The dirigible was quiet as it drifted gently over the snowcapped mountains. Looking out the window, Kate was just as silent. Today the air was still. The last several days the wind brushed up against the walls of the airship, it reminded her of the sea coast she was familiar with.

She was looking outside for hours thinking about the message from her grandmother, Nan. The snow slowly drifted past the window; it was relaxing and at times frustrating. She had so many questions and nothing but silence to answer her as she traveled where she was born, a place she never knew.

Kate was as far away in thought as she was from the place she left. This all started when her grandmother transmitted a brief message, told her to return to Denali City, that she would be replacing her as the cities grandmaster farmer. Kate

knew that would not sit well with the others in the guild, especially the three master farmers who were hoping to take her grandmother's place. Nan didn't explain; it was her right to select her successor but selecting someone outside the city was highly unusual. Selecting a journeyman, even a Master Apparent was unexpected. Kate shared messages regularly but the last message, Nan seemed more worn. Kate left the very next day.

It had been three weeks she'd been traveling now. She missed hearing the crickets, the large white airship was silent, and she was the only one onboard. Traveling alone was not uncommon. Few people traveled outside of their city, what few were left. Six in total that is known. That is what the Elders say before the calamity only a few specs of civilization left.

Nearly five generations have known nothing but these small communities. Denali City was one of the larger with about 3,000 people. It was a place every other city wanted to be like, a place of

artist and prestige.

Ryan’s Pursuit

Ryan’s was nervous about seeing his sister, Kate. She would be in town soon, maybe a day or two. He thought, how odd it would be standing next to her rather than looking at a recording. He only spoke with her through video message or text. Kate left when he was just five. So many changes, he thought to himself. Live video communications were not usually available unless there was an emergency. He never had the chance to see her in real-time video. The lines needed to be left open for the network.

Ryan enjoyed the silence outside the walls. He had time to think. Everyone was told how dangerous it was outside the walls. How cold and harsh it was with the terrible beasts that would eat a person if it could. He liked the stories.

Ryan was more fascinated with the Elder’s stories of the ancient never-ending crowded cities. They told of the days before the network, when millions of people lived in great glass buildings that were a hundred stories tall. How terrible it became when the unpredictable weather came and never left.

So many died after the crop failures and countless people who starved or drowned with the waste and endless fighting, all before the network. The Elder’s story always began with telling of a hidden massive underground shelter, an abandoned complex found by a handful of hackers, engineers, and programmers.

The complex was automated before they arrived, it was a closed system kept in balance by a unique machine-intelligence they called Alpha—far superior to what people could hope to achieve. There the scientists and engineers hid underground for years. After a while, they had developed new technology to gather energy and grow food. The hidden scientists left with a lot of time to ponder worked on solving the mistakes of the past, more than just surviving. And the scientists and the machine- intelligence worked in harmony.

The scientists eventually simply called it the network or Alpha when they spoke to it. They were content to stay in hiding until years later when a troupe of artists camped near their hidden secured doors. The scientists, as the story is told, were en-

thralled by a traveling band of musicians, dancers, and actors. For a week as the troupe camped outside the hidden heavy doors of the complex the scientists listened and watched from inside the complex. Unknowingly, the artists kept sheltered from the dust storms and entertained next to the great doors from those below.

Ryan liked the story. He was a newly accepted journeyman for the builder guild and imagined himself building something great one day, as they did. To his disappointment his job was mostly watching the metamaterial slowly assemble into the forms, his senior builder apprentices told the city net was needed.

Ryan was excited to be outside of the city, outside the tedious routine. He imagined he was going to discover something great one day. It wasn’t long before he realized his lips were getting cold. That was a new sensation. He was well-dressed. His form-suit had enough reserved energy to keep him warm a good while, a day or two. As he began to stalk around in the snow, moving between the alder bushes, his face was exposed, and he could see his breathe.

Being in the wild, even if it was just outside the city walls was novel to him, and it was thrilling, unlike anything else. Within the walls the air was always comfortable, the people and things all had their places and order. Ryan spent hours working on getting the camouflage colors just right on his form-suit clothes. He was even more impressed at getting his suit to adapt the forearm-sleeve to a hunting tool.

Ryan learned a lot about the meta-material in the short time he was an apprentice. He never felt very successful in any of the art guilds. He was tone-deaf. It didn’t take long for Ryan to figure out how adaptable the meta-material was by experimenting. He found out the hard way that it could get as thin as a monomolecular blade and just as sharp. Fortunate for him the form-suit material was also programmed to act as a sterile dressing for his cut hand.

The material stored energy from the sunlight, the motion of the wearer, and passed energy freely from one section of material to another. His journeyman-mentor showed him how the form-suit material could be made into a solid plate when they crawled beneath the city for maintenance.

The buildings all looked like greatly exaggerated

tents, reaching up to the sky like a white seamless citadel. Denali City was pretty if not a predictably boring. The tents and covered paths between buildings were made of the same white meta-material that provided the shelter and warmed the air enough not to become uncomfortably cold.

As Ryan was just finishing his trek around the city walls, looking for signs of game in the area, he noticed the large white dirigible in the sky. His first impulse was to consider how he would color the large craft. He spoke to no one in particular, “White should be banned. Why does everything need to be white.

His sister was on that big white airship, and he rushed to meet his grandmother to share the news.

Kate Arrives

As Kate sat in silence, it occurred to her why the transmission her grandmother sent was so odd. There was a flickering in the recording. That sort of thing doesn’t happen, she thought to herself.

She stood up quickly and walk to the flight observation deck. The dirigibles are automated, but a pilot and navigation console was still present. The captain’s chair was her favorite seat. The only comfortable seat. The others stations had hard stools. She was now captain of a remotely piloted ship; she smiled at the thought. She brought up her grandmothers recorded transmission on the console.

“Kate, I am sorry this is so unexpected, but you must return to Denali City.” Her grandmother’s voice was trembling in the recording. “I’ve selected you as my replacement as Grand-Master Agriculturalist. There was a bit of a fuss with the other masters, but I told them it was my mandated right of succession. I suppose it might be a bit irregular, to choose someone outside of Denali City. They may not be happy about it, but there it is. Come home, Kate. There is work to do.”

Kate played it again. Her grandmother wasn’t one to speak with a trembling voice. The image had an odd flicker about it too. She sat for a moment, and then it occurred to her, there is more to this message, there must be something hidden in the background data.

She opened the recordings data files. Not every agriculturalist studies programing, but she studied many topics that she didn’t need too. Farming wasn’t that complicated. Especially with the nanoengineered seedlings. Everything was predictable and mostly automated.

The regional net from her home city, Gamma, calculated everything that was needed and cross-checked its data with the neighboring city net’s calculations. Everything was predicted. It was well-known that for the last 76 years the activity forecasts were within the 95th percentile of accuracy. The Nets were designed to take care of much of the mundane or when something was needed. They scheduled the dirigibles to move raw resources and transfer it from city to city. It monitored, measured and made an analysis of the soil, moisture content, and minerals. Whatever was needed the Nets took care of it. The large dirigible delivered materials in a constant loop with only a few actual people taking part.

Kate continued to look over the data file of the recording carefully. The amount of data was odd. A normal video recording that was that short wouldn’t be as large as what was stored.

“You are a sneaky old woman,” Kate said to herself. “You hid a message in the data.”

As she was about to dive into the data, a transmission alert hummed. It was from her brother, Ryan.

“Kate, I suppose you will be here soon,” Ryan somehow seemed older than his last video. He looked almost grown up. “Don’t freak out but grandma is sick. She’s not dying or anything. Shit that came out wrong. Look, it will be good to see you in person. Things have been strange here. Grandma has been more unsociable than usual. She hasn’t left her bedroom the last two weeks. She says everything is fine but, you know, she only says half of what she is thinking on a good day. See you soon, bye.”

The dirigible was descending, and the tent city was in full view. Denali City was impressive with its towering spires reaching to the sky. The stark white structures made more impressive with the dawn sunlight peaking over the mountains.

Kate didn’t have much time to ponder why she was called back to Denali City. Now that she was about to arrive she felt somewhat panicked. She hardly knew her grandmother or brother, at

least not face to face.

She thought briefly about the other journeymen she left, and the few she socialized with often. Her peers had refrained from showing too much excitement with her leaving. She knew it exciting news but unexpected. Maybe that was it; the unexpected was uncommon. The city network’s did so much of the planning.

Kate asked herself, could people do well without the city network? If history exemplified anything, while individual people may be kind and thoughtful, a group of people tended to falter.

At her former city, the phrase ever-persevering-master was used in private whispers. Kate used that term often too. Now, she was a master. Not only a master but a grandmaster. Kate knew how rare the opportunity was to move up so young. What was her grandmother thinking? What was going on?

Landing she was reminded of a long and silent trip as several people began to unload supplies. They practically ignored her. The last five weeks she heard no one speak, but for the recording, she replayed from her Grandmother. She kept thinking about the odd message sent. Something was odd, but she couldn’t figure why.

Kate was caught off-guard as a young man reached out to her after she stepped out into the landing zone. She paused then realized it was her brother, now nearly a man. He was taller than she was. She smiled and then reached to give him a hug.

“This is strange, seeing you in person,” Ryan smirked. “Grandmother is at home. She can’t see that well anymore. Well, you know, she is excited to see you, Kate. Me too, of course. Welcome home.”

“How did you get taller than me,” Kate asked. “Look at you. Oh my, the city is bigger than I remember. It seems like a whole other world now.”

They walked together to the farm tower. Ryan pointed it out as it came into view. It was nearly the tallest structure in the city but for the three turbine towers. The apartment they lived in was below the farming levels and that alone nearly four floors high on a series of pillars. The farm levels added four- and-a-half stories.

The large white turbine towers were the only things that dwarfed the farm building. The

cylinder-shaped turbine reached up from the city floor to nearly 200 feet. It was quiet; the entire area was quiet but for the music and performances that frequented the apartments along the way to their home.

Kate read about the new turbine generators. Denali City was quick to adapt to the latest tech from the city networks. The city she came from was a bit older. There was an old geo-thermal generator that served them well enough. Kate realized, she didn’t know much about her new home or what was happening or why.

“Ryan, do you know what’s going on?” She stopped walking and looked at Ryan. “I don’t like not knowing. What is happening here, with grandmother and the council?”

“You probably know more than I do,” he said looking uncertain. “I don’t know. But if I find something out you can count on me. I have your back.” He stood tall, “I’ll always be there to help, no matter what happens. Okay? You may be my big sister, but I am ... I am a man. A young one. But still, I have skills and stuff.”

“Let’s go, then, skill monkey,” she said. “I could use a good sleep and meal. Think you could find me something to eat here?” They walked in silence most the way to the farm tower. It was larger than she expected up close. It was shaped like an eight-story mushroom building with clear walls on the top. It must have been just over 100 feet tall and just as wide in most parts but the base that was a third the size of the rest.

Ryan’s Bargain

Ryan got a message to meet outside the central tower as they got inside. He had just started getting these convert messages the last week. It was the reason he was exploring outside the city walls earlier. Someone took notice of how well he took to the engineer training, he thought.

One of the first lessons Ryan learned as an engineer-builder apprentice was that much of the energy in the city came from the three large turbine towers throughout the city. The tower walls oscillate on a nearly microscopic level. At the base, there was no sound, but the further inside and up the air moved quicker.

These tiny molecule-sized turbines covered the inside of the towers, but the human eye could

not see or hear it move. The air moved from the bottom to the top like a wave, from the ground to the sky. Amazing how that powered the city. Ryan thought it was amazing.

He left to meet the messenger as asked. It was getting dark; it was mostly dark now. Ryan noticed the Arora as he waited. It was beautiful, he thought, as the sky went dark. He was waiting for nearly a half- hour before the messenger arrived. Whoever sent the messenger, Ryan thought, was certainly important.

The meeting was brief. It was a message delivered in person, and they only stayed long enough to see that it was read. The message was simple enough, hunt for snowshoe hare or ptarmigan. The reward will be two seats to any requested concert. Reply by e-message once the hunt was successful, use the phrase, ‘Orion’s new opera was to kill for.’ He chuckled, the messenger sighed and left.

Afterward, Ryan left for home and planned on leaving first thing in the morning. Not everyone could get seats to the master concert players. It was quite the reward and one he would not be able to get at his standing. Maybe he’d even be back before the others woke up. He was excited to have this secret hunt.

He had prepped for weeks now. He learned quickly; the form-suits carried enough energy to keep a person warm for about two-days from a full charge away from the city net. They were efficient but the more complex the forms, the more energy it took to maintain.

He figured out that the form-suits could become just about anything if he had a design and enough material on him. The first thing he did when he figured this out was triple-layer the suits he wore. He stood a little taller; his usually slight frame was a little bulkier. If he was connected to the city power, he found he could augment his form-suit to lift more weight and jump higher.

By chance, he also found out the automatic features, like the air bladders that deployed when he jumped from a rooftop and missed his footing.

Ryan left the next morning, everyone was still asleep, and it was dark. He felt comfortable in the wild, outside the city. He was hoping to find a snowshoe hare or two. He never had meat himself; he didn’t eat it. No one did really. It was only from tales from the past and distant rumors that Ryan

learned people used to eat meat all the time.

As he was stalking in the wild, he found what looked like snowshoe hare tracks. He read a lot about hunting. He was always reading something. The stuff he learned from his mentor was not that involved or challenging. You find the pattern for the needed part, you loaded it into the system through one of the archived forms in the Net’s library, and you watch the material morph into whatever was encoded.

As he walked quietly, he spotted a group of hares. He shot but missed his mark. His form-suit had three small sling-tubes with short barbed bolts that fit on both forearms. They shot out a fast speed.

It was nearing dawn before he saw anything else. He carefully moved through the snow as quietly as he could and noticed several snowshoe hares again, about 30-feet from him. He moved a few feet closer and took careful aim. Silently the small bolt hit its mark. Ryan was surprised by the sudden bright red flow from the small fur-white body. It kicked and made small cries. He nearly panicked then put two more shots into it. It stopped crying or moving.

He was breathing heavy with excitement and the novelty of his hunting success. He jumped when he heard something move beyond the alder bushes to his left. Whatever it was, was larger than a hare.

Wildmen

Ryan held his breath and knelt low. He listened for what seemed to be forever. Suddenly, from behind, he heard footsteps crunching in the snow. He turned, but before he could face the direction of the footsteps, he noticed a dark figure running at him. It looked human but not. Ryan fell back scampering on his hands, backward, as the figure rapidly advanced.

Ryan closed his eyes then felt the warmth of whatever it was on top of his chest. He opened his eyes to see large dark eyes inches away, staring at him intensely. It wasn’t a person but something wilder. Ryan screamed, and the creature grimaced silently in return. Then it picked him up like he was a toddler and set him down on his back again. He got the message.

The creature’s face was dark, nearly black,

and wide eyes were inhumanly large. Its face had gray and white paint in an odd pattern that went to its neck. It's hand gripped Ryan's mouth. They were impossibly large and calloused. The creature seemed to scrutinize his teeth more than anything. It was not as tall as him, but it was at least twice his width.

Ryan again yelled as furiously as he could, but it sounded more like fear. He began to panic and managed to get on one knee and took a swing at the creature. That was a mistake, he thought. He grabbed and pushed at the creature hoping to free himself, but it just looked annoyed and exposed it's yellowed teeth with a wicked smile.

It wore some black fur clothes. Whatever Ryan was grabbing was some weave of beads and tough, stringy material around its large neck. Ryan gave one last push, the creature let go, and the collar piece fell off, both moving several feet apart.

Ryan ran as fast as he could, nearly falling before getting a good stride. He didn't look back. He ran. He ran the entire way back to the city with the odd collar still in his hands.

Kate woke-up
"No city needs laborers, Kate," said Nan as she walked into the living space after she woke. "Not really. Farmers and engineer-builders just watch the city network, and the meta-materials do most the work. Not even the doctors are truly needed, the form-suits and city network monitors everything." The jobs she and her family did were rare.

"Grandmother, what is going on?" said Kate. "Your message, the hidden one, I arrived just as I uncovered it. What did you say?"

Nan moved closer to her granddaughter and sat. Her eyes had a fog like an appearance but she had an intense gaze even as she could no longer see. "I wish you never had to leave here. Time slips the past and before you know it, old age wrecks your body. Kate, this city needs someone to see this place for what it is; not what they are pretending."

"I don't understand," said Kate.
"I know. I know, and there isn't much I can do to make that right. I'll just have to trust you are the person I think you are. Your brother, he will need you. He is mixed up in some mess. Smart boy but not as smart as he thinks."

The door opened, and Ryan ran inside breathing heavy. He stopped and looked at them both then darted to the window on the opposite side. "Grandmother, do you know what is beyond the gates?"

Nan got up and slowly walked to Ryan who was still breathing heavy. "Well, I think you may."

"There is something," Ryan was nearly panting. "I don't know what it is but it's, it's dangerous, and it is not human. I mean it is not like us."

Nan placed her small hand on Ryan, and he held he breathe at that moment. He said, "It looks like us only, only more beast-like. It moved like a wild animal but its eyes. Oh, those eyes. They looked through you. They were so large and dark." Ryan turned to Nan and went to his knees looking up at her. "What if they followed me? What do I do."

Kate moved to the window, "Ryan, take a look."

Ryan walked to the window and dropped what was in his hand. "Oh no."
"I'm an old blind woman. I didn't see anything. What is it?" Nan reached down and picked up what Ryan had dropped. She ran her fingers over it, feeling beads and sinew. "You best do something, though. Can't have Wildmen running around the city. No, that would not be good at all."

The form-suits turned red when someone had an irregular heart beat or breathing. Ryan's form-suit glowed bright red. The City Net spoke, "Ryan Webb, your vital signs, and bio-measures have indicated extreme anxiety. Do you require assistance?"

The Nets voice was always present but mostly just something everyone was accustomed to hearing. Ryan paused and then blurted out, "Zata, there is a creature that followed me into the city. It may be dangerous."

The city nets reply was measured, "One moment. There are two unknown entities in the city. All area citizens have been alerted and instructed to remain in the nearest dwelling space. Please await further instruction before exiting your current location."

"Zata's got some sense, it seems. Stay inside! Such a thinker that one," Nan chimed. "Ryan, this beadwork, where did you get it? Where you outside the wall?"

"Grandmother, now, seriously?" Ryan was moving around the perimeter of the room trying to get a glimpse of the creatures outside. Then there was a thump at the door. Everyone turned to look and was silent for a moment.

"Please be advised," Zata's voice was calm. "Two unknown entities are attempting to enter your dwelling. They are possibly hostile. Do not open the door."

"No shit!" Ryan cried out. He closed his eyes to access the program controls to the dwelling. He knew he could alter the room as he did his suit and made an attempt to alter the building in the same way.

"What are you doing?" Kate asked.
"If I am right, I can change the walls. Hold on." Ryan accessed the net through his interlink. A moment passed, and the walls, ceiling, and floor began to change. They slowly moved into spike shapes. The room soon transformed, huge thorns with spikes obscured everything but retained the all-white color. The surfaces moved slowly but eventually looked more like an oversized briar patch of thorns.

"Ryan, can you give me access to your personal files? I have an idea" Asked Kate. "Um, I guess, what are you thinking?"

Kate opened the data file from her interlink to learn how he changed his suit and the room. "Let's get as far away as we can, okay?" Kate said to herself more than Ryan.

The door was struck violently, and whatever was on the other side was in a rage. The angry thumping sounds filled everyone with fear as a small rip appeared in the door. The sound suddenly stopped. Ryan and Kate watched helplessly as several dark fingers emerge through the small rip. Grasping the torn edges the creature's fingers violently rocked the opening until it grew larger. Another pause, then an arm moved through the rip, and it methodically tore at the material of the door.

