CHARACTERS IN STORY

• John “Johnny” Kley:
• Clay Jones:
  Father of Paul Jones, husband of Carla. Unemployed. Laid off due to mental instability. Seeing a shrink for help: Dr. Schussel in Bentford Clinic.
• Paul Jones:
  Son of Clay Jones. Final trace of the “Key”. Likes sweets. Has the Dragon Key imbedded in him as a special splinter.
• Carla Jones:
  Mother seed of Paul Jones. Homemaker and works with stained glass.
• Dinty McGinnis:
  Crazy old lady next door to the Jones family in Bentford.
• Dr. Thomas “Tom” J. Schussel:
  Served as Paul Jones psychiatrist in Bentford Clinic. Has lived since the time of the Sumerians. Has been many great physician’s and mystics through time. Wants to block the Dark Hall and the Linkles. He was forced to assist the Watchers to develop the clay clones.

• Beratu:
• Herm:
  The cyborg. Of the Sympasium Breed. Feel they are superior beings. Son of Kalmarian.
• Anubis the Linke:
  The Linkle are a race from Sirius that have been working on earth for tens of thousands of years to perfect a race of information gathering clones to penetrate the universe.
• Isis:
  Leader of race from the Pleiedes that lost space wars with the Jehovahs in the third millennia BC
• Anghii:
  The good creator: “Feldsum, Wencil-aarum, Oniel, Emman
• Siinga:
  The bad creator, the Leviathan: lives in a black hole in the constellation Cygnus. “Lucifer, Beelzebub, Scratch, Satan, Cellum-abah, Orpheum, Krun”

DEFINITIONS

Kley  French for “key”

Bentford  City where Jones family lives

Dark Hall  The organization producing clones with the purpose to either gather information or to reorganize reality. Lead by Anubis with contacts in all world governments—including the Pentagon.

Lost Human  Herm’s description of the clay clones

Splinter  Tracking devices in clones so the Dark Hall may track them and gather data

Apes of Toth Mere  guard animals (or so it is believed) aboard the Tarachna Mar, the Linkle Mother Ship

Tarachnoid Splinter
  A device which can incapacitate and destroy cyborgs. Developed by Linkles.

Beeznit  Angry, savage insectoids that come from Orion. Suck out the brain fluid of other life forms. Hate high heats.

Quin-rats  Rodent forms that live inside space ships in intergalactic space. Can live in a total vacuum for three months.
Nadii A healing, antibiotic herbal ointment made from May-blooming Tibetan flower

Dragon Key A special splinter forced into Paul Jones’ shoulder to strike at the Leviathan.

OTHER DETAILS

In Thrace, about 1000 BC, after 10,000 years of experimentation, the Linkle were able to succeed in developing a strong clay clone form with the help of Dr. Schussel.

Schussel believes that the clones are only to enhance the data of Linkles so they may grab more territory and power. He has no idea till well into the story how great that power grab is meant.

THE SPLINTER

*by Rick Tobin and John Hancock*

1. THE SUBWAY
   A. THE CROWD PREDATOR
   B. THE AMNESIA SYNDROME
   C. FEAST OR FAMINE
   D. ASSAULT AND BATTERY PARK
   E. THE ACCIDENTAL ESCAPE
2. THE STREET SIDE TABLEAU
   A. DISORIENT BRUNCH
   B. AUDIT MEMORY TRAILS
   C. THE SHADOW DOESN’T KNOW
   D. STINKING’ KEYS
   E. SITTING UP WITH AN OLD FRIEND
3. THE FAT LADY CHOKES
   A. PHANTOM OF THE DETERGENT
   B. SUDS AND SPUDS
   C. SPANKING THE DOG
   D. RUBBING HIS NOSE IN IT
   E. NYLON HOSE
   F. APPROACHING LIGHT SPEED
4. BREAKING INTO THE YELLOW WARD
   A. THE RELUCTANT POSSE
   B. SYNCHRONIZING WATCHES
   C. JIMMY THE LOCK
   D. SILVER BUCKLE
   E. SCAR TISSUE
5. VOMIT AND VACUUMS
   A. CONCRETE BLOCK PARTY
   B. SHEDDING SKIN
   C. EULOGIES
   D. THUNDERSTORMS AND SLUICE BINS
   E. ALL THE KING’S MEN
   F. THRICE PAYS FOR ALL
   G. CULTURAL ANTI MATTER

1. THE SUBWAY
Kley did not intend to enter the subway car. In fact, he was really not thinking about anything at all when the sweaty press of New York’s most desperate carried him in bodily. Against his will? He wasn’t sure. He was too tired to even compose an intelligible “hey, what goes here?...” simply too exhausted to remember why he was standing in the public outhouse of the platform to begin with. There was a metallic aura buzzing in the underside of his brain somewhere. Hovering, or creeping, just out of range of the most peripheral sensibility. Where was it exactly he needed to get off? How was it that he came to be here?

He stared around the cabin, searching for some talisman that would jog him into full wakefulness. A deep rumbling in his bowels reminded him he better be off the subway soon and find a sanitary facility. He tried to take in a deeper breath and found a cool air stream, thin as paper, hugging the top of the car and leaving droplets of condensation around the circular air condition vent. His dry lips stretched upward to suckle on the metal teat.

Before he could fill his lungs completely, the tracks jolted to the left, and the mass pushed him flat against a metal silver pole. Unable to extricate himself, Kley tried to convey with his eyes both a modest and a fervent plea: Excuse me, Sorry, can’t help it. Forgive this tattered human rag.

1A. THE CROWD PREDATOR

“Let not thy Left hand know what thy right hand doeth.” Matthew. V1.3.

Clay rolled to his left, causing his three-day growth to rush against the plastic wheel cover of the ‘64 Plymouth station wagon.

“Sorry,” he whimpered in his sleep. “Sorry,” he whispered again, as he began to lose control.

“Shit,” he grunted as the first trickles of urine ran warm and unstoppable onto his leg.

Clay forced open his left eye, though the scum of sleep bound it shut like the grout of a master mason. He swore again, thinking he’d ripped his eyelashes out of their sockets.

The starlight was blocked in the heavy shadows of the woods. A perfect place to camp. He’d told his son this would be a great experience, but the tent poles had failed. It was the back of the station wagon for them, just as it had been for his father’s failed camp outs.

Clay listened for his son’s breathing. He was still asleep, unaware of his father’s shame and anger.

“Damn these dreams,” he grumbled. His son moved restlessly, so Clay clamped down. He wondered if the mess he’d made had gotten to the down of the sleeping bag. The airtight car was so stifling; no air to be had. The windows were curtained with the rivulets of water trapped from the camper’s breath. This wasn’t camping, just another prison without a hope.

Clay slid out from his bag and surged like a fat caterpillar, up and over the front seat. He pawed, blindly, over the surface of the wagon. There. He had the plastic cover and wrenched it as quietly as he could from the roof. The bulb refused to give way easily, but then popped free, out of his hand and into some dark corner of the floor where no human hand could reach.

Someday, Clay thought, I’ll get my hands on the asshole engineer who designs these things and put his balls in a ringer washer.

Now assured that the light would not wake his son, Clay pulled up on the bare metal door handle. He could feel the grease of a thousand fingers that had pulled on it before. The humidity of this oxygen-less tank had given it new life and fattened it: like some glob of life waiting to invade a wary space traveler.

Clay swallowed his revulsion and slowly pulled up, waiting for the pins to loosen the latch quietly. The latch sprang. The draw bridge fell, crushing the thousand mirrors lined below it, next to the microphones leading to the twelve-foot high mega speakers.

His son rose, banging his head on the roof of the station wagon.

“Dad, is that you? Dad, where are you?”

Clay bristled at the terror in that young voice. Why did he have to continue to fail him, just like his own father? “It’s okay, Paul,” Clay whispered, forgetting that there was no reason to be secretive. “Just going out for a smoke, son.” “I’m scared, Dad. You aren’t going far, are you? I need to go.”

“No, I’ll just be back by the trailer. I’ll check everything out and call you outside in a minute. Can you hold it that long?” “I think so. How come the bulb didn’t come on when you opened the door?” “Must have burned out. No problem. You’ve got the flashlight. I’ll be right back.”
Clay pushed his sore, crimped bones up from the slimy vinyl car seat, and into the brisk, fresh air. The woods were threateningly quiet; the quiet that makes a mouse into a mammoth, and a stumbling armadillo into Leviathan, come to eat the world and its memory.

“Oh Christ,” he cursed, as he felt about his sweat pants to find how much damage had been done. Soaked. “Shit”, he cursed again, as he kicked the U-haul trailer tire.

With a mired pride, he pulled back the tarp over the short bed of the trailer, and reached for his valise. Clay shot back. He cried out a foolish gasp.

The back window of the station wagon rolled down. “Dad are you okay? Dad, are you out there?”

“Yeah, just a minute Paul. It’s nothing,” Clay flipped up the Zippo and peered into the U-Haul. A huge black millipede had wrapped itself around the leather handle. His rage turned to laughter. Well, he thought, you’re about as useless as some old fart humping away at an inflatable party doll. That old handle won’t give you much satisfaction.

Clay pulled the plated Romeo off his beloved mannequin. He tossed the ancient life form off to the pine needles and sand. A quick flick of the snap locks and Clay was into fresh, clean, dry underwear. He grabbed the wet washrag from the sponge bath the night before and headed to a dark spot on the side of the camping pad.

No one must ever see this, especially Paul, he thought. The “other life” as Clay called it, was beginning to intrude more and more each year. This other Clay, tucked away in his subconscious mind, was cutting out new territories. It was taking away parts of his decency, and his humanity.

The rag was shocking against his loins as he rubbed away the soil of his night dreams. Clay stood naked from the waist down, searching for a target. He heard the rustle just beyond him. A “something” crawling in its dark destiny; searching for food, fodder, or like the millipede, some ghastly 1000-legged fuck.

“Take that,” Clay barked, as he pointed his bladder’s contents at the unknown enemy. It was only now that he became aware of the buzzing rising out of the weeds. His urine had aroused a squadron of the woodland’s favorite blood-letters.

Clay forced his issue forth and rushed to slide on his fresh shorts and a pair of thick jeans. “Bastards” he muttered, as he rushed back to the trailer for the Off.

Once covered with the acrid mist, he stepped back the battle zone. “Come get me if you dare, you little sap suckers!” he challenged. In the meantime, he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Some of the night’s tension seemed to be cut by that first taste. Clay kicked back the litter from years of pine tree defoliation, creating a shallow, moist rut. The sand swallowed up the moist jockey shorts and the gym pants. He was just covering them over when the light from the industrial strength flashlight hit him.

“Are you all right, Dad? I had to go so bad I couldn’t wait, and then when you didn’t come back I got worried. What’s down there?”

“Geez, get that light off me! Trying to blind me?

Clay thought quickly, wondering if his son had seen the blush run into his face.

“Thought I dropped the lighter. That Zippo grandpa gave me. Got it right here.” Clay flipped it open, remembering the sound from childhood. His father would always flip it back like that whenever he was ready to philosophize on the Great War, or politics in the “Real World”.

Paul peered into the darkness, recognizing his father by the glow of the cigarette pirouetting in the void.

“Wish you’d quit smoking Dad. It really does bother me.”

“I know son, I’ll try again. It’s just not that easy.”

Clay put his arm around his son, leading him back to the Plymouth. His mind filled with the rage of his own failures, as a man, as a father. He burned to put his hands around the throats of the supervisors who had fired him, the bankers who had taken his home, and the engineer who put an impossible bulb in the courtesy light on the Plymouth.

“Forgive this tattered human rag,” he screamed. Kley was outside the subway car, pushing a savage knuckle into the executive’s throat. The rush of the subway cars, inches from their struggle, wafted a stench of ozone and heated steel through their nostrils. The shocked stares of thousands of commuters passed over the assailant as he squeezed the life out of the suit pinned to the marble station floor.

“Never again will you take my job, take my home, or design those little fucking bulbs!”

The words scrambled useless and unheard over the unconscious body of the computer designer as the two hundred dollar tie broke his neck and his carotid artery.
Slowly, like a drenching fog, Kley came to himself. Or at least he came to whatever he was, whoever he was. He looked down and saw there was brilliant red blood on his hands and forearms. Terrified, he wiped them on his overcoat in broad clumsy motions, and realized for the first time he had a green hospital gown on underneath his overcoat. He quickly dropped to his knees as though punched viciously in the solar plexus.

Once on platform level, he came upon two new horrible bits of information; first, a man’s body lay directly in front of him covered in the same brilliant red blood that soaked into his sleeves, and second, horrified stares around him were giving way to increasing waves of alarm. People were slinking away from him. That was good, but he felt sure that in no time that direction of movement would reverse, and someone would be approaching down to his end of the platform. Possibly many persons. People with guns and handcuffs and less than charitable dispositions. This became the one clear thought he could hang on to with any certainty. I’ve got to get away, he ordered himself, and at the same time realized that he did not have the slightest idea where to run.

Kley hopped over the edge of the platform and ran off into the pitch hollows of the tunnel. The bowels of the city rumbled and roiled as if he were an intestinal flu being flushed through the spastic colon of a great behemoth. His muscles felt drained and rubbery and with every breath come a taste of blood and acid. And something else: something metallic and poisonous. As he ran another noise rang in the chambers of the beast. The sound of alarm. He ran faster.

Between ragged breaths, he caught glimpses of shiny eyes on the underpinnings of the tunnel walls. Bright soulless eyes that followed him as he passed, and seemed to close in behind him. With his lungs fair to bursting, Kley stopped, hunkered down and grabbed his knees to keep from collapsing. Behind him and to the right he heard rustling noises. Hungry movements. At first he thought rats, but then another noise to his left and he realized the movements sounded too large for mere rodents. It occurred to him that if blood had a smell, he was now covered in it. Predators would surely be drawn to that smell, to him. A vague new terror struck him as the possibility of being arrested by the authorities suddenly seemed far preferable to being dragged down into nameless dark passages.

He was midway between stops, in the darkest part of the tunnel. Lights from the platforms ahead and behind glimmered like ice atop the rails. Something impossibly big occluded the rail light briefly behind him, so briefly, he couldn’t be sure he actually saw anything.

Kley tried to pull in a deep breath, but found the stitch in his side barely let him take in the shallowest sip of air. It would have to do. He started to run. Primal fear was driving his legs now, and the light from the next subway platform became the juggling crosshair he aimed for. Once or twice he stumbled, but he hardly noticed as his gait turned to a hypnotic inner scream for escape. Inside his mind he counted steps like an automaton, and a smaller, more frightened ear listened and counted unknown slithery things. Three,... four, five or six. Blood pounded in his temples and his chest felt as though it would explode for escape. Inside his mind he counted steps like an automaton, and a smaller, more frightened ear listened and counted unknown slithery things. Three,... four, five or six. Blood pounded in his temples and his chest felt as though it would explode for escape. 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1C. FEAST OR FAMINE

And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. Kings II. Chapter 2: Verse 9.

He pressed against the indent on the front door, forgetting about the unexpected soreness in his shoulder. Paul hadn’t turned the doorknob fast enough to let him through.

“What’s the matter Clay,” asked his wife, as she stepped into the entry way.

“Don’t really know. Slept the wrong way in the station wagon, I guess. Feel like somebody hit my side and shoulder with a jackhammer.

“Need a massage?”

“Thanks babe, but I’ll pass.”

“Oh, the big macho man again, back from the woods. I wished you let me help when you get these weird pains.”

Clay dropped the sleeping bags and the ice cooler. He took a deep breath and turned to question Carla, and dig out what she intended by that crack.

“What do you mean by my “weird pains”?” “I just...”

“Just what? Just thought I was suffering delusions again. Well, have a look at this delusion”

Clay pulled back his shirt to reveal a huge black and yellow mark that stretched down the side of his body.

“And how about this” he continued, as he pulled back the hair from his forehead. A brilliant red scar raked across his light skin.

I’m sorry, Clay. God, we ought to take you to the hospital. Paul, what happened to your father last night?”

Paul shrugged his shoulders and continued piling the camping gear in the hall. He looked at the bruises and grimaced.

“Dad, did you fall when you went out of the car?”

“I don’t know;” Clay replied. “I don’t know much of anything anymore. I think I may be losing my mind...and maybe my soul.”

Clay wandered to the hall bathroom, edged toward the toilet, and shut the door. The hollow core construction echoed like a canoe battering against a rocky shore. His wife and son stood in the hall, holding each other, while they stared and wondered about the man barricaded in the rest room.

Clay’s head pressed against his brain, straining like a cable ready to snap from an overload. He looked into the mirror, wishing it would all go away: the dreams, the pains, the rash actions. He stared at himself in the mirror and decided to play the game from childhood. He shut off the bathroom light and stretched his face into a horrible grimace. Then, with his face close to the mirror, he flipped the light on. The shock of a new, growling face would always scare him, and sometimes make the uneasy dreams and hallucinations disappear. But this time was different.

“Aaaaah,” he snapped, as the face in mirror was not only grotesque, but someone else’s image. The scar was there, all right, but instead of his own thirty-five year old, red-headed face, there was an older man, unshaven, haggard, and full of desperation. The salt. and-pepper hair draped in greasy traces over a deeply tanned skin. The eyes were black, without a border between the iris and pupil. They seemed burning coals, as the tight visor-like lids only let a bit of their fire be seen.

“This is the worst doctor,” Carla whispered into the phone. “I don’t think he should be here, like this. I don’t think Paul and I should be here, either.”

Clay pushed his ear against the cool bathroom walls. He could hear Carla talking to someone, in a low tone. There was no one else in the house, and she never talked like that to Paul. It had to be the hospital. She would send him there again...again to be poked and probed by the butchers of Bentford, as he called them. Bentford only had one clinic that could deal with Clay’s symptoms. He was convinced that they only wanted to use him for a new paper or a research grant. But Carla was working with them. Trying to turn him into their guinea pig.

“Have to get out,” he whimpered. Clay pulled the sliding window out and set it into the shower. He pressed the tabs for the screen and was out on the back lawn in five seconds. He still had the car keys in his pockets.

Clay held the keys up to his face, in the mid-morning light. “Got you, my precious,” he chortled, in a Golem imitation.

The KEYS, he thought. He focused on their majesty, their symmetry and flash in the sunlight. The lines and creases of the metal. The imperfection of the lines from the forge. The name and number so carefully crafted. KEYS. KEYS. KEYS. The word became a cresendo. Clay was delirious under the tone and vision of Keys.

Keys were the drug: the freedom, the power, the authority in humanity’s wake. They were escape and security in one package. They were wealth and fame, strength and stealth, and the tools of a knight or general.

Flecks of saliva formed on his lips as he turned around and around. Clay, the Sufi dancer, spun with the glittering handful of magic metal beans. His knee glanced against the steel teeth of the Plymouth’s grill. It tore him back into the world of flesh, fear, and paranoia.
“Damn, what am I doing? Clay pounded his hand against the car top. The thud echoed down the empty suburban streets. A door opened two houses down, and a head popped out to investigate.

“Clay Jones, what is ever the matter with you?” The spinster of the cul-de-sac edged out onto her groomed concrete stairway and pointed a decrepit digit toward the Jones home. “You make such a racket when you know Mr. Thompson is trying to sleep. You know he’s got those sores that…”

“Oh go fuck yourself,” Clay screamed back. He didn’t wait to watch the puckered response on Dinty McGinnis’ face. His foot was on the gas, and the car was veering back, out of the driveway before he realized he was escaping.

Got to get out, got to get anywhere. Piece of shit life, never worked out. Never got a decent break. Why don’t you all just leave me alone?”

Carla Jones tore the door open as the roar of the station wagon sent shudders through the house. She pushed her son back, in case there was some danger, or maybe so he wouldn’t see his father gone mad. “Oh my God, Oh my god,” she cried, as she rushed back in to get the phone.

“911, this is Carla Jones at 2310 Renton Lane in Bentford. You’ve got to stop my husband before he hurts someone, or himself. Yes, I’ll wait.”

Carla sat on the floor and tugged at the carpet as the dispatcher handled two other more important calls.

“Are you still there,” the dispatcher asked, when finally returning.

“For the love of God, you’ve got to stop him. He’s half crazy.”

“We’ve sent an officer to your address. Is he armed? Is he trying to get in?”

“No, no. Of course not. He’s not here. He just drove out of here in a mad rush. He could be anywhere by now. He’s been seeing a doctor, Doctor Schussel over at the Bentford Clinic. He’s gone this week but he’s had my husband on Prozac for several weeks now. He’s been depressed and he just came back from a camping trip all beat…”

“Camping trip?” the voice asked. “Did he have any weapons when he went camping.”

“I told you no. What is your problem? Can’t you hear me I’m going to go look for him myself. He’s in a green, 1986 Plymouth station wagon. There’s a dent on the back left fender. He’s wearing a red plaid hunting jacket.”

Carla slammed the phone down. She pulled Paul into the hall and kneeled in front of him. Her nose invaded his face.

“You must do exactly as I say, Paul. Stay here, near the phone, and tell anyone who calls that your mother has gone to find your fa….no, don’t do that. Forget that!”


“Just stay here,” she replied, “and when the police come, open the door and tell them I’ve taken the Honda to go look for your father. Do you understand?” She continued to stare into Paul’s face, begging to find understanding. Paul only showed fear and confusion.

“Okay, mom, I’ll tell the police that you went to find Dad. What’s the matter? What’s wrong with Dad?”

“I can’t tell you now, Paul,” she stammered, “just know that I love you very much, and so does your father. Don’t ever forget that. Now lock the door behind me, and don’t let anyone in except the police, including your father.”

“You mean I can’t let Dad in?”

“No, not even your father.”

“But he has a key!”

“Then if he comes in the front door, you go out the back and go over to Mrs. McGinnis’ house. Got it?”

“Sure. But mom, I’m scared.”

Paul’s voice cracked as a tear began to drip from his eye. Carla could see his skinny legs shaking against the hall wall. It was a terrible weight to throw on a child so unexpectedly.

“Never mind, just go over to Mrs. McGinnis now. Tell her daddy is sick and Mommy went to the hospital to help him. Can you do that, honey?”

Paul nodded weakly. They were out the door, with Carla wrapping her protective arms around her son. Once she saw him at Dinty’s door, knocking at the white paint like he wanted to chip it off, she felt she could go after Clay. Carla pulled the Honda out of the garage and was speeding down the suburban streets to the Interstate. He’d go there, she thought, the quickest way out of town. Probably head north, towards Sheraton or Castle Rock: the pattern he’d followed before. Another suicide attempt.

Clay looked over the jagged corners and peninsulas of steel-hard granite in the quarry below him. He’d driven south, towards Mayfield. The heat rising from the pit below bit at his eyes and nostrils. The constant dust made it hard to breath while he winced at the din of the pile driver, tearing the blast holes into this invasion of mother earth. He wallowed in the vast cuts, the inner gouges and gashes strewn over the countryside. He remembered over the vista and placed his childhood haunts here, where squirrel and rabbit hunting were a juvenile past time. The red-tailed hawk had lived in the elms of that forest,
swooping and beguiling the skyward glances of a young, carefree Clay Jones. He’d felt his first broken bone here, as he climbed over the tortured limbs and

    trunk of the elms left by the clearing crews. Bentford Granite and Gravel took the trees, the squirrels, and the rabbits. They took the hawk, with its protective glare.

    Clay could feel the eyes of the long-departed creatures burning into him. He felt them tear a him, begging him to protect their home. They would overlook his wanton killing sprees if he would just save their forest. But he couldn’t then, or now. He only wanted to join them in this infernal grave. A grave deep enough to hold all the troubles and madness in his soul.

    Clay edged closer to the precipice, sliding a few rocks over the lip. He listened for the scurry of falling dirt, gravel, and rock down the balustrade of granite. It was quiet, and then the trickle and tinkle of concussions barely audible between the drills percussion. He thought of rolling, like a barrel over the side; or maybe he’d fly, like the hawk, spying over the labors of some overweight crane operator. Then the pile driver stopped.

    Clay looked over the slippery drop, sliding forward like a snake to its bowl of milk. His beady eyes trying to pierce the dust and sudden quiet. The heat still rose up, but so did a new cloud of dust. A stretch limousine was in the pit. An oddity. So out of place that Clay chuckled. Was it the pimp of the pit... some Mafioso boss coming to dump a body in the gravel and rock? The FBI on a search for a Most Wanted Criminal secretly working the quarry?

    Clay didn’t have to wait long for an answer. The limo turned out of a shadow to reveal the logo of Bentford Granite and Gravel. It had to be Chisholm Anderst, the President and founder of “Grab It” and “Grovel” as Clay had dubbed them. Here was the man who had taken the forest and all the life in it.

    The car stopped next to the now inactive pile driver. All of the giant trucks and the shovel had ceased work. A small crowd of strong, tanned men stood around the limousine as the driver opened the back door. A short, wide, suited figure rolled out of the back seat. His dark sunglasses were surrounded by gold frames that sent reflections slashing over the walls of the quarry. The noon day sun made his eyes flash like fire, as they were riveted beneath the bald head above them.

    Clay could not hear what was being said, but he could see Anderst passing out cigars and pay checks. He called the men into a semicircle and was giving an oration. The men seemed riveted, until Anderst pointed further south, over the lip of the quarry, towards the edge of Bass Lake and the wet lands near the Pachemick River. The men let out a loud yell, and began jumping.

    Clay couldn’t hear a word, but he knew what had been said as if he’d written it himself. Chisholm Anderst had beaten the system again. Clay had written his report as the Bentford civil engineer saying that the quarry was creating an unsafe drainage problem for the towns water supplies. There were solvents and other chemicals appearing from parts of the aquifer that drained from the pit. Chisholm had blocked every attempt by the City Attorney’s office to have exploratory holes dug into the “soft” end of the quarry to see if Grab and Grovel had been burying toxics as a side business.