The sound of the thumping earlier had no bellowing or voices before, and now the three inside could hear the creature, the Wildman, breathing heavy as it struggled against the fabric door. The tear gave more and more. Then the wildman stepped through the door. The fabric of what was left lay loose, now that it was ruined. The creature's eyes meet Ryan's gaze as it stood in the doorway.

"Ryan, tell me what you see," said Nan.
"There are two. They are a dark color and about 5 and a half feet tall and nearly as wide," said Ryan, whose voice was deliberate and fearful at the same time. "It looks fierce with old scars. The one is just staring at me. Only me and pacing back and forth."

In the light, Ryan and Kate could see the creature's skin was embellished with paint. Its clothes were black fur, like a bear with dark leather detailing, all in shades of black. The sun was beginning to shine through the room as the creature paced angrily, looking for a way to get to Ryan.

"Zata! Help," Kate said as she stood in front of Ryan. Their grandmother was several feet away but divided by a shallow wall of thorns. "Ryan, clear a path for grandmother."

The creature grabbed at one of the spiny thorns and tried to break it. It took all of a few seconds to twist it out of shape. The creature was frenzied and began moving through the makeshift defenses all too quickly.

"There is a Gwich'in tale my grandfather used to tell us when we were young," said Nan. "Beasts, wild men who lived in the tundra in Aht-na, the interior." Kate reached for Nan as Ryan clear away the spikes. "These wildmen were ominous like bogeymen, sometimes taking or even eating careless children."

The creature stopped when it noticed two men dressed in black form-suits and helmets move into the room. They had long rods that glowed at the end facing the creatures.

"These Gwich'in tales were not the sort that had happy endings," said Nan. "The stories were often just as harsh as the cold and unforgiving. What happened outside the wall?"

The first man in the dark form-suit and helmet seemed confused at the sight of these beasts. He paused a moment then charged. He struck the creature squarely in the chest. The creature gasped but made no noise. Suddenly, the other creature who had been only observing earlier suddenly charged at the man who attacked.

It moved so fast. The creature was next to the man in an instant. Its large hand enveloped the man's hand and rod all at once. In one quick motion pulled his arm from his shoulder and threw them across the room. The white walls and spiny thorns spattered in red. The man cried out briefly

and collapsed to the floor.

Ryan and Kate stood in shock of it all. Nan held Kate’s hand tightly. The creature then stood over what was left of the limp body and then pummeled at the what remained several times. Then it stood tall, let out one aggressive breath and looked at his companion and then at Ryan.

The wildman that was hit earlier moved forward. The remaining security guard in black had his back against the wall, whimpering. He ran as the creatures only watched. Kate had her eyes closed. Ryan threw up at the sight of all the blood.

The two creatures began to make their way to them again. Kate kept her eyes closed and said to Ryan, “I have an idea. I need a few minutes; keep our distance?”

Yeah, good plan Kate.” Ryan took Nan by the hand, and they all began to move through the spiny thorns. Ryan adjusting the thorns reach as they passed and closed them behind as they walked.

The room began to curve and bow. “Ryan, I think I figured this out. Keep us away.” The room began to move and then split. Then a break expanded from the ceiling to the floor.

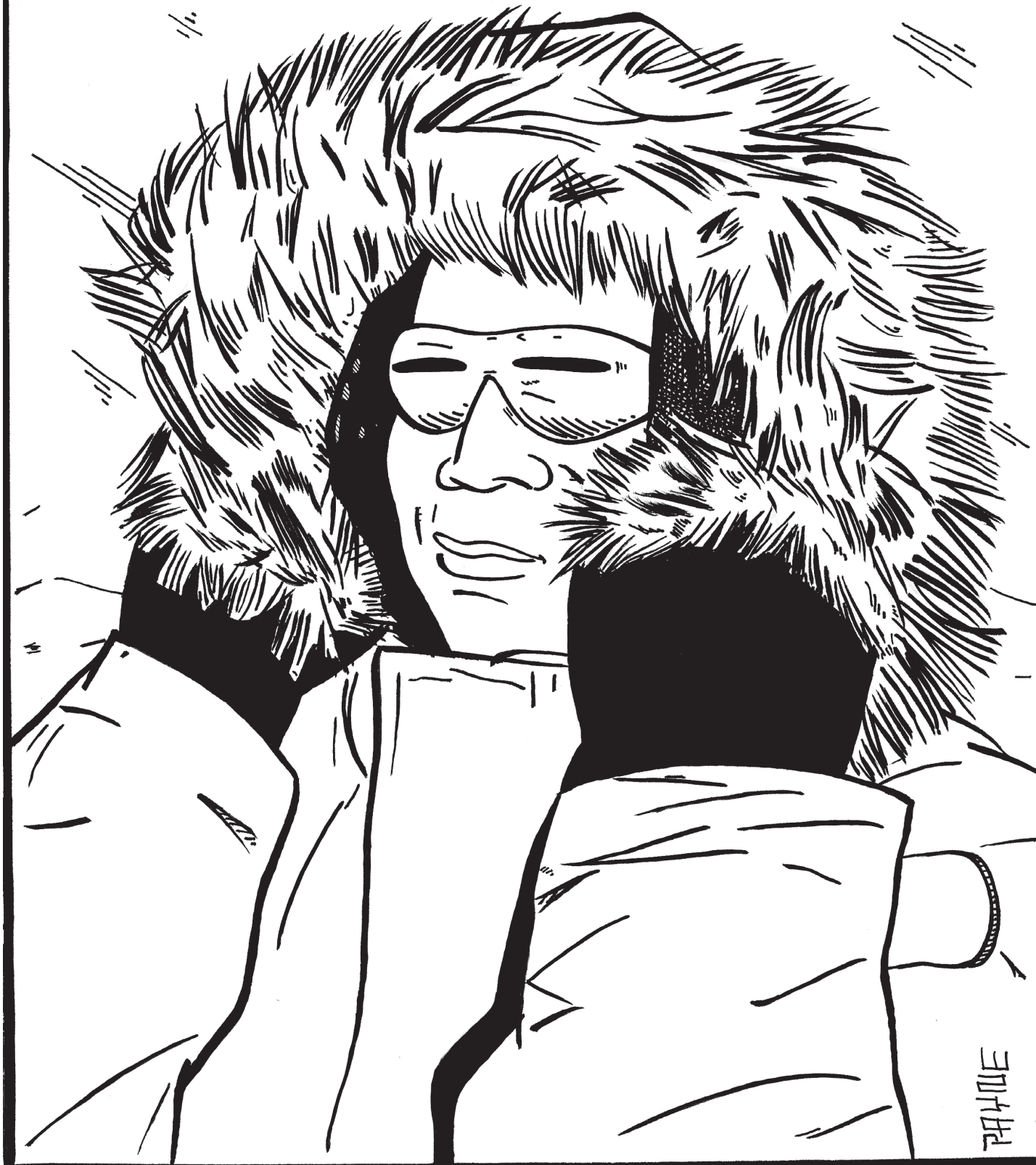
“I spent a lot of time on those dirigibles.” Kate opened her eyes and looked at Ryan. “It was peaceful. It’s time for our uninvited guests to go.”

The room formed another wall as half the room began to move upward. There was a gap as there was not enough material to cover from the floor to the ceiling. The siblings watched silently as what once was the other half of the room began floating. As it moved further away, it became clear it was forming into a mini dirigible. One of the creatures thrashed against the wall. The other simply stared at them as they floated gently off into the sky.

The silence was heavy. The dirigible was quiet as it drifted gently away. Looking out to the sky the air was cold, and Kate was silent for a moment and said, “This isn’t over,” Kate said and looked at Ryan. “tell us what happened, everything.”

The End

"SHE KEPT HER HEAD DOWN AND PULLED HER THICK FUR LINED HOOD SO ONLY THE IGGACK WERE VISIBLE."



Story Sanctuary

skywalker payne



The ocean called to Sehene Claire. She knew she had to cross the ocean to get to the North Land and find the Story Holder. The Lawsons did not have a boat. For them the ocean was a place for recreation and the source of the rivers that irrigated their land. No matter how many times Ben explained it to her, she could not understand how the salty sea became the fresh water of the rivers flowing into their fields. But she had tasted both waters. The ocean had a deep sweet, salty taste she loved to float over her tongue and allow a little to flow into her stomach. The river water was warm and sunny to her tongue and a salve to her throat and stomach.

As soon as she recovered her strength and her leg was totally healed, Sehene Claire told the Law-

sons she had to leave. She knew her destiny was in the far North Lands as she also knew she was not a farmer. But, she did work the fields, listened, and waited.

The Lawsons wanted Sehene Claire to stay with them. Her intelligence, ingenuity, and gifts amazed them. Todd told her she was beautiful, "all the way through." Her pale skin quickly bloomed into a golden bronze beneath the sun's rays. Her long thick locks fell below her waist. With lean, slim limbs she moved with strength and grace. Her large blue-green eyes changed in the light, in the sea, with her emotions. She found the young men Paula and Ben introduced her to when they went to the Market Centers immature. Sehene Claire knew she was older

than the Lawsons. But, with Sanctuary not measuring time she did not know her age in conventional terms, knowledge of living and people told her she was much older than she looked. Knowledge was all Sehene Claire sought. One day as she swam in the ocean she heard people talking about going to the North Land after they stocked up on supplies. She swam to the surface and looked around, near the horizon she saw a large ship, its sails taut in the wind. It was a fishing ship heading to Matanuska-Susitna, some called Seward's Success, the gateway into the North Land. Her first impulse was to swim to the boat and tell the captain she wanted to join his crew. But, she didn't know anything about catching fish in the deep waters. She continued listening carefully and heard someone say the cook was sick and they needed to find a substitute. Now she had a key.

Sehene Claire did not tell anyone she could hear conversations from great distances. It was a gift she inherited and her grandmother taught her how to cultivate and to control her hearing so hearing too much did not overwhelm her. Sehene Claire accompanied the Lawsons to buy fish. She carried a bag with a few clothes and the determination to become the ship's cook. She placed her intention in her mind, as taught by grandmother Therese, to achieve her goal. As soon as they got on board the ship, Sehene Claire saw the flier "Cook wanted, applicants go to kitchen." She pulled the paper from the wall and walked straight to the kitchen.

"My name is Sehene Claire and I'm your cook to Matanuska-Susitna." A large man with skin dark as fertile earth looked into Sehene Claire's eyes and saw a determination he'd never seen before. He extended his hand as he took the flier from Sehene Claire and said, "I'm Devon Hill, first mate and you are our new cook. Let me show you to your quarters. If you got anyone to say good-bye to, best do it now. After you put your rags in your quarters you've got work to do, miss?"

"Sehene Claire," smiled broadly as she shook his hand.

Solar panels and sails with wind turbines powered the ship. When it was not stopped or slowing to fish, the boat sped through the water so swiftly it kicked up waves. Preparing three meals a day for a crew of 50 kept Sehene Claire busy from

sunrise to nighttime. But, the captain and crew were easy going and took turns helping out with dishes and some even prepared their favorite foods she didn't know how to cook. Sehene Claire kept to herself, not talking about herself because she wanted to learn as much as she could about the North Land and how to find the Story Holder. She was used to hearing other people's conversations at a distance and had managed well for years. But since being on the ship she began to feel overwhelmed with conversations she seemed unable to block out. After a while she understood she was not only hearing conversations, she was hearing thoughts. She was carrying a bowl of soup stock from the refrigerator to the pot on the stove, the first time she became fully aware she was hearing a thought and not a conversation "That girl sure has a fine ass. I'd love to rest ole roger right between those warm cheeks." The bowl fell from her hand, thin stock flowed over the floor. Jared, the young man whose thought caused the fall, rushed over with a mop before Sehene Claire said a word.

"Yep, that's why we got everything in here made of stainless steel, Captain told me when I first started helping out in the kitchen. Spent too much money replacing glass and porcelain bowls and dishes. Don't worry cook, I'll take care of this."

"Thanks," Sehene Claire said as she quickly looked into the deep blue eyes of the smiling young man. She did not smile back as she picked up the bowl and placed it in the sink of sudsy water. He'd see a smile as an invitation to pursue his thoughts. She did not have time; true he was attractive, but not as attractive as Mage. A cold sharpness hit the center of her chest as his smiling face came into her mind's eye and she smiled even as tears welled in her eyes. She had not thought of Mage for months. Now as she quickly brushed the tears off her face she knew why.

"I'll be back in a few minutes and start the soup," she said as she quickly walked past Jared and ran to the bathroom. Tears poured from her eyes as she sank to the floor. The pure, loving kindness and concern of the Lawson family was a hive of protection and familial love absent on this huge ship of narcissistic, ego-maniacs, each one male and female, trying to outdo the other. Her body shook as tears fell, until a soothing

fatigue rolled over her and grandmother Therese stood before her. Her warm hand gently wiped the tears from Sehene Claire's face.

"Oh, my darling anointed one, so long you resisted accepting your path. You thought Sanctuary would keep you from the light but you see light, you've seen it since you sat in my lap as a little girl and did not know how to tell even me. And now, just as I told you when I taught you how to limit the conversations you hear, you know you are hearing thoughts. You were able to hear thoughts in Sanctuary but it was easier for you to dismiss them as your own thoughts because you were so close to so many people. Here, you are like an alien from another planet. These people have not spent, even a few hours, in conscious sitting, compared to the years of sitting in silence everyone in Sanctuary did.

"Yes, Sanctuary is gone. You did not want to accept the truth that it would end when I told you just before I ascended. It had to end. All of that mental and spiritual energy could not remain underground. Yes, it was selfish and shortsighted of the leaders to think it served the best interest of the earth and the residents of Sanctuary to enshrine such energy, wisdom, and compassion in one underground place. Of all the many wise decisions made that one was wrong. Our energy did not flow up to the surface. We were not gods or saints, maybe bodhisattvas but our compassion and wisdom benefitted only the few thousand beings living in Sanctuary."

Grandmother Therese sat on the floor and wrapped her arms around Sehene Claire as she did when she was a little girl. Slowly her hands stroked her hair. "You're not the only one who survived the earthquake. Mother earth planted the seeds of Sanctuary's wisdom and compassion all over the world, particularly in the places we're most needed. You received your mission clearly and keep it close to you."

Gently, her grandmother, kissed Sehene Claire's third eye and stood up. Their sea blue/green eyes met and a warm smile flowed through Sehene Claire with the soothing, comfort of the Pacific waters.

"Have no fear, do not be sad. You and Mage will have your day."

Even though she could no longer see her grandmother her presence was palpable in Sehene

Claire's heart and mind. She remembered now, that grandmother Therese told her this day would arrive. She told her the world and life she knew would be gone and the impossible would be true, life on the surface on the earth. Sehene Claire smiled as she stood up, walked to the mirror and splashed water on her face.

Her eyes looked at her reflection and saw here grandmother's eyes. She smiled. Grandmother Therese had warned her when she heard the thoughts of others, she was gaining strength to accomplish her mission and her life work.

"Thank you Grandmama, I'm ready."

For the rest of the journey to Seward, Sehene Claire worked on remembering the advice and guidance she'd received from Grandmama Therese. By the time the boat pulled into the harbor, she could protect her mind from receiving unwanted thoughts and conversations, most of what occurred on the ship. As she shook hands with the captain and crew on her departure she felt a sense of accomplishment and new strength. Even though almost every man, and woman, expressed in one way or another a desire to get close to her physically or sexually, she managed to change their thoughts to seeing her simply as a kind, considerate and concerned cook.

The captain's rough brown hands held hers and looked directly into her eyes with his large, brown eyes. "Any time, any time you want to join us, you're welcome. I don't care if we've hired another cook. If you want to join us, you're always welcome. You've brought us not only good food but a sense of order and peace no other cook's given. I wish you success in your travels."

Matanuska-Susitna was a city Sehene Claire never imagined could exist. In the midst of tall trees and fields of green and blooming flowers sat a gleaming, golden glass and brick city. She learned that millennia ago it was called Seward's Success, named after one of the modern explorers of the great northland, then called Alaska. The original idea was to create a glass-enclosed city, but over the millennia with earthquakes and changes in land surface and geography – Matanuska-Susitna retained a perfect climate and temperature. It seldom got colder than 35 degrees or hotter than 70 degrees.

The beautiful buildings, the exquisite food, and colorful plants were alluring and inviting but

Sehene Claire knew this was not the home of the Story Holder. This area was consumed with comfort, civility, and commercialism. She did find places called houses of worship, but they did not offer time to sit in silence. Men and women stood on huge stages and performed long, unwieldy speeches exhorting people to practice basic civility and kindness. The speakers were compensated for telling the audience to do basic practices of every person in Sanctuary.

Sehene Claire knew she had to go further north. She learned of a place called Denali City that surrounded the highest peak of the same name, nearly in the center of the North Land. While in Matanuska-Susitna, she found the best places to buy coats, boots, and gear she needed for traveling into the colder parts of the North Land. Many companies offered trips to Denali City, she chose one that was least tourist oriented and offered the best price for her resources.

They traveled in an airship. The small oblong vehicles were inspired by the obsolete dirigibles of the 20th century. After the destruction and limits on technology, innovative scientists figured out how to harness natural air to power small ships that flew without threat of exploding. They were called Denali Dirigibles because the engineers who first built them lived in Denali City.

Sehene Claire smiled. Sanctuary's energy and lights had come from natural electric earth energy. She looked out the window and watched the changing landscape below. Soon the glowing city disappeared and small specks of isolated houses and farms disappeared into a gleaming white landscape with patches of towering trees. The ship flew so close to the Denali Mountain Range, Sehene Claire could see the crystal designs in the snow.

Cold air hit her face as she left the ship. Tears filled her eyes and she breathed deeply. She was happy to get into a warm trolley that swiftly carried her into the glowing lights of Denali City curving around a large lake beneath the towering mountains. Even though a clear weather resistant tent covered large parts of the city, Sehene Claire always kept her coat on.

She found a small, quiet hotel and spent a month sitting in silence seeking guidance to find the Story Holder. She had no idea where she was supposed to go. One evening she sat in a restaurant,

listening for a key. Clearly, as if the person was talking to her, she heard the voice of a woman, mature and strong.

"I know you don't want to hear me. I know every scientist and politician says it's not true. But there is a place called Arctic City and I know it's up there between Kotzebue and Barrow. But, it's covered by an invisible, impenetrable dome. The old man, yes, he was a direct descendant of the ancient Inupiat, he told me about it. He said only people of a highly attuned spiritual consciousness can enter that city. It's a protected place. He said it keeps the balance on this planet and protects life so earth won't ever again experience a great destruction. He said he had a relative who went there and he's never seen her since. But, he can't get in because he's got blood on his hands. He killed moose."

Sehene Claire knew Arctic City was her destination. The airship carried her to the end of its line, Yukon Town, where she hired a sled driver with dogs able to pull her and a supply of food, water, and two tents. She found her driver at the Inupiat Services Center. His name was Kaiana and he said he could trace his lineage back to the 19th century. Sehene Claire looked into his clear slightly slanted brown eyes, smiling in his brown face and knew his heritage was true. They set out at sunrise on a cool, sunny day.

The first snowfall of the journey began slowly with large, light wet snowflakes. Sehene caught them on her mitt, and examined the intricate, lace-like designs through the slits of her iggaak, ancient wooden goggles that protected her eyes from the bright sun and snow. She thought something as beautiful as the snow could not be harmful. But, with relentless persistence, the snow continued to fall, the intensity increased as the flakes became smaller and harder. A harsh wind blew from the north. With knife-like pricks, flakes blew into her face. She kept her head down and pulled her thick fur lined hood so only the iggaak were visible.