    The fire burned deep in Clay Jones. If ever there was a slime worth removing, Chisholm Anderst and his crew qualified. Clay ambled ape-like around the top of the quarry. With the sun straight above, the men below could not easily pick him out among the circling stone work above. Anderst and the workers made their way away from the pile driver towards the soft diggings, where a section of sand, gravel, and some clay was being mined. A pool of black, odious liquid was surrounded by drums and some rotting crates. Guess he can afford to be a little careless, thought Clay, now that he’s got the zoning commission in his pocket.

    Clay could hear the men laughing as Anderst pointed at the pit and the barrels. One worker, the largest of the lot, was slapping his knees and practically rolling on the ground. One man stepped over to one of the remaining upright barrel and kicked it with his boot. The orange and yellow barrel burst its top as it hit the rock floor. A clear liquid oozed onto the rock and then left a trail of smoke and fume. as it dripped into the standing pool. The man was about to throw his cigar into the mess when Chisholm Anderst’s hand grabbed his arm and gave him a warning nod of his finger. Anderst directed the men over to the shade left from the lower tailings of a fresh rock fall, probably left from a morning blast.

    Clay crept to the edge of the man-made canyon, just above the meeting. He could hear then, occasionally, as their voices rose up in waves, with the heat. He could hear phrases like “kill em all and let God sort em out”, something about Nancy Harding, a local reporter, and about the draining of the wetlands in order to get at some high quality kaolin clay worth millions.

    Clay began to investigate his surroundings. He suddenly realized how precarious his perch was amongst the talus. It was loose, three to four inch rock, scattered amongst an occasional boulder. But the angle was steep enough that one false move could send him tumbling to his death.

    He thought about his death. The meaningless toils and efforts. The pain and hallucination. Maybe this was just one more hallucination. Maybe if he just pushed a few of these rocks.
The deafening roar woke Clay from his day dream into a night mare as he began to slip with the talus. He could feel the pull and tug of the loose stone tearing and ripping at his sides and face. He tried to protect his head. There was sudden pain in his groin as he slipped into unconsciousness, unaware of the desperate screams of the dying men below him.

1D. ASSAULT AND BATTERY PARK

Across the quarry, the rising dust from the fallen talus drifted over to where unseen watchers sat on an unfurled carpet of laced dung and bio-matter. Briefly the outline of the strange grandstand was revealed as the wisp of dust particles floated through the light-bending field. Otherwise, no earthly vision would have beheld it. At least, no human vision. Not that it mattered at this point to the twisted and bleeding limbs protruding from the talus fall, where once stood corrupt men who thought themselves invincible.

“Nothing exists long on this world...” snorted Beratu through hoary nostrils, as he settled down on hindquarters deeper into the loamy carpet. His disapproval of the overall project was well documented, and it dug into the stomachs of Herm each time it was voiced, no matter how thinly disguised.

“You know full well life span is no indicator of intrinsic value. Besides, the second splinter survives, through no help from you,” Beratu’s eye sockets narrowed “...and as long as any piece of the Lost Human is alive, our task continues. Now...” Herm crouched close to Beratu and let loose his most offensive odor, “...your job is to recapture this specimen before the humans in the Dark Hall find him.”

Particles of spittle filled the air between them while Beratu gestured backward to two supine human forms in the interior of the ship. “And what of the human doctor? I see no need to waste time on a tool no longer useful.”

“All tools once useful may again be, my friend.” Herm turned shoulder-armatures and scuttled into the portal before twisting back around once more. He carefully surveyed the quarry area before adding, “Even you.”

It still required a good 40 minutes of searching before Beratu found the correct human with the precious splinter underneath the talus fall, unconscious but relatively unharmed inside the tractor beam cocoon Herm was able to cast. Though his joints and muscle pads ached from too-long exposure to the bone-leeching dryness of this world, he grumbled not at all when Herm opened the portal to the ship and Beratu dragged in the human. And though he was angrier than a beeznit on a traylar oven, he did not mention it to his superior. And though Herm belonged to a vastly more evolved species, one that prided itself on its lack of pride, he was, nonetheless, an imperfect biological organism. This is perhaps why he was burning with over anxious self-importance and righteousness, and why he buried himself in the rigors of navigation to avoid saying something that might be regrettable later to the less-evolved member of the sortie. He was that evolved.

And so it was that neither of them paid the proper attention to how long the three humans had been in suspended animation, or more importantly, how soon they might be coming out of suspended animation.

1E. THE ACCIDENTAL ESCAPE

Dr. Schussel was aware of the aftereffects of anesthesia, the groggy arsenic-tinge that ran around the inside of the mouth and the low off-center ringing that wrapped around the head like a cheesecloth gauze. For he had once been on the other end of the scalpel. And he had been less than a gracious patient, as he recalled.

The feeling he had now was nothing like that. Vision came to him in waves and ripples of confused color. Yet he felt perfectly lucid, if somewhat forgetful. It was simply difficult to get a bearing on his surroundings. And where he was and how he ended up here was an intangible eel that kept slipping through his mind. And, oh yes, he was paralyzed. There was that, too.

It felt as if he had been wrapped in an incredibly taut web of super strong material. He tried to move a finger and found that he could tire of the effort, but achieve nothing. Or a more apt description might be to compare it to a second skin of high tensile plastic wrap. This last thought made Schussel uneasy, because that is often how you prepare something you might want to eat later. Inwardly he shuddered at a barely touched forgotten memory, and that was when his little finger popped out of place.

Of course, if Dr. Schussel’s Swiss cheese brain had been more adept at clear trains of thought, he would have remembered that once the non-terran stasis field is broken, it instantaneously reverts the subject back to its natural state. As it turns out, his amnesia probably changed the sequence of events more towards his favor and the good fortune of the other two supine forms. For the moment, he remained perfectly still, unaware that he had any choice in the matter. That was the precise moment Beratu opted for a quick visual scan of the subjects. Had he also checked the shoral waves according to procedure, he
would have known that the human doctor was in partial control of his faculties. And, as luck would have it, that one human
turned out to be the only one who had an inkling about what was going on.

One meter away, Kley was able again to mark another tic in the list of things beyond his understanding. In waves of
unbending color, different aspects of the same view dripped into his head. There were several delicate curves of light that
seemed (incredibly) to support massive solid chunks of material in mid-air. As Kley watched, the chunks slowly and lazily
described intersecting orbits, accomplishing feats mysterious to him.

There was a sickening feeling he could only relate to going over a bump in a car driving swiftly, but it felt as if it went on
and on. Kley found it difficult to attach himself to any feeling of solidity. Instinctively, he tried to grasp the floor. His body
would not move.

Disorientation gave way to panic. Adrenaline pumped into every muscle fiber as Kley strained against the stasis
envelope, struggling to break free.

And so it was that every muscle in his being shot out when the stasis field suddenly collapsed, propelling him upward and
forward, unfettered by any normal gravity. Simultaneously, Dr. Schussel reacted to this new stimulus, lifting his head just in
time to witness Kley’s unreadable horror as he collided with two very odd-looking and very surprised creatures.

Quin-rats and whatever species of creature Herm considered himself are hardily built beings, to be sure. But even
relatively invulnerable creatures caught between a flying human and the control console of their craft can find themselves
making mistakes in judgment. Kley would hardly have had the mass by himself to cause any lasting injuries. However, in the
resulting split-second confusion, Beratu and Herm tried to avoid the collision and instead ran full-tilt and headlong into each
other, rendering each other unconscious. A hundredth of a second later, Kley collided with both of them, knocking himself out
as well. If the situation were not so serious and confusing, Dr. Schussel might have broken out in laughter. Might have, were it
not for the sudden and sickening lurch the craft took down and to the left when Herm let go of the controls. The situation
quickly became more grave and more immediate. Dr. Schussel promptly tossed his lunch.

Somewhere below them, Carla jumped out of bed when she heard a high-pitched whirring sound, unfamiliar yet
seemingly drawing ever closer. Dark circles gave truth to lie that she had actually been sleeping.

“Mommy? what’s that noise......?” Paul rubbed his eyes with his fists as he came into the bedroom. “...is that Daddy?”

2. THE STREET SIDE TABLEAU

Genesis V. 1:1:...” . . . the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair: and they took to wife such of them as they
chose.”

2A. DISORIENT BRUNCH

Shrieking, exploding treetops fled beneath the inertia of the titanium hulled craft. The intense ion field, which normally
provided a gentle golden hue around the saucer, now splashed the night sky with gigantic electrical arcs of blue lightning,
severe and blazing. The pungent clouds of pure ozone exploded in the vapor trail behind this Roman candle that was setting
the Bentford Memorial Park on fire.

Schussel pawed at the lights in front of the two twisted chairs before him. He could not sit in their organic mesh, suited
only for the like of the Sympasiun: Herm. Schussel felt the craft strike, waiver, and strike again, as he desperately tried to
stabilize the veering ship. Then there was stillness. A deep abiding weightlessness. The view of the park had completely left
the viewer in front of him. There was a large, formidable blue-green planet, surrounded by Christmas tree lights, swinging in
the ink. They were alive. They were safe.

The blood began to flow back into Tom’s hands. He looked down, wondering how many times a surgeon could depend
on such weak tools to remove a wound, a tear, a nauseating rip in human kind. Perhaps now, with the Sympasiun disabled,
along with his beastly Hydrosh sidekick, Dr. Thomas Schussel could be free, and free the other poor beasts that the
“Watchers” as they called themselves, had toyed with these many years. Clones of one man they thought worthy of
continuance. Clones living out similar lives throughout the planet’s surface. And what was Dr. Schussel, but their unwilling
understudy to this mutation merry-go-round.

Kley became aware of the renewed efforts of his body to away from an unearthly stench, one worse than any he’d smelled
in the hostiles. Worse than the napalm victims in ‘Nam. It was gut-wrenching foul. A smell of death and near death that
lingered on. It overcame and ate its way through him. He retched on himself as he pushed away the hoary face of Beratu, the Hydrosh. Besides the nasal agony, the visual shock was pushed onto his presence. This thing, this horror, was a monster: a huge anthropoidal menace, all fur, mold, and decaying matter. It was the Sasquatch, the Skunk Ape, the Yeti. It was disgusting.

“Jesus H. Christ, I gotta get out of here,” Kley whimpered, as he crawled past the slimy, coughing form of a huge amphibious beast. Its eyes were those of a bull frog, golden and foreign. It rumbled under the blue metallic armaments seemingly growing from out of its sleek skin. Kley could see every ripple of vein and bump along the webbed hands. The nostrils swelled back and forth, as the Sympasiun struggled to recover.

Kley felt the dense, moist, air hamper his own progress. Even the hunt for wild boar in the cane fields of South Carolina had not been this sweltering.

“Move slowly, and you’ll be less likely to disturb our two hosts,” Schussel whispered, as he noted Kley’s progress across the smooth, metallic floor.

Kley froze in place. He felt his belly pushing against the warm metal floor: he ached to breath. Maybe it wouldn’t see, whoever it was that spoke. Maybe it would go away.

“Nice try, cowboy, but it won’t work. C’mon. I’m a man, just like you. Get up off the floor and let’s get busy before they come to.”

Kley peered up, slowly, trying not to move an eye beneath his squinted lid. It was a man, tall, graying, with a lobed forehead, shining under the persistent brightness of the vessel.

“You’re human?” he questioned, weakly. His stomach was still fighting to rise into his throat. His ears throbbed, and his field of vision was still foggy and disrupted.

“Some days. Other days, well, call it PMS.” Schussel laughed, even in the face of disaster. Death meant little to him now, after so many centuries of being toyed with by these beasts. He remembered Galen, Harvey, Kwin Yow, Abbes O’Ben, Pasteur, Fleming, and thousands of other forgotten miracle workers. The lives he had touched who then were corrupted by the seeping sands. But pain, aah there was another story. His great weakness; and they knew it, this interstellar trash.

Kley watched the brilliant, reflecting sandals of Dr. Schussel as they passed by his prone mass. Schussel was quick to remove a gadget from the side wall of Herm’s armor. Kley could smell the ozone and the stench as Schussel applied it to the upper areas of both the denizens bodies. They lurched, at first, and then were still. The gigantic blue-gray frog continued its sonorous sleep, as if tranquilized. The rotten carpet of a hulk was still, without any perceptible movement.

“No, they’re not dead. Don’t have it in me, not even for these kind. If you’d known Hypocrites you’d have believed in the oath. So few now do. What a bother! Oh, my name’s Schussel, Dr. Thomas J. Graduated from Kos, Baghdad, Alexandria, Memphis, etc., etc.. Last was Yale, I believe. I suspect you could care less. A street person, as yourself, has probably had little chance for the benefits of a higher...” Schussel felt his legs being torn out from under him. There was no time to react. Only the cushioning of Beratu’s body kept him from crushing his spine against the hull. Kley was on him in an instant. His thumb stuck deep into Schussel’s throat, bringing a crimson to the pallid features. Schussel’s gray eyes stuck out like stale olives in red Jell-O.

“Listen, asshole. Listen very carefully. I don’t know how I got here, or even where I am, but you seem to, and I better get some straight answers or I’m going to rip off your head and shit down your windpipe. You got it?” Schussel stared up, helpless, and nodded jerkily.

“Good, we have an understanding, and it had best stay that way. My name is Kley, John Kley. I’m not feeling well. I figure this is some kind of holding cell. You’re the Doc. You put me on some heavy shit. I’m not really seeing all of this, right?”

Schussel stared blankly, afraid to answer with anything, especially the truth.

“Right!” Kley demanded, readjusting the thumb for more effect.

“Gaaccckk, Kay. Yes, gichhh.” Schussel reached up and gently pulled the hand from his throat. The very kindness of his touch unarmed Kley. He fell back and tried to regroup.

“You’ve had a terrible shock, John Kley.” Schussel hesitated, rubbed his throat again, and adjusted his clothing. He could feel the blood flowing back out of this face from the backed-up dam caused by Kley’s digital tourniquet.

“I need a cigarette.” Kley mumbled, as he wiped the sweat and grime off his forehead. His focus began to clear. He noted the absolute smoothness of the surroundings, without any differentiation of texture or hue. Just the glaring light coming from various sections of the hull, from nondescript sources.

He searched his pockets and pulled out a half-empty pack of Camels. He reached into his pants for his lighter. It was gone. He checked his military fatigues for his spare. It was missing!

“You won’t find them, John. They can’t allow you to have fire aboard...I mean, here at the hospital. Just too dangerous for the staff.” Schussel sneered as he looked over at the “staff”, and then he returned to concentrate on the reluctant guest.
“Too damn bad, I could use one.” John Kley felt the alloy beneath him and began wondering. The haze was clearing. Not like any street drug he’d tried. He was coming out of it, but things just seemed to get clearer. The hallucinations were real... real...real!

Kley pounded his hands against the hull behind him. There was no echo or thud from the bulkhead. There was an uncanny soundlessness, as if his fists had been muted. Suddenly, a rush of disjointed memories flooded into his vision, as if the act of hammering his fist hardened to an earlier, worn habit of pounding on camouflage metal surfaces. Apparently, John had a stint in the army, navy or some military installation. He felt on some level he had received detailed training in hand-to-hand combat, useful in nearly every environment except this one. This simply did not feel familiar, it just didn’t add up. Then he stood, as far as possible within the curvature of the ship near his resting spot. The ship’s view screen caught his eye, and he felt he should know something just on the periphery of his memory.

“What... what?” Tears clouded his eyes as he looked down over the control panel, studded with unrecognizable configuration of lights flashing back and forth. Underneath everything ran a fine tuned whirring. The heat and swampy odor was almost asphyxiating at this height. He crouched down into a cooler patch of air, and in the utter lack of any firm belief of what would be the correct action, trained killing muscles bunched as he lunged at Schussel.

“You knew,” Kley screamed, as he pulled at the human’s suit. His hands slipped off the shining fabric. There was nothing to grip or tear. It was like a second skin, but tough as steel. “You goddamn well knew what was happening here. You and these things! You fucking traitor. You lousy scum!”

“Wait,” Schussel screamed, waving him off. The huge-headed figure ran the back of his hand over his mouth. “The scar over your left eye. Do you remember how you got it?”

Kley reeled back, reaching to his forehead. No one should be able to see what remained of a mysterious deep, red gouge. A slashing vision of being lifted up from the edge of a frozen rice paddy into a hovering dark helicopter, slowly spinning in the night jungle. Suddenly, he did remember. An evacuation military surgical team had worked three weeks, while he faded in and out of consciousness to repair the perfectly circular hole with fetal tissue. Kley was interrogated, but could never explain why it was there or what caused it. Intermixed with this memory was of a smaller, similar hole behind his ear, noticed by his step parents one day, when he returned, sweating and chilled from his play in the woods that ran along the back of their property. It never bled, but scarred horribly. His stepfather forbade him to play any “older kids”, although Kley did not remember any other children. And yet... and yet, there was something more, something metallic, something gut-wrenching and secret that never presented itself honestly. Never, perhaps, until now.

“Yes, you do remember me, don’t you, Johnny Kley?” His eyes narrowed. “You thought it was a dream, but it wasn’t. They put that thing in your head. The thing that gives you the headaches you’re having now. They call it a ‘splinter’. It’s like a homing device on a deer or a moose. They see no harm in it.” the doctor pointed to the prone Herm and Beratu when he said “They”.

Kley slumped back against the curvature of the wall behind him, and slumped down into a heap. What the doctor said started to ring as the truth, or at least a plausible explanation. The veil on his memory was pulled back, but only slightly. He could not remember it all. He seemed to recall only vague feelings, snatches of bright lights, a smell much like what now invaded his nostrils, and the clattering of knives. Scraping knives that called forth an unbidden gorge of anger. Unfocused, he found his lips mouthing “Those fucking knives! those fucking knives! Get them away from me!” In another dimension he felt his flesh tear away under the pressure of those knives, even though his little body screamed for mercy. Along with this visceral memory came a still frame of a seemingly kind family doctor who spoke to him in reassuring whispers, who smiled a toothy smile as he administered an injection into his abdomen. And, as the pain receded, dark and strange shapes that rustled in the dark.

“It’s probably a bit much for you to accept right now, but you’ve got to listen. These “Watchers”...Ahh—you do remember” Schussel noted Kley’s immediate alert to attention after the use of the word, “Watcher”. “These things...,” a sweeping gesture around the cabin, “are the very reason you exist. Some three thousand years ago, in a place they referred to as Thrace, a confederation of aliens achieved the end result of a ten-thousand year long experiment. Out of their efforts came the perfect man, or the Root, as they called him. He was without blemish or imperfection. A giant of body and of intellect. And he was to be the source of all future cloning...” the doctor paused, licked his lips, and regarded Kley with steel eyes. Kley wondered how much of this too-readily offered information was true. Schussel seemed to desperately want to convince Kley it was. Or himself.

“... these clones were to be used to influence our growth and culture, and to bring back information and experience to the Watchers. Since each clone was considered a soulless entity, unworthy of atonement by the alien concept, they were used until a predetermined moment....”

“And then?” Kley questioned, warily.

“They were, and are, collected like flowers. They are then consumed by their gardeners, so to speak.”
Kley considered, and in spite of his caution, burned in anger from the inside out, as though every cell in his being were individually outraged. His nostrils flared with blood as he looked at the things that had “collected” him, now tangled in a heap beneath the console. In the reflection of the view screen Kley caught a glimpse of something lying on the ground behind them. He whirled. Caught in what resembled a plastic sheath, like refrigerator wrap, lay a supine form. There was a throbbing, greenish glow around the encasement. It gave Kley a hideous feeling, but he crawled to it, nonetheless. He seemed drawn. It commanded his presence. The doctor turned also, and released his tenuous hold on the console.

“I’m sorry you two had to meet this way,” Schussel said in a low tone. “But it was inevitable. With any luck, we’ll all survive this.” Kley found that a strange pronouncement from one who acted as if in control of the situation.

It was to become soon apparent that Schussel was in control of nothing, as the unmanned console decided at that moment to auto pilot a protective evasive maneuver. A deafening roar rushed through the ship as a blaze of kaleidoscopic colors flew past the view screen.

“Proton beam”, screamed Schussel, as he rushed bank to the panel. “The military’s firing their Bright Pebble at us...” but it was too late. Already the floor of the craft again slipped sideways with the rest of the ship. Through the confusing alarm sounds and high-gee force stomach lurch, Kley thought he heard Schussel mutter “...always hoping to get another one down. Herm and that damn Senator’s daughter. Well, there’s no help for it. The fool consumed the ransom before the Dark Hall could bargain...”

Kley scrabbled for a finger hold on the seamless metal floor and failed. Helpless, he slid underneath the console shelf, a little too close to an unconscious alien for his particular comfort. From his restricted angle, he could only see the form across room, and noticed it slipping toward him. As it slid, the greenish glow winked out. Amazingly, the doctor seemed unfazed by the crazy tumbling of the craft and continued to drone on in a way that reminded Kley of someone with Alzheimer’s. “...yes, that’s what they call those bastards in the Pentagon, the Dark Hall.. and the bright pebble is stone in a circle of light...who knew the senator’s daughter could even think?... brain salad surgery and I’m the idiot...”

“I don’t understand any of this,” moaned Kley, holding his head again as the motion sickness overcame him. “Why me? I’ve never hurt anyone. I’m having enough trouble just getting by.”

“Aah, well, you know, it’s not your problem, son,” continued Schussel, “you’re property, simple and pure. Bought and paid for from the time of birth. Birth bought and paid for actually...” Kley watched the sliding form twist as it came closer to the console. “...But you, and your other, have a critical role. I think. Yess’m. Oops, shit.” sound of something soft slamming into something hard. “Fuck!... well, they call you two the “Keys”, for whatever that may mean. God knows what kind of doors they expect you to open.”

Finally, the figure jackknifed until it came face to face with Kley, inches away. Beneath the glow, Kley could see a face of that reminded him of himself, some ten years earlier, before he became homeless, drifting from city to city; stealing to live; drugging to forget his state and the headaches. It looked like the reflection he saw in the cracked subway that wasn’t his. An older version of his new scar snaked just under the other’s scalp. The other man’s eyes snapped open. Their eyes locked. Suddenly a scream louder than he thought possible came out of what seemed to be his throat. The totally unbelievable sensation of looking backward into his own head slammed down his throat. A mirror within a mirror within a mirror reverberated psychic feedback that fed and throbbed and became a separate entity between them. Both screamed again as the spiral staircase of unstoppable thought within them collapsed like a Chinese box inside a Chinese box. Waiting there was a hungry caged dragon, with scales collected of devoured lifetimes. It bristled against the cold, suddenly, finally awake.

2B. AUDIT MEMORY TRAILS

Lieutenant Belnap stared down at the young man, framed in the green glow of the computer-enhanced holo-radar screen. “...and you say it disappeared off the screen, lieutenant Shelvey?” Belnap arched his eyebrow up at the end of the question, barely containing his impatience. Of course, Shelvey really was a lieutenant. Belnap merely affected the title as a minor form of address. Operatives like him never adhered any normal form of military hierarchy. The Dark Hall was independent of anyone, even the President.

“Well, it sort of slid sideways out of this dimension...” Shelvey pulled off his headset and swiveled around to confront Belnap directly. “...or at least that’s how it appeared, if I had to hazard a guess...”

“You’ll hazard nothing!” snapped Belnap, the whites of his eyes rimmed with tiny, bulging veins. “You’ll know! You find out what really happened and buzz me immediately!” Thus spoke one of the most powerful and unknown men in the world, wearing a solid black uniform that picked up highlights from screens on the right and left as he strode back across the flat metallic mesh walkway. Shelvey swore silently to himself and went back over the craft’s telemetry data. If not another dimension, then what...?
2C. THE SHADOW DOESN’T KNOW

In sweaty underwear Paul tossed restlessly, like a dinghy on a troubled sea. Beads of perspiration dotted his young brow as dreams of unknown power possessed his tiny body. In the dream he cowered, cold and frightened, grasping a dull metal dagger. Red dust choked the ravine where he was crouched over the still body of his father, dressed in battered armor. It was not armor like he remembered ever seeing. The outer surface was a mass of welts and carvings in a strange language, as if the breastplate were a book page made metal.

The dream Paul looked around, scanning back and forth, searching for an evil power he felt was somewhere very close. In the distant night countryside he heard bellows of pain and short, excited yelps of alarm. There was no moon, and the stars looked ominous and somehow wrong. Instead of sparsely dotting the night sky, they rose in graceful arcs with clumps of millions of stars describing broad brush strokes of light. The place seemed eerie, cursed. Even to his young mind, alien.

A sound that reminded Paul of loud tinkling glass caused him to spin around. Behind him and towering over him was a menacing blackness that blotted out the stars. Frozen, he could do nothing but remain breathless and wait for the huge something to decide what to do. Large glowing green eyes within the darkness carefully regarded him. A smaller bulbous shape on the end of a flexing arm swung effortlessly around and hauled Paul up like a cat grabbing a kitten by the scruff of the neck. Paul felt his body shake back and forth like a rag doll as the green eyes loomed closer and closer. Finally, he was held inches away. The eye was huge, the size of a football field. Inside his heart, Paul kept repeating, “this is only a dream, this is only a dream...soon I’ll wake up...”

Suddenly sharp earthquakes rattled around him and actually through him. He felt his body shudder and bob with each wave of solid noise. It threatened to snuff him out entirely, and slowly Paul became aware the earthquakes were the sound of the giant shape laughing. Then, in a more controlled, yet still unbearably powerful voice, the leviathan shadow said, “Sorry, little prince. This is no dream.”

The green eye narrowed and swallowed up his rapt attention. “There are yet many things to discuss, little prince. When we finish, you’ll know this is the worst nightmare made real...” the ocean of a voice stilled to a tiny whisper inside Paul’s head and stabbed him like tiny slivers of broken glass. “…there is a dragon. An ancient and trapped creature. Behold, it grows anxious and hungry. Hungry for life.” Paul did not understand.

“ Aaaahh, not to worry, little prince. I will force understanding into you!” The last was a hideous wail that threatened to destroy Paul, then and there. Waves of sharp pain ran through his little body. Unconsciously, Paul answered with a scream of his own, and before wresting wakefulness, Paul thought he sensed a note of surprise within the heart of the giant shadow as it dropped him and he hurtled earthward and wakeward, still screaming until his lungs felt raw.

“Paul, Paul, wake up!” Carla frantically shook awake her nearly comatose son, frightened by the blood that streamed from his nose and ears.

Paul snapped open his eyes and looked around him. Before Carla could speak, he said in a tiny, still voice, “Mother, there is a dragon... and I must find him”

Carla was dumb struck and could only think how the small boy before her sounded as if he were no longer a child. Worse, she felt he was no longer her child. She became very, very frightened. Paul merely blinked, and wiping the blood from his nose, got out of bed and calmly began to dress.

2D. STINKING KEYS

Nehemiah 2:13

“And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well...”

The air continued to fill with the throbbing hum of the alien engines.

“Almost stasis, “ Schussel yelled, not caring to look back over his shoulder to see what the screams came from. If it was the clone’s, they would be self absorbed in their own knowing. If it was the bloated toad Herm, or the furry, sulfurous Beratu, they would assume he had gained control in their favor. Such simple logistics had always evaded the alien mind. Tom Schussel knew the value of the buttons on the craft, and the buttons in their slimy consciousness.
A whir rose, and fell. Kley heard the pulse, as though he was inside a vacuum cleaner being turned off. The turn of pulsing proton pulsars died away. The purring left over was almost indiscernible. The craft was stable. Kley felt new confidence in trying to walk. His back still ached from the hard ride, as did his head from his trashing of captors.

“Are you all right,” Kley asked, looking into his own eyes; his own face.

Clay mumbled something, and then looked away. The sight of his fallen jailers gave him new energy. His twisting became furious under the mesh of the captors bindings. He howled out an obscenity, lost to the air as an unmodified grunt. His vocal cords had not healed completely.

“Easy, old friend,” Kley said, placing his bruised hand over Clay’s forehead. He withdrew his hand quickly after he felt an electrical charge rush from the cocoon through him. The bleeding and bruise were gone. He was also at stasis.

“So you’ve discovered why we wrapped him, eh” interrupted Dr. Schussel.

“Huh,” grunted Kley, as he sat back again, inspecting his hand for the pain that existed just seconds before, but was now vanished. “Absa-fucking-lutely amazing. What is that stuff?”

“Pretty hard to explain to anybody, especially a layman,” Schussel continued. He felt the rise of pride in his chest. The first human to ask a question of his work in three hundred years. It was a delight.

“You might call it life’s essence. The researchers at Yale called it the “L” field, the field of life. With a bit of luck, I found out how to trap it in a mesh of ultra fine silicone spheroids, which could then be fashioned into a fabric with a Teflon base. Quite wonderful stuff, really. So simple. The very force of the universe that moves the world of inanimate matter to become animate is gathered in this silk, and continues to grow stronger while in any thriving biosphere. Totally worthless in space after a day or so. But here, it can almost bring back the dead. Capiche?”

“I just want to tear it open and get me, or whatever that is, out.”

“Patience, friend. He’s not fully himself yet. The voice tells it all. One of the last things to heal after a major trauma. I remember the chariot wheels that mangled you during the 4th century in Rome. And what a mess you were!”

Kley was perplexed at the reference, and continued to attempt an unraveling of the healing veil. Clay’s struggle was reduced to pitifully weak tosses and turns which landed him face down against the decking.

“You might have a deaf mute to contend with if you don’t desist for awhile,” warned Schussel.

“I don’t care. Can’t leave it...me, or whatever like that. What if these things come to?”

“Ah, our hosts. Well, knowing their brain function, I suspected this little shock should keep them out for several days. No great harm. They just don’t react well to sudden change. Must be some kind of protective factor from their world...a hibernation of sorts. Certainly can’t be many predators that would want to eat either of these.”

“Nice thought, Doc,” continued Kley. “So who is this guy?”

“You’re double, or doppelganger, is currently called Clay Jones. We, or should I say “I”, really loved the macabre humor of it. Can’t say they have much humor,” Schussel said, looking over at the piles of alien stench. “Clay and Kley, two men, like Adam, formed from the clay of the earth. Such a metaphor. Aristophanes would have been proud of me.”

“I’m sure. So that’s why we’re so similar.” Kley whistled between his teeth and pondered. He pushed back the slick of greasy forelock hanging over his eyes. “Sure I had a cigarette now. God I need one.”

“You’re choice, Schussel returned, “but a rather bad one. Here, rub this on your arm, it should help.” Schussel crushed a small capsule over Kley’s palm. Kley rubbed it over the top of his left hand. The nicotine craving disappeared, and a light euphoria entered.

“Nice stuff. Could really do well on the street.”

“Sorry, not for sale. Just a pleasant reprieve from your own addiction. The Tibetans call it nadii. Make it from a little flower that grows along the roaring stream beds in late May. But I digress. So, the two of you are the living experiment. The tableau rasa. You bring new meaning to the word double blind testing. But, that needs to come to an end, like all things disgusting and unnatural. With your new found awareness, the door may be wide open for renewal and untold adventure.”

“Well if it’s adventure I wanted, I got plenty of that already,” snapped Kley. The nadii did not wipe away his bitterness or anger. “I suggest the first thing we do is commandeer this ship and dump these two over the Atlantic. Let the great white’s have ‘em both.”

“Doubt they’d even touch them, Kley. Besides, it would be very tasteless to destroy your maker. I’m not even sure the Bible has a sin to cover that one.” Schussel chuckled, as he felt for the pulse on the bound Clay’s neck.

“Made us, huh. My old man made me, buddy. These guys weren’t there. What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“There? Of course they weren’t there for the sodden act of mutual contamination! We insert high quality, fertilized ovum. The work of the millennia, and you refer to it as your “old man”. I can’t imagine such idiocy. The work of a lifetime...”

The diatribe faded out of Kley’s earshot as Dr. Schussel ambled toward the front of the ship, babbling and arguing to the stifling environs.
“What a wacko!” Kley pulled at Clay Jones once more. The wrapping fell apart under his touch, and the iron tight grip of its contents pulled him down to the floor.

“Who are you?” asked the pale figure.

“Not sure myself,” answered Clay, a bit shaken at the death grasp around his shoulders and arms. “Seems we look the same, and both are named Kley. Could be we were twins. Who knows? Too much going on here, but it’s not a dream. Damn straight on that one. Not a dream. You’re real.”

“Paul...Carla...got to get back. The pit.”

“If you’re looking for a pit, you found one. And what a hole. We’re stuck inside a ship from outer space with a k-oed crew and a madman as our new captain. Think we ought to talk this...”

Kley stopped short as the stench reached him. It was a new odor, one he could not equate with any previous experience. His eyes watered, and he felt an uncomfortable tug at his traumatized gut. A glow arose from the waist of the unconscious denizens.

“What the..” Kley whispered. He crawled carefully to Herm’s side and peered over the amphibious relic. A metallic object, somewhat pen-like with a sharp curving edge on the end, pulsedated on the waistband of the sleeper. Kley felt at it gingerly for heat. Assured, he pulled at it. Its release let off a short, high-pitched squeak. Another wave of offensive odor rolled over him, but he did not let go of the thing. Kley rolled back to his clones corner and examined the find. It was particularly light, but strong. He tried to scratch the hull with it. A small rip appeared in the bulkhead’s fabric.

“Stop,” screamed Schussel. “You’ll get us all killed!” He rushed at Kley’s hand and began wrestling for the object. “It’s the dragon’s key!”

2E. SITTING UP WITH AN OLD FRIEND

But of course, the damage was already done. As the doctor and Kley continued to struggle, the gray-green hull of the ship unraveled into bright ribbons of coalescent light. Ripping ever wider, the hole in the ship grabbed a sudden handful of air and cantilevered the ship backwards into a powerful force undertow, vaguely similar to slamming into a mattress at ninety miles an hour.

Everything in the ship not tied down rattled and spun out the opening in a mass and tumble. Several screams were heard, and then nothing. The ship proceeded to unmake itself in a slow whirl through known space. It skipped on the hole between universes like a flat rock skimming on the surface of stream.

The great mass of the alien ship diminished to a small blob of dismantled matter that floated down the sky in a fluttering tassel of color wrapped around something small, metallic and topped with what appeared to be a curved razor-sharp gem.

The dragon key fell down through the roof of a small ranch-style home. As it came through the insulation that covered the bottom of the attic, it was slowed by the pink fiberglass until it spun butterfly soft and noiselessly imbedded itself into the only substance that could actually stop its ripping of the fabric of dimensional space. Living flesh.

“Ahhh!, what the !?....” screamed Paul as he leapt out of the doorway clutching his left shoulder. He ripped off his tee shirt and stared at a hard swollen lump midway between the point of his shoulder and his chest. It glowed just under the skin in a flash of fluorescent green and pink spots.

He gingerly tried touching the lump in the hollow of his shoulder when the key suddenly twisted and sank deeper. Paul had convulsed and collapsed into a fetal position on the floor by the time Carla came running into the room. She had no idea what had happened, she just knew something was terribly wrong. Paul was whipping his head back and forth, his little cherub face a contorted red mask of pain.

Carla jumped down and tried to grab him by the shoulders. Suddenly, horribly, a shriek of gut-wrenching agony spilled from his lips, and then he wasn’t there. Carla blinked, but he didn’t reappear. In her arms was a handful of empty clothes where a second earlier her son had been. Her precious son. The only rope she had left to hang on to. Gone. First her husband. Now her son. The loss hit her so completely, so thoroughly, that she was numb before it occurred to her that the way he left was less than usual. Carla blinked again. And again. Still nothing changed. Carla was beyond understanding, or even crying.

The morning sun found her still slumped in the doorway, her assaulted mind barely forming the question.

“Where did he go?” and this was more quickly, and more resolutely followed by “and how do I get there?”
The first sensation was similar to tumbling, although it was difficult to feel if there was an up or down. The next thing Clay noticed was the absence of something. Something so inherent and pervasive that its presence goes unnoticed. Only when it is gone it leaves a gaping hole, an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. Clay found he could no longer tell how much time was passing, if any. Time was missing. He wasn’t sure how that could be, but he knew almost instinctively that he was apart from time. And he couldn’t see. Or hear. He felt as if suspended in a gelatinous muck that tangled in his limbs as he spun, unable to control his movements.

Kley felt his gorge rise, but nothing came up. His left leg felt twisted backward, but there was no pain. Just a horrible feeling things were going badly. And out of the corner of his eye, he felt rather than saw other figures whirling through a black deeper than any he had ever seen. Where was he? What happened? Finally, he did upchuck, and was disconcerted to find the vomit twirling with him through the black.

Dr. Schussel slid backwards through a cream velvet fog, blacker than the inside of a cadaver’s heart. His bloodshot eyes opened so wide he feared he would never close them again. This was just plain wrong. This was not good, not good at all, was it? Damn the torpedoes, we’re screwed. We’re screwed and I didn’t bring any penicillin.

To a being who found any movement a little disconcerting, this mad fall practically scrambled Beratu’s ability to compose complete thoughts. Not that forming coherent thoughts right now was all that comforting. He kept coming back to the same coherent thought. The same bad thought. We’re not where we should be. The last thing I remember, we were on the ship, and the humans had woken up, and... wait, this isn’t safe. And for sure I don’t want to cease to exist because of this lousy assignment. That would be futile.

Herm didn’t have time to think. His keener than human eyesight picked up the warped yet very massive ship coming out of the ebony mist right at all four of them. And then for a long time, he didn’t see, think or hear anything at all. None of them did. Which was probably for the better, considering.

Dr. Schussel’s head felt like an exploded ripe watermelon. Even small movements excited pain nerves along the base of his skull. If he could operate on himself, he would have simply blocked those nerves and damn the consequences. His eyelids clenched tightly with each wave of agony. Through the red wall of pain he tried to assess his situation. Apparently, he was curled up in a fetal position and laying on a hard, cold surface. There was a pool of liquid something touching his ear and ringing his head. He hoped it was not blood, but figured that was being extremely optimistic.

Slowly, he opened his topmost eye, and almost immediately snapped it shut. Blood. And darkness. And pain.

A moan escaped into the black, and it took a minute before Schussel realized it wasn’t coming from his own throat. With that, the overriding sense of medical responsibility kicked in, and he tried to get up. By the time he got to his knees, the world was spiraling around him, with his frontal lobes the axis. Damn, he emphatically wished the pain would stop. As he straightened, the pain vanished. Simply that. It vanished. Schussel opened his eyes with a start. This is new. He tried to make the pain come back, and it did, with a vengeance. “No pain, and clear thoughts,” he commanded into the fog. And instantly the stray channels his thoughts used to love burrowing in were gone. He was thinking clearly for the first time in over 500 years. What the...

“uhhhhhmmn...” the moan came from a supine form not three feet from where the good doctor had been curled up. It was Clay Jones, bleeding profusely from a huge belly wound, which explained the pool of blood. His eyes were partially open, but operating in separate circles. A few feet further away Schussel could see the unconscious forms of Kley and Beratu. Kley was vaguely the color of blue milk, which probably indicated internal injuries, or improperly operating lungs. With Beratu, who could tell? It was very, very still, however, and one of its bulbous gnarled limbs was missing. A thin blue viscous fluid leaked out of a nasty tear where a limb should have been.

As his eyes quickly swept back over the entire scene, Kley’s twisted right leg registered. Almost immediately, centuries of accumulated medical knowledge popped into his head, but as a new experience, he was able to select only what he needed.

The doctor leaned over Jones and reached down to examine the belly wound. The ragged rip ran from just under the right bottom rib and ended up somewhere in the hollow of the left hip. A chunk of what must have been the ship protruded from the side of the wound, and the viscera was tangled in a bloody mess. Not entirely certain if it would help, he muttered to himself, “no pain, and deep sleep.”

Jones stopped groaning.

With a felt sense of urgency, Tom dragged out the twisted metal ship part and tossed it over his shoulder. He tried mentally superimposing a picture of what healthy insides should look like over the existing hole in Clay’s abdomen. He felt a tug from deep inside him that took his breath away. But before he could even think about what that might mean, the abdomen became whole, slowly, and in stages, but sure enough whole. Schussel blinked. This couldn’t be happening. Yet, it was.
An absent thought occurred to him about the incredible loss of blood, and Clay’s body began soaking up the spilled blood like a sponge, sucking in spent fluid through the pores in the skin. “Well, “Schussel, thought, “whatever works.”

Schussel moved over now to Kley, and lightly brushed his fingers over blue-white frame. He was surprised as he realized Kley’s entire anatomy became clear to him as if viewing a three-dimensional X-ray. Whatever was happening to his healing abilities, he seemed to be getting better at using them. Where might this lead, and where was this coming from?

Well, no matter, there wasn’t time to worry about it. Kley had three broken ribs and a punctured lung. His spleen was ruptured and blood was pouring into his chest cavity, collapsing the remaining lung. He quickly realigned the ribs and began repairing injuries, while in the back of his mind he was a little apprehensive about what to do with Beratu. He wasn’t sure he knew enough to deal with extraterrestrial biology. But in a few minutes that problem took care of itself.

Beratu shuffled up while Schussel was finishing up on Kley and dropping him back to sleep. “You seen my arm around anywhere?” it mumbled through triparted lips, “I know I had it on before...oh, there it is, under this filthy human.” The overgrown alien jerked up Kley’s legs and snatched the missing limb. Almost absent-mindedly, it jammed the limb over the wound, and sank into what appeared to be deep though. It reattached with a sound vaguely like a boot stuck in mud. Beratu opened his eyes, and surveyed the area around them.

“Where’s Herm?” The massive head swiveled back to the doctor, and the gigantic horse eyes narrowed. “We shouldn’t even be here. You shouldn’t be awake. This is very not quite all right.....” the eyes became mere slits, and the rumbling voice became ominous, “...find him now, or die, human.”

“Number one, I don’t know where he is. Secondly, this was none of my making. Thirdly, you seem to know where this...” Schussel opened his arms in a helpless wide gesture, “...whatever is, and you’d better start talking, or we’ll all be in trouble, including yourself.” Tom hoped his false bravado would be enough.

The smelly hulk leaned over the doctor and breathed a foul odor into his face. “Find him. Where we are be none of your business. Whether you live much longer is, human.” The alien made “human” sound like “vermin”. But after a second he looked around in a way that made Schussel feel that even it was less than comfortable in these surroundings.

“Well, these guys aren’t moving anytime soon, so unless you want to leave them here....” Tom raised his eyebrows in a question, and Beratu grunted. He wasn’t sure if that meant yes or no, so he continued, “we’ll have to wait till they wake up. And that is what I intend to do, since they’re my patients by default.”

“Leave them. We go now....” Schussel started to object, but was scooped up anyway by the creature. The strange pair shuffled off in a direction that struck Schussel as purely arbitrary in the featureless black fog. Two unconscious forms dwindled from view, and he could only breathe in small gulps. The alien had him a death grip, and no scream was going to make it out of his body. He wondered who there would be to hear it anyway.

This was not shaping up to be the kind of adventure he enjoyed. The only good to come out of it was, with his brain no longer Swiss cheese, he had plenty of time to think things through, including his own place in the scheme of things.

What Beratu thought about, he didn’t communicate. He just frantically twisted his lump of a head back and forth, searching the horizon for the missing Herm. His colleague. His friend. His only way out of there.

3. THE FAT LADY CHOKES

3A. PHANTOM OF THE DETERGENT

Exodus 29:17 And thou shalt cut the ram in pieces, and wash the innards of him, and his legs, and put them into his pieces and unto his head.

Carla sat by the phone, twisting her hair into a psychotic braid. Who to call? Who to believe? It was 5:30 a.m. They’d all be asleep. Everyone knew she and Clay were having problems. His job was a wash. He’d been drinking. She’d wondered if it was another woman...but that would have been a blessing compared to the visitations. She was sure they were only dreams; perhaps, as their family shrink had suggested, merely hypnogogic translations of daytime fears.

And now Paul was gone without a trace. What was real? She might be going insane. Her mother had a breakdown in ‘57. Carla remembered the strange, empty gaze after Mom came home from one of her treatments. They still do electroshock, she thought.

The outside door banged shut. Startled and horrified, Carla charged to the garage door and glued herself to it. She had grabbed the family baseball bat on the way. An intruder could be anyone, or anything at this point. She pushed her ear to the door to listen for any sign of movement. It was silent. Then she heard the brief murmurs of a humming, as if a vacuum cleaner was on in another room. A bright light shone under a crack in the caulking above her head and lit up the edge of the living room. It moved like a laser knife over the ficus and philodendron, through the book cases, and over the dishes mounted on
the wall over the fireplace. The eerie blue light cut fine patterns over the small print of the wallpaper and promised an unpleasant surprise on the other side of the wooden bastion guarding her from a trespasser.

She heard the thud of tools being knocked from their supports, and the dragging squeal of the rubber tires on the riding mower as it was forced across the tile of the garage floor. Carla thought about the strength it would take to move the mower like that. She decided to bolt. She could not move. A blue, holographic shadow melted through the door and around her arms, her legs, her mouth, her chest—she was helpless to move.

Carla twisted like a carp in a net, but to no avail. The net grew tighter as she felt the presence violate her mind and body. She felt her heart pound and wondered if she would suffocate. The bat dropped to the floor but she could not hear it over the train roaring through her ears. Everything was an eerie blue, as if she were in a soundless, boundless sea of sky pudding. There was no demarcation to give a bearing, only the ever present overcoming she felt from the presence. Like the dreams...so helpless. Then the voice came in her mind...

“I am Herm. You may have heard me called other things in your culture such as Hermes or Mercury. I am not a god, but I am superior to you. I will not harm you if you cooperate. Do you understand? Do not speak for I know your thoughts as soon as you do. “

All Carla could think was, “NO—NO—NO ! “ In a mental scream. She was now motionless. She could look down...it seemed impossible...look down and see her body surrounded by this thing with arms everywhere. It seemed gaunt and plated, like an oversized insect and it was feeding on her. It was humming an insane, tasteless rendition of a ‘60 song. “Mrs. Jones you’ll HAVE a lovely daughter...lovely daughter...”

“Oh God,” she thought, “It’s not eating me! It’s in me. I must be dead...I must be dead— “Stop it, you silly hormone laden sheep’s bladder. I am only borrowing a few of your silly little eggs. Totally useless to you. Do you want to see your precious husband again? Clay Jones, that twit! “

“You have Clay?” she questioned.

“In many ways,” Herm slurried as he slurped through her abdomen, sloshing through tissue to her ovaries.

Carla winced, not over her body now, but with it, feeling the coldness trespassing her privacy. Stealing her essence and her feminine wealth.

“You have Paul too, don’t you? You have my boy! You put took him—you took him—you took him!” She pushed her anger out, hammering at the violator.

“Stop that, you cow or I’ll—”

Herm did not finish his mind probe. Herm only felt the Tarachnoid Splinter pierce his shell and turn the translock in his armor. He was now “off” and his life battery would discharge should the holder of the key care to dispose of him in some hell-hole asteroid or burning deep space magnetic storm.

“Mother, are you all right?”

Carla was still shaking and struggling out of the somnambulism of the mind probe from Herm. She awoke to find the metalloid monkey-man laying next to her. His huge, multi-faceted eyes open and hideous. No pupil or eyelid to protect them from the glare of the rising sun. The night was passing away. She could feel warm human arms around her. She felt the arms comfort and empathy from a pounding human chest. Her weakened gaze lifted to his face...a fine man. A strong, worthy man. It was Clay but it was someone else as well.

“Mother, are you all right?” he asked again. She slowly realized the impact of his question. The gogginess still rushed over her in waves. The pain from her abdomen was throbbing and felt like a ball of burrs wrapped up in her belly, tossing around against unprotected skin.

“Can’t be,” she faltered, going into a coma, “can’t be.”

“I’m afraid it is, Mother. I can explain everything, including this stinking Symapasion trash that dared to assault you. I am the Key for the Dark Hall. I have come back for you and for Father. “

Clay writhed as the healing continued. He could remember more now as Kley hung over him.

“Pretty serious this time, my brother. I’ll have to clean you up from the inside with the tendril wash. “

Clay looked away and shook the bloody pulp of his hand, trying to convince Kley to let him die, finally.

“It’s not that easy on the time line juncture we chose, old friend. Hang on...here I come! Clay Jones could see the metamorphosis of his twin. Kley’s hand became vine like as Kley pushed it into the open wound. Kley then grabbed a bottle from his belt pouch and began pouring a thick, green, luminescent liquid into the wound as his arm disappeared into Clay. It was overwhelming for Clay as the snakes wrapped about in his viscera, thrashing around in
his pain. A foaming, like bubble bath, came out of his wound now. The pain subsided and Clay began to feel healthy and relaxed.

“That a boy!,” exclaimed Kley. “Got you on the flip-flop now. Looking good... just a few more passes with the healing wash and—- yup, we’re all done. There now. “ Kley pulled his vine from Clay, and the wound healed instantly as the last bit of his fingers pulled out. The bubbles were dissipating, and only a fine rivulet of the green cleansing detergent remained.

“Fraid I had to leave a bit of myself in there to start the regenesis. Strange how I can remember all of this now and just a week ago I was scrawling mindless graffiti on the underground in New York. Wild stuff, buddy.”

“Where am I...and who are you...we—-ooh.” Clay fell back as he tried to rise.

“Easy pard” Kley said, as he supported Clay’s head. “Been a long one and I suspect if that hairball comes back with Doctor Death we’ll have the devil to pay. Take a few seconds to rest and let the cells do the walking. We’ll need our strength to get out of this one. “

Then the movement stopped and the low humming of the craft’s engines ceased throbbing. Not just slowly, but suddenly as if all matter had been stilled. A great howl rose from the front of the ship as Dr. Schussel ran back in terror.

“They’ve got us. Got the ship. Swallowed us whole like a bug. What’ll I do...What will I do. They’ll punish me this time for sure. I did it against my will you know,” he rolled his eyes and his head in Kley’s face as he pulled him close by his shirt collar. “And they’ll have no time for you either, my little petunias. “

The mad man ran further back into the craft, striking the walls with his fists and pulling at his disheveled hair. Beratu was not far behind.

“Clay Jones”, commanded Kley, “act dead or at least unconscious. Let these birds go past in their fear, then we’ll head for the controls. “

Like storm-tossed possums they laid belly up, exposed and useless. Beratu stopped for a second on his gaseous, fuming route to the engine room.

“No hungry, but should eat anyway. You food the problem. Herm a beznyt proto begni boff, hog dirt bug!” The undefined swamp of Beratu’s body now opened to expose a gigantic tooth-lined maw with a powerful, snakelike tongue protruding toward Clay Jones. Kley took the initiative to kick out, for what little good it might do to stop the marauder. His kick hit home, startling Beratu into a short retreat after producing a high pitched squeal. It was like standing in the backwash of a jet engine on start up and smelled like fresh sewer gas. The bulbous mass went from its grayish obesity to a florescent pink corpulence with lines of flashing fuschia. It rushed towards Kley but never reached him. Kley and Beratu were frozen by the blinding white light that now cut the ship in half, revealing a much large vessel around them. A voice echoed into their minds, “You are now residents of the Tarachna Mar, trillion vessel of the Dark Hall. “

3B. SUDS AND SPUDS

Time folded in on itself. Like re recording over the same magnetic tape, events from concurrent and intersecting timelines bled into each other. In one thread, Paul was the dragon key, come to rescue his earthly mother. A large dark shadow hovers over his right shoulder as he stares down at the immobile Herm. His mother is sobbing and semi-conscious. In this timeline, Herm fumbles badly and loses control of the whole project.