Before dark Kaiana slowed the team. Sehene Claire looked up; they were headed toward a cave. The warm darkness felt like home to her. She was happy he found a cave to protect them from the driving storm. With such high winds and heavy snowfall their flimsy tents would have been worthless. The cave was large enough for them

to set up separate sleeping and toilet spaces and build a fire for warmth and cooking. Once again Sehene Claire was in a timeless world. Kaiana said, "When you leave Yukon Town, nature is the ruler and she is a moody woman. She doesn't obey any rules. It's summer, according to man's calendars and the sun says so too. But, you see for some reason ole mother nature said she wanted snow and here we are. His wise, narrow eyes smiled into Sehene Claire's. "Or maybe she's doing this just for you to prepare you for the Arctic world."

They resumed their journey a couple of days later in a bright, frigid cold, sunny, sparkling white wonderland, empty and vast. Sehene Claire passed the long hours sitting in her sled in deep silence. She was happy Kaiana was a man of few words. Keeping the dogs running, caring for them, and staying in the right direction required all of his attention. Sometimes the smooth rhythm of the dog sled lulled her into a deep dreamless sleep.

Suddenly, Sehene Claire was jolted awake as the dogs stopped moving, whining and barking. Kaiana walked toward her and helped her out of her sled.

"We are here, I can go no further." Sehene Claire looked ahead and saw only the endless snow covered earth but the lead dog's head was at the ground sniffing as if something was in front of him. Kaiana helped her put her backpack on her back and led her to stand next to the head dog.

"I have tried, many times. But I cannot enter. Put both of your hands in front of you and push like you're opening a door."

The invisible space in front of her felt solid like a door but with a push it opened easily. She made one step and saw before her a city of sparkling round buildings. She turned back to speak to Kaiana but he was gone. All she could see behind her was the broad wide expanse of snow-covered land. But she stood on soft grass and realized she was beginning to sweat. Quickly she removed her coat, lined outer-pants, and sweater. She was mesmerized by this place unlike any she had ever seen. Every building was round, of different sizes. Some had walls of glass, but can glass bend she thought. Some were covered with tarps and some seemed made of bricks. She saw people dressed

in colorful flowing clothes, walking, gathered in groups. Some rode on bicycles, children ran and played.

Before her was a narrow, wooden suspended bridge with no railings on its side. Sehene Claire took a deep breath and stepped on the bridge. It swayed gently under her weight but she continued walking, one slow step at a time. She extended her arms horizontally as a counterbalance and carefully stepped across the bridge, her eyes watched her feet, she breathed deeply and slowly. The bridge ended with a grassy landing as it began.

Slowly, wearing a light golden colored dress draping her tall, thin frame a woman walked toward Sehene Claire. Her skin was as dark as a starless night but seemed to glow like the sun. When she reached Sehene, her large sea green/blue eyes smiled as warm, gentle, yet strong hands embraced her. "Welcome to Arctic City. My name is Bella Justice and I am the Story Holder you seek." Immediately Sehene Claire recognized her as the woman of her dreams. The woman whose skin shone like Mage's. Her legs collapsed beneath her. Bella Justice caught Sehene Claire as she crumpled to the ground losing consciousness. She floated into the corridors of Sanctuary. Mage sat in their corner and for the first time she realized that was where she found the book. She hadn't thought about the significance of that corner at the time. She hadn't thought about Mage because he was taking a break from her, he said they were spending too much time together when they had important work to do. Sehene Claire asked him what the important work was and he said she would know soon. She didn't understand what he was talking about. As he walked away her heart hurt.

But now, there he sat as if nothing happened. He never left. There was no earthquake. He stood up and walked to Sehene Claire, wrapped his strong, warm hands around hers and looked at her directly, as he always did. His sea green/blue eyes a reflection of hers but always with a hint of darkness as if a storm was approaching.

"You're home now Sehene Claire. We've been waiting for you. I had to leave you so you would find the book and find Bella Justice, just as I did. You must be strong, stronger than you've ever been. Our work is important and endless. Don't

feel overwhelmed, everything will be revealed step by step. Soon we'll be together in Arctic City, the Story Sanctuary. I'm here just to let you know I never left you, you're right here in my heart always, all ways and we're together in this great work." He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly.

Sehene Claire opened her eyes and found herself lying in a large bed surrounded by pillows and soft white covers. She blinked her eyes to adjust to the brilliant light flowing through large windows that surrounded the room. It was round too. Slowly, Sehene Claire sat up and looked around. On a table next to the bed was a water pitcher and glass. She drank some water and energy flowed through her body. She did not know how but the room seemed familiar to her, she went to the bathroom and showered. A long, multicolored floor length dress hanging in the bathroom fit her perfectly. Just as she was preparing to leave, Bella Justice met her at the door.

Breakfast was a colorful buffet of fruits, vegetables, and breads Sehene Claire had never seen or eaten. Bella Justice advised her to eat mindfully, take a little of whatever appealed to her. "In time you'll learn what families these plants come from, you'll learn how to bake the breads, and make the teas. In time but now that is not your priority." After breakfast Bella Justice gave Sehene Claire a quick tour of Story Sanctuary, "Story collection and preservation is the purpose and reason for this city's existence and why it is protected. Before the great destruction, during, and after it for two millennia too many of the stories that taught humans how to live, provided wisdom, taught ethics, showed how to love, were repositories of history, preserved cultures and languages were lost. For centuries those who survived in the protected places on the surface thought these stories were destroyed and lost to man forever. But we, just as you in Sanctuary, learned how to cultivate our innate mental, spiritual, and conscious faculties by sitting and developing those ancient practices of spiritual and magical traditions with special words, visualizations, and intent. And we did this through stories."

Bella Justice stopped talking and walked away from Sehene Claire, without turning around she lifted her palm telling Sehene Claire to stop, as she had learned to do in Sanctuary. Bella Justice

turned a corner and Sehene Claire could not see her. But she heard her words clearly.

"You are now hearing my thoughts, I am purposely directing them to you. Now I am going to be silent and I want you to listen to what you can hear."

Sehene Claire took a deep breath and her eyes looked off into the distance and she listened. A symphony of words surrounded her. She heard hundreds of voices telling stories, many in English, many in languages she'd never heard. Yet she understood them all. She heard stories of creation, love stories, animal stories, spiritual stories, stories of healing. The stories flowed over and through her with the cooling comfort of the ocean. She floated on a cushion of stories revealing worlds and wisdom.

When Bella Justice returned, Sehene Claire knew why she was in Story Sanctuary. Bella Justice's warm, soft hand held Sehene's as they walked. "Yes, you are a story collector, just like Mage. He was given his name and purpose at birth, magician, wisdom, imagination. Those are the stories he is finding and collecting now. He is now in Africa but will also go to Southern India. Africa is easy. The radioactive fallout did not touch most of what was called Sub-Saharan Africa in the second millennium, before the disasters. But all of the continents changed over the millennia and Africa has become a breadbasket of the world. It is one of the few continents that retained its name. Fortunately, none of its countries ever developed the capacity to produce weapons, even though some tribes continue to wage wars over borders and water rights, they still speak their languages, tell their stories, and perform their rituals. And they are open to sharing them with story collectors. Mage may run into challenges but his wisdom will protect him.

"Now, Southern India is what is left of that great sub-continent. It's now an island and is a country where Mage must use all of his powers to negotiate his way through a maze of millennia old beliefs, grudges, magic, mysticism, and spiritual practices."

They entered a large round building whose walls were filled with bookshelves reaching to the ceilings. In small rooms Sehene Claire saw individuals sitting and talking to small groups of people with one person writing so quickly the hand

seemed to fly over the paper.

"You see this is how we protect our stories. Just as every other human group who survived the destruction, we know the height of humankind's potential is not more machines. Just as you and your leaders did in Sanctuary, we worked to perfect our minds. After the great destruction, those who remained, those who were fortunate enough to make their way to the pristine North Land knew machines and weapons would no longer ensure the continuation of human beings on this planet. We have stories, just as you in Sanctuary did, of the few who stood up for non-violence and cooperation as the key to continued survival. And we held on to the power of story. Even in Sanctuary, you had story holders. They kept you underground because they knew they were planting seeds for future story collectors. Your Sanctuary was a model for Story Sanctuary. For centuries story collectors have brought back stories of Sanctuary and the earthquake liberating you was foretold."

At that moment, Sehene Claire sank onto the bench beside her. The cool, sweet liquid Bella Justice gave her to drink quickly calmed her speeding heart and slowed her breath.

Bella Justice sat beside her. With mesmerizing softness her words wrapped Sehene Claire in a cocoon of calm and confidence. "Sehene Claire you see light. You know this. You have seen light since you were a child. The first time you sat in silence you saw light and when you told your mother she questioned you, so you kept it a secret. You see the light of compassion and spiritual attainment. The stories you will collect will be a balm and guide to those still burdened by the darkness of ignorance, hatred, and desire. Do not be afraid. When I learned who I was, I felt as if the weight of this planet fell on top of me. How could I hold the stories of the millennia of human existence? I was quickly reminded I do not exist. Bella Justice is this role I have inherited to manifest in this physical body in this time to ensure the most important legacy of humankind continues, our stories."

Sehene Claire closed her eyes and swam in the sea of stories.

Saturday Night at the Denali Dome

joshua medsker

Batman is gearing up for another crowd-pleasing run here at the Denali-Dome. His joustier looks nervous as he puts on his pads there. They’re climbing onto the bike and the joustier is flipping down his foot pegs. The half-pipe looks nice and polished after that terrible accident last week that left one Cheechacko Wizard blinded in one eye. I’ve never seen an eye just pop like that, and I honestly didn’t think they could squirt that far. It was into the stands. I heard it landed in some guy’s beer. It was incredible. Let’s give a big hand for our janitorial team. You could eat off of this ramp.

I’m getting signal from one of my producers to

move along, okay ladies and gentlemen...

Sourdock and his joustier look lean and mean, boy, I tell you what. A far cry from the pair we saw in the last Northern Games. No more baby fat and no smiles to be found. They look ready to eat Batman and his team alive. I’m curious what they have written across their faces. It looks like some sort of hieroglyphic symbol, and if I’m not mistaken, it looks like it’s written in... yes it’s written in blood. Let’s have our team of sports anthropologists check that out and we’ll get back to you.

Let’s take a look at the gear these guys are using,



huh? Both riders are running on factory model Street/Vert Retro-Rippers. Remember those? With the square frames? Sweet, sweet machines. Batman has a grey and blue, naturally, and Sourdock has a metallic green. Sparkly!

Batman’s rider is tricked out this time with a self-modded X2 Defender-style electro-lance. I think he fastened the electro-shocker pistol to length of pipe or something... Not so good for a strafing blow, but will certainly have more control when you can get in close to the body for a hit. Let me tell you, as someone who’s been on the receiving end of one of those bad-boys, they do pack a punch. And while the zap is only 5 seconds long, that’s more than enough time to knock that joustier off the back of his bike, and possibly get him run over. And that can’t feel good.

Sourdock’s rider has got himself an X26 model which is a little older, but has the semi-automatic capability. They will need to prove themselves after the last games, and this new electro-shock gun may just put them over the top. They have theirs attached to a 5 foot standard-length BMX Electro-Jousting pole, with what looks like bungee cords? What were they thinking? It is a good idea for an untested team such as theirs to get a little distance between themselves and their opponents.

Now as you know, this game is a combination of riding skill and jousting skill. Both riders on the team have to work in concert, in order to make a winning hit. Not as easy as it seems, and quite treacherous.

They’re getting into position. They’re squaring themselves on their bikes and getting their lances ready. Don’t forget ladies and gentlemen, it only takes one hit to win this round, and one hit is more than enough. And they’re off!

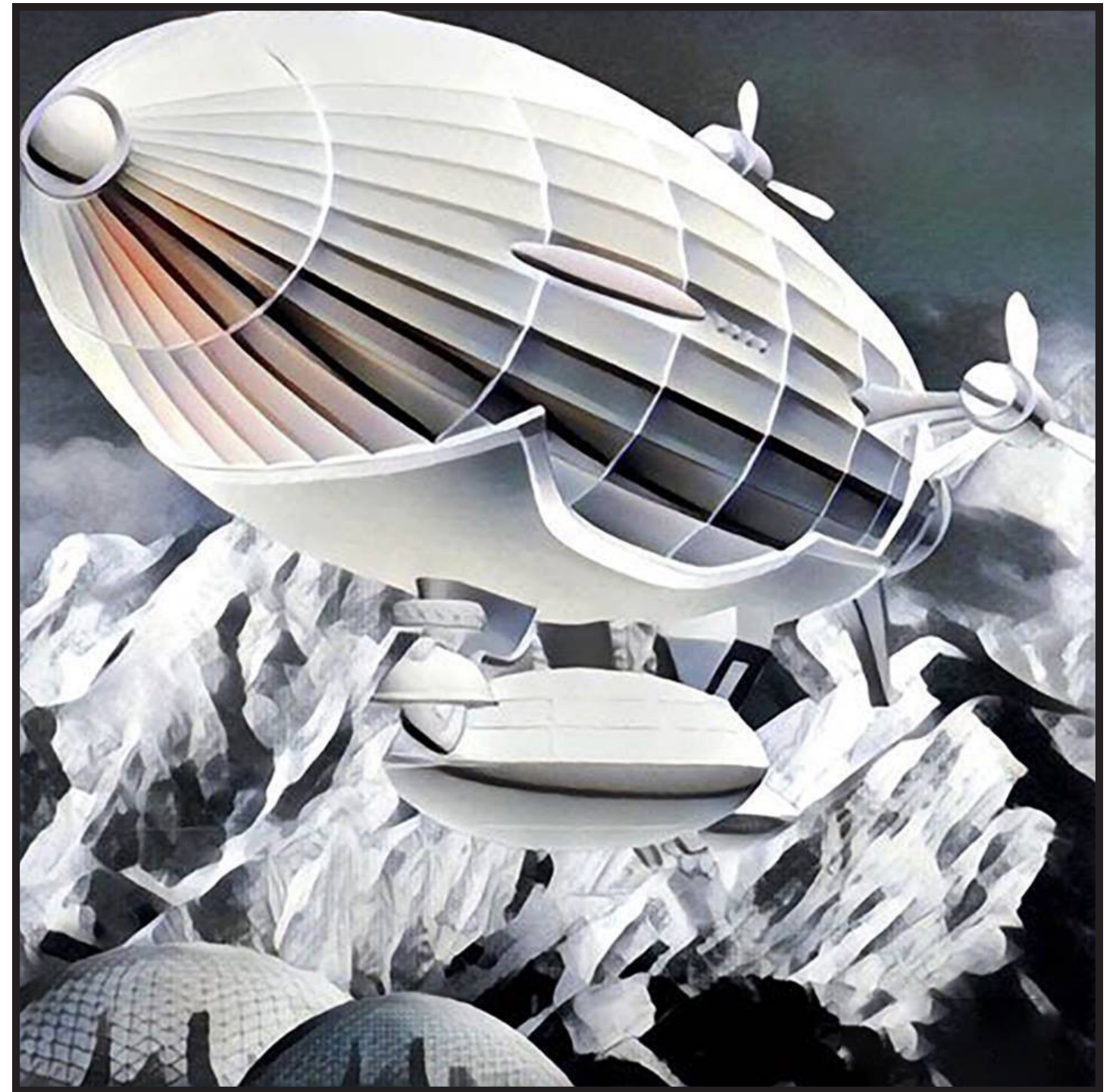
Batman is out first, with a wobbly start, and he’s passing Sourdock on the ground, no one’s made any moves yet... And Sourdock’s team is up and over the lip! What a beautiful 180 that was. It looked like the rider was going to fly off into the stands for a second there, but he grabbed the back of that seat for dear life, boy. Batman and

his rider seem to be having some sort of technical issue. Their bike is wobbling, but there they go, and they are balancing on the back wheel, at the top edge of the ramp, ladies and gentlemen! The man with the lance is aiming as Sourdock comes up towards them... Are they actually going to go for the shot? Unbelievable! How long can they hold this trick?

Sourdock is going, going, and he’s going to fly clear over Batman’s team, no wait! Batman’s rider has discharged his weapon, and THE HIT IS GOOD, I REPEAT THE HIT IS GOOD! DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES? BECAUSE WE’VE JUST WITNESSED SOMETHING SPECTACULAR TODAY, FOLKS! Sourdock’s rider has been lifted up off of his bike and is currently crumpled in a heap at the bottom of the ramp. And, oh, yep, he’s foaming at the mouth, and he’s convulsing. Those X2 models pack a pretty rough punch. The medics are running out onto the scene, so now’s a good time to hear from Batman his triumphant joustier, today’s clear winners of the BMX Jousting Challenge...



ARCTIC City



Distortion

jaclyn bergamino

Distortion

I remember her stepping off the dirigible from Fairbanks. I like to keep tabs on who’s coming to town and her arrival left me unsettled. It was winter solstice, but the dome was lit for high noon. You could almost imagine Outside didn’t exist.

Tipper disembarked bundled like a yeti and stood in the doorway of the docking gate. She brought her hood down and looked at the sky. As she blinked at the brightness, the daylight glitched. For a few seconds, everything was dark. You could see Outside. It was pitch black out there already. But inside, there was a bit of light. The girl’s hair blinked softly, some familiar winking that I hadn’t seen in years. You notice a thing like that.

The daylight came back on and the dome breathed a collective sigh. Tipper made her way out of the terminal. One to watch for sure. But really, isn’t that true of all Outsiders? I told myself I would keep my eye on her. That ended up being easy enough, because she came looking for me.

“Mrs. Beck? I’m Tipper Halloran, journalist with the Chicago Herald.” She held out her hand and I took it, but stayed silent.

“I’m here on a long-term assignment to document life in Arctic City and the effects of climate change up here.”

So she came looking for stories, eh? Wanting to document those of us “on the frontlines of climate change.” It’s like they can’t see them-

selves out there at all. Our weather is becoming more pleasant: longer growing seasons, warmer winters, and they are getting all our cold and yet, they look to us as victims. Coming up here and disturbing our peace so they can make a buck. Some shallow, sensationalistic report about America’s first domed city. Perhaps suggesting that the whole country should be domed. As if it’s only weather that the dome keeps out. Perhaps that is the only way we can deal with the new unpredictability. It would sell Outside.

I stood silent in the doorway, so she continued, “As the dome’s oldest resident, I thought you might have some useful insight and stories about life in the dome.”

Wasn’t that kind of her to remind me?

I nodded.

“So... may I come in and ask you a few questions?”

I turned toward the kitchen and left the door open behind me. That was as much a welcome as she was going to get from me.

“Your house is lovely,” she said, as she followed me to the kitchen table.

“Built it myself,” I said. “Pine shipped up from Seattle a little at a time.”

“It’s...classic.”

I snorted. “Old, you mean?”

“Well, it’s nice. Gives the feel of what it would have been like back then.”

I set a cup of tea in front of her.

“Is this Labrador tea?” she asked, getting taller in her seat.

“Ha! No! It’s just tea. You think an old lady

like me is traipsing around the forest picking Labrador tea when there’s actual tea at the store? You don’t know what’s out there.”

“Oh,” she nodded, the very picture of a disappointed Cheechako. The dome is never Alaska enough for Outsiders.

“So, you moved here in 1968?”

“You’ve done your research.” I sat down across from her.

“I have.” She sipped. “This is a year-long assignment, so I figured I should get to know my neighbors.”