Another worn weave brings the two splinters together, trapped inside the undamaged ship. A large crushing prescience floats over Dr. Schussel’s head as he frantically struggles to rip out his hair in tiny, blood-rooted clumps. A much larger ship encompasses the undamaged vessel, severing it asunder with a flash of light. In this path, the project is scrubbed by a more powerful alien race.

The continuum skips and Clay and Kley laying bleeding and broken on the black milk plain. The ship is twisted metal and all the parties are dead. A huge inky mass observes the scene, and notes that in this timeline, there is no project to advance.

The entity bubbles up in a froth of anger. No! This cannot be! A galaxy-shattering scream fills all the timelines simultaneously. For a fraction of a second, all ruts and weaves synchronize, enmeshed by the shout. Leviathan holds and scans all the black, roty lines of time running away from him through all dimensions like evil spider legs. Their number was infinite, but the entity’s patience was not. In there somewhere had to be the thread in which the project was completed.

Splitting his awareness into a hundred pieces, he sent pieces of his mind down random dark tunnels of time. Gathering the spider legs in his massive arms like a deflated parachute, leviathan waited for his mind to come back from its reconnaissance. His huge head turned slightly upwards in an ebony scowl. Glowing green eyes burned and crackled. He imagined he heard
gentle laughter from somewhere. Somewhere as full of light as his own realm was devoid of it. Coldly cursing, leviathan hugged the time threads closer to him.

In a twisted tunnel, one piece of his mind started to understand more and more as it followed the spider leg backward, in a reverse race towards the beginning of time itself. Separated as it was from it’s owner’s mind, things began to occur to it outside the parameters of the mission that split it from the behemoth’s gnarled brain. As it gathered the information it would need before returning to the group brain, the piece began to start another, more personal database. Perhaps it contained slightly more of leviathan’s strategic nature than had it’s fellows. Possibly it was an accident caused by a distraction. More likely, there was another hand in this, that didn’t want the project to succeed. Or maybe this shard merely wanted to protect itself, a kind of consciousness survival instinct.

When the 99 pieces came back, and conveyed the relentlessly pessimistic data to leviathan, they struck his mind like endless arrows launched by a powerful enemy. Each left him more depressed and furious than the last. In this state, the hundredth piece returned. In this shattered despot’s head the hundredth piece whispered soothing possibilities. In this furrowed soul the hundredth piece held out a lure, fashioned out of his own mind. The hundredth piece smiled a tiny, inward smile as the desperate ebony hulk lunged after the tiny worm of lie surrounded by meaty truth.

Leviathan grinned a shark-tooth saw. If I cannot rule in one timeline, I will wreak havoc in all of them! Throwing parts of himself down each timeline, he saved the largest part for the tendril explored by the hundredth piece. Totally unnoticed, the piece rode piggyback.

Paul cowered, cold and frightened, holding a short-handled unpolished metal dagger. A bright green glow flashed inside the flesh of his left shoulder, and pain was a quiet language inside his tiny body, a monologue he forced himself to ignore. Carefully examining his surroundings, he tried to mentally record the totally alien landscape. Red dust choked the ravine where he was crouched over the still body of his father, dressed in battered armor. It was not armor like he remembered ever seeing. The outer surface was a mass of welts and carvings in an unreadable script, as if the breastplate were a book page gilded with smelted gold.

Suddenly, a great scream broke the silence. Paul dove into the shallow pool of dust-choked moisture at the bottom of the ravine, still reverberating with the rumble of the sound. He felt spread out, as if diluted over miles of space and time. He felt several selves simultaneously cowering in fear. It was somehow strangely comforting. Then the noise faded, and the connection with other Pauls subsided with it. He felt a cold emptiness start growing under his ribs. Kley – French for key... kept chirping in his head like an invocation for a demon, the only residue of the multi-soul contact. He looked down at the glow in his shoulder and realized the thing embedded in his body was a key of some sort. It’s use hovered tantalizingly close on the edges of his awareness. He couldn’t quite grasp it.

“Mother, are you all right?” he asked again. Paul watched his mother, spent and exhausted on the floor. She appeared to be fading in and out of consciousness, obviously in pain after being attacked by Herm.

“Can’t be,” she mumbled, drifting away, “can’t be.”

“I’m afraid it is, Mother,” Paul slowly shook his head, and grimaced in pain and shame. “I can explain everything, including this stinking Sympasiun trash that dared to assault you. I am the Key... Ahhh!”

At that moment, an intense noise scraped inside his head. Paul dove onto the hardwood floor next his mother and deadly still bio-mechanical alien body. While the scream reverberated seemingly everywhere at once, he felt exploded into infinite tiny pieces of himself. He felt independent of space or time. He felt several selves simultaneously. It was vaguely empowering, and ultimately a rush of psychic energy. Then the echo diminished and he felt a cold emptiness start growing under his ribs. Kley – French for key... ran through his mind like a song you can’t shake, a limerick you can’t erase. He looked down at the glow in his shoulder and...

“Leave them. We go now...” Beratu encircled Schussel’s waist and yanked him up in stranglehold fashion. The doctor mumbled something, but Beratu couldn’t hear what it was. He also didn’t care. They didn’t belong in the realm of the Leviathan, and it would only be a matter of time before they were discovered. Beratu was unprepared for that eventuality. He desperately needed to find Herm, and was afraid the twisted wreckage he’d seen so far was a bad omen. Without the dragon key on Herm’s belt, there was no way out of this dungeon. He sniffed the air and headed in a direction that most smelled like Herm’s biosteel oil and shuffled off into the featureless black fog. Two unconscious forms dwindled from view, but Beratu cared not.
Almost between steps a shout drilled between Beratu’s head, and the roiling mist sheared in sonic waves. The alien dropped the doctor on his head and slapped all three arms against his ears.

“Noooo! Noooo! Aieeeeee!....the leviathan!” Beratu slobbered and wheezed in Schussel’s ear, “we must find Herm before it is too late, human....”

Beratu felt several selves holding limbs against ears. He was not comforted. He was going insane. He was certain of it.

3C. SPANKING THE DOG

Psalms 22:20 Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog

Paul felt a mighty force lift him by the shoulder. His pain was gone. A dull throb from the buried metal remained, but it was diminishing in effect. He shook his head, clearing the daze from his eyes and mind.


“Lord save you well, my servant Paul Jones,” replied the figure, his words echoing in Paul’s blurry brain.

Paul was not shocked or frightened by the cloth covered head of the giant figure. The entity’s snout stood long and protruding just below its huge dark eyes—-eyes that held the night sky and wisdom beyond measure. Anubis had been a well of life for Paul. He had saved him from the abduction by the intruding threads of the Leviathan. The sons of God would not be driven out by the lines of the dark destroyer, for there were promises and destinies written in interstellar gases and primordial space winds that preceded even the creative fostering of that feebleminded Leviathan of Cygnus.

“Bring her to my tabernacle,” Anubis directed, in his deep, melodic tones. The air about them cleared of sulfurous smells and oily residues from Herm the Sympasiun. A fragrance of flowers, nearly lilac in quality, emanated from his aura. He walked . . . no glided . . . above the floor of the ship in floating elegance.

“How did I get here?” Paul asked.

“Travel thought, as when we first came for you. As you were sent to HER, whom we hold great gratitude. These bumbling outsiders have had free hand long enough. Their trifling almost cost the effort. If they only knew the role they could have played! “ The voice grew tense in Paul’s head as the twenty-foot tall being levitated his mother over an open, glowing bed of luminescent crystals. The stones began to throb and hum as the light ebbed and flowed from them up and over his mother’s still body.

“She is in a state of shock, but will recover. The tin-heart had not yet completed his violation. Praise to my Lady Isis! “

“Isis be praised,” repeated Paul, crossing his chest with one arm in reverence for the Captain of the mother ship and this mission.

“How long before I can—-” Paul started, and then stopped in mid-sentence. Anubis held up his hand to still his speech and continued with the healing.

Far from the healing circle the ape-thing Beratu crouched in the shadows, shaking as it continued to grasp Dr. Schussel’s head.

“Feel bad. Very bad. Something very wrong. See trouble. Inside the flow from the Lake of the Leviathan. Oh Herm!”

“Stop it,” screamed Schussel, as he found himself through his delirium and struck at one the many fur covered eyes of Beratu. “Herm is finished. Now listen to me! Let go!” With that he struck at the underarm of Beratu, causing him to squeal and drop his prisoner.

“You want teeth?” Beratu growled, baring his fangs.

Schussel kicked the soft, rubbery dentures that threatened him.

“You forget, pus head, I knew you were an algae-straining parasite long ago. Those false teeth don’t frighten a man of science. “

Beratu crouched back into the shadows, wailing and moaning over the damage to the false front of death his kind so often used to confuse and frighten predators. He was beaten and he knew it.

Schussel felt about his head and noted the damage the berserk Leviathan satellite had done to his composure. There were bleeding welts around and atop his skull where tufts of hair once rested.

“We’ve nearly lost this time, old friend,” Schussel continued as he pulled Beratu up from the shadows. “I can only guess who’s ship we’re on, and if I’m right, the talons of Isis will be in us soon enough. Do you still carry those anks we stole from the Syrians?”

Beratu muttered and withdrew two golden ankhs, about 16 inches long, from some unseen pouch of his marsupial-like fur bed.
“Good thing too,” continued Schussel. “If we keep these in front we won’t set off any surveillance or guard probes. We’ll fit right into the ship’s magnetic field. “ He looked back at their gutted ship, torn like a three-minute egg. The pain of his self-scapling began to distract him as the blood oozed down to his eyes. He could taste its salty bite.

“We can forget the Tulip. She’s gone. C’mon, you old floor mat let’s see if we can’t steal a scout and get off here before the Leviathan kicks our asses for the last time. “

Leviathan spun in the recess of the black hole, feeding off the stars, planets, and life forms it could vacuum into its hold, like so many of its kind throughout the galaxy. Each had its own time control and destiny code. Each had infested its space like thistle seeds strewn through the universe since nearly the beginning. Untouched. Flouting all authority. They were the seed of destruction and consumption sucking the fabric of all matter back to feed their endless, tireless maws.

The piggyback time thread returned with an electrical snap. Leviathan wretched, nearly poisoned by its message. It was filled with a quasar-type of poison: light and power unpalatable to even the night seed of the black-hole life forms. With it came the howl of a dog: a galaxy-riding breed from Sirius, whom the Leviathan feared most. The howl bit through its stygian consciousness and pinned it to the walls of the spinning maelstrom from where Leviathan ruled, nervously.

3D. RUBBING HIS NOSE IN IT

The majestic being Anubis sprinkled dust motes of light over Carla’s unconscious body. As they fell, a chrysalis of light accumulated around her unconscious form. Off to one side, Paul scratched his nose in anger, and finally could not contain himself.

“Why does the Leviathan do these things? What has my mother done to deserve this?” Paul shook with the fury that coursed through his veins.

Anubis sighed a deep sigh that seemed to draw his large body inward in a soft collapse. “Remember that anger is a sword that has no handle. To wield it wounds the man who holds it,” Anubis quoted in the sing-song voice he used to lecture Paul when he forgot his lessons. Paul disliked that tone in Anubis, although he had to admit he was usually correct in his wisdom. Anubis remained still for a few moments, as if deciding whether to say something or leave it be.

“You’ve brought up a many-pronged question, little prince....” He rubbed his hands together in a circular motion, then clapped them over Carla’s purple aura. He shuffled over to where Paul was standing and sat down next to him on hard flat shelf attached to the wall that seemed created for Anubis to sit.

“Do you know what the Leviathan is?”

“Evil, pure evil,” Paul spat out in disgust, as if a garden slug had been found in his mouth. The long snout of Anubis burrowed in one of many pockets on his uniform, and he picked Paul up and set him in his immense lap.

“Cookie?” Anubis knew Paul was fond of sweet things. But his habit of initially sidetracking serious talk with unimportant distractions infuriated Paul, because he recognized the manipulation in the technique. Relax, catch off guard, attack. Must everything be a lesson?

“No, thank you. Will you please get to the point?” Anubis sighed again, and made a small chortle before giving Paul a sad look before continuing. He draped his immense doughy arm across Paul’s shoulders and traced his long, flat fingers under the boy’s chin.

“Little Prince, the concepts of good and evil are not so simply understood. Things are seldom easily defined, rarely yes or no, and almost never black and white...” Paul silently seethed, thinking of what had happened to his mother. He nearly didn’t hear what Anubis was saying. “... But this may be as close to black and white as anything in this reality becomes. First, we must begin at the start. Understand, little one, that there are many stories that explain how the Leviathan came to be. All of them cannot be totally true, but there may be grains of truth in each. Some races believe Leviathan began as Siinga, the brother of The holy and most high Anghii, Creator of all things....” Anubis made an enigmatic gesture across his eyes when he named the Creator. Paul didn’t quite follow it.

“You mean God,” Paul offered.

“Yes, on your planet that is His name. On some worlds he is Feldsum, the Giver of Life, or Wencil-aarum, the Builder. On others he is Oniel, the Fire-bringer, or Emman, the supreme essence. His names are probably infinite, because we have only traveled but a small part of this galaxy. There must be untold other worlds as well that we have not yet visited. In the same way,” Anubis opened his hand and flipped it to show Paul the back of his hand. Paul took it as the opposite gesture he had seen used when invoking the name of Anghii.”...Leviathan also has many names, which are often forbidden to speak aloud. On your planet, Lucifer, Beelzebub, Scratch, Satan. Others carefully name him these names, whenever they are brave enough; Callim-abah the Slayer, Orphem the Destroyer, Krun the Life-eater,” Anubis stole a glance at Paul’s mother.

“Sometimes it is felt that the various names of Leviathan becomes imbued with evil from being attached to him. That is why
many will not speak them aloud...” He got up and spread his massive arms the size of tree trunks over her body once again. Paul watched the light motes drift on her sleeping body like flakes of snow.

“Well, in this story, the twins are equal in every way, in the beginning. Together they co-created many wondrous things. Siinga’s creations were more brutal, and hard-edged, and blunt — nevertheless, blunt things do have their own beauty.” Anubis pointed to his own fleshy trunk and smiled. Paul smiled, too. “The Great Anghii created things more fragile, and light, and what you and I might now consider virtuous, although at that time virtue had not been invented, and all things were neither good nor evil...”

“But how could something be neither good or evil? Either something is good, or it is not,” insisted Paul. “Well, at the present time that appears to be true, for the most part. But back at the spark of time there existed nothing but the two brothers, working in tandem, creating things from the energy that existed between them. Anghii celebrated joyfully their joint creations, and Siinga celebrated, too, at first. Gradually, his enthusiasm waned. Finally, Anghii discovered Leviathan off by himself, working on something hidden.

“What do you have there?” Anghii asked curiously, and Siinga turned quickly around.

“We have no way to know who is the best between us, brother,’ and Leviathan thrust his creation toward his twin. ‘This will tell us who is the better. See?’

“Well, Anghii looked down in Leviathan’s thick fingers and saw a crudely constructed, small, living thing. ‘What is it?’ Anghii asked. ‘And besides, why do we need to know who is better? isn’t it enough to simply create things. Doesn’t everything have it’s own value?’

‘No, I must know!’ Leviathan insisted...’”

“How much of this story is true?” Paul interrupted, “which parts are the grain of truth, and which aren’t?” Patiently Anubis ignored his distraction and continued.

“So Anghii agreed reluctantly to the test. Both brothers would create a new work and have the tiny creature decide which it liked best. Siinga invented matter, which shapes all that we can touch and feel, in one form or another. His brother Anghii invented light, and not just the limited spectrum you earthlings detect, and even more than we Linkle can see. All the infrared and vibrating wavicles as well. Perhaps light we have yet to discover.”

“Who won?” Paul asked.

“What the creature chose,” Anubis emphasized the distinction, “was a surprise. Even though the little animal was itself made out of crude matter, the creature chose the light instead as it’s favorite. When the verdict was spoken, Siinga became enraged, both with jealousy against his brother and a feeling of betrayal from his own creation.”

“In fury, he gathered up all his power and struck down at the pathetic little creature, intending to utterly destroy it. Horrified at what his brother intended, Anghii acted instantly, perhaps something akin to instinct.”

“Oddly, he felt compassion for something he did not himself create. We have come to appreciate Anghii’s greatest strength: seeing the beauty in everything, no matter how ugly. He could not bear to see it destroyed. Instead, he prevented his brother from being able to strike at the creature...”

“The black hole!” Paul jumped out of his place on the shelf.

“Yes, little prince. You jump ahead of me. Anghii wrapped his brother in what we now refer to as a black hole. A place of such dense gravity that neither light nor matter can escape. But what your scientists haven’t discovered is that a black hole warps reality, also. In effect, it is like a great black pearl that the universe keeps coating with reality after alternate reality, preventing irritation in it’s own cosmic linings. After so many millennia, those realities have collapsed in upon themselves, and...?’” Anubis sniffled up his bulbous snout in a queathing mode.

“...and that is what is causing the reality Rift?” Paul completed.

“Precisely. There must be chinks in the layers of time surrounding the black hole, simultaneous thinnesses that over infinite time coincide just enough for Siinga to send out feelers into our world, our reality.”

“What would happen if he got out?” Paul wondered, shivering slightly at the thought of what that would be like.

“Either an infinity of imprisonment has caused him to reflect and repent, or else it has made him more bitter.” Anubis looked again at Carla’s body. Her breathing was becoming more deep, less labored. He breathed another sigh. “Either way, it threatens to end all reality, or at least as we know it and are comfortable with it. Let us take the first possibility: If he is bitter, he may destroy everything in his fury. He may war with his brother and overcome him, or lose, or perhaps they will destroy each other. The second possibility, although it is the one I pray for, could be equally devastating for us puny life forms. Because If he is repentant, he may erase the chalkboard and start over, relegating his crude creation to oblivion. After all, we were not Anghii’s personal creations. But I pray it is a point that is, how you earthlings say, moot? But I do not think Anghii would allow that much slack on the leash of Leviathan in the first place, nor allow our destruction in the second.”

“How do we know that for sure?”
“We don’t, my prince. And that is why we struggle, even unto this day, to make sure the layers that seal the black pearl
do not tear. We endeavor to strengthen the bars of his prison. We search out the black threads he sends through into our
reality, and we seek to end them. And we hope the other worlds and the other realities are equally diligent. And equally
successful.” Anubis smiled, and led Paul over to Carla’s body. He held Paul’s hand over his mother’s arm and squeezed them
both. The radiant motes had absorbed into her skin and lent her a small leftover glow. Her eyelids fluttered, and then opened.

“P...Paul...? and ...ohhh, my Gawdd!” Paul’s mother leapt off the glowing crystals and snatched up Paul in such a swift
move it knocked the breath out of him. She drug him across the dark room, to be the furthest away from the twenty foot tall
being with a large pasty trunk. Anubis jumped back a little himself, in mirrored alarm. His huge bottomless eyes darted back
and forth between Paul and his mother.

“What the... what is the matter, sweet lady?” Anubis managed to sound angry, hurt and puzzled all at the same time. “You
act as if you do not recall...” suddenly Anubis slapped his trunk, and Carla flinched at the unexpected movement. Paul was
unable to speak, but his forehead knit in an intense gesture that he hoped would translate to the twenty-foot tall Linkle.
Because Paul realized what Anubis was going to say, what he had to be thinking.

Anubis slowly straightened and sadly hummed in a deep voice. “My sweet lady, you do not belong in this reality.”

Leviathan, now calm, searched the reality shells. They floated like layers made from an oily film around his spherical
cell. He knew what he sought was incredibly rare. He waited for the timelines to coincide. He stood on the balls of his inky
feet, and held another skein of black, ropy threads, created over the last eternal interval. Without the restraints of time, he
could be patient. Or at least feign patience. Just when he thought he found a nexus of probability, a dazzling white form
appeared to his right. Leviathan nearly unraveled his malicious ball of black strings trying to guard his glowing green eyes
from the light.

“What have you come to torment me again, pathetic worm?” Leviathan grated. “If you will not aid, then begone, and never
return.”

The dazzling glow reflected off golden armor, the burnished surface a mass of raised symbols and delicate engraving that
spoke a strange language, as if the breastplate were a book page made metal. It was Qlay’s turn to look down, even though the
Original Human was shorter in stature. He drew a blackened sword, and crouched as if inviting attack. “I’ve come to deliver a
message, Siinga.”

Leviathan hissed like a thousand serpents. He did set down the skein of ink, and turned to the crude creature.

“You dare! That name is not for your lips! Prepare to breathe your last. I care not for your message, and especially not for
who sent you.” Before the armored man could flick an eyelid, Leviathan dealt a backhand blow that caught him throughout his
left side and vaulted him into a ravine, where he lay with armor like something jettisoned into deep space. Siinga turned back
to watching the inside of the black pearl and picked up his card of knitted mischief

Patience, he reminded himself, real or feigned, it matters not.

3E NYLON HOSE

Isaiah 19:9 — Moreover they that work in fine flax, and they that weave networks, shall be confounded.

Linkle space craft follow a predefined zig-zag through space. Their twists and turns, if followed by a paint brush, would
draw out a fine textured design of DNA strands. The tortuous tract made a difficult trail for the entrails of Leviathan to snare a
ship. The Dark One only travels in straight lines. Even the slightest deviation into a curving motion was enough to deny the
potent snares of the black-hole demonic.

There is no sense of twisting and turning in space, when the artificial gravity on a ship is effective. But not so for hairy
Beratu. Nature had played an elegant trick on the beasts of Hydrosh, who could so easily turn into a ball and roll in any
direction. Their inner ears held a priceless navigation device of cartilage and crystal: the most sensitive gyroscopic sensors in
the biological world. A hold over from their days as slime swilling amphibians covered with useless mats of blinding hair.
The Linkle ship’s trajectory was beginning to take a toll on Beratu, as he could no longer hold back his caustic stomach fluids.
Genetic seasickness.

“What is your problem,” yelped Dr. Schussel, as he barely missed a projectile of most potent vomitus. “This is no time to
bend to air sickness. My god, you’re supposed to be the wonder of balance. The being that cats dream of becoming. And what
is this? Sick to our little tummy, “ he taunted, as he poked into the fleshy depths of the Hydrosh’s belly. This set off another explosion.

“Need to get—get out!” Beratu grunted, his matted arms flailing overhead.

“Soon enough, my fur ball. First let’s get a hold of some navigation documents. I haven’t the foggiest where the Linkle has us now. The last time I was on the Tarachna Mar The God’s were at war and Isis was leaving for the Pleiades with her wounded pride. We could outmaneuver the Dark Hall any day of the week. Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to out think those old dogs. But, without Herm’s computer brain, we could be lost out there like so much comet dust. Heh, keep your ankh up, you beezel snit barnacle!”

Beratu had weakened and was rolling back and forth on his pads like a teeter totter. His arm began to drop the ankh away from the two stowaways. A sharp pinch at Beratu’s elbow brought him around long enough to keep the device poised.

“Go down to the cargo bay and get us a scout, or better yet, an attack flyer. We may have to shoot our way out of this mess. You know these Linkle ships. Just like the last time. . .if we’re lucky. “ Schussel pushed Beratu to the left. “I’ll meet up with you. We need a hostage to secure passage. Oh, don’t growl at me,” snapped the Doctor. Beratu continued to grump and hiss as he edged to the left of the craft’s hallway. Schussel moved toward the purple panels over the archways. He noted the hieroglyphs as he held the ankh before him.

Anubis stepped down from the healing podium. The glow of the crystals made multi-colored pools in his dark eyes. His movements were liquid. His robe floated over the silvery, polished floors. He hovered over the son and daughter.

“It is truly a wonder to see you alive and….not violated by that cyborg filth. Please, my deepest apologies for the terrible experience you’ve been through.” He reached to touch Carla but she withdrew, holding Paul closer. “Aahhh. My appearance must be somewhat strange, even frightening. Let me assure you I would never harm you. And your son,” he said, pointing to Paul,” is of unimaginable value. You are the receptacle of a savior. Your son is as great in our eyes as Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, or any other great avatar of your earth. You must know that his destiny will result in the saving of not just your world, but of millions of solar systems you will never know. I have been graced with having him as my understudy.”

“Why have you taken me? Where am I?” Carla whimpered in the corner.

Paul continued to soothe her and wipe her forehead. “He is our hope, Mother. So much has happened. It must seem strange to see me grown so quickly, but time means nothing here. I’ve been taught so much in just a blink of your time. I’m still a young man, Mother, but I have the wisdom of the ages, thanks to Anubis. He helped me save you. With the Tarachnoid splinter, the dagger of Thoth, I struck the robot demon and saved you. Without the help of Anubis, god knows what might have happened to you.”

“He speaks the truth. Those interfering space slime would have…” Anubis halted and spun around. His upper lip raised in a slight curl as he exposed his ancient canines. The blood lust of millennia could not be overcome by his temple training. “They dare enter my sanctity,” growled the Priest.

“Oh I dare, all right, you dog-faced liar,” returned Schussel, as he stepped out of the shadows, past the healing bed of embers. “And I think we must meet again though the last time found my friends in Eruddi, Sumer a bit bewildered and awed by your pretentiousness. How a little wisdom and distance can change those attitudes.”

“I should have killed you then. You vermin! How dare you enter even the space I breathe. Well, then so be it. Paul Jones, watch the cleansing of a bacterial infection.” Anubis raised his arms. The glowing embers turned to a violet pulse as a maelstrom of force rose above its surface. Anubis swung his arms toward Schussel, as the rings on his left forefinger began to hum, and then stopped.