“I’ve been in Alaska since 1964, but it was getting more and more like the Lower 48. Joe and I found it harder and harder to live in Anchorage. Here, things are so pleasant, so calm. So much more like the Alaska we came up here for. And there are the birds, you know,” I looked over to her and raised my eyebrows.

“The birds?”

“Yes, you’ve seen the birds, haven’t you?

Do you know what they are?”

“Oh, um. Well, I saw magpies and also some smaller ones but I’m not sure what they are.”

“Redpolls,” I said. “They are the storytellers.”

“Oh?”

I heard the front door. Bjorn was home. I shifted uncomfortably and Tipper turned.

“Hey mom,” he said, kissing me on the cheek. His eyes met Tipper’s and he said nothing. This was going to be worse than I thought.

“Hello.” Tipper stood, offering a cold, professional handshake. “Tipper Halloran, Chicago Herald.”

“Bjorn Beck, Arctic City Historian.”

“Oh,” Tipper softened. “I’ve been hoping to meet you. I’m doing a series of articles on Arctic City and I’d love to ask you some questions.”

“Er, oh, yeah, of course. That would be great.”

Good grief. You could almost see his heart fluttering.

“Are you home for lunch?” I asked.

“Oh yeah.” Bjorn grabbed a jar of salmon and some pilot bread. Maybe he would be Alaska enough for the journalist. “Just come down to the city hall building. No need to make an appointment.”

Bjorn left quickly and Tipper’s eyes followed him out the door.

“So,” I said, “where were we?”

“Yeah... So, what brought you to the dome?”

“Oh, originally it just seemed like an adventure, and they were looking for nurses. But it felt like home in an instant. Arctic City was everything good about Alaska, everything I had been hoping for when I came up here, without any of that other stuff. It had just opened up as a resort for recreational hunters. It was so opulent and beautiful. It might be hard to imagine now, but it seemed to sparkle. I never imagined that you could sit next to mango trees in absolutely perfect weather and watch the aurora. But there it was. It was irresistible. It was both perfectly Alaska and you could almost forget that you were in Alaska.”

Tipper tilted her head at this.

“Well, so we moved into the dome and decided to start a business and really try to make our way here. We got in on the ground floor of the hunting industry, thinking it would be a real boon. But then the federal government started sticking their nose in with all that regulation. But even during the bust, the dome really was so much nicer than Outside. The sounds especially. You know, the wilderness is not quiet, not quiet at all. People want you to think that, but the spruce squeak when the wind pushes them and there’s a reason they call them whispering aspen. And the ice. The sounds in the dome were so soothing in comparison, even then. Well, we didn’t know then that the birds were emitting stories.”

“Oh, yes. So you said the redpolls were storytellers?” Tipper finally seemed to be recovering her composure. Her smile radiated, like she thought she could win me over with her chipperness.

“And the magpies are the cameras. They watch while the redpolls tell. Part of what I love about living in Arctic is the softness of these stories. They are whispers in the background of our days. You can hear the flutter of the mechanical wings, gentle hums of comfort selected just for us. The birds know, you know? They know just what story you need to hear that day because the magpies are watching. I especially appreciate it in winter. Blocks out the silence from Outside. Birds year-round, isn’t it lovely?”

“Wait, so.” She scribbled as she spoke, “they are real birds?”

“Didn’t do that much homework, did you, dear?” I chuckled. “Of course they’re not real. There are no real birds in the dome. The magpies and redpolls are mechanical. The magpies are just cameras. And the redpolls just broadcast. They’re always around.”

“And you’re ok with that?” she asked.

“Well, it just makes it so much safer and more pleasant. The more they watch, the more they know what you need.”

“Uh huh...” she said. She had stopped writing notes. You could tell she was sizing me up, trying to weigh the truth of what I was saying. Another one of those who couldn’t listen. I knew what she was thinking, Greta Beck, Arctic City’s Oldest and Most Looney Citizen. Her eyes were wide, like she was trying to see more than her brain could take. Or that’s what I thought. Maybe even then she knew more than she let on.

“Well,” I said, tipping my head to the door. “Perhaps you’d like to talk to Bjorn, then?”

“Uh, yes. Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Beck.”

Tipper shuffled toward the door and when she reached the shadowy alcove, I saw the light again, just behind her ear. A greenish light that winked, sending out a message and I remembered where I’d seen it before. Fireflies.

“And don’t forget,” I called. “Seeing a redpoll alone is bad luck.”

I had hoped that would be the last time I saw her, that maybe I had scared her away for good. But then the visions started.

Bjorn’s office was stifling and messy. Maps rolled out of boxes and files licked the floor with yellowed paper tongues. There was hardly room to exist there, so I held myself close, trying to take up as little room as possible. The pheasant mounted on the wall seemed to be flying in fright away from me, as if I had surprised it. The caribou over the desk stared me down.

I hadn’t even asked my first interview question when Bjorn started into A Not-Short History of Arctic City, a speech that he obviously gave often.

“Far from Otto’s original intent, the dome’s design was bought by Tundra Outfitters,

who turned it into an opulent mecca for hunters. Completed in 1967, the dome was an elite experience. Patrons had the option of donning clothes and gear that were replicas of turn of the century supplies. The town itself was a caricature of a frontier town, rows of log cabins. Of course, they are just facades, and not historically accurate ones at that. Visitors could have a real frontier experience in climate-controlled comfort. Even in winter,” he chuckled and looked at me like we were in on the joke. I looked to the caribou for clarification, but none came.

“Well, you know, that was what people were looking for when they came to Alaska, some imagined return to a golden, wild past. The authenticity didn’t matter as much as the idea of it. People loved it and the town boomed. Until the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Without the extraordinary draw of hunting polar bears, visitors waned. There are plenty of places to hunt moose and black and brown bears on the road system. No dirigibles necessary. Much easier to access. Arctic City, like the Gold Rush towns on which it was modeled became a ghost town. It might be the most authentic thing about it.”

My eyes drifted out the window. On the sill sat the redpoll that had been following me since I arrived.

The dome reminded me of Florida in ways that made me uncomfortable. Like I was never going to be able to leave that place behind. As the dirigible neared the dock, I had wondered if this place would finally be far enough, if maybe inside the cocoon of the dome, I would be safe from that past. But when I stepped off the dirigible, the air smacked me in the face. It was so much warmer and more humid than even being inside the airship. It was like swimming; it was so thick. It was like Florida.

The expensive parka that I had bought in Fairbanks weighed heavy on me, but my hands were full of luggage, so I just moved forward with the weight.

Like Florida, the rain seemed scheduled. At 2:55pm every day, thunder cracked from the mouths of mechanical birds, giving a five-minute warning. At 3pm, it rained. But there was no lightning, and that was unnerving to me.

It was midwinter, so the dome’s air was significantly hotter than the air outside. We were

essentially in a hot air balloon. The city itself could be a dirigible. The air was constantly trying to escape, to pull the dome with it out into the blue. The problem with constructing a dome like this one wasn’t one of scaffolding it up as much as anchoring it down. The anchoring was the most difficult part. Like Florida.

And don’t even get me started on the theme park-like facades.

“But some residents stayed?” I asked, trying to fill a too-long silence.

“Ah, yes, there was not enough business, without the tourists, to support very many residents, but there were some hardcore domers who kept it going. My parents, of course, were among them, running a taxidermy shop and a small guiding outfit.”

“What about the birds?” The redpoll looked at me with its one glassy eye.

“The birds, yes. Quite an impressive feat of engineering for the time, I daresay.” There was something about the way Bjorn spoke, a genuineness to his old-timey turns of phrase. I smiled at him to continue.

“Well, the birds take stock of the dome’s climate system. Mobile thermostats, if you will. They fly from place to place to compare humidity, air pressure, temperature, and wind. It takes a complicated system to control the climate in the dome. It must be constantly monitored.”

“And who monitors it?”

“Well, what do you mean?”

“Who monitors the climate? Who controls it?”

“Well, no one, of course. It’s all computerized now.”

“So, why birds? Why do they fly? Why not just have weather stations at set points like the rest of the world?”

“Well, you know,” he took off his glasses to examine them better, as if there were a speck in his view. “People say it’s because if they fly around they can better compare the microclimates at different points. But really, I think it has more to do with the fantasy and whimsy of the founders. The feathers are authentic, you know. Arctic had some of the greatest taxidermists in the world and they used actual animals. They fly and flap just like real birds, don’t you think? They even seem to group into flocks in similar ways,

coming together on particular trees and following each other around the city.”

“Your mother mentioned stories?”

“Stories? Hm,” he rifled through papers on his desk not looking up.

“From the birds?”

“Ah, yes, those stories,” he sighed and looked at me over his glasses. “My mother is getting quite old, you know. So you have to take some of what she says with a grain of salt. It’s an old wives’ tale. I think it has to do with the uncanniness of the birds. As if the designers made them too real. People think they are some kind of mind control, but the dome isn’t really that technologically advanced. You can see we don’t have many resources around here.”

“I can hear them,” I said.

“The hum they make, yes. It is just barely audible.”

“No, I can hear the stories.” My voice, I knew, was too insistent.

He set down his papers and looked at me.

“You can?” He sat slowly into his chair so that we were eye level. “What do they say?”

Maybe it wasn’t not right to call them visions, exactly. Premonitions, maybe. But I didn’t see them. They came as words, almost like hearing them, but not quite. It was the worst when Tipper was around, which was far too much for my liking.

The green flashes she gave off put stories in my head. Stories I hadn’t thought of in years, and for good reason. Visions of hot summer nights of my Oklahoma teenhood. Visions of danger and stickiness. Visions of all that stuff Outside creeping into the dome. Like she was bringing it with her.

Bjorn had never brought home a woman before. In his teens and twenties, he was more interested in reliving the past than in building a future. Instead of going on dates or seeing movies the way other kids did, Bjorn went out in the woods, made his own tools and breech cloths, pretended that it was 1879. I always figured my child would be strange, but growing up in Arctic City probably didn’t help either.

So when he started inviting Tipper over for dinner, it was unusual. Even more so because it was her.

When I opened the door, she made an exaggerated smile, opening her maw in mock joy to see me and even waved excitedly. Then she handed me a slip of paper. I’ve lost my voice, it said. I nodded and handed it back to her.

Dinner was a game of charades, sometimes subtitled by Tipper’s notebook.

“So Tipper,” Bjorn started. “Are you from Chicago originally?”

She shook her head no. Florida, she wrote.

“Florida! How lovely! I bet you miss it there?”

She scrunched her shoulders up to her ears and smiled uncomfortably.

“What made you move to Chicago?” he asked.

“Bjorn, let the woman eat,” I warned. I could see her starting to squirm.

“Just making conversation,” he smiled.

“How are you finding Arctic, dear?” I asked, changing the conversation from the past, from Outside. There are things that you want to leave behind, and I knew it when I saw it. Those parts of yourself that you never wanted to see again. That was what I loved so much about living in the dome. You could let go of those things. They couldn’t follow you here. This one, the past was flashing all around her like warning lights. My son really knew how to pick them.

When she left, I confronted him. “Don’t get attached, she won’t be here long.”

“Mom –“

“Don’t you think it’s strange that she’s lost her voice just as she’s come to the dome? Like she’s bringing some sort of sickness.”

He smiled gently at me, in that way that so gets my panties in a wad. “I’m being careful,” he said.

“And what about those flashes?”

“Flashes?”

“Blinking in her hair like fireflies. She flashes like a goddamn Christmas tree.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“You don’t see them?” I moved close to him and squinted. “Because they are green?”

“Mom, this isn’t a colorblindness thing. I don’t see them because they’re not there.”

“Stay away from her.”

“I’m a grown man.” He made his way to leave. He couldn’t say I didn’t warn him. I’ve seen

this before. People who were unwilling to let their stories be. They bring all that shit up here, thinking they can escape it. I knew she wasn’t trying to hurt us, but the stories you bring with you impact the place, even if it didn’t happen here.

And that girl, she looked like a runner. I stopped running and stayed put here so I could listen to the stories of the redpolls. But you couldn’t trust that she would, too. What would that do to Bjorn? To the dome? My redpoll stories are so soothing, so reassuring to me. But since she’s arrived, there’s been distortion, as if there are some other signals, some other stories in the air. Ones that are not comforting.

I opened my mouth to call after him, but the door had already shut.

The mango hung low and I reached up to poke it, to remember the feel of its skin. The dome lights were just starting to set, so you could catch glimpses of the night sky beyond.

I sat down on the ground under a tree and Bjorn sat himself uncomfortably next to me.

I whispered, “That one over there, you see him?” I pointed to the redpoll in the tree above us.

“How do you know it’s the same one?”

“Only his right eye is intact. The left one looks damaged.”

“Uh huh. And it tells stories? What does it say?”

“Well,” I paused, trying to think of how to answer. “I can’t catch it all, exactly. Only bits.”

“What do the bits say?”

“Pretty. Safe. White.”

“Are they like whispers? Too soft for you to hear?”

“No…” I searched for the words. “There are other noises.”

“Like distortions?”

I wonder if I can think fondly on them. I have blamed the land mostly. Like there is something about the hot stickiness of Florida, something about the way that people are disconnected from the land that makes them angry, horny. Mad as cut snakes. As if methane from the swamps has wafted into their nostrils, seeped into the drinking water, infected their brains. It feels like that place has infected my blood, is some insect-borne disease that has taken hold inside me.

But my parents, do I blame them? Do I blame them for sending me away? For deciding that they could not believe my stories? For deciding that it is easier to live with a perpetrator than a victim? They might be right about that.

The stories now, they rattle in my brain. It’s been getting worse since I’ve been here. Usually the sounds and distractions of everyday life at the Herald are enough to drown them out, push them back. But things here are decidedly not bustling and those old stories are getting so loud that I can’t hear everything the birds say.

“Kind of, yes.” I finally said. “You could think of it that way.”

“Fascinating,” he smiled.

I blushed.

He looked away, avoid my eyes and then – “What the hell?”

I followed his gaze, squinting to see what he saw. At first there was nothing, and then, it blinked. A lone green dot in the distance, like a light at the end of a dock.

“Oh! A firefly!”

“I thought those were kids’ stories?” Bjorn said.

I giggled, “What?”

“Well, like fairies or something?”

And it dawned on me just how little time he had spent outside of the dome. For him, the place really was in his blood. Even his mother, who wasn’t born here talked about it just the same. As if this strangely constructed frontier is naturally home. Like, capital-H Home. I can’t imagine it, with any place, let alone a place like this.

“Well, we don’t have them here and it seemed too magical, like something that couldn’t be real,” he continued.

“It seems you do have them here,” I teased.

“Amazing,” he said, and then looked at me as if I had just introduced him to a new world.

As he kissed me, my feet pressed down, became earth. Rooted.

Bjorn showed up at the doorstep with Tipper draped over him.

“Is she drunk?”

Tipper had been coming over more and more often. She and Bjorn always sat professionally at the table, avoiding making eyes at each other to keep me in the dark about what was going on. But I could see the way she pulled him in,

her gravity attracting and rejecting him, letting him get closer only slowly as he went around and around. Like celestial bodies that will eventually crash.

As the days passed, I had watched her more and more, reminded of a childhood with fireflies, a childhood that I had abandoned long ago, and purposefully so. I could see them blinking, flashing. The reflection in her eyes seemed to send out an S.O.S., some Morse code that I should have been able to decipher. I read them. Studied them. Wrote them down. Slow quick quickslowquickquick quickslowquickquick stop? slowslow quick. But I could never make sense of it. It was always just beyond my grasp. I couldn’t tell really where the stops were or the starts. Every time I felt like I might be getting closer to figuring it out, she looked down.

And now this.

“I don’t think so,” he said, pushing past me and dragging her to the couch.

I flooded with questions. He laid her down gingerly. Too gingerly.

The lamp by my reading chair made the only orb of light in the house. Tipper’s hair blinked a soft green and the flickers of fireflies reflected off her teeth, bared, as she moaned.

The dusty old nurse in me came to life.

“Turn the lights on,” I instructed Bjorn.

I leaned over the girl. In the light, her hair was crawling. I pushed a few strands of hair near her ear up so I could see her scalp. It was teeming. They were nesting in her hair, trying to burrow into her.

“You can see them now, can’t you?” I asked Bjorn as he looked over my shoulder.

He nodded.

Tipper coughed and hurled. Her vomit glinted, a soft cold light. They came up, larvae and females, blinking. They writhed in her bile and I wondered if they were flashing a mating dance or looking for prey. The females flash the same way for both. The males come looking for mates not knowing whether they will be sated or sating. Perhaps they wish for both. A firefly clung to her bottom lip.

“What the hell?” I looked at Bjorn and he just opened his hands in confusion. I turned Tipper on her side. She threw up again, splattering the blinking green flecks on the floor,

tiny soft twinkling stars.

The firefly that hung on to her mouth and I chuckled to myself about the flashiness of Outsiders.

“What do we do?” Bjorn asked.

“We let her get it out of her system.”

Tipper’s eyes fluttered like she was trying to figure out where she was.

“Why did you bring her here?”

“She was sick?”

“And you didn’t bring her to Dr. Seth?”

“Well, I was worried. You know it seemed, too strange...”

I nodded and took a deep breath. Well, he might have been in love, but he wasn’t stupid. So he was giving some credence to this old lady’s tales. The dome has eyes. Magpie eyes.

Once the fireflies left her head, the flashes started making sense to me, when I could see them all clumped together like this. Oh, the stories this girl brought. Even just the snippets I got were painful, jabbing. One firefly blinks, brother. Another, spread. Another, weight. They gave impressions, not whole stories, but words repeated. As if each firefly could only hold one, could only find the rhythm of a single word. Then there were the ones that just flashed quickslow quickquickquick. Over and over again. No no no no no, repeating itself as they fly off into the night.

And like that, I saw myself in that girl. In the way she couldn’t stay put, the way she was running from the very idea of home. I ran, too. You didn’t end up in Arctic without a past. The dome was filled with people trying to forget. Most of us were “not from here” and we all had stories we were running away from or trying to forget. Usually both. But we also knew to keep our mouths shut. And that worked out pretty good for us. Let the redpolls calm you, tell you stories that are easier to hear.

But this one... I wanted to step in. I wanted to hold her and make a home for her so that she could make other stories to tell. Instead, she just filled the air with grime and incest. Why couldn’t she leave well enough alone? I’m sure the stories that the redpolls tell her are comforting, peaceful. Who needs them to be true?

One of the fireflies waded away from the mucus, shook its wings and flew flashing out the window. I crossed the room to close the drapes. “We can’t

hide that.”

I feel safer if I sit under a tree. I rest my back against a European aspen. It’s almost too warm for them here, but the streets are lined with them. They are imported, brought to the dome because they don’t branch out and take up as much space as Alaska’s aspen do. It would be better if they branched out like that, if I could hide a little from the glare of the Teflon. I am feeling somewhat better, but Greta has instructed that I need plenty of ‘fresh air and sunshine,’ whatever that means in Arctic City.

The redpoll sits on the branches above. Its stories have been becoming clearer. The distortion is fading since the night I got really sick. It whispers, “You are so soft and sweet, made of sugar and spice and everything nice. You are home now. Home is safe and warm and nothing can hurt you when you are home.”

I know from experience that these are lies.

It’s becoming more difficult to be in Arctic.

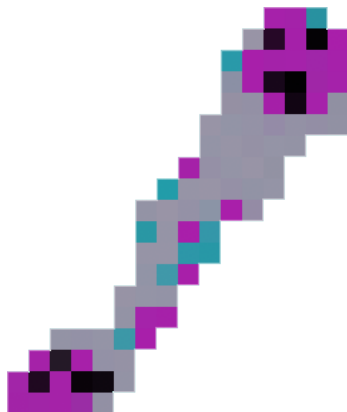
The stories are becoming too much. What have I unleashed? Everything feels foggy, like they left some residue on my brain.

All I can see is the stories. I can’t get away from them. They are blinking at me in the night. As soon as the sun starts setting, the fireflies come out.

But during the day, it’s the redpolls. It seems like everyone else can just block them out. They go on with their days and the narratives are constantly transmitted. I don’t know if the domers can even hear them anymore; maybe it just sounds like white noise to them. But I can’t stop listening to them. They just repeat and repeat. And at some point, if you hear it enough, won’t you begin to believe it? I can’t let that happen.

I cough and a lone firefly comes out of my mouth. I look away. There is a small thump on the ground next to me. I turn, startled. It is the redpoll, my redpoll, glitching and twitching, seizing on the ground. It stops and for a moment, there is silence.

I grab a stick, poke its belly open. Inside, it is teeming, hundreds of fireflies have made a nest in its wiring. They are not flashing now, in the daylight. Instead they are flying, looking for a new redpoll to call home.



The Archive: Denali

patrick lichty

The Archive: Denali

Date June 2176, 400th anniversary of the United States

Susie Beaufort woke up in her apartment in the upper reaches of Arctic City, shaking the sleep out of her mind and opening her blackout curtains. Up here, the sun played lousy tricks, like refusing to go down, especially at times like now, with the Summer Solstice days away. Although she hated the long, bright days in the summer, she hated the eternal dusk for that time in the winter. The illumination in the domed city never quite felt right, and at least in summer they would power up the electrochromic glass to shorten the days, but not enough for her liking. Her big white tomcat, Abelard the Fourteenth, didn't seem to mind, as he'd just sit there on the edge of the divan with those big, pale blue eyes and purr like someone rattling their knuckles across one of those washboards you'd see in the old Mainland country comedy shows.

That cat's as much a Sourdough as she was, she thought. Dome life wasn't really her gig; she was raised a Valley girl, and she had the tats to prove it. Fortunately, she'd stayed away from the old-time meth and the new school amylin and the neural transplants that had become so

fashionable lately. She was old school; home grown child of South Central, all fresh and smart, and lucky her parents convinced her to go off to UAA to be an Archivist. She was a little above average height for this age and probability, with chest-length sable hair and the Valley Girl tattoos that she started to get before her parents got her interested in more than hanging out outside the Domes. When the Domes were built at the end of the last century, her folks were still young. But when they had Susie, they knew the future of humanity was bound to the Archives, and anyone working them would be an elite, they thought. This isn't exactly what happened, but at least she had a good, stable job where she had a little power and she was able to take the airships on trips to the other Archives, although she'd only seen Dubai, San Pyongyang (what the East Koreans called old Frisco), and of course the first Archive, the seed bank in Svalbard. There were nearly a hundred Archives in existence now, as humanity neared the knee in its statistical graph.

The 21st century idea that humanity was going to go on with postindustrial growth levels was just taking bad drugs. Malthus had come to roost in no uncertain terms, although there were a lot of signs for hope. That doesn't mean we'd run dangerously low on some things, and the ocean rose way too fast to build dikes, so we tried to pre-

vent having too much crap wash into the oceans, switching to bridges and airships in the flooded megacities. The 3rd World coastal cities took the worst of it, but they were broke and hungry and no one really cared about them...

The Revelation of Johnny Apocalypse
John Patterson stood back from the massive Jacquard loom as it shuffled thread through its weft. "These things still take too long, even after they became computer-driven," he thought. The Jacquard loom was admittedly the first truly digital method of production, making the task of translating pattern to weaving foolproof by using punch cards to tell the picks to make a given pattern. In the late 20th century, they started making digital ones, substituting computers and solenoids to raise the picks instead of springs, cards, and steam. And even with higher dimensional quantum computing, there was just so fast you could weave atoms; just so fast you could encode DNA. Having one in the Denali Archive was Johnny's life victory, as the Council wanted to replicate some of the world's great pieces, like the Bayeux, The Lady and the Unicorn, and the Apocalypse Tapestry.

The last of these, the Apocalypse Tapestry, was John's (of course). Ever since he was a child, the burden of that Saint was his cross to bear, which became his in the Quake. And when he was given the task of reconstruction the Apocalypse, it became a personal obsession, although he hid his fervor for the project from the others on the council. Perhaps it was the subject and his legacy coupled with the times, or perhaps it was the irony that the Tapestry was to be hung around the perimeter of the Rotunda, displaying the End Times at the End of Time, or so the Archivists thought.

The main difference between the Apocalypse Tapestry in real life and its doppelganger was the function of the object itself. While tapestries were historically tools of power or status, every Archival project was data as much as material; every piece had every molecule in it coded in redundant googolbytes of information. Unlike early precursors to Archival Objects, like the Long

Now Foundation's nickel Rosetta Disks of the 20th, the Archival Objects had codes in the DNA of organic matter, like the cotton and wool of the weft. Unlike the Disks, you'd need the code to the DNA encoding, but once you had that, you'd find out that DNA could hold so much with such stability – almost infinite data along with the woven images themselves, some of which were woven in scan-readable patterns.

And encoding the record of all known cultural records of the Earth had become the function of the Tapestry, and John's life work. So much so, that in tragically hip circles around the world, he had become known as the data artist Johnny Apocalypse, a distinction that got him drinks, and got him laid. Being an ur-librarian was nothing like the stereotype, he thought.

All his other projects, like the Unicorn and the Lady, were flawless. The Object that resulted from John's coding was probably better than the original, exactly the same size, and equal to some zillion hard drives full of information, if you happened to decant the genetic information. Each of John's works were sublime artifacts, worthy of being holy relics. He thought of the traditional way of showing many of his works, on wooden frames in cathedrals, and he had a slight bitterness for thinking his work, however perfect, would be locked inside some dome on a puny rock somewhere in an average galaxy. With what they had found using the revived parts of the HAARP ionization array and a little quantum physics legerdemain, his work should be celebrated on the exoworlds – even if they were in the next universe over.

But the Apocalypse was different. As John started working on the data structure, the utterly crystalline nature of his work was evident, but by about the second panel, little perturbations became clear as the themes of the Tapestry started to writhe on the loom... and the other secret was that the Apocalypse Tapestry was as much Johnny as it was anything else, which was the key to the near infinite storage capacities of the Loom.

LOOMSMITH
But to understand the Looms, one must under-

stand where they came from. Dial back from Johnny Apocalypse about a decade and a half to consider their beginnings. Now, most of that technology was, well, just weird. The HAARP high energy array up in Gakona was an equally weird place, and suitable that the technology was discovered, well, maybe given there. It was a place where the old US government used to do high energy research into the ionosphere, which always got heat from the locals for the strange effects it created in the sky, and the skunkworks suspicions it created around the world. But a few decades after it got shut down by the Feds and given to U-Fairbanks, we discovered its real use. The thing wasn't a transmitter, but a receiver, and that was its secret.

What was discovered about the array was that the frequencies that the array was tuned to was just close enough to experiment with resonant transmissions between the physical "membranes" between quantum universes. When the physicist Brian Greene popularized the quantum multiverse theory a couple hundred years ago, there was no idea that we could contact these 'probabilities' (as they called them), let alone go to them (well, sort of...) Basically, that idea that there are parallel universes got borne out when we started receiving messages in English from humans (or something pretty much like them) from these other worlds. The idea that there is an infinite number of worlds based on matters of probabilities in physics, and the fact that you are on any one of them being solely grounded on the fact that the numbers said it was the most likely one for you to be on was a mind blower; a real cookie-baker. And there was someone else statistically pretty much like you a few quantum states away. As you jumped further into the quantum mist, things got stranger, but infinitely more interesting.

And the quantum world we're thinking of now was the one that Future Head Lakanoff was on. Somewhere back the line, one of his nth granddads was an Unungan/Aleut, and the name stuck. And, because of that, his mom fell in love with the old Unungan legends from a book, and gave him and his brother, Mainland Slayer, their names. Mom didn't have an ounce of First Nations

blood in her, and dad, even though he was a full Lakanoff in name, was a good, tree-huggin' East Korean from San Francisco. Dad? Well, he loved Mom, and as these things go, one overlooks a lot. Future Head and Mainland Slayer? You better believe they took their bullying in school, and grew up sharp as tacks and tough as nails.

Of course, those names were a mixed blessing, and had certain ironies. Future Head, of course went into Theoretical Physics and Applied Ontology, while Manny (he had to ditch his proper name for obvious reasons) had a band with a guy in the World Archives project up in Arctic City named John somebody, but you know who we mean... FH (easier than the full name) turned out as a researcher for Gesung Mem/Comm, working on a faster than light communications through that odd idea of simultaneous passage of data through quantum entanglement – that thing where it seems like something's in two places at the same time.

That brought him to the HAARP, where he was also working on that holiest of grails, direct brain to device communication. Everyone had been trying electromagnetic simulation, or even that barbaric idea of throwing wires or other metal implants like that Neural Lace stuff into your noggin. First, that approach perpetuated the false notion that the brain was just a wet computer, and that some lame serial upload interface was going to communicate the beauty and subtlety of human thought. Where this brought FH to was the idea of using that entanglement thing on your head as a sort of wetware interface for a lot of information, and the Cognitive Ontologists had pretty much mapped out the brain. They also got how brainwaves were just the brain's form of data packets swishing around. So in FH's mind, 2+2 equaled some unfathomable prime number, which meant he had to go to the HAARP.

Getting up to Gekona wasn't the craziest thing to do, not like flying to some out of the way place on the North Slope, and the gasbags were big enough and strong enough once they got jet thrusters on them. But it was a bit out of the way for FH, being so used to the sprawls of East Korea, which underwent rapid expansions after the old US gov-

ernment sold off the bankrupt state of California to zero its debts. It pretty much stayed the same, except it got a little more Asian, maybe. And had a lot more Korean business in it. But the 22nd had a lot of odd shifts, like the big move to lighter than air once we figured out how to harvest helium from offworld, and the domes, with the first being The Mall of the World in Dubai and the Daley Plex over Chicago. It's just that the CO2 thing was threatening everything, and humanity was panicked into action as we got our Act Together and waited out the Big Knee.

But we digress.

FH came down the gantry to meet the HAARP researchers, and extended a firm hand to the director of the Project, Dr. Ethan Beaufort. Ethan was a tallish, pale guy in his mid 70's, which by now constituted late middle age. He returned the handshake, and invited him inside, as it was November in this part of the story, and you'd get a few cold snaps here and there.

"So, Dr. Lakanoff! Care for some Agutaq or seal oil to take off the cold?" FH gave him a glance, "You racist...", he spat. "You know I probably don't have enough Aleut in me to be recognized as First Nations by the government?" Dr. Beaufort smiled wryly. "Actually, you just make it. Part of why we got the grant so easily. That, as well as the backing of the Dubai, Fes, Svalbard and Chicago Archives, as well as damn near getting close to Nobel territory with your work... Don't be so sensitive, I'm just pulling your leg." Man, FH thought, this guy can sure be an asshole. But if this test went right, it might open up a lot of things. "Do you have my rig connected?", he asked, with a little clip to his voice. "We do." Dr. Beaufort replied bemusedly. "And if you don't fry your frontal lobe with it, I'll be really interested in what you find."

RAVENWORLD
What Ethan Beaufort hadn't said to FH was that he'd been commuting from Anchorage for the past few years, staying a few months at a time, mainly during the winter months. They lived hear

the Mat-Su Valley, which was what they could afford at the time he took his position between U of Alaska Anchorage and Fairbanks. A lot of the work was at home or at the HAARP, and teaching was mainly grad stuff. The idea was that he and his wife Shel (which translates to "With me" in Denai'na), changed her name from something much longer for reasons too long to discuss here, would have time to take care of their daughter, Susie. However, at age tweenish, he'd just found her first tattoo, and a big dark cloud was on the horizon there. Shel's family would have nothing of Susie becoming a Valley Girl, and Ethan just didn't have the time to fix things. Life, he thought, was far more complex than his work.

One long night during FH's work, Ethan came back to check on Susie. As usual for the time, she was out late, but he'd hoped she would stay in for a bit with the two of them. Shel sat down next to Ethan in their modest apartment, leaned against him, and asked, "So, how's the new guinea pig?" Ethan let out a breath, as if to note a moment of relief. "He's sharp. Really sharp. I teased him about his being a sliver Aleut." "You didn't!", Shel said in exasperation. "Did you tell him?" "No, not really." Ethan said with some amusement. "Thought I'd see how he'd react when he comes in contact with something other than his East Korean egghead buddies. Asked him if he wanted some agutaq..." Shel lit up and smacked him on the chest. "No! Really? You know, you can be a real ass, right?" Ethan looked at Shel and smiled. "How do you think I got the HAARP?" Sat back on the couch. "I'd like to think it was your boyish charm, but I know I'm totally wrong there." "Yeah, although I'd like to agree..." Ethan replied. "He found something. We're still doing additional experiments, but if the information we're getting is consistent, it'll change everything. It'll make my leaving you and Susie down here worth it." Shel gave him a deep look. "That big?" "Bigger." Ethan's tone was deep and quiet. Shel got it. "I'll tell you when I can. How are you doing with Susie?" Shel exhaled deeply. "It's a problem up here

without her dad around. But she’s reading a lot, and her grades are good. She’ll be all right if she doesn’t get into too much trouble. You know what you should have done to Lakanoff?” Ethan cocked an eyebrow. Shel’s eyes lit up. “ You should have offered him a Burgers of Tomorrow TesseractBurger. Those things are horrible. Seagulls won’t eat them!” They burst out in laughter.

That weekend, Ethan took the family to an attraction that Disney had concocted to somehow engage indigenous populations. After the release of their newest film, Princess Akiak, Disney decided to create a roaming attraction called RavenWorld, which was a bizarre site that obviously had no native input into the design whatsoever, and Shel winced even before she got to the front gate. Designed in a hodgepodge of native motifs, RavenWorld should not even have what little traffic it had. I mean, who in their right mind would think having a Yuyqul (a Denai’na beluga spearing platform made from an upended spruce tree) where you spear holographic belugas was a good idea? The baidarka ride was innocent enough, and Raven’s World of Beginnings was something that you could possibly sit through. But it was obvious that this was something devoid of sensitivity, or even much research. This was obviously something an East Korean focus group cooked up from some telepresent research and a couple insincere talks with a couple Elders who thought they really had a shred of altruism in them.

But it was the Agutaq pops that sent Shel over the edge. I mean, sure, the old recipe using seal oil got dumped for Crisco, even merteca, or whatever congealed fat analogue whatever ‘ethnic’ people living in the area used these days. And the stuff was definitely an acquired taste, sugar, fat, salmon, and cloud- and watermelon-berries (where the hell did East Koreans get those?), and a few other things, depending on your family. It was a staple at Shel’s folk’s potlatches, and to her, it was a goddamned thing, you know? This was, like, hers; her family’s, her people’s. I mean she could forgive all the other rehashed corporate neo-colonialism, and she thought the yuyqul experience was just dumb. Ethan saw Shel was about to ‘go there’ with the vendor, but she saw it was the

Abramov kid. “Jesus”, she said to herself, “these people have no spirits. None.”

That wasn’t the real reason why she was so incensed about it. The problem was the stuff was good, better than it had a right to be, and it even tasted like seal. Probably fabbed in one of those Achaemenian bioreactors they’re building over in the Yukon, who thought...

Ethan put his arm around Shel, about to sound unavoidably condescending. “Oh, come on, it can’t be that bad.” She sat down on a remarkable un faux-like faux fur, quietly shaking with rage. “No, it’s not bad, it’s a hell of a lot worse than that. The stuff’s good.” A tear fell from her eye, and she said, “Do you get it? I don’t have anything anymore, OK? This was IT for me, you know? The ‘final frontier’, right? Where ‘no (white) man has gone before’. They just think they can just come in and make a buck off anything their little focus group think they can, and now they have this...” She felt like it was like that hundreds of years ago, all over again, and she sat there with her agutaq pop, pulling a watermelon berry out with her tongue, silently shedding bitter tears.

But as 10 year olds often do, Susie accidentally showed the absurdity of the thing. She sat on her haunches in front of Shel, all limbs, dark hair and eyes and hugged her knees. She looked up at her and said, “Don’t worry, mom. Their stuff sucks. I like yours a lot better. The seal stuff smells like fish. Ewww!” She shook her hair into Shel’s knees. ``Your ‘gootick’ is a lot better. You use twice their berries, and you use Crisco. They’re cheap-asses, mom!” Susie lifted her eyes to Shel’s, and after a second, Shel cracked into laughter. “Don’t worry, mom. I’ll remember yours.”, Susie said, hugging her knees tighter. Shel wasn’t the sort for big greeting card moments at times like this, but she took a deep breath, and held Susie’s, and looked down with a sharp exhalation. She looked up at Ethan, and said “You know I feel like leaving here right now...” but she looked at Susie, cheerful as ever. “But right now, all I feel like doing is getting up in the pine tree and spearing a damned beluga. I wonder if their programmers know about and old technique my great-grandpa

told me that old Shem Pete told his grandpa.”

And another morning, Alpha Archivist, Susan Star-Eye Beaufort sat on her balcony, with a bowl of her mom’s ‘gootick’ in her hand, Abelard purring and fighting for bits of salmon. She’ll be damned if every recipe for everything at every potlatch in all of Alaska in the last hundred years wasn’t in the Tapestry that Johnny whipped up. Along with just about everything else...

THE EPIPHANY OF FUTURE HEAD LAKANOFF

For about twelve weeks, Future Head Lakanoff had been waist deep in wire, supercooling rigs, and wetware contrivances that could leave you without a frontal lobe if you plugged it in backwards. They thought they’d gotten the quantum resonances tuned to the local timespace continuum, the brainwave synchronizers reprogrammed to dynamically lock into his thought patterns... It wasn’t that tough once you had a high frequency array like the HAARP at your disposal... and a small tokamak to amp it up. See, that was it – just take the electromagnetics, have them synced to your cognitive patterns and just translate that to the entanglement frequency, and whammo – interuniversal travel without moving an inch. But beyond a few tests that basically was a test pattern that was like standing at the door of a really long tunnel, that was it. Time for the first space shot, and FH felt like Laika the Dog, about to go up for who knows what.

But in reality, it wasn’t as sexy as that – no pressure suits, no cool rocket, no dog food. He really wanted to be on a rocket, or even a cool optical interface he’d shove up his noggin like in The Matrix or Saturn 5, but that wasn’t part of the job. The sensory rig was pretty much what every science fiction writer of the late 20th talked about for VR; body suit, rotary treadmill, and a neural headset with the SQUIDs in it, kind of like that old novel, Ready Player One. That was it. But he did put a lot of unnecessary status lights, and programmed the typography to look like a display from a 1960’s science fiction movie. When you do this stuff, you gotta blow off steam somehow, with the funding crunches and the news of impending doom (said in an ominous tone), making

your research as much like a VR game sure didn’t hurt. And today he was going to high score. As he stood at the ‘mill, all wired up, he thought, “Ready Player One, indeed...”

But they got their big break when weird data, non random data, started coming across the array. Of all things, it was the atomic signature for hydrogen, then binary, and by the end of that week, we figured out that it was the stuff we put on the old Voyager probes, which was damned peculiar. Whatever was sending that, and something was sending that, had found that record.

Or it was us, which was weirder yet. FH was about to find out.