Schussel was already countering with his ankh. He threw a fine powder overhead. The frozen Anubis seemed helpless in the dust and from the light of the glowing ankh.

“Oh we have grown a bit weary of your slight of hand, bow-wow boy. How nice of Isis to let me know of your weak points before she took her astral departure. A little pulverized worm wood and a frequency of 16.3 megahertz on the old ankh dial and your about as useless as a puppy in heavy traffic.” Schussel chuckled and moved quickly towards Paul and Carla, still holding the ankh at the frozen dog-headed god.

“What have you done? Who are you?” Paul questioned, as he stood upright, fists readied.

“Not to worry, young Paul. Or is it old Paul? No matter. You’re just one more piece of the clay clan to me. One more knot on the rope. But a critical knot, albeit. Hmm. Must be your supposed mother. Bet she’s totally mind melted.” Schussel reached out and touched Paul’s clenched fist, and Carla’s shoulder. The relaxation in their musculature was immediate.
“A little pressure-point skill and you two would follow Godzilla into the frying pan. Hah, so easy! I don’t care to travel with a crowd, but I’m afraid you two will have to go with us. Paul, would you like to meet your father, again?”

Paul nodded yes, with a slow, trance-like gaze.

“And you, madam. Care to be held in the arms of that dazed and worried husband of yours?”

Carla repeated Paul’s motions.

“Oh I just knew you two would be so agreeable. Now just follow me and we’ll have a wonderful little trip out of the Dark Hall’s hell hole. Perhaps I’ll even have time to tell you what’s really going on here. You’d like that, wouldn’t you.”

They nodded. He touched both of their noses and then their eyelids. They followed him like ducklings. Schussel could here the muffled growling of Anubis as they scuttled past his robes and towering frame.

“Go bark at the moons of Jupiter for all I care. And I won’t be back again, or if I am, you’ll be the last to know. Didn’t want to be here. Wasn’t my idea. I’m just the medical stiff trying to set a few cosmic fractures. Anyway, you’ll come out of this in a day or two. Don’t bother to follow us. It won’t do you any good. You’re lucky I wrote the Hippocratic oath or I’d drain your black blood for what you’ve done to Herm. He was a favored son of Kalmarian, a credit to his race, and a good friend. Things you will never be. Aaah! “ With one last effort, Schussel struck Anubis in the shin and then ushered his captives towards the cargo bay.

Schussel could hear the hydro-drives begin to hum and cycle. Beratu had done well. And none too soon. The echoes of maddening howls were drawing closer.

“Quick, inside,” commanded Schussel. He pushed at Paul and Carla as they stepped gingerly up the gangway under the belly of the craft. The Linkle fighter was a maze of fins and bulbous protrusions piled over a saucer shape. Every inch a weapon of death and pain. But useless to fend off the apes of Thoth that were closing quickly on their escape. The Doctor had no weapon to stop their mindless berserking when they were in a defense mode. The ankh was useless against their hungry fangs and powerful arms.

The ramp was almost closed as the hairy furies began their assault. One arm had managed to reach into the ship as the ramp closed. It continued to grasp and tear at the air even after it was ripped from the sockets of the ape it served. Schussel could hear the talons scraping the sides of the craft, and the thuds of the rabid defenders pounding against the hull.

“Beratu, get us out of here. And now,” he yelled to his furry pilot. “A Wookie,” he muttered, “if only they existed! “

Beratu spun about on the fighter controls, frantically learning their patterns and sound requirements. He could not break the code.

“Paul, you do want to help, don’t you?”

“Yes, I will help.”

“Can you fly this ship?”

“Yes.”

“Then get your little ass up there and get us out of here! “

Paul ambled to the panels, as if Beratu was not present.

“Beok emru contin de riuyu. “ Paul commanded. The cargo bay of the Tarachna Mar opened to reveal the wonder of the stars. Paul guided the ship forward and entered a slow orbit about the mother ship. Schussel looked back through the view screen and wondered at the apes, floating now in vacuum, still gnashing their jaws and swinging their poisonous nails at the fighter.

“They are loyal, if nothing else,” Schussel exclaimed.

“Where do you want to go?” Paul asked.

“I’d say earth, but I’m sure the old house pet of Isis would think that same, linear thought. Instead, set out for Sirius. I doubt he’d expect us to head for his own backyard. Can you do that?

“Yes,” Paul replied in a hypnotic dullness. “Course set.”

“Oh very good, my little lackey. Now, I think it’s time you and your mother had a refreshing rest and debriefing from the old country doctor. Come, let’s go to the galley and see if this old hunk has more than a few dog biscuits stuck away.”

Paul and Carla followed Schussel from the control panel. “And Beratu, old friend, would you be so kind as to tell us when we reach Sirius. I believe you can handle that!”

“You food me soon?” Beratu grunted.

“We’ll dig up something. Have a care you old fur ball. Give me an hour with these two and I’ll be back with some nice Hydrosian crybian foose. Good?”

“Good! Good!” Beratu panted, looking out the view port. His fur changing to a golden, metallic glow.

Schussel touched Carla’s left cheek and a shudder rolled through her face and then her shoulders.

“You!”
“Yes, just little old me.” Schussel stuck his index finger in his cleft chin and did a fine spinning pirouette. “The good Dr.
Schussel at your service.”

“Schussel? Schussel? Where have I...” Carla furled her brow and began to rub the back of her arms. It wasn’t particularly
cold in the ship but she felt dazed and uncomfortable.

“Your husband’s shrink at Bentford Clinic. Remember now?”
She nodded, rolling her eyes. She then began to shift her head back and forth snapping the cartilage and tendons in her
neck.

“Please don’t do that,” protested Schussel.
“What? What am I doing?”

“That proto-typical American I’m-my-own-chiropractor stuff. God I hate to hear that crunching. Just leads to problems
later, you know. “

“Oh don’t be silly. I do this all the time. Helps me relieve the tension when I’m working over my stained glass windows.
Where are we and how did I get here? Shit...I remember now...that’s my son, but it can’t be. This is really so much bullshit
I can’t believe it. You better have some good answers mister.” She stuck her finger in Schussel’s chest and squinted into his
gray browed face.

“Answers. Women always want answers.” he shrugged and turned. “Never like what they hear and then it’s always a big
sobby mess and .... aahh the years of marriage I wasted. Never found one I could trust half as much as that scurrilous Beratu.
All right,” he motioned over his shoulder for her to follow. “Come along. Let’s at least have a decent cup of tea to talk this
out. You’re hardly a major player in this opera, but you deserve an explanation after all of this. “

Carla paused, looking down at the young man next to her, so familiar yet unknown, and then back at the ambling
curmudgeon before her. She continued to rub her neck and then her lower back as she shuffled slowly to the ship’s mess with
her bewildering host.

Schussel moved his hand over a smooth wall in the cafeteria. The smell of Linkle dumplings and pollard yogurt still filled
the air. The floor was covered with used receptacles and cutlery. Saliva and markings of Linkle also greeted Schussel’s nose
with rapaciousness.

“Ugh,” Carla grunted.

Schussel pushed against a small blue panel and circled it twice with his index finger.

“Yapushna butona pars,” he commanded.

“Christ, what a smell,” Carla cringed and moved back out of the mess hall. “This must be the toilet, not the mess. “

“Get over it, madam. Surely a mother who has changed diapers can survive a bit of inconvenience. It’s just the way the
Linkle mark their territory. It’s an old watering hole habit. C’mon.” Schussel paced impatiently.

Carla poked her head around the corner again. She pinched her nose shut and delicately stepped over the debris about the
floor. Her attention became riveted to Schussel’s open hand, suspended in the air. A bubble of light appeared over it and soon
there was a hot cup of something within his grasp.

“Is that...coffee?...I’m afraid to try to smell it.”

“It’s not Juan Valdez, but it’ll do. Here, hold your hand out. Guess you’ll have to use your left hand.”

Carla hesitated and then pushed her hand into the void, as Schussel had. His hand pressed over the wall again. A coffee
cup formed in her hand.

“It’s amazing!”

“Sure. Guess you see it once and it seems normal. It won’t put Julia Childs out of business anytime soon. Didn’t know
how you’d take yours. Black’s about it. These dog faces never cared much for cream and sugar. Forget the low fat stuff. What
do you think?

“Ummm. I needed that. “ She closed her eyes and rested against the cleanest wall space in the room.

“Let’s sit over there. That table with the funny chairs. They reserve that for people they don’t like. It’ll be the only flea-
free spot here. Trust me. “

They pulled back the black and red objects that were twisted and unstable. Schussel pulled up on the left corner of one
and it immediately shaped into a comfortable director’s chair. Carla imitated the motion and joined Schussel at a clear, acrylic
table top. A portable computing device was resting at the center of the table. It had a blue light flashing on its upper surface.

“This is all so strange—so bizarre. How can I react to you? I want to kill you and thank you.”

“Do I get a choice?” Schussel sipped noisily at the brew. His eyes crinkled in a knowing smile.

“We’ll see.” Carla replied.

“Then let me make my case to you. I’ll give you the nut-shell course of reality. Could be a bit overwhelming. Can you
handle that?”
“Try me!”

“Fine. Simply put, I’m a 5,000- year old physician working his way through medical school. The medical school of the stars. Send your dimes and dollars...I see you’re not amused."

“Hardly.” She sipped lightly.

“Well, the first part was the truth. I started out in Eruddi, Sumer. A beautiful time and place. Then this woman Isis... called herself a goddess... messed with my genetics and off I went, immortal. To make things worse, her competition captured me and forced me to help with a genetic research project. Your husband is a result of my work—a clone. “

Carla snapped back in her chair and began rubbing her forehead. “Slow down. Maybe I don’t want to know,” she begged.

“Sorry, you opened the box. Have to finish it all now. So the Linkle start making these duplicates. . . “

“Who the hell are the Linkle?”

“Remember that big schnauzer back on the other ship?”

“Horrible! “

“More so than you can imagine. Apparently he’s had your son for some time . . . well in your world for some time. We thought he was another clone at first. We were going to test you and find out what the hell they’d been doing to your eggs. Ever see a big, smelly robot with lots of arms?”

The coffee cup slammed down on the table, throwing boiling liquid over Schussel. “You sent that thing after me . . . you bastard!” Her arm swung out at his face and then froze. Schussel had already pressed key neural points on her shoulder and suspended her mobility.

“I know you can hear me in there, so sit still. Yes, I sent Herm to see you. Must have been a lot rougher than he was supposed to be. There’s no telling with Sympasiuns. They do so look down at us. To them we’re about as evolved as mushrooms. Still, no excuse for his infernal roughness. When you calm down I must find out how my dear friend fares after that attack by your son.

“As I was telling, your son is different. The Linkle must have improved on my processes, though I thought I had destroyed all of their records and laboratories. We’ve collected several of their clones over the years to save them and find out what the Linkle are scheming. Just saved your husband Clay and his DNA twin Kley. Such humor.” Schussel chuckled.

“Why my involvement?” he asked, as the mannequin stared ahead in front of him. “It was simply the best chance THEY had. Guess I’ve always been some somewhat of a medical savant. It just comes easily. I helped solve the replication resonance issue. Of course you know what that is,” he laughed again, sipping at his cup.

“My, this is bad java. Has that “makes its own gravy” essence.

“So, it turns out that if you start making enough clones that they began vibrating their DNA in sequence, no matter how far apart they are. You see a weaker impact with twins, triplets, etc. This can have serious consequences when you have hundreds of the exact copy. One small imperfection in one model and they all suffer instantly. That’s where the implants came into being—the splinters. Just a frequency final filter, if you like. Only the good stuff gets in. Only the good stuff gets out. It was so easy, but those Linkle are such idiots.”

He pressed her shoulder again and released her stupor. She shuddered and tears began to flood from her eyes.

“Not to worry, Pilgrim,” Schussel drawled in a perfect John Wayne.

“How can you be the good guys? Impossible!”

“Now looky here, ma’am,” Schussel continued, in his Duke phase,” just belly up to this here computer screen and Ah’ll betcha we can find out what them little doggies is a doin’ out on this har range. “

Schussel pressed the blue light on the server station and began plucking at the smooth pad in front of it. “Been a while, but they haven’t upgraded their technology. As I remember, old Anubis had a chart he was using to track these clones. Should be a couple hundred of ‘em left. Sort of like a geographic positioning system, but on 3-D. Ah ha, here it is.”

A rotating, holographic image appeared before them over the table. Schussel rocked back in his chair. Carla was mesmerized by the floating diagrams and deep renditions of star systems and galaxies, rolling one after the other. A galaxy would appear and then parts of it would expand. Moving red dots would appear, practically covering the image each time.

“No, no!” Schussel stood and screamed, spinning around and around, repeating “No” again and again.

Carla stood and moved away from him.

“You,” Schussel snapped, pointing a finger at her,” You are more important than I thought. Those cosmic bitches have gone too far. How dare he think he could go to the second degree of God? I thought they were only information probes... a minute push to become omniscient. But do you see?” Schussel pointed back to the table. “Do you see what he’s been doing? The universe. He’s put them out like thistle seed. He’ll be able to sense it all, be it all. By the lights, he might even dare . . . “

“But dare to become God?” A deep voice crashed out of the darkness, slicing Schussel’s diatribe.

Carla felt strong arms around her shoulders. Familiar arms.

“Are you all right? “ Clay asked, holding her to him.
“Yes,” Carla said. She faltered, beginning to collapse back into a comfort she had prayed for, but then snapped forward and around to see her beloved. She held her hand to her mouth and pulled away.

“You’re not . . . not Clay.”

“Give me a minute. It’s not that easy to explain, but I am Clay.”

The voice was right, but she still stayed at arms length. Schussel charged to get past them. He was blocked as another figure stepped into the passage. John Kley landed a solid right to the Doctor’s jaw, landing him unconscious on a pile of Linkle dining ware and refuse.

“C’mon. Let’s get Paul and split,” Clay said, reaching for Carla. “We’ve got to protect Paul at all costs. The Leviathan is bound to find us if Anubis doesn’t first.”

A searing magnetic filament reached through the galaxies. From the stygian darkness of Cygnus it forged a passage through the inky vacuums. Sirius drew onward as it caught the vibratory linkage of the clones. It’s hunger grew as it reached the small Linkle craft. Leviathan ignored, or was too preoccupied to notice the awakening of the stunned warrior, thrown to the side of its den.

The only focus in its blinding rage was catching the Dragon key and his party.

3F. APPROACHING LIGHT SPEED

On the side of the Linkle craft was a semi-translucent ovoid. As the ship spun and dawdled, twisted and slipped, the ovoid caught the distant starlight and bounced back a feeble glow. On casual inspection, the ovoid appeared to be part of the ship. Until the observer noticed it to be the only asymmetrical structure on the craft. And of course, occasionally a dark figure could be seen moving inside the ovoid, if one did not blink. What the inhabitants of the ship detected was unclear, as they were probably too preoccupied with their own affairs to notice. At least, that’s what Twaan surmised when, after several minutes, no servo-bots raced across the hull to quietly dispatch him.

Twaan considered that a small miracle, and himself a considerably fortunate Thothian ape. Especially when he summoned up the images of his fellow apes twirling ever smaller into the ether as the great black nothingness of space absorbed them. Even more fortunate was the amazing coincidence that he happened to pack the Therekell Insta-base Hemi-ovoid bioshelter in his sidekit this wakeperiod, intending to take it to Supply and upgrade it for the newer model. Twaan even speculated the outlandish coincidence suspiciously beyond a miracle. It seemed almost overtly intentional. Perhaps The great Wencil-aruun was tinkering in his life for reasons known best to The Great Benefactor, creator of all breath. That a being of such infinite magnitude would be remotely interested in his worthless life struck Twaan as peculiar, even foolhardy. Hugging the hull, he glanced at the ribbon of shame on his right arm, and quickly turned away. Twaan needed nothing to remind him he was non-Thoth. Not even other apes counted his blood worth the trouble to spill. There would be no glorious marked path to the afterlife, No weathered spirits to take him home. Twaan knew this, down to the core of his being. Surely Wencil-aruun must know it also. Is it possible for the creator to make a mistake?

Ever the pragmatist, Twaan shrugged inwardly and decided to take advantage of such a windfall, no matter the source, whatever the reason.

Stuck to the hull like a leech, and hanging on for dear life, Twaan could do little but wait while the autodrill worked its slow arc around his body. It was a tradeoff between his biological need for the dwindling oxygen inside the Hemi-ovoid, and the inexorable consumption caused by the autodrill’s laser cutter. If only the air would hold out, he hoped. If the drill did not succeed soon, he would be dead in a lifeless cocoon dangling from the side of the craft like a vestigial organ, atrophied by the vacuum. As it was, the low pressure inside the shelter was leeching milky venom out of his clear fangs, and drawing thick viscous drops of poison from his seven-clawed hands. Twaan manipulated the great cords of muscle tissue in his chest and slowly squeezed air out his lungs. Anything to help reduce the painful pressure differential between the space inside his body and outside within the hemi-ovoid.

To forget the pain, he closed his eyes and mentally recited his battle mnemonics. Instead of accessing his adolescent file, he went further back, to when he recalled the holo-sparing mobile as it spun over his head in the Urlong leaf cradle of his aunt Nomo. A weary grimace escaped his buried face as an image of Nomo came out of the depths of his memory. Quickly he banished it. But in his head he heard her voice drumming out the cradle-level mnemonics while the holo mobile displayed each species in turn, a green latticed three-dimensional form that contained the basic shape and strategic points of a given species.

“Twaan, Kemembrullan ice dragon. Kill. Quickest method.”
Twaan’s tiny seventh finger selected a nexus of nerve clusters on the underside of the creature’s neck in the hologram.

“Good. Now, easiest method.”

Infant hands created a twisting motion, as if a neck of the holo-beast were being crushed between already powerful pink arms.

“Good, very clever, Twaan,” Nomo smiled, and he thrust the remembered image far away. Only her voice came through.


Sharply angled fingers pantomimed a blow to the bridge of the nose, driving the broken bone and cartilage into the fragile brain.

“That’s one way. Of course, this is a harder problem, because humans are so easy to kill, that the myriad of possibilities almost overwhelms a battle-ape. Sometimes the indecision affords too much time to your opponent. Even a human can best you, if clever enough.” Nomo cleared her throat, and resumed the battle-mnemonic litany of death.


A two-headed quadruped twisted to life over his crib, snorted in two directions, and seemed prepared to stampede the young ape in his crib. Small clawed digits slashed the eye-orbs of both heads simultaneously while a hooked knee came up into the frontal groin, hammering the blinded holo to the veldt floor. Adrenaline seethed through Twaan in waves of pleasure. Killing well is the best thing for a Thothian assass-in-ape. Aunt Nomo belonged to the Exament-plexor Kree of Assassins, attached directly to the lady Isis and her retinue. Her greatest dream was for Twaan to be the Lady’s own personal assassin. Her greatest dream, and his worst tragic nightmare.

Twaan was surprised when he felt a sob escape his great barrel chest. Instantly, he forced himself to quietness inside the hemi ovoid. He could not afford the loss of breath.

His tenyear final was held in the auditorium/coliseum of the Sulamin Kree Temple. The ritual was overseen by Nomo. By then she had blue and green tattoos on the inside of her eyelids, and graying fur on the back of her forearms. She stood stick-straight and thrust her lower jar out as if it would break. Twaan felt her mental life-force willing him to stand proudly with barbs of granite. Instead, he smiled weakly to himself before mounting the raised platform, covered with tautly-stretched skins of thousands of different life-forms sewn together. The soles of his bare feet shuddered with each step. His stomach wavered on the edge of nausea as his nerve endings identified the original owners of the pelts by feel. Freena lizard. Corbon water-ray. Water buffalo. Horvath-omniphid from the Orange number 3 galaxy. Ruff-necked Gimanc. Sperm whale. Twaan could have blamed nerves for the queasiness, but he knew better. He glanced down at his legs and noted the blue and green tattoos winding up around them in crooked spirals. The path of Light. One mark for each holo-kill. When he finally covered his entire body with death-notches, he would be one of the True-Thoth, highly-revered assassins. He would have to choose a Kree (although to choose outside Nomo’s Exament-plexor Kree would have been an insult). What tied up his insides was the knowledge that he was becoming increasing uncomfortable with killing. He couldn’t have told anyone, and so it gnawed and ate at him from the inside. Where these feelings came from, he had no idea. Thothian apes were the universe standard for loyalty and deadliness. He had never heard of any that abandoned that legacy. Yet here he was, surrounded by an audience of the greatest assassins from every Kree, and the Lady herself, in a gilt-nimbus observation sphere, hovering over the platform. Today he would graduate from artificial battle dances. Holo-mnemonics would be put away, like human children put away dolls. He would have to deal with facing up to a true, non-computer generated non-sentient creature, and besting it in hand-to-hand combat. The ceremony was the penultimate end to which every ape aspired. Glory and battle, pride and seething hormonal tides of bloodlust. Twaan swallowed bile and tried to keep from losing his lunch.

Nomo’s great pride would not have allowed him to forego this pageant, so he did not ask. Resigned, Twaan entered the center ring of the platform and waited for the suspended creature to be lowered.

He glanced up at the metallic bottom of the cage as it twitched and twisted under the weight and movement of the beast within. Without joy Twaan speculated what the creature might be. He had studied them all. If it was a Rurhmthian Gumwort, he could use a quick slashing blow to the back of the spineless and brainless slug. A many-tentacled Brine-Moll would take the better part of the first round just disabled its limbs before going in for the kill. Twaan’s mouth tasted of acid and his tongue felt swollen. The cage floor was still for a moment, and then started violently shifting as the chain started to lower. Oh great Wencil-aruun, Twaan prayed, let it be just a Rurhmthian Gumwort. He found something else to look at instead of the cage. He watched Nomo. Her eyes were closed and her lips were muttering something he couldn’t understand. He wondered what she was hoping for, what kind of creature. He hoped no god was answering her prayers.

Slowly the cage grated to a stop on the drum-tight skinned floor of the platform. It was a blunt metal box with one small open square set into the front door. There were no windows or openings of any kind besides that small, dark hole.
Senses heightened by fear and dread, he jumped at the screeching sound of the front metal slab dragging across the box. The cage began to unfold itself. Clumsy, furtive movements disturbed the interior black shadows. Twaan’s mouth went dry as cloth. Nomo’s eye sacs opened, and then tightened, and a small drop of venom trailed from her ancient fang, now tusk, the only one surviving from an heroic tangle with thirty-two Klavian centaurs. The levitating sphere of the most imperious and ever-beautiful Isis bobbed lower to get a better look.

What ambled out of the cage almost stopped Twaan’s heart on the spot. He had expected any of a million kinds of deadly or challenging creatures. He was apprehensive about facing brute beasts of wanton killer instinct. He perhaps anticipated multiple opponents. Who knew what Nomo might conjure?

What tumbled underneath the dwindling shadow of the cage as it was raised back overhead caused every mouth and breathing orifice in the temple to gasp in a huge collective indraw of stale air. Twaan sensed first that something was wrong from the tangible dismay of the onlookers. Then he recognized for himself what had fallen out of the cage. Twaan whirled imploringly at the stunned gallery. Finally he was brought up short by the knowing gleam in Nomo’s rheumy eyes. What had she done? Twaan’s mind reeled. In a heap before him on the patchwork canvas was something a tenyear ape should not have to face, not until his twentyyear, and never in a sport, or graduation ritual. What faced should only happen in a field of battle. What faced him was... the creature was... it was...

Sentient.

The glowing nimbus of Isis rotated around the assembly until the Great Mother looked down at where Nomo d’Exament-plexor sat rigid in full formal battle dress. Nomo did not look up. Twaan watched, a statue. The opponent creature continued to kneel, eyes planted on the floor. Not a word passed among the observers.

“Battle-mother....” Isis bestowed the highest address possible for a Thothian, but in low vansrit, a language used only when ordering about house domestics. Nomo grudgingly looked up. “...this may yet prove to be a proud day for you,” Nomo’s heavy brows dipped lower. “But you have placed this tenyear in shoes overlarge for his feet....” The queen’s expressionless eyes gazed upon Twaan’s opponent. “...and you are placing a sentient in harm’s way.” Isis brought her imperial chin back to hover over Nomo’s seated figure. “Your blood connection to this tenyear is bare excuse. Your position as masterkiller d’oman is the only justification. Say you then, that this tenyear is sufficiently trained and equipped for this jump in training level? Consider carefully before answering.” Twaan’s aunt shifted and began to lift a finger to reply when the queen’s commanding voice interrupted her.

“Know this. If the tenyear fails, then I will declare this for what it is. Political maneuvering of the lowest order. You are aware of the punishment. Your bloodline will be cut off....”

Murmurs spun around the temple. Twaan heard them only as the buzzing of beeznit in his ear. Much louder was the pounding of his own blood. His opponent did not move, continuing to kneel on the skinned platform. he marveled at its patience, courage, or perhaps stupidity.

“...if he succeeds, then your judgment was trustworthy, in spite of the temptation to advance your own blood relative.” The great Isis made the word relative sound like something unclean.

“Yet, I swear by my own name he is ready, Great Skymother. I have trained him personally since birth. No other tenyear could ever be more ready.” Nomo punctuated the statement with a hard stare to Twaan which interpreted in this way: Do not fail.

He stared back and tried to convey: You had no right.

The nimbus drifted until it faced Twaan, and dipped down so low the great God Isis almost appeared to rest directly on top of the sentient. For a moment, he wondered if he was actually confronting both the creature and the God Mother as opponents. It felt so unreal, he was almost convinced he was observing it from outside his body.

“Tenyear...” The Imperial Womanhood paused, as if discarding something she had been about to say, thinking better of it.

“Yes, great mother of the cosmos, ruler of all galaxies, founder of...”

“Tenyear...” Nervous sweat ran down his eye sacs.

“Yes, mother?”

“...this pairing was not of your own choosing, I assume?” The words were spoken with a voice that was kind, but the eyes did not seem kind. The eyes looked more than capable of hefting the weight and authority necessary to hold half of the galaxy in a velvet vise.

“I was unaware, Mother. That is true.” Twaan’s voice wavered slightly. Political acumen was a pool he never deigned to tip his little toe into. He was woefully outmatched. On several different levels.

“Yes, I see the truth in your young eyes. Even so. Are you, as the masterkiller d’oman suggests, ready and equipped for this match?”

Twaan looked not at the great Skymother, but at his aunt. His words came out clipped, and angry.
“If the masterkiller d’oman says so, it must be true.” Nomo inclined her head only slightly at Twaan’s words, and a grin slid across her face that he was unable to interpret. He thought: Could she actually be correct? Am I truly ready for this?

That it could even be a remote possibility stunned him. True, he had nothing to judge himself by. All his training had been private and secret, in aunt Nomo’s ancestral forest home. He had few friends, and never trained with any. What his abilities might be paled in comparison to Nomo, he was certain of that. But was mere skill enough?

For Twaan, endless holo-killing had begun to be a repulsive, tedious chore, even if it had only been holo-generated images. Of course, the blows he received were dealt by air pressure jets and robotic weights to perform exactly as a living creature might on the field of battle. The fighting had been real enough, the exertion certainly palpable, and resulting holodeaths disturbingly convincing. But lingering in the back of his mind was the knowledge no actual beast was killed.

What he was forced by misfortune or honor to deal with now was the genuine article —- and it was lean and muscular. It would naturally defend itself like the holo-images had. The difference would be it would be doing so because it didn’t want to die. It would know the consequences with a knowledge beyond instinct or programming. As weapons it could use cunning, and learned skills. Because it was sentient. Twaan was going to have to kill a being with a soul. Or, he suddenly realized, be killed by a being with a soul. At this thought, his fluttering stomach became rock-still. After eliminating the beast, he would then make his aunt pay for this, he vowed. Someday.

Once more a mental image of his aunt screaming in rage with claws outstretched came unbidden to his memory. He quickly spun it away from him thoughts and checked on the autodrill’s progress. By slowly raising his head, and glancing off the reflection from the inside of the bioshelter, Twaan saw the lopsided arc was nearly 320° completed. Only 40° more to go, and he would be in the craft instead of on it. Dear Lord, he prayed, let me get in before they jump to null space. Just one more miracle.

Settling his head back down to rest on his right arm, Twaan tried to redirect his thoughts away from what happened at his tenyear battle. But his perverse mind turned back again like a barely-caught snake twisting in his helpless hands.

The sentient shot haunted looks around the temple coliseum. Still kneeling, he locked eyes with Twaan. The previous discussion seemed to have no effect on him. That struck him as cavalier, considering the battle they were about to engage in. Another thought struck him, that perhaps Nomo may have forgotten to install a unilator in the being’s ear canal while she prepped him for battle. He frowned. Why not? This began to bother him even as his Thothian frame began to crouch in a classic opening gambit, spider eats the worm. Venom glands began secreting his body’s ancient defense, and viscous drops began dripping from his outstretched claws.

It was then that Twaan’s own unilator hummed with a translation of words coming out of the single mouth organ of the sentient:

“Alright, you blasted filthy ape-thing, whatever you are. I guess you’re pissed at me for something. But I didn’t ask to be roused out of bed at three in the morning and get kidnapped by you stinkin’ aliens. Go piss up a rope.” With that, the sentient sat down cross-legged and folded his arms in a defiant gesture.

The entire assembly froze, as the sentient’s words were translated into various languages and dialects by each individual observer’s unilators.

Amazing, Twaan thought, the being never consented. Is this legal?

“Silence!” The voice of Isis lashed out, whip-thin and sharper than a sword, “Hold, Twaan, retract your claws. Nomo! stay in your seat!” The nimbus cocoon bobbed as it spun around to face Twaan’s aunt, who had shot up like a bolt and started clawing her way onto the platform. An unintelligible scream let fly from her lips, and Twaan noted detachedly that even the inside of her mouth had been marked with the tattooed record of her lifelong kills. It occurred to him for the first time that she might have been more than just ruthless or cruel. She might very well have been insane. Suddenly the fragile lattice that held up his own sanity seemed in immediate peril. Nomo had taught him it was only through killing in the service of Isis that a Thothian lit his way to paradise. The incomplete tattoos marking his body corresponded to spiritual steps he had attained and had yet to attain in the stairway that lead to the throne of Wencil-arun. Or so he had been taught.

Twaan stood paralyzed in a crouch while Nomo galloped on all fours, bearing down on the sentient with claws outstretched, venom and saliva dripping in a froth from her mouth. Sounds reached him obliquely, barely registering. There might have been screams from the audience. Later, he was never sure if he himself had screamed or shouted. It was a blurry frozen moment in time. He did remember the gold translucent nimbus turning instantly metallic and opaque, with high sheen spikes popping out of it, presumably an automatic defense of the nimbus device, or of Lady Isis herself? Twaan never knew.

Then there was a ripping sound, then the floor fell out from under him, and everything went black.
The autodrill punched through the last bite of the arc. With a pop, Twaan fell through the opening, swimming downstream through an outrush of air that ballooned the ovoid bioshelter and began tearing it before he could replace the divot and reseal the breach by converting the autodrill into a makeshift welder. It took all of about four minutes, but he was unaware of the time passing. He also dismissed the alert klaxon broadcasting his break-in, simply because at the moment it seemed not as important as preventing the breach from letting all the oxygen escape. Emergency lighting had not punched in, and he had to fumble in the near dark, lit only by the flame of the welder.

The pit below the platform was incredibly deep, with steep-slanted sides. When Twaan came to, he realized he must have only been out a few seconds. The hole was dark and dank, and the only light was what reflected off the spiked metallic nimbus. It lay in a crumpled heap to his right. The confusing shapes made it difficult to tell if there was anyone near or in it. Twaan wondered if the nimbus of Isis had been too close to the skinned platform when the defensive spikes popped out? His immediate memories would not reveal anything, as he seemed in a state of shock. His eyes had not yet adjusted, and the breath was knocked out of him.

Almost at the same time his tenyear eyes acclimated to the dark enough for him to make out they were not exactly in a well, but rather in a huge common room that serviced several common tunnels. The tunnels were gouged out of the rock, and the upper arch seemed hundreds of feet high. What would need such a large opening, Twaan wondered. Then both he and the great Skymother heard exactly what that might be slithering in the dark with slithers that must have been thousands of feet long. Twaan’s dark world turned suddenly blacker.

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“C’mon. Let’s get Paul and split,” Clay said, reaching for Carla. “We’ve got to protect Paul at all costs. The Leviathan is bound to find us if Anubis doesn’t first.”

Suddenly, the ship’s alert klaxons started banging.

“What’s that?” Carla asked, a look of fear masking her face.

Clay and Kley looked at each other, momentarily disoriented and apparently unfamiliar with the exact workings of this ship.

“Alert klaxon, red, interval two shorts, one long, one short: life support system interrupt. possible breach of hull due to meteorite or other foreign object.” Paul’s methodical voice recited from the control panel of the ship, “Klas meran bvord RI. Translation: null-space launch aborted. breach must be found and sealed.”

Carla thought the combination of the klaxon blasts and the disturbing robotic voice coming out of what was and wasn’t her son in the control room was enough to finally send her over the edge. What else could go wrong?

That was when the ship’s internal lights went out completely. The only source of light in the room was the blinking of billions of red lights, glowing from the three-dimensional holo-image of the thistle seed progeny of Qlay. Like homing beacons, the blips pulsed in the darkness as the intergalactic star map keep spinning and unraveling. Carla saw the stars reflecting across the contours of the faces of Clay, Kley, and the prostrate Schussel. A bright green lattice formed a reflected target on her abdomen. The klaxon shut off suddenly, and Carla became aware of another figure entering the room. It was about 5 feet tall, had a sloping forehead, and the light from red blips illuminated fangs that jutted out of its mouth. The creature appeared to be half painted. It vaguely resembled an ape with seven finger claws. It smiled at her.

4. BREAKING INTO THE YELLOW WARD

4A. THE RELUCTANT POSSE
John Kley’s head popped through the control room curtains, rank with the markings of Linkle pheromone organs. He winced as he pushed forward to a struggling Paul Jones.

“Look’s like you could use a hand, kid. What can I do?”

“Who the hell are you?,” snapped Paul.

“I guess you might call me your Uncle John. Hard to believe. I’m sure your Dad never told you. Odd story, anyway...” he paused, settling into the obscene, uncomfortable seat of the Linkle co pilot.

“Try this.” Kley pushed across the panel and until a small blue disk popped up from the flat, garish metal markings. It pulsed, slowly, with a blue glow and a low, throbbing hum.

“Hate these things,” he muttered. Kley slammed his fist down on the reset mechanism. The ship was suddenly righted, gravity restored, and all hull breaches repaired. It was one of the few luxuries about the Linkle craft—a bionic mechanism that repaired its own wounds. “I dream about these ships all the time. It’s like I’ve always flown them. Not like Nam—-not at all.”

Paul turned to face his benefactor. A cold, steely glare took John Kley aback.

“Easy, kid. Let’s not get all flustered here. I just pulled your ass out of a sling. Least you could say is...”

Words froze in his lips as Paul’s fingers -moved passed his face with lightning speed. Paul was a master of spatial hypnotism. John Kley would be his open book until he released his gaze. The interrogation was interrupted by the echoes of a woman’s scream rolling down the metal hull.

“Mother,” Paul gasped.

Twaan’s teeth were soaked in the adder foam of the d’oman. He smelled the stench of the human thing...the female kind. The darkness of the ship had been friendly to Twaan’s hunt, but the restored lighting made the hunt even easier. He sensed Carla’s defenselessness. Her scream propelled his hunger juices. He lunged over the still, prone body of Schussel, under the silent hologram. Clay Jones rallied to intercept the beast of darkness. Huge claws tore through Clay’s shoulder. The power of the ape’s swing sent him flying over the tables. He fell, unconscious, against the empty vending machines.

Carla searched desperately for a weapon—anything. She ransacked Schussel’s clothing, the paper waste of the tables. There was nothing. The wild ape before her was turning now, from Clay’s useless defense. She could see the madness in its eyes, and the intelligence. It snorted towards her, as it sniffed the stench of the cafeteria. The furry head twisted side-to-side, as if to catch its bearings. The lips pulled back, revealing the massive jaws and razor fangs of Nomo’s breed. It crouched, preparing for a final onslaught.

“Preee alow —hmmp, hmmp.”

The command in low vansrit froze Twaan in place. He had been trained to freeze until the release phrase of the Master’s was uttered. The pulse weapon’s flash was the last thing he sensed as he fell motionless to the floor, under Schussel’s feet.

The tensed fist and ready nails relaxed as Carla slipped back against a panel, wrestling for stability. It was all coming too fast. She began to slip into shock.

Paul crashed through the doorway, expecting the worst. There was Twaan, the Most Perfect, before him. He feared the worst. Whatever had bested the master beast was too awful to consider. Paul had watched under the tutelage of Thoth as Linkles bet at the arena. There was nothing to match the pure savagery of Twaan’s assassinations. Paul saw the bleeding from the crushed body of his father. John Kley ran up fast behind Paul.

“See to my father, now,” Paul commanded, directing Kley.

Paul pushed forward past Schussel and Twaan to the mumbling, crouched figure. Carla had reverted to a child-like, catatonic state. She rocked back-and-forth, clutching onto a piece of sodden napkin.

“Mother, thank the stars you’re safe.” He held her to him and brushed back the hair from her face. There was nothing in her gaze. Paul, and all around her were invisible to her now.

“Mother...Mother!” he exclaimed. He shook-her shoulders with no response. His attempt at any psychic connection was blocked, as was his power to mesmerize.

“Isn’t this just touching?” A tinny voice escaped from the shadows behind the Linkle serving bar.

Paul pushed his mother behind him, protecting her from the voice he had been trained to fear: the Kalmarian cyborg, Herm.

“All together. Such a moving reunion.” Herm’s multiple arms flashed in a blurred series of moves as he set off a stun ball. The flash was deafening in the small space.

“Ahh ahh ahh,” Herm warned with one hand, as John Kley prepared to charge him. “ Wouldn’t be a best bet, partner.” Herm played a John Wayne slang into his command.
“You bastard,” Paul swore, still immobile from the blast. “You brought the ape upon us. I should have known.”

“Oh, on the contrary, you silly child. See the wound on the side. Only a pulse weapon could have done that. Without it your dear old wet nurse would be a pile of spaghetti splattered all over this dismal dinner where only the culturally impoverished would care to fare.”

“Why did you save her? You should be dead! I drove the Tarachnoid Splinter into your heart, myself.”

“You ask so many silly questions, but that is the nature of your race. What a complex little pile of fools you are. I find traveling through time more amusing when I become involved in your little diversions. Oh my, what have we here?” Herm held the pulse pistol on Paul as he inspected Schussel and the glowing hologram.

“Come, Doctor. Not nice to sleep on the job.” His shaking of Schussel got no response. Herm extracted a metal canister from his waist belt and pressed it against Schussel’s head. Schussel shot upright, fully conscious and babbling.

“He’s gone too far, I tell you!” Schussel stood, gaping at the hologram and shaking his fist at an imaginary heaven. He stood still as Herm approached him.

“Please, oh physician of joy, still yourself. We have three of the Lost Humans in one room. Imagine that. I suspect the dog face is barking to Isis by now. Little good that will do him. I think we may thwart whatever he’s planning this time.”

“This time! This time! There is no this time, Herm. By God, how did you get here? And what the hell is that thing?” Schussel pointed at the ape’s crumpled form.

“Call it a guard dog, if you like. Nothing quite like them that I’ve found in my travels. Even the eels of Trel don’t have a meaner personality. Absolutely suicidal when loosed. How the old dog must love them. Oh, and me? Well, thanks to this impish little boy...hmm, seems to have aged a bit...this young man, I was out of order for a bit. I should have anticipated that they had a warning device on the tracker bar in his mother. Still there, too, which is somewhat disconcerting. Probably only a matter of time before,”

“Now, you. How did you get here?” Schussel pressed his point with a wagging finger.

“Simple enough. The Tarachnoid Splinter is nothing more than a rest mechanism for our kind. We only let the Dark Hall think of it as our weak point. When they use it they merely believe they’ve destroyed us. In fact, it allows us rest. Unfortunately, they gathered up every damn one of the splinters to use against us. We soon became a race without rest: the sleepless cyborg. Can you imagine how distressing that can be. I really do owe that young man a vote of thanks, even though he must have felt he was destroying poor, helpless little me. I was just trying to remove the tracker bar, as you asked, dear Doctor.”

“You were trying to help my Mother, not hurt her?” Paul cocked his head to the side, trying to overhear the conversation between Schussel and Herm.

“And more, dear boy. Your mentor had already planted two more eggs that were set to go into operation within three weeks. Twin girls, I believe. More Lost Humans. Now what of this picture before us, Schussel. What is it that is so terrifying?”

“It’s more than we imagined. They have been using the Earth for millions of years as a hatchery. We thought it was only a few, here and there. But it’s not. He’s been working at this behind the scenes almost forever.”

“For once, Doctor, I must admit you have jumped beyond me. What ever are you saying?”

“It’s not easy to comprehend, Herm. But for a Sympasium it should make sense. What is the limit of your total ability as a race?”

“What you suspect is an abomination. And your other fear, that the Dark One might be his source, is simply not credible. Isis would never have let the hound take such a risk. It threatens the fabric of the All. My Dear Doctor, I don’t mind saving a few Lost Humans through history, but this is much too great a leap to have any credibility.”
“No. It’s not impossible.” Paul interrupted. He pulled Carla to her feet, and slung her arm over his shoulder as he supported her to the doorway.

“I see the truth now,” Paul continued. “I have been lied to, tricked, and manipulated. I have risked the lives of my father and mother, all for the madness of one being. I do not deserve to live. How could I have been such a fool?”

“Just the nature of your species,” Herm replied. “And where do you think you are going?”

“What can you possibly want now? We’ll be of no use to you. To you we’re just some kind of laboratory experiment; me and my fellow clones. God I hate this!”

“No, Paul, you are more than that.” Schussel stood and walked towards Paul. He helped him move Carla to a table where she could be propped up more easily. “We wouldn’t be risking our lives to thwart the Dark Hall if there wasn’t a reason. I am a result of their tampering, or a mistake at the very least. I have a commitment to free more of you, and I will. But you, Paul, are very special. You are a new model or mode that the Dark Hall didn’t anticipate. Their own cloning program mutated and they don’t even realize it. Not yet, anyway. With your help we can free billions of other spirits who have an empty shell for a soul. Look how lost your own father and uncle have become. That is happening to all of the clones. Their DNA has become so finite in the last 10 years that they can no longer focus on what is needed to survive or maintain their surroundings. The experience of other clones is invading on their life space, driving them mad. That’s why I work in the mental health field. I’ve been retrieving failed clones that Anubis has tossed aside, and I’ve been doing it for thousands of years. But now, the numbers are growing exponentially. He’s burning out the resources so he can push for one last achievement. There’s something very big coming this way.”

Schussel took a small needle from Herm’s belt and injected something into the back of Carla’s neck.

“She’ll rest now. She can still walk and move as we direct her, but inside she’s asleep and recovering. In a day or two she’ll be fine. But we should remove that tracker bar.”

“I agree, but what about us?”

“You mean the clones?” Schussel returned.

“Yes, won’t we be tracked as well?”

“No, there are so many of you now Anubis has no one-line method of connecting. There are two many nodes, but he did want these twins. They are part of the new line that came from you, Paul. That’s why we had to intercede. Here, let Herm remove the tracker, and we’ll prepare the ship for travel back to Earth. By the way, how did you get here, Herm, and don’t talk around it this time!”

“Stole a ship from the Pentagon.”

“From the Pentagon?” Paul questioned.

“Okay, that’s good enough for me,” Schussel responded. “The Sympasiuns never lie to lesser races. They find that offensive. Just get the tracker out, Herm. We’ll deal with the eggs later, once we explain it to her. She should know why.”

A flurry of fur rolled into the cafeteria and opened into a ferocious, growling mass of anger.

“Nice entrance, Beratu. A little late for the party. Could have helped with that thing.” Schussel pointed at the downed ape.


“Oh please,” he replied. “Don’t be so emotionally unstable. Of course I’m alright. Please go help Schussel and the Lost Humans. They’ll need a good pilot. And be careful, I’m tethered along side.”

“Ho-ho-ho,” Beratu cried, jumping up and down. To have a friend back and an enemy deposed was such joy. Beratu released a Hydrosh odor of happiness, which immediately sickened John Kley to retching. He ran from the room to join Dr. Schussel.

“What was that smell?”

“What if he hates you?”

“What is that smell?”

“He only does it if he likes you?”

“What if he hates you?”

“Then you have to sleep with him?”

Kley shuddered. “What about Clay. He’s hurt.”

Use the melding technique you used on the craft over Bentford. If you’re still in good health you can fix him right up.”

“What about those two things back there. Do you want to jettison the ape?”

“No. Tie him up. We may need him, yet. Just feed Beratu, and then send him up to the bridge to help us navigate. He’ll eat just about anything son, but if you got some algae bars he’ll love you for life.” Schussel moved forward, away from John Kley.

“Sorry, I’m fresh out.” John shuddered again and headed back to the cafeteria.
Schussel and Paul settled into the pilot’s cabin and began inspecting the damage to the ship. The Linkle craft was almost completely finished with it’s self repair. They could see the shining saucer craft off the port side of the fighter.

“Hard to believe our own military has such a thing,” Paul commented.

“It’s all part of something called the Third Alternative. I’m afraid Earth is full of so many conspiracies and secret societies that no one outside could keep track of all the players. The Dark Hall and the Pentagon have been playing together for a long time. You were part of the price we paid to get that technology. What a price to pay for a few spare parts.”

“That’s how I feel now, just a few spare parts. Who am I...are we... anyway? I wished I wasn’t born.”

“Life is still sacred, my boy, as you’ll soon find out. Here, help set this course in.”

“Where are we heading?”

“Back to Earth, my friend. There’s a tool we need to retrieve if we’re going to break up this cabal Anubis has established.”

“What is it, a weapon?”

“Not exactly,” Schussel replied, as he began testing the power supply.

“Where exactly on earth?”

“We’re going to a small city in Ohio. I worked in the state mental hospital, there, trying to retrieve clones. I hid the device, after I completed it, in a nearby lake situated in a triangle of parks. All we have to do is find Shafer Park, Cleveland Park, and Belmont Park and we’ll find the pond. It’s there, under twenty feet of mud.”

“Won’t that be risky, I mean, trying to retrieve this in front of everyone.”

“I don’t think so. First we’ll go up to the Perry Nuclear Power Plant and cause a power fluctuation. The entire town of Dayton will be blacked out. We’ll have the pond to ourselves.”

“So we’re all in on this?”

“Yes,” Schussel replied, “I think all of us are going to play a role in some great play that’s coming to the third act. Even that beastly ape seems to have a part in all of this, but I can’t imagine what.”

“What a posse!” Paul exclaimed.

“Posse, indeed.”

4B. SYNCHRONIZING WATCHES

Some time later Twaan awoke. Something instinctively told him not to make any sudden movements. That instinct was a good one, he realized, as he began to gingerly test the cords lashed around his wrists and ankles. By themselves, they wouldn’t have held him for long, but before he could stretch too far, he felt the bitter tang of the shoral wave cocoon that surrounded his form in a skin-tight force field. He would not be moving any time soon.

Just as well, Twaan thought, because that pulse-blast had burned a hole in my left side, and moving too much right now could restart the blood flow.

Twaan’s unconscious mind had apparently shifted into battle survival-stride and automatically constricted veins and capillaries surrounding the wound. Carefully, he sent his awareness down to the wound and reinforced the auto hypnotic command to clamp down on torn vessels. What he could not explain even to himself was the uncontrollable impulse that drove him to attack the woman he found inside the ship. Deep psychic conditioning, apparently. But who would have planted it, and why? There could be a host of reasons for someone to secretly program him, and he wasn’t sure he really cared why. He just needed to root out the heretofore unknown threadlink and destroy it. It could take time to do that, and access to a neurasthenic Bollide analyzer. Probably it didn’t matter because the damage was already done. Twaan remembered the attack only vaguely, as if viewed through a blood-red filter. He knew the woman resembled the great Starmother Isis, though it was only that. The implanted command might have been too general, and triggered prematurely, but that left an even more disturbing question: Who would program him to kill the Lady of Worlds, and to gain what?

He estimated three days before he would be ambulatory. Three days he could ill afford to lose. Less, of course, if they kill him. But they should have done that while he was unconscious, and unable to fight back. Only an idiot with a death wish merely wounds a Thoth. It only serves to really tick them off, and in fact, Twaan was having trouble reining in his massive anger.

His keen ears picked up a sloshing sound approximately one-half plink to his left. Twaan kept his eyes shut but listened intently. His mind equated the noise to what it sounds like when pulling your foot out of the mud, only sloppier. In a rare moment of insight, he decided to continue acting unconscious until an opportunity presented itself.
“Are you OK, brother?” slurp. And then something sounding like a popped bubble.
“Hunnnhh? What the...?” The second voice seemed frantic. Twaan resisted the overwhelming temptation to open his eyes.
“Don’t freak out, Clay. This is your brother, sort of: Johnny. Just sit back and relax. I know this looks weird, and feels even worse, but it’s going to fix you up.”
“Easy for you to say.” Clay answered, in a voice that quavered slightly.
At this point, Twaan must have been more severely injured than he estimated at last inspection, because everything went blacker than black, and he had no internal clock to gauge how long it was until he came to again. It was the sound of hushed voices that woke him, the same two as before.
“Wow. how many are there?”
“Well, this holo is merely a computer model. There are actually more. Close your eyes. Can you feel anything?”
“Wait...” long pause, “…yes, there is something....hanging around the back of my mind, it feels like an incredibly huge...but like fragmented... what the hell IS that, Johnny?” Twaan heard rustling sounds and someone shifting weight.
“I’ve been feeling it off and on, though mostly it’s stronger when we’re closer together, like now. I have a partial theory. Do you want to hear it?”
“Go ahead, man, you got the floor.”
“OK, first of all, close your eyes again and reach out to that feeling in the back of your head...” Twaan strained with his ears to catch everything they were talking about. The silences were maddening.
“...can you tell them apart?...”
“well, some of them have a different flavor to them, almost as if...oh my god...”
“So you see it too, huh?”
“They’re from different realities. Johnny, how is this possible? Just the ones from this reality are too numerous to count. What is going on?”
“There’s a lot more to it, I’m afraid, Clay,” the voice Twaan had identified as Johnny explained, “Someone, or something, has planted all of us here in this reality, in this timeline for a reason...”
“What, you mean God...?”
“I don’t actually know who, yet. Regardless, I’ve found that none of those scattered throughout this reality seem to be aware of the others, except us. I think it’s because we’re in close proximity. It sort of doubles our ability to link up with the whole...”
“The whole WHAT?” interrupted the voice of Clay.
“Now that is exactly what I also don’t know. I do think if all of those other beings were all in closer quarters we’d be able to tell. Because I think, for whatever reason, we’re like a zillion pieces to the same puzzle. And the awareness we share would be multiplied a zillion-fold.”
“To accomplish what?”
“I don’t know. Maybe we’re parts of the ultimate being.” a long pause followed while Twaan began to get a little apprehensive about the whole discussion, but he couldn’t keep himself from listening.
“Is the ultimate being a good thing, or a bad thing?”
“You tell me. Or just wait, and we’ll find out.”
“What do you mean? The pieces are scattered throughout the galaxy, right? At least it says so on this holo-whatever thing.”
“Remember, this is just a computer model. It’s a snapshot at a given point in time. What it isn’t showing is vector analysis...”
“Victor-what?”
“Movement, Clay. Some of those red dots are moving. Some aren’t, which probably means they don’t have access to space vehicles. Not yet. If you’ll reach out again, I’ll join with you, and it’ll make it clearer....just ....ahhh...yeah. do you see?”
“They’re more or less moving toward the same general area.”
“Right. And we both know that area as....?”
“The green, green grass of home.”
“Yeah, earth.”
“Now why doesn’t this make me happy?” Clay mused.
“Well, ecstatic or not, I think with all this other confusion, nobody else needs to know about this just now, wouldn’t you agree?”
“Well, OK. But if this superbeing turns out to be a nasty fucker, I’ll turn in my brain pronto, and I won’t even ask for my deposit back. I didn’t ask to be a part of this mess.”
Nobody asked for this, Twaan thought, right before he lost consciousness again.