The “flight team”, as he called them, were at their holofaces, poking at the displays, grabbing a waveform here and there, twisting a resonance in place, tuning up to match FH’s dynamic brain-wave profile with his cognitive gestalt. You knew you got it when you could merge your consciousness with the test pattern, but without the cool giant robot. FH thought he was missing out on all the cool shit, but science fiction actually was cooler when you live it. Seriously. Even if you didn’t have a giant robot. But he really wanted one. He loved that movie, but he hated that you needed two people to pilot one.

Again, we digress.

In the “Waiting Room”, as they called it, which wasn’t really a room at all, but more or less a floaty sphere-place full of really bad-ass data visualizations that FH borrowed from Shirow’s Ghost in the Shell manga, a small onion-headed creature stood next to him. It was actually his flight manager, Eunsook Kim, who he’d brought up with him from San Pyongyang, and was his support for the work ever since its inception. She wasn’t wired in, as if she were, she’d go wherever FH was going as well, and he didn’t want that liability until he found out if this crazy thing did what the hydrogen-heads promised. “Looks like we’ve got 99.7% sync, your biometrics look good, power’s stable, and the weather’s good for the foreseeable” Always the perfectionist, FH sideeyed Eunsook, if you could do that in a space like this.

“Can you get it up to point 9, at least?” her construct furrowed its brow a little and cocked its head. “Well, we’ve be there if you hadn’t flushed your head full of crap this morning...” FH almost sounded like a petulant 14 year old – “Oh come on, acetocholine, taurine, B-complexes, with the faintest touch of psilocybin for neuroplasticity.” She shook her head in exasperation, “Great. Shrooms and bull balls. You’re lucky to be pulling anything over 85%. Don’t worry, the most you might feel is a little tickle at the back of your mind. I’ll see what I can do. Anything else you would like to tell the flight deck, Mr. Science?” FH shrugged, “Nope. Major Tom, ready for blast off.” Eunsook punched a couple circular constructs and said, “OK, we’re off in 5. Remember, we’ve got the failsafes in place, so it’s all good, and worse comes to worse, just rip the interface off, but you’ll have a heeeeeaddddaaaaaccchee... lol. So, I’ll be here, take a breath, and do your pre-flights.”

FH nodded, and adjusted a few of the resonance displays surrounding him. The sync got up to 99.8%, and that made him feel a little better. In a few minutes, the room turned green, and Eunsook quietly said, “You ready to take the red pill, Neo?” She never understood his obsession with old sci-fi, but she humored him, even watching some of the old non-interactive stuff. Boring, she thought – whatever...” FH satred dead ahead, as if spatial orientation was going to do any good, and said, “Systems nominal, sync at acceptable levels. Hit me.” Eunsook nodded, and said, “Quantum engagement begins. In 4. 3. 2. 1.”

And the trap door opened, more like his head became a tesseract, unfolding into the multiverse. “Holyshitholyshitohmygodohmygodohmygod-whatareyoudoing...” was the only thing he could think of when the array engaged. He Smeared into infinite probabilities of himself, tapping into the quantum universes that go like foam every molecule makes this or that transition. It was as if hims streamed off in all directions, but they weren’t discrete from him, and that was what was so unraveling. It was all him in an infinite number of worlds, and he slid down the rabbit hole, making this decision or the next, having this life or the next, the sky being this color or the next...

It was really, really starting to pull his head apart until...

He snapped back to reality. But it wasn’t his. He opened his eyes, and saw Eunsook. No, wait. Not Eunsook. FH looked around and knew he was him, and he was talking to Eunsook somewhere else at the same time, but not here... get yourself together, man... She was taller, darker, oh damn. Persian. “Crapcrapcrapcrap, there’s gotta be a reason for this.”, he thought. His mind swum about the Neo- Achaemenians in the Yukon and their being the first nuclear micronation in the late 21st century... She spoke. “Since you’re not insulting me, Future-jaan, I’m assuming you’ve engaged your probabilistic selves, and you’re a consciousness probabillity from another Earth. Welcome. I am Taraneh Mossadegh, your collaborator, Dr. Lakanoff. Or, I might say mind-slave, in this universe, as you give me far too little credit for my genius...” She cocked a playfully accusing eyebrow at him. “As you have guessed, you are you, but here-you has entangled with there-you, as you might guess, we are doing the same experiments, except we are a bit friendlier in this probability. At least you aren’t the you that wound up working in the Dubai Archive. You might guess that, maybe not, as I don’t know how divergent your timeline is from ours. Anyway, our simulations project we have about 82 minutes until our alignment combined with neural fatigue sends you both back. But probability and the fact that you two have synchronized means we can do this again. Let’s get started.”

For the sake of expediency. Taraneh gave FH a cup of coffee (or what passed for it, because there were so many things that had an otherness to it here), and got him up to speed on their research. There were two things that Taraneh emphasized as essential to know this first time; that the Neo-Achaemenians here were not enemies of the American Republic (the name for the USA there), and they had created a powerful set of data recording technologies by weaving textiles with encoded DNA using Jacquard, and traditional Persian techniques. At current estimates, there was no upper limit on data storage yet, and DNA was tough as stone when it came to data retention. And the weird thing about that is that it was

developed in the Yukon by a rogue nuclear micro-nation; the difference here is that the American Republic here didn’t think the neo- Achaemenians were quite as bad as the Americans did in his universe.

This was going to take some time getting used to.

Back in our world, the other Future Head (for our purposes, we will call Future Head Prime, or FH’) winked in, and looked around the room. “For Raven’s Sake!”, he said in exasperation, “This is certainly not what I had expected. Eunsook! Are you kidding me? Did you use a kids’ Kim-Chiba DIY Fun-tal Lobe experimenter kit to make my brain interface here? No wonder Ethan was joking about frying your frontal lobe, because it’s really a possibility! Thank you So Much! I guess I have to keep this on for how long?”

Eunsook looked at FH’ disapprovingly. “That would be about 80 minutes, sir. And how do you know my name? Did the ontological entanglement work?”

FH’ looked at the ground and shook his head a little. “No, no. It did. And how. Right, right, right... Sorry, maybe I’m a little fried by a misalignment of this thing. Before we get down to business, could you call up your plans, and I’d like to see how you interpreted my instructions.”

Eunsook stared into FH’s eyes. “Your instructions?” The other FH gave her a knowing smirk. “Listen. Who contacted who? Now, let’s get to work before I wind up with the mother of all migraines and I’ll have to just have to take some Ayahuasca next time to jump instead of trusting this hunk of junk...”

Back in the other probability, Taraneh informed FH about something she called “The Sigils”, which take their form in one way or another in the human inhabited universes, and they are typically a symbolic technology to allow conscious beings to reach out slightly into bordering probabilities.

“You mean, runes, petroglyphs, all that – It

works?”, he said, incredulously.

“Exactly...”, Taraneh said. “All that paranormal stuff you thought wasn’t real? Just accessing nearby universes. And in this Universe probability, we’ve integrated our media technologies into this.” She went over to a set of squares on the wall, inscribed with images and rune-like symbols. “Now, let me tune your headset a little, and I’ll reset this interface...” As she did so, the symbols seemed to writhe on the panel, and suddenly dimensional images sprang out, but they were alive. The summer sun was shining on Denali City – his Denali City, not like anything he saw here in the past half hour.

“Don’t worry; we’re a little ahead of your probability. We’ll get you up to speed.”, she said.

And she did. He knew he’d have a massive migraine, but when the Neo Achaemenian touched his third eye spot, it was as if his mind were an opening lotus blossom, it felt like he’d just jumped about 80 IQ points. Holy Mother of Snow – they even had Qupqugiaq here, the bullshit cheechako ten legged bear legend in my Universe – the damned things actually existed....

“Now you know why my version of you is such a jerk.” She said, snarkily. “But we know our work. And we know what’s going to happen, so hold on.” She sat him back into the chair, said “Don’t forget anything, OK? I wouldn’t want to have to reach you in your dreams through some shaman; much less bandwidth. We’re in a fairly divergent probability here from yours, but fortunately for us, it’s a very stable one one. It’s why you were able to entangle minds so easily. I’ll tell you a secret before you go...”

FH looked back, all bewilderment.

Taraneh smiled. “ I have a theory. The more stable human universes are the ones that have video games that play Cheechako Wizard Suicide Runners or dirigible reality shows. But what do I know? Get set – you have ten seconds left. Going back down the rabbit hole, Mister Wizard!”

Ten seconds later, that unnerving consciousness

smear happened again, but this time he was aware of a consciousness passing through his; one that was arrogant, annoyed, and a hell of a lot smarter than he was. Or, maybe as smart as he might be now, but he knew at the moment it held the cards to this game, and if he wanted his world to survive, he needed to do what it said.

And he was back. FH opened his eyes, and there was the image of perfect Eunsook, with a rare smile on her face.

“Welcome back, sir.” She said rather matter-of-factly.

“We have a lot of work to do.” Future Head Lakanoff said.

“You have no idea...”, Eunsook replied.

And they did. Swapping monthly, the Future Heads checked on each other’s activities with more detail than they could with the kinda-sorta-subspace data transfer interface they got to work most of the time. With the help of the Neo-Achaemenians, they built the Looms, and put together the dots on the sigils and created a kind of concrete language from them for The Archives – a Dewey Decimal System, but able to share data between probabilities. And that’s when everything took off- the Archives, the storage capacity, new hybrid technologies, going and mining comets for helium for the dirigible navies. Who the hell wants to be on the ground anymore?

APPLIED ACCELERATIONISM (The Establishment of Archive Tech)
In the next five years, the world changed. The notion of new climatological models, the emergence of The Global Archive Project, new CO2 mitigation schemes; humanity seemed like it had a chance, even if numbers were already on the decline. All we had to do is get through the carbon “knee” without going into runaway, and except for the necessity of having a lower population, humanity would go into its next phase without needing to resort to cannibalism or anything like that. The Sigils and a form of Augmented Reality replaced most media, including holocausts. The East Korean economy went into overdrive as the

new technologies went into production, including the DNA data encoding technologies. Seemed like moistware was the way to go, but scientists felt that the technology had far more promise than it was bearing out, which led to some radical experiments.

Future Head’s little ‘brother’, Mainland Slayer, was one of those experiments. He was a genetic replicate of Future Head, and an epigenetic ‘back-up’ of his brother. For this reason, FH thought ‘Manny’, as they called him, was more of a lab rat than a brother. But FH’, knowing the outcomes of our timeline, insisted on this, as there was a .86443 probability of a major quake near 2262, and if this happened, a .99743 possibility of FH’s death, with the helium mining incident aboard the airship Tanero in recent days raising the probabilities of these events skyward. So, Manny was a necessity, and he’d get “upgrades” with his inoculations.

Generally, he was a good kid, and FH saw similarities in Manny as he grew. Precocious to a fault, sharp as a tack, but with a couple differences, as they say with any system, things like epigenetics only defined initial conditions and general predisposition. The first was that cognitively, he was different than FH. Not less, but much more intuitive. For example, when he was shown the first examples of the sigil-interfaces developed through cross-universe technology transfer, Manny glommed right onto it as if he’d known it forever. He’d spin and shuffle the tiles, scene after scene before him. The second was an odd curiosity about that part of his lineage. Not that there was that much of him that was Unungan, but he wound up with artifacts, learned bits of what was left of the language, and even got high score on the Yuyqul attraction at RavenWorld.

The problem with Manny was that it was all out of context, as he was raised with governmental types, he was in the bind of being in a pretty white house, and being teased in school for his interests. He’d get out once in a while and find things though – like an old book of Unungan stories,; the one where the story of Future Head and Mainland Slayer was. He loved that.

But living in the Archivist community, you would not necessarily get a lot of exposure to indigenous culture. Most of them were Internationals, led by regional experts like Ethan Beaufort and Rachel Tanager, the latter of which was more of a project manager, and someone you won’t hear about much in these stories and there are plenty of strong women in these parts to talk about. Anyway, Manny; he grew up pretty normally, or as normal as you could in a massive dome under construction, with dirigibles coming in with hypercooled metallic helium dropped to the pole from gas giant harvesters, and researchers and tourists from the south.

In these days, everyone was around. Americans, East Koreans, Antarcticans, people from the African Federation, and a few of the weirdos from New Beringia – utopians in hopes of a new land bridge between Alaska and Russia. There was a salad of languages and cultures, and there was a lot to learn. He even felt a little smarter after seeing his “brother”, Future Head, who visited once a month from the Gakona Array. He’d tell him these great stories about talking to other universes through the Array, and he’d give him this great candy that made him feel smarter for a while, but no idea why. Because for all the tutoring and testing, Manny seemed to have nearly the same cognitive ability as FH, but he was far more intuitive, and that posed a problem for the Archive Project for one of the things they had planned for him, but not the others. The problem is that on standardized tests, Manny’s IQ was only about 140, while FH’s was around 175, and the treatments only spiked him to around 150. And Manny missed FH after the Quake. Although he wasn’t an emotional kid, He’d miss the sci-fi and the candy and how he felt.

Manny hit college around 17, as was the age these days, with Holocausts being replaced in the classrooms in the next years by the Sigil Interface. He went on field trips to the other Archive sites, and he especially loved Dubai for its chrome and sand. The dirigible flight took nearly a week, and their flight on the Tanero actually made it on that NeoGeo holocaust series, and taking over for that drummer in the house band, and that made him a hero at home, and he started hanging out with

Johnny Apocalypse, who was doing Archive business in Dubai with the Sheikha, and they started jamming. We’ll talk about that later.

And one last thing, and it had to do with the Sigils, we think. After he started working with the Sigils the next year, he started having dreams and what he thought were mystical visions. In older days, they said he’d be a shaman, but we knew now that he was just sensitive to probability. In those dreams, a girl named Taraneh talked to him about the Multiverse, and that he has an important part in it. These ended in a blinding migraine when he met a Neo-Achmenaen named Taraneh, which he thought must be the girl of his dreams.

She sort of was.

Well, not exactly. You know what I mean. But he fell in love with this one, which was more than a little trouble, as the US and the Neo-Achmenians in this universe weren’t on the best of terms. But it worked.

But Mainland Slayer would meet Johnny Apocalypse the day his ‘brother’ would die – in the Quake of 62.

THE QUAKE OF 62 (meeting of Johnny, Manny and Suzi, Death of Future Head)
Officially speaking, the Richter scale is a logarithmic scale approaching ten, but sometimes God is ambitious, if you believe in that sort of thing. Especially around the Ring of Fire. In the winter of 2262, it was a mild winter, as winters go in Alaska after 5C of temperature rise since the Industrial Age. This just means that in the darkness, you could have days that would seem like San Diego in 2001. This was extremely convenient, as this particular day it was if the stitches were being pulled off a botched wound dressing the entire length of the American West Coast, from Patagonia to Boroslof. It was deserving of the label, “Act of God”.

I mean, this is Alaska, so let’s be realistic. There were numerous 3’s, 4’s, and 5’s throughout the last couple centuries (sure, we’d do the Soldotna Shuffle), but nothing like the Good Friday Quake of 1964. That had lowered Portage a good 1-2

meters in spots so that the Turnagan Arm would seep into nearby low-lying homes, and Anchorage looked like an old amusement park earthquake ride. The train tracks near Whittier were twisted into an impossible s-curve, giving credence to the sheer brute force of plate tectonics., It was a 9.2, with the only one greater was the Maldivia in Chile two years before, so it was time to party.

Manny was just turning ten then, his “parents” Taanaman and Mina (GIVE THEM A NAME) were getting him ready for a day out on Turnagan with some of the other families, like Suzi and Shel Beaufort, the Rasmussen brats (they’ve been like that for hundreds of years), and some of the various Kims. Being that this was winter, it wasn’t a day at the beach per se. Every month or so, the families would come down from Denali for a couple days just to get out of the dome. There we things that could be done, like get environmental samples, test tidelines, and Taanaman would tell Manny the Yuyqul story; about how they’d rip a spruce tree out of the ground and stick it upside down out in the Arm. Over the last hundred years or so, this story was a little bit of a sensation; as an old display was dusted off at the airport, one was at RavenWorld, and the remnants of one was still here as an event done by the Otter Scouts a couple years back. Taanaman always thought that was a terrible name for a mixed youth group, with how brutal those animals could be, but he resisted the urge to say anything every time that they mentioned it. But this was a beluga hunting platform, so he thought it was appropriate, and besides, the kids did it with the help of some construction equipment, so let it go...

“Slayer”, Taanaman called, “Get your butt up here!”, he called down to Manny as he was near the water. “You’re not going up on that thing today, so just forget it, Pup.” He liked to be a little rough with Manny; thought it made him more confident. He was not comfortable with what he was, but between he and Mina couldn’t have a child, and he was that important to humanity, they looked past Manny being a research instrument and loved him as a son. Mina did not like Tan’s diminutive of Manny, and kept to the popular version. Tan thought it sounded too New York, and he was definitely

Alaskan.

“Dad, look what I found!”, many beamed, holding up a little Raven’s Hat shell.

“Conus Mamoreus.” Suzi said. Uncommon. Beautiful. “Abelard likes them. A lot”, she said, a little wicked grin in her late teenage way. She was half valley Girl and half Vulcan, Shel always used to say, which was a weird, weird thing. Again, those strange old science fiction metaphors; FH loved them.

“Good luck.”, Mina replied, standing next to Tan.

“I found two.”, Suzi added.

“Today’s your lucky day...”, Tan trailed off as God’s wry sense of humor (if you believe in that sort of thing) kicked in and the ground sank beneath their feet, about ten feet here, but in other places, the plates would jump over a hundred and fifty.

The Event happened, as these things do.

PRIME EVENT

In Gakona, FH and FH’ were involved in another transference operation. Eunsook and Taraneh’ (as a notice of things to come) oversaw the weekly operations, and after the first year or so of information sharing, decoding, and establishment of Probabilistic data channels between the ‘branes, as they called them. They had established contact with a couple other probablilites from FH’s side, but FH’ mentioned that jumping too many directions might create quantum instabilities that could endanger the continuity of the connection between the two worlds. Or so FH’ said.

“Twelve point five minutes until unentanglement, Dr. Lakanoff. I have a matter I want to discuss with you.”, Taraneh said.

“Is this regarding the event you wanted to tell me about?” FH replied.

“Yes. As we have told you, we have better tools regarding probability estimation than you do,

and you haven’t quite caught up, despite our best efforts...” Taraneh said with a soft sneer. “And we determined that in a half hour, there is a .999999 probability of a magnitude 9.8 earthquake 78 miles SE of Whittier.”

“Holy shit. Will the Array survive?”, FH looked into her eyes, for the first time actually seeming scared the first time since his third or fourth transfer.

“Yes, it will. But...”, she said, her black eyes burrowing into his.

“But, WHAT?”, there was a real concern in his voice now, as Taraneh had the look of a bird of prey considering her strike.

“Yes?”, FH replied, knowing he was somehow officially in deep tton.

“You’re not.” She said. FH flinched. She grabbed his arm. “And this is a good time to commit a plausible error to save my world. Before you try to kill me or struggle, or anything like that, let me assure you, it’s done. We decided this, once FH’ saw your plan B. You have no idea what you are planning.”

With that, FH sat back, stiff-backed in the chair. “What are you talking about? A number of us would jump into a probable universe created by the jump itself!”, FH protested.

Taraneh stared dispassionately into his eyes, cross armed across the holoface. “Oh, azizam... Did you think we were stupid? Did you think we did not know that you would invade our probability? Oh, joonam...”, she said with an almost pitying voice.

“No! Really! We weren’t; going to invade your probability! I swear!”, Fh said, his voice rising.

“You forgot one thing. Symmetry. What you didn’t know is that regardless of your best intentions, you would come here now, and to displace that much existence is like a probabilistic nuclear weapon.”, she said. “When you go back, you will dissipate; we are not sure of the results on your

universe, but we cannot let you do what you are. Communications will stay open, and we will do all we can to save your world. It has been a pleasure working with you, and I am actually sorry that this has to happen. But you brought it on yourselves.”

At that time, FH felt the untanglement commence. But instead, this time instead of the interdimensional Slip-n-Slide, he felt himself split into an infinitude of impossible bits of himself, reaching to other Probabilities, and maybe... Nothing. In our Universe, FH-s body went into rictus, and remained motionless, except for the fact that a pencil jumped from one side of the table to the other. And Eunsook would be looking into the 5th subbasement from her window soon.

The whole Western Hemisphere cracked after that. That’s all. But considering the possible outcomes, that wasn’t so bad; only a 10⁻³¹ variation in the probability matrix. But when you are talking about an entire universe, that’s enough.

TURNAGAN 2

When the Event hit, the cone shells seemed to hang in midair, and they probably did, as what happened was a slight ripple in the very fabric of their Universe. As time restarted and the shells continued their fall, it was just brute adrenaline that precipitated the time dilation.

Tan watched the Arm drain, and with it, the blood from his face as everyone was knocked to the ground. The undulations of the earth were so intense, for a couple minutes Shel felt like she was going to be thrown into the air on a blanket – did they still do that anywhere? Only times like this does your mind wander like that.

Once the ground stopped shaking, Tan looked around. Most of the group were on their way to the hills surrounding the Arm; if they didn’t get slowed down in the swamps too much, they could make a good 40 or 50 meters in time.

“Everyone!”, Tan yelled. “We have just experienced the motherfucker of all earthquakes! New record! You have at most fifteen minutes to get up those hills! FIFTEEN MINUTES!”

And then, Tan’s spine turned to ice.

Down on the shore, Manny had fallen and hit his head. Suzi and her classmate, John Patterson, a talented information science major, we’re trying to get him up. Manny was tottering a little bit; he probably had a concussion. Jon and Suzi were so involved with getting little Manny up, hey literally forgot about the situation, or more rightly, how deeply they were into it.

Tan ran to their side. “How is he?”, he said, with his former EMT voice.

John looked up. “Hit his head on a rock. Probably a concussion. We can get out of here, but he isn’t going fast.”

Tan shot back. “He’s going somewhere fast, one way or another. The wave’s coming in 10-12 minutes, my best guess. We gotta move!” He stared up at the hills, which looked way too far away. “We’re not going to make it. The hills are too far.”

Manny looked up, shaking his head. “Yuyqul! I wanna go! I’ve always wanted to go up.”

“Settle down. You’ll be ok...”, Johnny said. “He’s loopy as fuck!”

Suzi, pointing the other way from where they logically should be going, said. “ I don’t think so. Interesting. Check it out!”

Out in the Arm, the Yuyqul the Young Otters had put up in the estuary was now completely out of the water. And, like some Alaskan Miyajima, the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce had funded a stone walkway out to the damned thing, so you could read the plaque they put out there at low tide.

And it was really low tide. But not for long.

They made it out to the huge spruce bough, and managed to make it up; Tan, Manny, Johnny, Suzi and the two Rasmussen twins, Castor and Pollux. Fortunately, the Young Otters had not chopped the tree branches off too tightly, so any-

one with an average talent at tree climbing could make it, and they’d cut the root ball so there were plenty of places to sit, hold on, or tie lines. Johnny used his belt to tie Manny in as the surge came in. Holy hell, Tan thought...

Fortunately, it was coming in from the sea, so there wasn’t too much junk in the swell, and they were far enough out in the Arm that there wasn’t more than a ten foot wave, and this platform was a good fifteen to twenty. Then sat perched above the makeshift platform as the sheer force of the water and debris made the thing rattle and threaten to snap off at the base. It shook so violently, that Pollux, the one Rasmussen kid, fell and got pulled out with the wave. Manny even though he saw a stunned beluga swim by, but he was largely concerned with other things at the moment.

A couple hours later, after a couple aftershocks, the group climbed down, and they held each other’s hands to make sure they didn’t lose the path in the hip-deep water. As they made their way out, there was everything you’d imagine; trees, trucks, even a couple decent sized fishing boats. It was a mess. Even a Hostess Twinkie truck, which seemed oddly fitting in Johnny’s eyes for the End of the World.

And after that time, Johnny was obsessed with The End of the World and become Johnny Apocalypse, and when he would see Manny on the drums on board the Tanero, they would start playing together, and eventually form Johnny and the Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Taan looked back at the spruce platform, with goodly chunks out of the trunk from impacts of debris, and said, “Oh my God... I will never say a bad thing about an otter again...”

THE LOOM (2271)
One of the Great Things the Prime universe shared with ours was the Data Loom. We had worked on things like it in ours for years, but we never worked at the level of detail or granularity that the Primers did. After getting some advice on modifying the design, the capacity for storage went up tenfold by incorporating certain strains

of DNA into the matrix. Johnny got commissioned for the Apocalypse Tapestry, which would become the master example of an organic Archive for all the domes. But, with the current levels of storage, we could only get about a fifth of what we need, and maybe a twentieth if the 500-year plan were really going to happen. Johnny got it down to the source DNA matrix that was used in the encoding. It needed a longer sequence than we were using, and the old CRISPR tech had been abandoned decades ago. Johnny had a feeling they just weren;t using the right sequence.

“Damn it!” Johnny said. “Something’s not right!” “What do you mean?” Lead Research Archivist Suzi Beaufort said. “We followed the instructions that they gave us, to the letter.” “I know. But I think they left a part out. We aren’t getting a tenth of the data retention on this thing my numbers are saying.”, Chief Datatect John(ny Apocalypse) Patterson stared at the Loom, and wanted to kick it.

The thing, which was the last iteration of a distant cousin of the Jacquard Loom, invented in France in 1803 as the first digital manufacturing device, was a bio-digital weaving device that used encoded strands of natural fiber encoded with engineered DNA to redundantly store petabytes of information; hypothetically enough to store redundant copies of Global Archives on a Central Tapestry, maybe 125 meters long, more or less. And this was the reason why the Central Chamber of each Archive had a place for a Central Tapestry in the meeting chamber, as a backup for the digital forms of data.

Manny had borne this out wonderfully. If he was not going to be a backup Unit for Future Head Lakanoff when he hit seniority, his use as a genetic backup of his clone brother was a success. With every epigenetic data backup they gave Manny during the time he and Future Head had their play dates through the “candy”, that data was expressed in his hair wonderfully, and was kept to be integrated into a Master Tapestry. It’s just that the Looms, while creating fully readable records, just weren’t holding enough data.

And as with many science fiction stories, Johnny decided that he’d found the key, and was going to

stay late to test his hypothesis.

Good night, Johnny. I’m going for the night.”, said Suzi, with her odd Vulcan look. “ Are you going to test that hypothesis?”

Johnny gave her a knowing look. “I am.”

She looked dead into his eyes. “Is it your idea regarding chromosomal sequence length based on legacy experiments with Dolphin DNA? Too bad experimentation was banned on those guys.”

“Part of the terms of their sovereignty as a race. No more experiments.”, Johnny said with a shrug. “So it goes. They’ll go with us too, regardless of what they want, they’re in it with us, too.”

“I know. Regardless, we have to respect their sovereignty. We’re next in sequence length, aren’t we.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said. “Reason for Manny’s success.”

“Listen,” Suzi said. “I think I know where this is going,... and I don’t want to see you play Frankenstein, OK? Just don’t do anything stupid.”

“OK,”, Johnny said. However, we know this is the first thing he did.

About an hour after Suzi left, he had re-checked his findings. Damn it, the people in the Prime universe had said that you could get the same data retention with shorter sequences.

They lied. Of course, Dolphin DNA, and even Octopus, with its weird construction, gave good results, but the Sentience Convention of 2112 had banned experimnentation with samples of species that had petitioned after cognitive engagement was established. That meant humans wer ethebest; the only alternative, and he owned that sequence.

Time to get to work.

“OK. Johnny Apocalypse, Mad Scientist Mode – Engage!”, Johnny said to himself, without a little

trepidation. Suzi was right; What he was going to do was pretty stupid, but if it worked, it'd solve humanity's data storage problems forever. Whistling to himself, he went to the Biology lab, where they had the "samples", plant and test animals where they did stuff to them that was banned hundreds of years ago. "My turn, guys! Wanna watch?" He petted the calico cat that he so far managed to keep from the table as he walked by, saying, "Hey girl, if this works, you're moving in with me." She seemed to give an appreciative purr.

"All right. Down to work. Some Whatevercaine, aspiration needle, I've seen them use 'tools'...Ah, here." He took the packets, the autoclaved implements, and headed down to the exam room. He suppressed the chill in his spine as he sat down next to the Autodoc. "Thank God I don't have to do this. I think.", he muttered as he loaded the instruments and medicines into the unit.

He hit the ACTIVATE button.

"DeuxDream Autodoc Version 4.31. Please wait as we download definitions updates..." "God damn it.", Johnny thought, "right when you want to use the damned thing. F*, F*, F*..." The Machine rebooted. "DeuxDream Autodoc Version 4.5 Ready. State procedure." "Biopsy. Bone Marrow. Simple aspiration and extraction." "State species, Gender, age, weight." Jonny gritted his teeth. "Human. Male. 35. 80 kg." "Biopsy. Bone Marrow. Simple aspiration and extraction. Human. Male. 35. 80 kg. Local or general anaesthesia?" Shitshitshitshitshit. Do it. Do it. "Local." Oh God, that might be a Bad Idea. Just go for it damn it. "Disclaimer. This procedure involves the invasion of Sentient Subjects as stated by the Conventions of 2203. Acceptance of this agreement assumes the voluntary participation by all participants. Do you agree?" "Yes."

"Subject access granted. Please place subject in the procedure compartment." As soon as Johnny climbed into the chamber, it initialized. "Subject acquired, Immobilization

initiated. Extraction site: right femoral head."

FUCK.

Then a deep sting hit his right hip and suddenly that area went numb, like yesterday. He felt much better that their animal subjects were under a general, as he winced as the needle went in, hit bone, gave him a white hot of pain, and...

Then it was done. The doc cleaned the site, dressed it, and let him go.

"Procedure complete", the machine replied. "Subject must stay immobile for one hour until anesthesia dissipates. Thank you for using the DeuxDream AutoDoc."

Like hell Johnny was going to lay there an hour. He rolled over, and promptly fell off the table, his numb leg totally out of commission. He managed to grab a wheelchair and the sample, wheeling down to the Loom Center as fast as he could. The cold buzz in his hip and leg would subside to a dull throb as he worked; Suzi would be all over him tomorrow. He loaded he sample, extracted his DNA and after some PCR, he loaded it into the loom and ran a sample.

The thing spun impossibly fine threads in a ballet of precision, making a beautiful pattern somewhere between a French and a Bakhtiari weave. He took the sample and tested it. It needed work, but it was better – 1.6 petabytes/sq mm. He knew he could get 2.4; maybe more. The problem is that it was Terminal – it needed Fed, and it would Die. Thinking quickly, he got a little Bromeliad, some Bdelloid, and a little Glass Sponge material and threw that in the blender.

Holy Hell, he thought. The result was impressive – non aging, feeds on light and moisture, and has the data retention of human DNA. He fed it into the synthesizer, and the result wove beautifully, if not more luminous. And it was ALIVE.

Administrators turned their heads to Johnny's success, and soon Johnny Soup was loaded into the world's fiber synthesizers in the Looms, and Johnny started on his dream; the Apocalypse

Tapestry, a French design of the 1300s spanning over 300 meters. It would be the first global redundant backup, and would update as the Archives expanded.

The End of the World was coming, and right on time. THE FOUR HORSEMEN After the Quake of '62, John Patterson became Johnny Apocalypse, as he thought he had witnessed the first act of The End of the World. He became obsessed with eschatology, and the ideas of data storage. His obsession led to a PhD in HyperInformatics and an MD, specializing in Inter-species Genetic Therapy. He was grabbed by the New Anchorage Archive as an intern in the Informatics and Biology labs the year before his terribly early graduation from UAA. With the rage for late 20th Century science fiction happening in the late 22nd, he also became obsessed with the character of Buckaroo Banzai, by starting a band. And his idea of the Hong Kong Cavaliers would be Johnny Apocalypse and the Four Horsemen.

The band sort of started on the Tanero during the field trip to the Dubai Dome, when Manny and Johnny sat in for sick members of the house band. Although Manny was still just a college kid headed for Archive service (more than he realized), the chemistry was obvious, and the H were born. For the first couple years, they were a garage band until they got enough following and got off the cover tunes. After that, they became a regional thing, establishing a niche genre of music best described as Industrial Domepunk. Although the importance of Archive work excluded them from touring globally, they did do shows at the domes in Chicago, Dubai and Fes while visiting them.

The band into 2276 consisted of Johnny on guitar and vocals, Manny on drums, the Archive's sociologist Kevin Epstein on bass, and Kevin's partner Rachel on rhythm guitar. Johnny liked that he and Manny formed the central axis of the band, while Kevin and Rachel, both terribly aggressive redheads, were like this violent electron cloud around the atomic nucleus. In the studio, they all got along great, although the "axis" would

get annoyed about the electron cloud hopping off to the bathroom for a quickie. They played better after, so what the hell. They did a set of their most popular pieces, like Doppelganger, Brute Survival, The Knee, Schism, about the '62 Quake, and Book of Days, about a homeless man who died on one of the submerging Maldives, They also did a few covers, like the old Rush anthem 2112, and the Impaler's mid 2100's hit, Polygon, which has hard to play as it was during the Radical Mod era, and the original guitarist had eight fingers on each hand, and it helped to have a frontal lobe enhancement to play it. "The stupid shit people do for art.", Johnny thought. Tonight was a good night over at the Seward's Success Amphitheater. One of the local emerging bands, the Suicide Runners, (Would there be another game that youth would obsess about that much? Ever?) doing songs from their new album, Termination Dust, and that went, just awesome. Johnny loved the Success, as they had all the good holoscene equipment and protomatter effects that allowed Johnny to enter wrapped in great wings of flame before the parched desrts of the Empty Quarter. Johnny strode up to the mike like a magnificent Djinn bathed in flame..

"These are rough times, people!", the crowd erupted in applause. "But we will survive the Sixth Extinction!" The crowd went wild. "But we have the seeds of a new Renaissance! Within the Archives are the sum total of humanity's experience, and in twenty years when the Daley Dome is finished in Chicago, we will sleep!" The crowd took on a hushed tone. "We will sleep in the arms of out mother, Mother Earth, as she heals herself for when we all emerge from the fire, like Phoenixes, to begin the New Age! Hit it!"

At that point, a grand animation of the dome erupting with all the world's riches like a hemispherical cornucopia, with the Earth turning green again. A new Age, Johnny said, with Humanity at the wheel.

After the concert, Kevin and Rachel did their thing, as they did, and Johnny and Manny went off to get drunk. You'd think that there would be better ways to alter your head by the 22nd Cen-

ture, but one has to trust in the wisdom of the Earth. If there were ways beyond the good old fashioned and those hooked to the body, we'd have found 'em. "It's all bullshit, it?" Manny said, kicking back a Kodiak. "All a sideshow to give us something to do while we fucking fry, right?"

Johnny, having heard this populist shit before, decided it was time. "Ok, man I;m going to level. Sorta, but not exactly."

Manny looked up, surprised. "What do you mean, man?"

Johnny leaned forward. "I've wanted to be able to talk about this stuff for years, but you were too young. You're starting Archive work next week, and better you hear it from me than some network protocol. Think you can handle it?"

Manny knew that he had to. "Above my pay grade.", Manny heard his dad Taan say. "Ok, scan me." Manny said.

Johnny suddenly shifted from His Pal Johnny Apocalypse to Chief Datatect John Patterson, Innovator of the Looms. "It's like this. As of 2110, we knew that geometrics disallowed populations over a certain level. The planet just can't support beyond a certain point. We knew that we could not save the people in the outlying areas."

"Right. Everybody knows that the flyovers are toast. That's why we still have the protection forces.", Manny said. This was pretty standard propaganda, and it was true. "The lower 3/4's of humanity are gone. Nothing we can do. The Archives were the best scenario for the lifeboat hypothesis. Everyone knows that. And in twenty years, we hop in our chrysalis to emerge as butterflies five hundred years later."

"Maybe. Inshallah, as the Sheikha says. I'll take you down to Tapestry in the Council Chamber tomorrow, and we'll talk. You're going to need to know, eventually." Johnny drew from his Ten Footer IPA and looked out over the Knik.

The two didn't say too much the rest of that night. Manny thought this was Serious, but he didn't

have a clue except for him being Future Head's epigenetic twin, as he hated the word clone, but Johnny sounded Serious, and he'd have to take his word at that.

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST - PRELUDE

That night, while Manny was sleeping, curled around his partner Taraneh, the dreams started coming. The same damned dreams he got when he started working the Sigilcasts in university. They were a huge success; this augmented reality/physical/holocaust derivatve. Plain holocausts imploded; SigilMedia took over in under a year globally. However, there were reports that isolated cases were hearing voices; having 'visions'. Most dismissed it as another generational New Age thing, made even more prescient by the coming of the Closing of the Domes.

But for Manny, this stuff had something strage about it – it felt weird. For him, the augments saw weren't just projections, they were real. He'd spin this or that tile, and felt like he was looking through a window, and not anywhere here, either. He never said anything about this, but when he researched, he saw archeological records and ethnographic work showing things that looked a lot like the symbols, but not quite, and it remained like a sliver in his mind.

But later, as the visions got clearer, he'd have dreams of someplace like Gakona, but more advanced. In these dreams, there was a lab. It seemed like something from a sci-fi 'cast from the 2170's – slick, clean, full of Holofaces.

There was this Woman, she was a Neo-Achmenian; called herself Taraneh, and he saw she worked with someone who looked like, his Brother. But this Future Head seemed cold, distant, efficient. Even moreso than his brother. And he seemed to have an intelligence that touched him in his dreams.

The two of them would meet a few times a week. She seemed kind, but guarded, like most Neo-Achmenians. Passionate but hard. She told him she knew his brother, and they cared about him very much. They would talk about the band,

his studies, and she would show him things through the Sigils; things you didn't normally see. She laughed, called them an old thing called "easter eggs" that were hidden in the software, but they seemed more real than that. They seemed like Visions, and when he asked her about that, she told him that was just New Age nonsense. For some odd reason, he eventually felt the visions weren't extraordinary anymore, even though others gave him odd looks when he used his codes on the Sigils, like the 463rd permutation, or the 685th, which brought up a finished Daley Dome, which was just confusing.

The moment he'd said anything, they introduced him to his brother's research assistant, Eunsook. She was still youthful looking, but starting to grey.

Later that year, he met an exchange student, who seemed just so familiar, she was a Neo-Achmenian, and seemed like a younger version of his friend Taraneh in the dreams, and that's what she said her name was. The hair, the eyes – all achingly familiar, but not. She said she felt like she knew him forever, and they fell in love immediately. However, because Manny was anything but Muslim, and her family would be disgraced by her being with anyone but a Neo-A, and her family might even kill him if they found out. So they were discreet, but they were also inseparable; but her decorum made it clear that in public, they were only friends.

But in private, there was no question that they were anything but just friends. If they had an hour alone, they would not come up for air until fifty-nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds. But the first time they were alone, when the time came, there seemed like the universe opened up for a moment, and he saw the Taraneh of his dreams with a look of shock on her face...