Dinty McGinnis

Lieutenant Belnap slammed shut the back van door and grabbed a black leatherette seat next to a smaller man wearing headphones while viewing a monitor.

“Anything?” The smaller man jumped at the question and quickly removed his headphones. The look on his face told Belnap his carefully cultivated reputation for being a major hardcase was still intact. Ross Belnap waited for the other man to grab a clipboard hung on a hook, flip through a couple of pages, and meekly answer:

“Sir, the forensic team has found nothing out of the ordinary. We’ve disguised them as carpet cleaners for the time being. Radiation scans are a little hot, suggesting there was at the very least some unusual activity. What, we aren’t prepared to speculate yet.”

The lieutenant let loose a small torrent of expletives, then countered:

“Hell, yes, son! I’d say there was something unusual. I’d say there was a crashing unidentified craft that plummeted into that little house over there, only to disappear right before impact. I’d say it’s more than a little out of the ordinary that the residents of the aforementioned dwelling have suddenly disappeared, not to mention the head of the household is an escaped laboratory subject from our own bleepin’ super-secret hospital. I’d say that was downright pee-culiar!”

The technician’s face was growing more crimson with each word Belnap crammed down his throat. And he was just getting started. No wonder the smaller man was relieved when the van door sprang open. Standing framed in the sunlight of the doorway was a slight of build non-descript sandy-haired man wearing sunglasses and holding a walkie-talkie.

“Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Smith, is it?” A tiny smile crept over Smith’s otherwise stony face.

“Yes, Sir. This week. Anyhow, we’ve got the next door neighbor sitting in her Florida room. She insists on talking with the man in charge.” Stone-face leaned back and scoped both sides of the street. Habit.

“How does she even know there’s something to be in charge of?” Belnap demanded. Sandy hair just shrugged.

“I’m too busy to be bothered with neighbors. Discreet interviewing is your job, as I understand it, and I would think you’d have understood it that way, too. Smith. Especially the discreet part.”

“Normally, sir, I’d be in complete simpatico with those orders. This, however, struck me as just a little important — a little over my head, so to speak — so I felt you should be involved regardless.”

“How so?”

“Well, lieutenant...she asked for you by name and secret rank.” Smith stared into the gloom of the surveillance van.

“That’s intriguing.”

“So I thought, as well. We checked her and found nothing in her records that seemed suspicious. She appears quite old, I’d put her between seventy-nine and Methuselah. Unless she bumps you with her walker, she might be considered harmless. Her name is Dinty McGinnis.”

Belnap heaved a short sigh and walked toward the back of the van. Smith held out a hand to help him down, which he ignored. Smith smoothly continued the gesture as if he intended to grab the van door all along. Ahhh, diplomacy.

“Let’s find out who this bitch is, and what idiot gave her a level eighteen security clearance...”

“Sir...?” Smith fell in close beside him, and continued to visually scan the street. Now that didn’t look too suspicious, the lieutenant thought to himself.

“Yes, now what is it?” Belnap sounded short, and was.

“I’d keep an eye out for that walker if I were you.”

Siinga crouched, facing the inside curvature of the vast sphere of universes. His pale green coals scanned the whorls of slick patterns. Time did not exist here, as many things corporeal were warped out of true inside the crushing gravity of the black hole. There was no love or compassion, but that was probably framed by the omnipresent character of the being entrapped in the lightless void. Whole galaxies breathed their last, and others coalesced into being. The rich pageant of possibility paraded by, its beauty and rich variety lost on the barren stony heart of the solitary audience member. Realities flowed and meshed, broke apart, and formed endless patterns within patterns where they intersected like black jellyfish, barely
perceptible to inhabitants of worlds contained inside them. Leviathan waited, almost mesmerized by his own intense
inspection of the myriad patterns. Behind him, Qlay slowly pulled himself up, rattling burnished armor and bruised flesh.

“Siin...,” Qlay began, and halted when he saw the massive shoulders of Leviathan spin around, and felt the hot glare of
twin green furnaces burn into him.

“...the message is more important than you realize, perhaps.” Qlay finished, and resettled the armor around himself a little
more comfortably. He appeared to be trying to salvage a little dignity in an impossible situation.

“Speak on, then, worm! I’ll not bear up forever for this prattle!” Leviathan set down the inky threads that he had cradled
in his arms like a misshapen offspring.

“Oriel, the great Feldsum, world builder and ...” Krun the life-eater growled louder with each reciting of titles belonging
to his hated brother. Qlay continued on, however, until he uttered the sacred name, “...Anghii, sends you this message of time-
shattering importance:...”

“Speak it, dungheap!”

Then, Anghii’s crystal voice boomed out of the unmoving mouth of the human messenger, “...Brother of my twisted
heart, Even as I imprisoned you, I loved you as my own inner thought. Never would I have destroyed you utterly. But there is
something which has convinced my mind to do something I vowed never to repent of. We have a problem...” the original
human licked his lips and stopped.

“I’ll smash you to atoms! for the death of worlds, out with it!”

The voice continued, “...Brother mine, we have always been two. Before time there was thou and I. Before worlds we
shared omnipotence and being. But now, for reasons I fathom not, there is a third influence. And I don’t know who or what it
is...”

Siingga recoiled as if harpooned. A moan escaped his massive black lips.

“...I have always seen the future of each reality, singly and pure. Outcome was not a mystery. For the first, I, yes, even I,
am uncertain. A fog has settled on destiny, and I cannot chase it away alone. Reluctantly, a truce I ask, and offer the key to
this dungeon, in return for your vow to aid...”

Leviathan appeared to stop breathing, and unconsciously dropped to one knee as if stunned. The massive gnarled head
wagged in shocked disbelief. Then, his head lifted, and the green openings narrowed to ragged slits.

“Anghii would not offer me freedom, for any reason. This I know. No promise I might make could calm his concern for
the race of worms I spawned! This is a lie, and not even a clever one.” a mountain-sized fist raised up and poised, ready to
jackhammer Qlay into the ink. The crystal voiced stopped Leviathan with one word.

“True!”

Siingga hesitated.

“True, the offer is a lie?”

“No. True, I would not trust you,” the voice of the great healer of worlds took on a calculating tone, “That is why I would
not remove you from inside this dungeon, unless I could guarantee certain, shall we say, loyalty oaths from you.”

“I vow nothing!”

“I rather expected that, actually. That’s why I created this...” Qlay’s right hand shot out, and flung something hard and
sparkling at Leviathan’s midsection. It landed with a painful thud, and immediately started twisting and burrowing into the
interior of Siingga’s body. Monstrous hands clutched over the opening, and Leviathan doubled over, falling into a tortured fetal
position. A great guttural yell spread out from the jet-black form and seemed to shudder space itself. Over the sound of his
pain, he could still hear the clear crystal voice of his jailer-brother, as it droned out of the body of the first human.

“...now the prison is inside of you, brother mine. You can act and move, but if you try to destroy this race of worms, as
you refer to them, or anything else, for that matter, the device inside you will use your own destructive power against the
originator of that power. You will only unmake yourself. That is how I intend to muzzle you. I could never destroy or hurt you
myself, so I’m letting you do all the work.”

Siingga continued to writhe on the ink, and Qlay’s body glanced up at the filmy shells of reality that barred Leviathan’s
exit from the black hole. Slowly, each moving slick evaporated. Qlay could see actual stars peaking through as the prison
began to dissolve. Deep inside, Qlay wondered about those points of light. He wondered which reality they came from. Before
he could wonder anything else, a light so brilliant it made his eyes blind and his mind ache floated down to stand beside him.

“Well done, my good and faithful servant,” a sweet crystal voice emanated from the light. “Go, now, I have other tasks
set before you.”

In a blip, Qlay dematerialized from the melting ink. Soon, there was nothing left of the prison, and a great ebony form
floated in the natural void of space. The light that was the balm of Gilead draped itself lovingly over the knotted form.
Surprised, Anghii listened to small noises coming from Leviathan. They were the sounds of unrestrained sobbing.

“Come now, brother, we have another power to contend with...” Anghii hoped his voice sounded confident.
Lieutenant Ross Belnap rapped on the aluminum storm door, and wiped his feet on the worn green Astroturf carpeting that covered the porch. There was no immediate answer, and he was just about to say something to Smith when the door creaked open. Belnap smiled perfunctorily and moved his hand up to his forehead, as if tipping an invisible hat.

“Good morning, Mrs......,”


“Yes, McGinnis. I understand you’ve been asking about me.”

Although it was a bright day, the interior of the house seemed to have an impenetrable darkness. Belnap could only barely make out the outline of an old woman, bent with age and years, clutching a walker in one hand, and the doorknob in the other. Sunlight exposed just a thin chink that ran down the center of her face. She looked extremely old, covered in tiny blue spider veins.

“Come in.” she barked, and Smith actually jumped. Belnap took a sidewise glance at him before gingerly sticking his foot into the dark. The old woman moved away from the door, and inchwormed her walker towards a bland yellow couch. The lieutenant noticed something odd in the noise the walker made as it lurched along the carpet. He could have sworn it sounded like guns being twirled in a precision drill corps. For some reason, he felt uneasy.

“Sit down.” The woman pointed at a small wicker love seat. Smith started to cross over to it, and was halted by the strong sharp command that shot from Mrs. McGinnis, “Not you, him!”

Reluctantly, Ross took a seat and gestured for Smith to wait outside. The lower ranked man raised an eyebrow, opened the storm door, and stepped outside. When he closed the door, Belnap could see his silhouette framed by a waxy yellow square that ran across the wall across from him. He had his back to the door, and Mrs. McGinnis faced him, or rather, glared at him. Her eyes seemed extremely deep-set, as if the skull inside her head was slowly taking over.

“Now, what exactly is the problem, m’am?” He thought he’s put the ball in her court, and try to sidle up on the security questions a little later.

“The problem will become evident presently, young man. Would you like some tea?” tiny hands gestured to a silver tea set laid out on the coffee table. Belnap waved in a gesture to indicate he didn’t want any. Mrs. McGinnis frowned.

“There’s nothing wrong with the tea, boy. I haven’t poisoned it.”

“I’m just not thirsty.”

The old woman harrumphed, and quicker than Belnap’s eyes could follow, she lashed out and scratched him on the wrist with her fingernail. In fact, he almost doubted that he actually caught that movement at all, until his wrist started burning. She sat across the room, unperturbed, as if nothing had transpired. Her eyes did take on a new sharpness.

He opened his mouth to yell for Smith, but nothing came out. He tried to close his mouth again, and found he couldn’t.

Smith, Smith come in here now, damn you, his mind shouted, but his vocal cords were on standby. His entire body was frozen, and only as a minor consolation he realized he was still breathing.

“The tea wasn’t poisoned, son. But I am.” Mrs. McGinnis said in a conversational tone, with a toothy smile. He noticed for the first time how the yellowed teeth were chiseled to fine dagger points. The silhouette of Smith shifted on the only wall he could see, and it appeared as if he glanced inside, but apparently saw nothing out of the ordinary. Sweat stared to bead on Belnap’s forehead from the strain of trying to force his unyielding muscles to obey simple commands. For one of the very few times in his life, Lieutenant Ross Belnap was beginning to get very frightened.

Oh damn, he thought, after a distinguished career of black ops, done in by a grandmother.

Incredibly, she called out for Smith.

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“You’ll find you can still breathe, and blink. I’ve only paralyzed any motor functions that might have been dangerous to me. Blink once for yes, and twice for no.”

NONONONONONONONONONONONO

“That’s nice. You’ve either got a distressing tic, or you’re freaking out. Better get a hold of yourself, because we have a great deal to discuss. And time is not a luxury either of us can afford.”

Belnap stopped blinking.

“Better. Now. Do you know happened to the family across the street? the Jones’s?”

NO

“Whatever were the Brothers thinking when they made humans, eh? Nothing but a cheap lot of incompetent mouth-breathers. O.K., let’s assume for a moment you’re telling the truth,” She paused, considering. “Not that you’re known for such behavior. But I’m counting on the fact that you weren’t expecting someone like me, and you may be just rattled enough to be honest. Plus, you wouldn’t still be here if you really knew something.”

NO

“Well, there’s no help for it then, I guess. They’re no longer on this planet, or I’d feel them. Consider that free information, Arch-adjutant Ebony General Belnap. Oh, I know more about you than you would be comfortable knowing. And your Dark Hall mumbo jumbo, too. But I don’t care about all that. Really, I don’t.” She sat down on the coffee table facing him. Apparently his nose still functioned because he got a ripe musty whiff of her.

“You’re coming with me, because I don’t think I want you running around like a loose cannon anymore. I may have some use for you later, but for now, I only need you to come help me find something I lost. That something is infinitely more important to me than you could imagine. I swore on my mortal soul to protect it, and now something has mucked up and disappeared it on me. I don’t like that at all. Not at all.”

NO

“Yes. Yes, you are. First we need to go to Dayton, Ohio, and pick up the mad doctor’s chew toy. He doesn’t think I know about it, but it’s been keening to me for quite awhile, as do all such artifacts of power. Stupid dolt. Not you, him. Stupid is not your normal operating mode. If it was, you’d be blocking the door now along with your assistant.”

She stood up and looked down at her plain dress. The old woman seemed to notice herself for the first time. He watched while she made a sweeping gesture over herself. The air around her bubbled and rippled. The blue spider veins on her face became some incomprehensible pattern of tattoos. Her jaw jutted out and sported translucent fangs. Her seven-fingered hands (Seven!) grew impossibly long talons. In place of the aging woman stood a wiry ape-like creature. She grinned and curtseyed.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Nomo, of the Exament-plexor Kreel. Foremost Assassin of the Great Mother, and body armor of the sleeping Prince Paul. At least I was, before some soon-to-be-dead idiot stole him.” Nonchalantly she(it!) reached over and slung him over her shoulder like a sack of grain. Belnap was forced to look at her back while she strode to the back yard. Suddenly, he noticed a strange humming. Then a metal door closed around him. Inside his head ran a very loud scream that no one heard but him.

4 C. JIMMY THE LOCK

Evil is simply misplaced force. It can be misplaced in time, like the violence that is acceptable in war is unacceptable in peace. It can be misplaced in space, like a burning coal on the rug rather than the fireplace. Kabbalah

Paul stared at the tousled locks that wriggled over the top of Dr. Schussel’s head. Faint scabbing was still evident where the Dr. had lost his equilibrium and freed his gray turf during a moment of recent rage. How rare to be able to have the indulgence of studying a being at close range, without fear, who just days before had been the defiler of your faith. It provided both a calm and a joy within Paul.

“If you look any harder I’m going to have to charge you,” snapped Schussel.

Paul jerked out of his reverie and gave a sluggish shake to his shoulders. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Not uncomfortable,” Schussel continued, “just distracting. Got to focus when I fly this thing. Done it a few times before. Not as good as most.”

“Yes. Yes, you are. First we need to go to Dayton, Ohio, and pick up the mad doctor’s chew toy. He doesn’t think I know about it, but it’s been keening to me for quite awhile, as do all such artifacts of power. Stupid dolt. Not you, him. Stupid is not your normal operating mode. If it was, you’d be blocking the door now along with your assistant.”

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Schussel swallowed hard. He pulled his hand up from the liquid mess of the control drive dash. The Jell-O-like substance pulled away from his long, twisted fingers and returned to flatten out on the control panel. Both pilots could feel hum of the drives reduce as the craft slowed.

“Give it a shot. Guess its time I supervised and, as you say, delegate some responsibility.”

“Beauty before age, and I do mean age,” Paul quipped, laughing at Schussel’s discomfort.

Paul soon had the craft under his control, traveling much faster than Schussel had thought possible. He wondered if Herm’s craft could keep its tractor-beam lock onto the hull. A quick check indicated there was no problem. Paul had apparently increased the tractor-beam from the Linkle ship to compensate for the increased speeds.

“Impressed,” Paul asked.

“Don’t fish,” Schussel snapped.

Paul looked over the star maps flashing on the screen ahead, while paying little attention to the viewer screen.

“No, why should they? At these speeds visuals don’t mean anything. The priorctor vector projections give the only relatively safe indication of path of flight for the navigator. Only comets, rogue meteors, and occasional space trash cause any problems. Besides, with the hull deflectors, it would have to be the size of a small moon to really do us much damage. Of course there’s always something that might come up unusual. There’s always a little fear.”

“Hmm. If you say so. I prefer the terror from a Macedonian war wagon, myself. Got them from the Scythians, who later became the Celts. You know history?”

“Only my own, I’m afraid. The closest memory I have is the fear I faced when my Dad tried to teach me to ride my first bicycle. God I was scared!”

“Why? He was right there.”

“Aah, there was this old hag down the street, Mrs. McGinnis. I’d go over for milk and cookies after I mowed her lawn and she’d scare the shit out of me with these science fiction stories. She must have been some kind of writer, or loonie. So when she saw that bicycle, she went whackie and started telling me stories about boys, like me, who fell onto the front and broke their balls. How they died terrible deaths or lived horrible lives carrying around this huge nut-sack they had to strap to their pants, or everyone would laugh. By the time I got on that squeaky old bicycle seat, I could see nothing but pain in front of me—the end of life.”

“What a bitch she must have been.”

“Probably still is. Never saw a man around her. I figure she might have been a closet lesbian. But I do owe her for one thing.”

“Which was?”

“These guys from school were beating me up about once a week. You know, stealing my lunch money and roughing me up if I didn’t make their quota. Well, I told Mrs. McGinnis, cause I knew my parents would really go ballistic and do something stupid, like at the school. Mrs. McGinnis didn’t say much at all. She just said she’d talk to the boys and their parents.”

“So what happened.”

“That’s what’s so weird. I told her their names and within two weeks the kids were out of school and their families were gone. And I mean, gone—gone. There was nobody in their houses, food still on the table, cars still in the garage. It was like one of the most freak things that ever happened in Bentford.”

“Did you ever go back after that?”

“Only once. She was too old to have done anything that crazy, but she gave me the willies. Two months later, after the last time I mowed her lawn, she had me in for the usual cookies and stuff. I remember dropping a cup of tea she handed to me. I tried to grab it and she grabbed my hand. I didn’t remember anything until I woke up on her couch an hour later. My head hurt like hell, and my shoulder felt like somebody had driven a nail into it.”

“What happened?”

“She said I slipped, tried to get up and hit my head and shoulder on the underside of the table. Knocked me clean out, but that didn’t explain my shoulder and the red mark. Left a scar, too. So I never went back. She used to wave from her door when I’d deliver her the paper from my bicycle. Guess I did it just to show her I still had my testicles in tact.” Paul chuckled.

“Can I see the shoulder?” Schussel asked.

“Oh, only if it doesn’t interfere with my driving.”

Schussel pulled back the black pullover garment and inspected Paul’s right shoulder. The scar was still there, though small.

“Ever give you any pain? Any throbbing?”
“No...hey, wait. It did. But how could you know about that? I felt something weird when I got close to Dad and that guy who claims to be my Uncle John. Another fruitcake!”

Schussel remained silent and moved to the back of the control compartment.

“I think you’ve got the helm. Mind if I check on your Mom and Dad?”

“Please. It was good to talk to you a little. You’re not really as terrifying as I’ve been told.”

“We’ll see,” Schussel replied, as he pulled back the black, satiny, plastic curtains and headed towards the cafeteria.

“…”

Edward Tanner has been the senior supervisor at the Dayton Airport for ten years, through the worst snows, and the worst lightning. Even the tornadoes in ‘89. He was the solid core of the remaining traffic controllers from the Reagan debacle. He’d seen it all.

“Okay, Briggs, take a breath. Let’s see what we’ve got.” It was typical. The young controllers coming out of the national center knew all the bells and whistles, but occasionally something would come out of left field that wasn’t in the books. He remembered the night a piece of lint landed on the 280 runway monitor and almost caused a bladder dump. Rookies!

The screen was filled with the usual red-eyes in from Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland. But there it was—the streak. First it was at 30,000, then 20,000, then off the screen. Then it was back on again and zipping around Dayton like a ping-pong ball.

“Better call Patterson. This is some of their shit! Emily, get me Wright Patterson. Now!” Ed Tanner rubbed his sweaty palms over the top of his balding head, waiting for a voice to pop over his headphones.

“Who is this? Ed Tanner, Dayton Tower. Give me Captain Calveno, and make it snappy. We got a streaker.”

The control room was dead silent, without the typical sporadic conversations with incoming flights. Dan Briggs broke the silence as he looked back to Tanner.

“They all want to know what’s going on. They’re screaming for information. What should I tell them?”

“Don’t tell them anything. It’s not our goddamn job to explain every fucking thing that flies out there to those air jockeys. Our job is to get those bastards on the ground. Now do it people! If they push, tell ‘em it’s ball lightning.”

Before Captain Calveno could come onto the head set, Tanner heard his controllers groaning and gasping a second time. Tanner peeked over Brigg’s shoulder and saw two streaks popping all over the screen. He lost the flow once as Brigg’s shock of red hair got in the way.

“Get the fuck down, damn it. What the hell is going on out there?” Tanner stepped out to the corridor near an outside window. He could see the two lights burning across the sky towards downtown Dayton. The first light was green with a side light across the beam of bright red. A second light was further behind it, holding back, but it was almost a blinding white. Then there was only one. The white light blinked out of sight.

“Briggs, what’ve you got?”

“One unidentified low over Dayton. One still between us and the first.”

“You still got two?”

“Affirmative.”

“Shit! No, not you sir. Captain, we’ve got a condition here. Two streakers. One over D and one between here moving at 165 at...well, over Mach 7. I’m not shitting you! They’re out of my space now. You handle it.” Tanner switched off the mike.

Schussel came back to the command chair next to Paul.

“What are you doing, playing?”

“No, we had a little visitor. Had to lose them. I’m ready for directions.”

“It’s a little hard at night, but we’ve got to do this without a lot of folks around. Isn’t a lot of time to screw around on this. There, see that tower?”

“Yeah.”

“Go past it. Watch out for the power lines. And there’s a big radio tower coming up on the left. When you go over the Taco Bell you’ll see a big open field.”

“Got it. What now?”
“See the big building on the other side of a big empty field. That’s it. The hospital. Now out in the field, just a few more blocks. Good. Can you run the tractor beam?”

“Pick the wings off a fly.”

“Fishing again? Just center the beam next to that third base pad in the baseball field. When it pulls something out of the ground bring it into the exchange chamber on the cargo hatch.”

“Got it. Whatever it is, it’s in the hatch.”

“Paul, now I’m impressed. Let’s get out of here. Head for...”

The craft lurched against the treetops, setting the maples and elms on fire. The second blast of impulse fire struck the ship Herm had stolen, bounced onto the baseball field and melted the backstop.

“We’re under attack!” Paul screamed as the liquid in his hand turned from green and black to a glowing red-orange. The fear pheromones were rushing through the liquid into Paul’s system. Instead of instilling the survival instincts of a Linkle, the pheromones began firing the neurons in Paul’s system like a rave party cocktail. He could see the entire ship as one thing. Envision his attacker and analyze all of his options in a split second. His hands were moving like lightning through the control gel.

“Get us ...where are we?”

“Jupiter, on the way to Cygnus. Want a breathable atmosphere or an asteroid to practice your weapon out?”

“No, leave a trail,” Schussel interrupted. “Make it look like Cygnus is where we’re headed. We’ve got to go back to Earth. It’s the place of confrontation. Your Father and Uncle just found out something nobody would have even guessed, except your prophets. Everyone on Earth needs what’s in the hold. I don’t care who tried to nail us. We’ve got to get back.”

———

Ross Belnap felt the first bite of the peppermint schnapps rush down his esophagus, still half frozen out of the Michigan snow bank. The icicle from his nose stuck to the lip of the bottle. He brushed it off with the red wool gloves, covered in little frozen balls of ice, snow, and wool tufts. That was the coldest he could remember being until now, against the metalloid hull of the ape’s space craft. His black heritage did not do well with extreme cold.

A banshee’s wail rose from the mouth of Nomo, through the gnashing teeth. Her body crouched over a metal bar, like a balance beam. Her position was that of a motorcycle speed racer stretched over the gas tank for one last corner of death defying g-force. Her fine hands pressed on colored splotches along the bottom sides of the bar as she stared down at a cream colored screen. The screen had red symbols floating across it, with occasional bursts of blue flashes.

Belnap vomited a second time, wondering if there were anything worse than being suspended by his tied arms and legs while his stomach emptied. He didn’t have time to think about the stench. He was too afraid of being torn to pieces by the turns and stops that had no apparent effect on his kidnapper.

“Stop! Stop! Or just let me out of here!” he screamed, again and again.

Nomo stillled and then pushed herself up from the ship’s controls. She waddled, slowly, to the side of her prisoner as he floated above her. She didn’t step around the vomitus or the other offal lying about the ship’s floor.