And the room shook; at that moment, it was registered that a 4.3 level earthquake took place at the nearest place on the fault. The young Taraneh just took it as a sign of fate, Kismet, what have you, and so it began. Manny felt like eventually he was either inevitably going to Die or Get Killed through his choices, or merely by the fact he was

who he was, so a fatalistic recklessness set in, and that reflected itself in his performances with the Horsemen, from drumming with walrus bacula to joining Johnny in the holoscene immolations. The crowd loved it, but after the performance at Seward's Success, it was time to reel him in, so he invited him in a week before his official Work with the New Anchorage Archive.

And the dreams didn't stop. However, after the first night with his Taraneh (Who we will, in the most confusing way possible, call her Taraneh – prime [Taraneh'} because we met the other one first) was very measured. Friendly, but now exceedingly professional at times, and his "Brother" joined in. Manny cried in his dreams the first couple times, as while this person seemed like his "brother", he obviously wasn't. He would ask him about their times during his childhood, but he only got the basics. This Future Head asked him about how much he knew about the Archive Project, how he figured in it, and whether he remembered getting the candy as a child. After that, all he remembered was him telling the dream Taraneh' about a "repressed epigenetic personality" about how it was forbidden for it to emerge, and then he never returned. She only appeared weekly or so after that, except for when he told her that Johnny was going to take him to the Tapestry, which he thought was a stupid move. It was.

Taraneh' became very interested in this. That night, she got intense. I mean she grilled him over anything he might know; about the Archive, what Johnny was doing, how he got the efficiency of the Looms up, whether he felt like himself lately.

And then she said something very strange. She asked him to think very closely about History. All the things that had been done to Others in the name of Others for the greater good, and whether he was willing to do the same. She confessed that she was, in fact, the same person he loved in this world, but just another iteration, and he had become sensitive to other probabilities in the Multiverse. Manny was told that he might be told to kill all of them to save his planet one day, and to think hard if that day would come, and furthermore, that the mission of the Archives was

not a tenth of what it seemed. She told him if he learned of this, he would have friends to help.

Manny woke up in a cold sweat, and he had to just lie still to process things. When he saw Taraneh’ that day, she noticed Manny looking at her at times as if he’d seen her for the first time, but decided not to say anything; it would all come out in time.

That would be very true.

BELLY OF THE BEAST

In the morning, Manny went down to Sector R, which led to the “authorized” areas of the New Anchorage Archive. The official story was that it was just that these areas were under construction, and would be opened in a couple years as the Archives would begin to open to the public. He went to the gate, saying that he had an appointment with Dr. Patterson.

“New recruit, huh? Gonna go see the Angel of the Apocalypse?”, the old guard said. John’s an interesting case, that one. Said he did some damned unethical things to get that loom working right, but that’s pretty locked down. Be careful.”

When Manny put his hand on the handscanner, the brush of air came over his palm as the least bit of skin was swept off. The scanner said: “Identity: Future Head Lakanoff, PhD. Access Granted.”

The old guy gave him a really odd glance, falling silent. That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. These things aren’t inaccurate – what are you, his clone?”

Manny momentarily got pissed off. “I prefer to say epigenetic brother, sir. I’m not him, but genetically, we’re identical.”

The guard became utterly businesslike. “The Archive is here to see Dr. Patterson. Let him in.”

With that, Manny felt like he was dropped off the side of Denali into God-Knows-What... “The Archive?”, Manny thought. What did he mean by that?

Manny went through any number of glassed in libraries and offices, each looking very modern and efficient. It all seemed like the project was well under way, and the community would enjoy this center for living and education. As he went further in, he passed by any number of quantum computing racks, with some of the new organic storage units, making the whole thing look like a cyborg hothouse, but he went on. He found the elevator to the Council chamber at the top of the Dome, and pressed Floor 665. Superstitious, Manny said to himself.

He left the elevator, and went down a long gantryway into a large rotunda. Inside, there was a large circular dais, with the ceiling open to the great dome above. It was a really beautiful day, with blue skies and the clouds above. Johnny and Suzi were at the far side of the rotunda, He looked over and called out to Manny, “Hey, Manny! Over here!”

As he walked over, he saw his old classmate, Dr. Suzi Beaufort, Now one of the Chief Archivists in New Anchorage, look at him, then shot a look at Johnny. “What in Raven’s name are you doing?” she spat. “He isn’t due to be online for a week, and she sure as hell shouldn’t be up here!”

Johnny walked over to Suzi, to place his hands on her shoulders in reassurance. “No, no, no!”, she barked. I’m not going to let you cowboy this time when we’re at such a crucial moment! We lost FH, I don’t want Manny to come on board too soon!”

“Suzi.”, Johnny said, staring into Suzi’s eyes. “I have reason to believe that he’s been in touch with the Prime researchers, and that we have to bring him up to speed. NOW.”

Suzi looked at him, taken utterly aback. “The Prime Universe team? How?”

Johnny crossed his arms. “Ever see how he works with a Sigilcast? Waaay too fast, and lots of combinations not in our lexicon. And have you noticed that he’s been with our iteration of Taraneh? Granted they’re nothing alike... Hey, Manny? Can

you excuse us a moment?”

Mainly because of being hit with so much so fast, Manny was a but stunned, so he did as Johnny asked, and began to look around.”

“Cool! Just don’t touch anything!” Johnny called out. “Suzi, keep it cool.”

“Dr. Patterson, Don’t.” Suzi became steel. “I’m telling you, if you screw this up, and if we can’t activate his Engrams from the backups he took from Future Head, we won’t be able to reboot his ontological archive, and we won’t be able to execute the Diaspora if Plan A doesn’t work. Manny doesn’t matter. We need Future Head back.”

“Calm down.” Johnny pleaded. “Nothing’s a problem until it’s a Problem.”

“Dr. Patterson,” Suzi intoned, hitting her Vulcan mark on cue. “Let me inform you that all our probabilities of survival across the board are in the .75 range at best, and it’s bad enough that we have to lose five and a half billion lives, we can’t afford to lose everyone. We need Future head to lead the Diaspora if there’s a Problem, as you say...”

THE VISION OF MERGEN (2276)
As Johnny was arguing with Susie about the fate of humanity, like everything they had devoted their lives to, that little thing, Manny had wandered into a large spherical room that hummed to life as he entered, all glyphs and test patterns. He wondered why it responded to him, maybe one of them had left access codes open, maybe because there was some kind of DNA lock and he was a genetic twin and epigenetic backup of Future Head Lakanoff; he didn’t know. But as he walked out the gantry to what seemed like an access pad, the roomed seemed to zoom through a graphic representation of a giant fractal room of glowing digital records, ending up in an infospace roughly reminiscent of a Buddhist painting of any number of heavens, and a daeva floated down to meet him. Glowing, indescribably beautiful, with wide azure eyes and a great halo of wavy dark hair, she raised a hand in salutation.

“Welcome to the New Anchorage Archive. Central interface. Brainscans indicate English as your default language, with elements of East Korean and Unungan, is this correct?”

Manny was surprised, interested, and a little intimidated. Was the tech here THAT advanced? “Yes, that’s correct.” He didn’t know how far he was in over his head, but he knew that making any false moves was out of the question. This was obviously Bigger Than Him, and his brother taught him that you treat these things with Respect.

The Lakshmi-surrogate smiled. “Thank you. You are the first non-Archivist I have encountered. The Archives have been created throughout the globe to safeguard humanity’s resources, knowledge, and basics of civilization for the next phase of our species’ role in the Multiverse. As humanity moves forward into the next stage of its development, the archives were collected as a resource created for the benefit of all the people forever after the conversion.”

A spike of cold electricity shot down his back, as this was definitely Bigger Than Him. Words weren’t his forte; he was a drummer and clone of a legendary neurophysicist, so we were “live”, and the game’s stakes were obviously Big. “Um. Could you tell me about the Archives and what they do?” Being someone who was merely a friend of an Archivist, and that the hot-damned Future of the World was hanging on this project, Manny thought this is the chance to hear the real story outside of the Holocasts.

The Lakshmi-surrogate receded as a simulated world sprang from her hand and it filled the space. “You have chosen operational Record 12 one seventeen: The Plan for the Second Renaissance of Humanity.” The voice showed him a dying Earth under a relentless Sun, domes glittering under the blistering heat. Inside, the inhabitants monitored the environment and traveled to still habitable zones in Antarctica via the huge silver airships designed originally for the Venusian upper atmosphere. The voice went on.

“Although humanity had met its goals for mini-

mizing carbon emissions by 2100, atmospheric models showed a 35% potential for greenhouse runaway by 2400. The Archive initiative was created to safeguard Anthropocenic civilization until atmospheric carbon attenuation and repopulation is achieved. Or, the ontologic migration to alternate probabilities.”

Those last three words hit him. Hard. Repopulation is achieved. “Computer. Interface. Whatever you’re called...”

The room cut him off in a friendly but direct manner. “You many define any number of salutations, but my default name is Mergen...”

“All right, all right. Mergen.” He said. “Can you tell me what the hell you mean by repopulation and what the hell this has to do with the Archives?”

The goddess-analogue then proceeded to tell him what the Archivists were not telling humanity. It was not that people were going to bake or anything that drastic, but food, water, methods for distribution, were all collapsing, and would not be sustainable for the six billion people existing on the planet at the time, and that this number was unsustainable in itself. She went on to say that back in the twentieth century, with the levels of production and agricultural sustainability in place, studies suggested two billion was the maximum number allowable...

Where this was taking Manny was not place he ever wanted to be, or wanted to be. “So, Mergen...”, he asked, “What is the Archival scenario for the repopulation of the Earth?”

“Simply put,” she said, the mane of blue-black hair swirling around her, as if it were alive, “Studies proved that humanity would not depopulate using self-governance methods nor genocide, so it was decide to let natural homeostatic processes take their course...”

Manny was sweating, in shock of the clinicality of Mergen’s tone. “Such as?” he said through his tightening throat throat.

“There are only so many causes one has at their disposal.” she said machinically, “Famine, war, drought, pestilence.”

“The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” “If you will.” The construct said. “Or merely the forces of Nature. Upon the completion of the last Archive in 2280 in Chicago, the domes will then be sealed, along with their inhabitants, in perfect homeostasis. This will occur until the system’s processes attenuate and reach a position in which the Archives can be opened and repopulation can occur.”

Manny’s mind was melting over the proposition that ‘Mergen’ was unfolding before him, but there was still one white-hot question that was burning its way out of his mind. “Question: And what if homeostasis does not occur?”

“Restricted information.” Mergen said. “Authorized personnel may access through DNA recognition. Please place your hand on the interface panel for scanning.”

Although he did not have the extensive training of his ‘brother’, many figured that Future Head Lakanoff might have clearance, and he was a genetic double of him. He placed his hand on the panel, felt something like a passing of a large paintbrush over his hand, and the construct replied.

“Genetic Signature: Future Head Lakanoff, FH000-46692-16309. Access Granted. Welcome back, Dr. Lakanoff. It has been some time; the WorldMind has missed you, and your engram-self has been hard at work. Do you wish to review your public statement regarding the ontological migration to Universe Probabilities .456389577 to .4563897899, or do you wish to review protocols for mass consciousness transfer?”

He took a breath, as he had no idea what half of she was saying. Worldmind? Engram self? No time for that – Johnny and Suzi were bound to come back sometime. Mainland Slayer Lakanoff replied, using the best imitation of his pompous, abstract, affect-less, son-of-a-bitch brother (at least what he remembered of him at this mo-

ment). “Mergen, thank you. A detailed run-down of the logistical chain is not necessary, we can do that later. Can we review the public narrative?”

“Very well.”, she replied. ‘Mergen’ then repeated a public announcement explaining that in the case of an atmospheric runaway condition in this universe, something called a “quantum ontology asymmetry” would allow the transfer of consciousnesses from neighboring probabilities. She went on that the half billion inhabitants of the Archives could be offworlded within a week to neighboring universes, stranding their entangled selves that they switched places with, here. Along with the five and a half billion who were literally baking outside.

At this point, Manny’s consciousness was a singularity.

This could not happen. This would not happen.

After what seemed like an eternity, Manny felt a presence at the entryway. Johnny and Suzi standing there, apparently for some time.

John stared at Manny; no longer his rocker pal Johnny Apocalypse, but Senior Research Archivist John Patterson. “Mainland Slayer...”, Johnny said with a steely composure, “I guess you understand things a lot better now. The Tapestry, the band, all that. How did you get into your brother’s files?”

“I guess so, man. Family secret. We’re a little closer to each other than we let on. We’re genetic duplicates; even with variations from slight differentiations, out DNA is similar enough...”

Suzi stepped forward a couple steps. “Manny?”

John looked into Manny’s eyes. “You know you can’t leave now. Ever. We can give you a position with the Archive and you can be of service – given your ‘gift’. Your brother hasn’t been seen for five years now, and we’ve been trying to break FH’s encryptions. We need your DNA for that. But people can’t know about the function of the Archives. It’s essential to our survival.”

Manny had a feral look as he crouched in Johnny’s direction, and began back across the gantry from the center of the room...

“Whose survival? Yours? What about Theirs? It’s genocide!” Johnny stood across from Manny, looking directly into his eyes. “Manny. What would be better? Humanity didn’t solve the situation while it could in the 21st, so we’re letting natural processes do it. What’s better? The choice between killing everyone, and putting some of us in lifeboats?”

Manny shot back an accusing glance. “And if it doesn’t work? A half billion of us just move into the bodies of people something like us in a parallel universe?”

Johnny placed his hand on Manny’s shoulder. “Manny, we worked it out. In doing the transfer, we will have created a quantum probability in the blink of an eye.”

Manny shot back an incredulous glance. “You mean you’re going to create a universe for the remnants of humanity to just take over?”

Johnny smiled. “More or less. And the people in that universe will not have known that their twelve billion years of history literally did not exist a second before we pressed that button, because we willed it into existence.”

Manny glared. “You know damned well that’s not the case. They’re helping us, man, and you want to do to them exactly what got done to everybody throughout time just because you want their toys. Mergen didn’t tell me, Taraneh did.”

Johnny huffed under her breath. “What would she know about any of this?”

“Not ours, John. Yours.” Johnny gave a steely glare, knowing that limited intra-probability communication was possible through ‘soft’ methods. Low bandwidth. Dreams. Hallucinations. Old stuff. Being close to the same people in different universes. He probably did know.

Mainland Slayer Lakanoff sprang at Johnny

Apocalypse, and the two backed into the Archive Council Chamber for the New Anchorage node.

MORTAL COMBAT

So, you know what comes next. Suzi and Johnny fight Manny for the future of humanity in the Council chamber. By the way, the center of each Archive has this sort of Chamber for meetings and holocast conferences among all the Archive Nodes. Mainland Slayer, just like his clone-brother, was a fairly big guy, and had these fantasies about his heritage, like old science fiction tropes about rogue Unungans on nuclear motorcycles and the like. While he never learned the harpoon, your writer did consider having him wield an ulu, but thought that jingoistic, and how in the hell would someone who didn't have top clearance get a skinning knife into and Archive Council Chamber? Anyway, these Chambers are about 50 meters in diameter with a Dr. Strangelove-style dais going around the circumference. And since Johnny and his team, like Sheikha Hamda in Dubai, Jussi in Svalbard, and Bogosi in Durban, have been using the Loom tech for mass data storage, a Master Tapestry is on any chamber wall, growing as the Archive does, reflective of the regional culture. Needless to say, the Apocalypse Tapestry of New Anchorage is the crowning achievement of the age.

Yes. Back to the fight.

You might see what comes next. Johnny, who has more of a rock star physique and has the street behind him, and Suzi, who has a dancer's build and form, make a good match for the drummer (and roadie) for the Four Horsemen. Revelations of how Manny learned of the possibility of the Archives not being "For All the People, Forever", first through dreams, visions and then putting the dots together through intuitions he got as boyfriend of this universe's Taraneh Mossadegh. However, he did not anticipate that being a replicate twin of Future Head would allow him access to Central Records and learn the true nature of the Project, and thus, the reaction that led to this struggle. But, as they say, since the cards are on the table, you have to play them.

Johnny and Suzi triangulate Manny, allowing for a body check that sent him backward over the dais, with a number of loom picks impaling his side as he struck one of the machines, Johnny scraping he head as he flew into it as well. Manny, part enraged, and part panicked for the desperation of his situation, flung Suzi into a backflip that she caught single flat-footed, with a dull snap in her knee sending her down in an indigo flash of raw agony. Johnny, in a similar adrenaline rush, seemed to take a mortal blow to the head from Manny with little notice, only to slam him repeatedly into the dais to unconsciousness, himself slumping next to where Suzi had landed. If nothing else, it looks like Johnny and the Four Horsemen weren't going to tour again anytime soon.

Johnny picked himself up off the ground. His head felt like it was cracked open in six places, but he knew he was going to live. Seems like the same might not be the case for Manny, as he lay motionless next to the end of the Council dais. Little waves of hammer-pain banged on Johnny's head, as he realized Susie was cradling it, dabbing at the oozes.

Off in the distance, the klaxon sounded. "Containment breach detected. Central core lockdown in ten minutes."

Susie wasn't going much of anywhere either, as being slammed into the Council dais and spun like a rag doll had ripped her ACL. "Shit, Johnny – What're we going to do?"

"Not much, for the moment. When Ivo tried to breach the Archive security system, it decided to seal the complex off. Protocol says that it'll check again every twelve hours. Unless the data gathering routines are totally messed, we've got about that long to chill until the alert status resets. We'll be fine."

This didn't give Susie much comfort, sitting half a kilometer down in a major subduction zone. Even though they were in the foundations of Denali, the fact that her mom died in the Quake of 62, the second largest recorded, the one that was like, maybe a hundred miles off, never ever left her. But for a moment, she laid back in the dull

light of the Council chamber, Johnny moaning slightly as she shifted. As she looked up at the wall, at the massive expanse of the Apocalypse Tapestry, the repository of the world's known climate data, she noticed that it looked ripped where Johnny's head hit it.

But it didn't look like torn fabric. It looked more like a wound or a scrape.

And it was bleeding. A spike of ice replaced what used to be her spine ten seconds ago, and she tried to wrap her head around it. As she watched another drop of fuschia hit the ground, she gasped. "Johnny, what the FUCK is that?"

Johnny rolled his eyes up to meet hers. "Detail of the design. To up the data capacity, we had to make it a synthetic organism. It's alive..."

Susie's eyes went the size of abalone shells. "You mean, that whole thing's alive?" Johnny nodded. "Yeah. I just told people that it was hydroponic or some sort of bullshit like that... But it's technically a SynthOrg. Give it a little light or heat and some humidity, and it'll be fine. It's like a Bromeliad. The only difference is that it holds the world's earth science in it. And it has multiple data redundancies, so if it heals there's no loss."

Susie thought that she'd never signed up for this in her Library Science courses. As she looked down at Johnny's now swelling head, she saw something strange near one of his lacerations. "Hey. Where'd you hit your head?"

Johnny grunted. "Left temple, why?"

"Well, there's a little fuzzy red patch there, and it sort of looks... Alive."

Johnny gave Susie a side glance like she'd told him that the roof was going to fall in. "Oh, shit..." he said.

Susie's vision suddenly went white with panic, because Johnny Apocalypse NEVER said that. "What do you mean?"

He said, "I don't know, but I might be learning a lot more about hurricanes, real quick..."

They sat there in the quiet of the Council Chamber as the airlocks engaged and the facility locked down for the next twelve hours.

A long twelve hours.

Susie came out after the airlocks reengaged.

Johnny did, too. And a little bit more.

And Manny would make it too, with the addition of a lot of knowledge deep, deep, inside. In fact, inside the site of that abdominal wound, to be exact.

But that's a story for another time.