“Want out? Really want out? Well let’s have a look since I’ve lost them. Oh, if the great Dog did not need you!”

Nomo stretched her hand to a black lever against the dark, cold ship’s hull. It pushed upward. Outer protective hulls pulled back away from a huge view port, allowing Belnap to see, for the first time, his real location. He’d often fantasized about being on the first interplanetary travels for NASA—but not like this. Not with Jupiter staring him in the face like an overripe pimple. He lost control of himself.

“Nomo would love to let you loose. All you’re good for. But we have a meeting now. I must trace them and find the source wand before they use it. Too long has the white tooth hidden it from me, and before him, the red people of your putrid little world. They fought well. They died well. But, they would not give it back to me. I will need Anubis to help. We will ask for others to find the power wand and the promised one.”

“If I ever get loose, I’ll tear your heart into ape shit!”

“If not for promises, Ebony General, I would bring you to the tubing. We have an appropriate punishment for those who turn on their own people.”

“Own people! Own people! You make me laugh. When we’re done every race will bow before us, as in the time before the Semites and Hittites. The Land of Punt will be all powerful once again.”

“As I said, we of the True Thoth deal with your kind through tubing. We wrap you in a layer of impermeable, clear saran that allows oxygen in the bag, but no water out. Then we pump your veins full of water, for days. It passes through you like a sieve. The bag fills and you drown in your own dross. What could be more fitting for a traitor?”
Nomo scuffled back to the control bar, leaving Belnap to consider the cold and the horror worse than dropping through the ice-fishing hole on Lake Michigan.

“You can’t really believe the clerk’s going to let this menagerie in, do you?” Carla Jones held her hands to her hips and pocked her nose at Schussel. Her recovery was certainly complete. Her fire was back and taking hold. After the tracker bar was removed, and the fetal implants explained, she had a new understanding and bond to the scruffy crew of the Linkle ship.

Schussel turned back to face her. She and Paul were sharing the bench seat behind him in the stolen van. John Kley was riding shotgun, while the less “humanoid” of the posse kept to the cargo hold. Twaan struggled occasionally against his bonds, but was otherwise still stupefied from his wounds. It hadn’t been easy putting the ape into the van after they hid their ships under the heavy canopy of a riverside galleried forest.

“Madam, I can assure you they’d give me the Princess Diana suite if I asked for it. Paul will come along. I’ve witnessed his hypnotic powers first hand. They will undoubtedly lend us an upper hand, as you say.”

Schussel opened the door of the van. They were parked in the darkest corner of the Motel 6 parking lot. The rest of the visitors had arrived in cars, RVs, trucks, and even a few motorcycles. The late hour took away the advantage of loud parties and stereos covering the growls and groans the Thoth ape might liberate. Paul crawled over the driver’s seat and joined Schussel as he walked to the dimly lit Hotel Manager’s office.

Paul pushed the buzzer for the manager. A wizened man, full of half-shaved face and half-smoked Marlboro’s, peered through the safety of the bullet-proof glass.

“What’cha need,” he mumbled.

“Got two beds for the night?”

“Nope. You’ll have to share with the kid. All out. Big conference in town. Gonna bring in a new football team. Sorry you’re in so late. By your accent, I’d bet you’re a stranger in these parts.”

“Probably,” Schussel replied, searching his coat for a wallet and some current money. “Will this do?”

“Sure,” the geezer snapped, “If I was Jeff Davis and this was 1863. Is this some kinda joke? Christ, why do I always get em?” He started to walk away from the window with five hundred dollars in confederate paper.

“Wait,” Paul said, “I’ve got a credit card. How about this?”

The manager teetered forward on his toes to get a closer look at the offering. It was satisfactory. He trundled back to the window to take it out of the curved exchange shoot under the glass. Paul spoke again, slowly, deliberately, forcing the man to look into his eyes.

“It’s a fine card, isn’t it?”

“Yes, very fine.”

“It will be sufficient to cover all costs, won’t it?”

“Yes, all costs.”

“And you have two rooms in the back, on the bottom floor, for us, don’t you?”

“No, I...”

“Two rooms, each with two beds, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the manager stammered, “Two rooms. Everything included.”

Paul waited as the man brought him the keys and gave him directions.

“Tell us now, why you didn’t tell us about the rooms before?”

“Hate foreigners. Love to hear ‘em drag their friggin luggage up and down the stairs in the middle of the night. Wakes everybody up. I gotta stay awake. So should everybody else. They all think they’re better’n me so...”

“That’s enough. Go back and sit down. Forget you ever saw us or spoke to us.”

“Forget I ever saw you. Forget I ever saw you,” he continued to mumble as he headed back to the dimly lit living area off to the right. Paul could see the flicker of the black and white television reflecting off the porcelain finish of the kitchen’s cheap paint.

“We’re set,” Paul said to Schussel.

“Why bother him about his motives?”

Paul smiled. “I love to hear the truth now and then. Sometimes it’s refreshing. . . sometimes not. That was delightful. I left an imprint that will allow his subconscious to let him tell that to the District Manager the next time he come’s to town.”

“You’ve got a streak in you.”

“Too tired to argue. Let’s get the troops bedded down. Say, if you used to live here in Dayton, why aren’t we using your place?”
“That’s the first place who ever followed us before would look. This will do fine until we get a chance to try out the Morning Star.”

Schussel waved off Paul’s next question. He pointed Paul to the bottom floor to open the doors of the rooms. The van was soon backed up as close as possible in order to herd in the strange cargo.

“I’ll bed down with the real foreigners. You and your family take the other room. You’ll have plenty to talk about.”

Paul wrinkled his brow. “Don’t worry, lad. I’ve been traveling with aliens before your country had a twinkle. I’ll need Herm’s calculations for the experiments. You just get a good night’s sleep. If you need any medical help for your Dad, just knock. I’ll send your Uncle over. He knows what to do.”

The two split with a gentle nod of heads. Paul could hear the dead bolt and slide-bar lock as Schussel’s door closed. It was time to reunite and make something of the leftover shambles Anubis had put on his plate. He struggled with how to connect with people who knew him only days ago as a child, and now were encountering an adult. A powerful adult with knowledge they could never accept or master. Paul was more than a man without a family, or a country. He was without a species. He was some kind of experiment, or worse, the offspring of a failing project that would culminate in his own failure.

The door to his room had already been locked. Probably Carla, he thought. The word ‘mother’ was still too strange to use, even internally. She had always been afraid of someone breaking into her room at night, even when he was an infant.

Paul put his left hand at shoulder level while his right hand twisted the doorknob. The door offered no further resistance.

Training, training, training. That is what Anubis had always told him. Every puzzle, every riddle, every challenge was solved by concentration and pressure at the weakest point. A universal reality that never failed.

Schussel woke with a start. It was a cold-sweat terror that aroused him. It took a moment to settle the shaking in his hands, and to get a deep breath. But the dream was gone, as it had been for thousands of years. Every night the same dark specter, robbing him of a comfortable rest. Herm was staring straight at him, also as he had for hundreds of years, still unprepared to give anything but a brief witticism to the suffering slumberer.

“Sheep landing on you again, eh, good Doctor?”

“Blast you, Herm, don’t you ever give it a rest?”

“Not without another splinter. That last rest was so wonderful. You know how it is to wake up so relaxed and rested. You feel like a...like a...”

“New moth,” Schussel croaked, in a snide tone.

Herm curled his lips in the displeasure of being topped at this own game. He didn’t care to be compared to insects, which Schussel had more than once proved were the predecessors to his ilk.

Schussel kicked gently at Beratu, John Kley, and the feet of Twaan. All groaned slightly.

The doctor turned on the television set as a wake-up call.

“Is this really necessary?” John Kley rolled back towards the wall until he realized too late that the move put his face into Beratu’s fur. “Ughh,” he exclaimed. “Like waking up under a wet sheep dog.”

Schussel ignored the complaints of the crew as he turned through the channels. There was nothing of particular interest so he left it on loud enough to keep the groggy from falling back into their stupors.

A new commercial came on loud, catching Beratu’s attention.

“New puppy-pops. The chocolate treat for your dog that says you really care. 98% protein, and 100% fun. Just listen to what some of our toughest clients have said:

A computer-generated Chihuahua popped up on the screen, but it was not a tiny, bare rodent. This Chihuahua had muscles and was full of fur.

“Hey, hombres. Those big boys used to kick sand in my face. No more. Since I started eating puppy-pops I rule the hood.”

The announcer came back. “And what happens to owners who refuse to serve their best friends puppy-pops?”

The next scene showed a buffed french poodle directing a group of storm troopers to drag away an overweight woman in her 60’s. The last shot came back to the poodle eating a puppy-pop and laying on a Hawaiian beach.

“Puppy-pops, the way of the future. Don’t let your dog down—or they might let you know it.” The commercial stopped and the local news reporter came back up on screen. He seemed perplexed and there was silence and then laughter from the stage crew. The young reporter looked straight at the screen, grimacing.

“Look folks, I know they’re our sponsor, but that was disgusting. Now about that astronomers report on the new...”

Schussel shut off the set. “Three thousand years and we’re feeding sweets to our pets while people starve in the street. Makes me wonder why I give a damn sometimes.”
“Wouldn’t be so hard on myself, Doc,” John interrupted. “Saw enough starved kids in Nam to last a life time. Life’s cheap, and always has been. We just find new ways to cheapen it in the good ol’ US.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t take up our valuable time to dwell on the lowest common denominator. Better feed and water the team. John, you go out and get us some grub. Look’s like they never cleaned up this room from the last occupants. Maybe we can dig around till you get back.”

“Got some giddas?”

“Better talk to Paul. I haven’t had too much luck with the money in the old wallet I was carrying. We’ll just wait.”

After Kley left, Beratu and Schussel began rustling through the half-used bags of food and supplies piled in the corner. A box of puppy-pops rolled onto the bed.

“Me see, have hair already. Try?”

“No, might be toxic to an amphibian. But we can give them to that thing,” he said, pointing at Twaan. “Don’t think you could make him any more aggressive. Get some water into this pan and give him the box. But don’t untie him!”

Schussel rested on the reclining, flimsy chair near the table at the end of the room. After pulling the chain of the hanging lamp, he struggled to unfurl the hidden contents of the dirty, muddy rags. A shiny metallic rod, looking more like a medieval mace, lay flat on the chipped, worn formica. A light hum came from the rod as he rubbed the length of the object. Its shaft was three inches across at the base, narrowing to a half-inch wide neck below the bottom of the four-part crown. The long shaft had chiseled lines, making the center section appear as a fluted column from the Parthenon. The end crown was a series of four collars, six inches wide, with sharp corners pointing upward, like stacked pagodas. There was no visible seam. It appeared to be carved from one solid piece of steel.

“You’ve never trusted to tell us what we’re dealing with here, my good Doctor. Care to be a little more explicit?” Herm leaned back, pulling just enough of the curtain aside to allow his fingers to start some photosynthesis.

A knock at the door interrupted them. They all fell to the floor, preparing for action.

“Hey, guys, open up. C’mon already. Got the Big Macs and a couple of Breakfast Burritos for the daring.”

Several of Herm’s arms reached through the door and drug the surprised Kley in the door.

“Where’s Paul,” Schussel demanded.

“He’s getting Carla and Clay. They’ll be right over. Thought we’d all eat together.”

As he spoke a second knock caught them off guard. Paul, Carla, and Clay were also wrestled indoors by Herm the reluctant doorman.

The smells from the huge bag of fast food filled the motel room, almost enough to overtake the rancidness of the Hydrosh, Beratu, and the healing Twaan. Carla found a small space in a corner to take Clay. He was still too weak to feed himself. John Kley joined them, with Paul, to attend to Clay’s health.

“Now ... now it is time to tell you about this, and how much we have risked for this day.” Schussel had everyone’s attention, in between the fury of feeding. Beratu was particularly engrossed in a giant orange juice cup. “If you will bear with me,” Schussel continued, as he raised the metal object from the table and held it high for all to see, “I will tell you an amazing tale of mythology, courage, and perhaps prophesy.

When the Dark Hall first experimented with me, in my home of Ur, I was a simple physician. I knew little of the larger world. But how that changed! In less than a century I had become knowledgeable of the workings of Anubis, the cloning project, and the real story of the Earth and her people.

There were many forces playing with my planet. There were the Great Light and Dark Ones, Anghii and Siinga, so ancient that all of the gods barely dared to speak their names. There was Anubis and Isis, visitors from another star system we call the Pleiedes. But their were so many more from the Orion system, from Sirius, and even from within the Earth from a culture alien to all known on the surface. So complex! The more I discovered the more confusing the entire picture became.

But during this time I learned how Anubis and Isis had formed a pact to advance some life forms. Isis had seen this as a way to work the magic of evolution. Anubis had seen it as away to develop more miners and slaves, while working on his secret cloning research. I often wondered why he had not tried to overcome the Queen’s throne.

One day, I waited in the shadows of the embalming room of the kings, while listening to Anubis talk to his great ape generals. He commanded them to keep looking for Osiris, until they dropped from death. Of this I could not understand. No one ever saw the Lord. Isis always appeared by herself, thus generating the myth that the Dark One, Siinga, had killed him and torn his body asunder. But this was not what Anubis was saying. Osiris was real and apparently the force that kept Anubis away from her throat. And these ape generals, the apes of Thoth, were betraying their own tribe, ever vigilant and dedicated to Isis. It just didn’t make sense. Of course, I was just a pawn to Anubis. I kept the information in my memory banks where it gathered dust.

During the third century AD, I was visiting with the last mystical temples of Dionysius. Most of the movement has been trampled by the Romans, and they were now under pressure from the new Christian cult. The temple virgins confided in me,
when I disclosed my immortal nature, that they had secreted something away from the temples of Egypt some 900 years before. They had the body of Osiris! You cannot imagine the pounding in my heart. The ancient memories, long buried, came to light and I was again before Anubis, listening to him dispatch his hordes. But here, in this cult of dark worship, glossed over by uncontrolled passions, was the body of the all powerful: the god no one had ever seen.”

Schusssel took a sip from his water glass and rested for a moment. He handled the rod again, until a blue, pulsing mist began to form about it. First a robin’s egg blue, and then darkening to a crisp blue-violet with sharp flashes of electrical discharges in the cloud. Schusssel set I back down on the table. Herm moved further away, towards the door.

“That night they confided in me of what Anubis had longed for those many eons. There was no god Osiris, but only the image of a power so great as to make Isis the Queen of the Heavens. All of it locked away in this object—the Tet A’Ur’Et. Some referred to it as the backbone of Osiris, or the most high symbol of Osiris, himself. But all along, it was this object, a power condenser of unimaginable age, forged by races possible as old as Siinga and Anghii.

Only twice had I seen the Goddess, and both times she sat next to this object. I remembered the glow around it then. When she knew of the plot to steal it, she must have taken extraordinary efforts to hide it away from him. It was that ploy that kept her alive, able to slow the egomaniacal drives of the dog-faced fiend.”

Paul sat cross-legged on the floor, silently absorbing the story. Twaan also took in every word. It was almost beyond his belief. He might have been brought to this point to fulfill the prophesy of the Great Mother, that one of Nomo’s breed would return Osiris to his throne.

“Dr. Schusssel, I’ve seen that thing, the Tet, before,” Paul interrupted. “I was on the home ship of Anubis, near the Crab Nebulae. He needed the ionic charges of the clouds to charge the center of the power grid in his vault of Deep Magic. There were four gigantic tet statues set up at the corners of an open court about the size of a volley ball game. The force field inside was so intense that I could not enter further than the doorway of the vault. Continuous bolts of lightning flashed between the points at the ends of the tets, such that a fence of power encircled the field.

Anubis was inside the perimeter, wielding a long staff across the air above him. It gathered a yellow ball, like cotton candy, around the staff and congealed around the far point. A yellow rivulet of energy rolled down under his robes. I could see it slither beneath the folds of his long white robe, move up around his throat, and gather around his head. His eyes took on a glow, replacing the everlasting blackness I had always seen.

Apparently he was ready to strike out—to whatever I was unsure. But too late. One of the tet towers fluttered in a shimmering light, like a distant mirage, and then was gone. Two others quickly followed. Anubis howled with vengeance; a sound I’ll never forget. I never spoke of that time. I don’t believe he saw me.”

“And good he didn’t, young Paul,” Schusssel replied. “He does not tend to keep anyone who he does not need, or who threatens his power. What you saw ties into my story, and explains a few pieces still unanswered. Let me continue.

That very night, the temple of the Dionysian virgins was burned to the ground. All were sacrificed, brutally. It was a scandal in the ancient world that left a long shadow over the Roman Empire. But the Romans were never there. I saw the apes of Thoth destroy and devour those poor women. They died protecting my escape with the Tet.”

It was absolutely still in the room. All had stopped eating. Carla’s appetite was gone. She rocked her husband in her lap, hoping to give him some succor.

“I knew I had been given an incredible responsibility, and that I would be tracked. Through the centuries I traveled with the Christians to the British Isles, where the Tet was buried at St. Michael’s Mass, near Glastonbury Abbey. Then, it was on to the America’s. I traveled with Coronado deep into the Southwest. I tired of his endless greed for gold. On my own, I traveled east to the heartland. Eventually, I found the Shawnee people and they accepted me. Since I never died, they deferred a special status on me. Unfortunately, once in the late 1600’s, I tried to use the Tet. I had studied it for so many years as I lived among those gentle people. I foolishly believed I was hidden too well for Anubis to find me.

Kenack hat cho, the Shawnee shaman, spoke to me of a place where the sky gods had walked with his people. I took the Tet to that spot. It immediately began to glow. I tried to let go, but I was unable to release it. The electrical charge froze my muscles in tetany. Clouds gathered above the shaman and I, spinning like a hurricane. The blue glow grew up from the earth and split the clouds. A blinding flash rose up through my body, through the Tet, out and beyond the maelstrom.

I have no idea what happened next. I was unconscious. The first of my awakening came under the gentle hand of Kenach hat cho. He brought me back to health over a period of weeks. I remember the women walking past the lodge whispering about the Morning Star and the star man. That’s what they called me, “Star Man”. And all of that time, in my vulnerability, no one tried to take the Tet from my side. I wondered why until months later as Kenach hat cho and I rode to the site again. The devastation was startling. The impact pit was twenty feet deep and extended out at least a quarter mile. Nothing of life remained, and every rock was fused into a fine glassy covering. How we survived baffles me to this day.
Three months later, during a violent blizzard, I wandered far from the camp looking for game. I had been gone for three days by the time I returned with some grouse and a rabbit. The camp was still. No smoke rose from the wigwams. The horses were gone. A pall drifted over the site.

I tore through each flap as soon as I saw the trails of blood drips in the snow. Each discovery was the same. None survived: man, woman, child, or dog. The apes had shredded everything, including my old friend, the shaman. Once again, mankind had protected my secret from the hand of Anubis. From that day I devoted myself to stopping Anubis at any cost. I would eventually find supporters, like Herm and Beratu, but never since that time had I tried to use the Tet. Now you know the truth of why I am here. Any questions?"

“So what’s next?” asked Kley.

“Fair question,” Schussel replied. “We’ve got to try the Tet again. I’m sure the Earth is going to be the center point of the plot by Anubis. John and Clay have felt it—a drawing like your face tightening after a fresh cleaning. The clones are being pulled together, somehow, back to Earth. All that consciousness in one place. I’m sure other forces have noticed.”

“That might explain the news reports last night.” Paul stood and moved to the window, looking out through a narrow slit to check the parking lot.

“What report?” asked Schussel.

“The one from the Hubbel. Two astronomers in Arizona discovered two bright objects moving toward our solar system. Two objects that produce their own light. But, they weren’t there two weeks ago. It’s got a lot of people freaked out. Nothing Earth scientists know of moves that fast in space.”

“I have great fears, Doctor, that we have awakened the neighborhood. Sounds like some big neighbors.” Herm seemed smug in his assessment of the situation.

“Still hungry. Want more,” Beratu interrupted.

“Later, later,” Schussel snapped, pointing for Beratu to be still.

“You don’t expect us to take another shot at operating the Tet thing, do you?” Carla quizzed Schussel.

“Not exactly. I’m afraid what I’m going to suggest won’t sit well with you, madam. Paul is the key—the real key to the entire power base. He can stop this whole thing. The prophesy of Osiris speaks of the power of Horus. Paul is that Horus. He is truly the son of Isis, in many ways. He is also the only one who can bear the powers of the Tet, through his male side. Paul is untouched by woman, and therefore the sepulcher of purity that Anubis needed to control the Tet. *He is the key.*”

“I don’t believe any of this,” Paul barked.

“Oh don’t you? Someone watched you for years. Someone looked over you besides your parents to make sure no one would hurt you. Someone made sure no young girl would forsake the promise of purity. I dare say I know who...a Mrs. McGinnis if I am any bit the detective.”

Carla snickered, as did Paul. Mrs. McGinnis. The very idea!

“So why are we keeping bonzo over here,” Kley asked, pointing at Twaan.

“Let me recite from memory to you,” Schussel continued, “from the Papyrus of Ani, in the Book of the Dead:

> Verily my formations evolve. I am the power called Unen, who moves with the seasons and contains all time. Born sole son of the all knowing, who is omnipresent, and omnipotent. I am like the center of the sun. There is no good or evil under my sight, nor does any being act for or against me, for all are within me. I open the passage to eternity. I control the way, and in so doing, ensure my immortality. I am the I am, who knows the past and future, but only lives the now. You are my children, forever more, for from me you sprang to life. In this you fear me for you cannot know me anymore than you know your breath, yet fear its loss. I am pure of being who lives within the center of the All. I can never perish.

My time of knowing rests with you, though I exist in all the forms. Those you call the Gods are with me, and are no less or greater than the dust at your feet. For I am hidden to them all. The time when all was created wherein I now lie cannot be found by man or beast, or gods who dwell within me. My vibrations shed but truth, and nothing but truth goes forth on my vibration of creation. I am the form, the flow, and the pathway. I am the I am. I rise from the heavens and go back to the heavens. For as I was created, and sealed, I have no power of my own to walk among the world but am bound eternally within. My power is in your hand. I am not known to you, but you are known to me as I rest in your hand. I cannot be held in your hand, for as you do, I hold you in mine. I am the egg of time, the egg of eternity, the egg unbroken and unborn. I am the Horus, the bright sun, who lives for eternity to provide the flame to burst open the closed hearts of all beings. I sit within my egg, sealed upon the throne of my desires. My time will come as chosen, for all time is mine to have. Evil is not upon my pathway, for my pathway is the All. I await the ape of gold, three palms and two rods bending, without arm and leg to hold up upon the breast of Ptah. Then will I come forth, even as the golden ape is free to go forth. And when you have done these things, you shall open the way and enter within.”
“Ahh, sure. I get it. We’re having trivia night. Well, I’m not buying it. If that thing goes off like it did in the Indian village we’ll all be toast. I don’t think I like the idea of Paul being part of that breakfast of champions.”

“Clever alliteration, my harlequin bard, but I feel the Doctor has hit the nail. Paul has the DNA of Isis in his bones. She was the only one who ever used that thing successfully. If we have this ape near him I’m sure the prophesy of the Egyptians will work.”

“Well for one, you metal octopus, this isn’t Egypt. And two, the ape ain’t gold.”

“I could fix that with a little hair coloring,” blurted Carla. She pursed her lips wishing she could call back her words.

“Excellent,” Schussel continued, “That’s the spirit. Some good hard questions and a little team work. But time’s wasting. Here’s the plan. I’ll work on Clay and get him back in order while Carla, Paul, and John get the supplies. I’ll need a map, too. Unfortunately the site we need to use is on one of the runways at Wright Patterson Air Force Base.”

“Unfucking believable!” John Kley threw his McDonald’s trash bag against the wall, splattering the empty cup and containers over Schussel and Herm. “You’re a suicidal old bastard, you know that? Easy for an immortal to send us out to get our asses shot off. You know that’s one of the tightest bases on earth? Why not just take the Pentagon?”

“Not enough time,” returned Schussel, dryly. The sheer aplomb of the response stunned Kley. He held his hands to his face, shaking his head back and forth.

“Not to worry, good soldier. You just get the supplies and we outworlders will take care of the operations and the planning. Think of yourself as the logistics branch.”

“I know where I’d like to put a branch right now you sanctimonious old fart!”

“C’mon, John, join the program. Let’s get with it! You know what we felt on the ship.” Clay Jones’ faint voice stopped the bickering and refocused the combatants. Soon the teams were split up and preparing for the night mission to Wright Patterson.

4 D. SILVER BUCKLE

The frenzied preparations of Doctor Schussel and the others provided Twaan some time, and he desperately needed to think. He wasn’t sure what kept him from crying out when the good (bad?) doctor mentioned something, almost offhandedly, that struck an outrageous blow to his sense of reality. His heart became a hammer in his barreled chest. He fought an overpowering (and yet futile, he knew) urge to try and rip free from his bonds and run somewhere, anywhere in the night. But he was a stranger to this planet. He had no idea where to go, what to do. The compulsion to flee arose in him because he thought he heard an all-too familiar noise, a raspy slithering, of something impossibly huge and powerful, and decidedly malevolent. It took a second before he realized the sound was not in this mold-infested hotel room where he lay captive in choral wave bonds, but was bubbling up from his own mind. A memory that had been triggered by the doctor’s incidental (?) remark:

The golden ape!

Twaan’s mind raced back to the Sulamin Kree Temple on his homeworld, and to the coliseum where his tenyear test was held, then plummeted down into the huge vaulted chamber underneath the ruptured multi-skinned platform. The place where he had first heard that raspy slithering, feared it even before it came near, the anticipation ripening in his mind while he peered into the huge organic archway. The day of his nightmare and his shame: the day he irrevocably became dead in all ways but fact. The day he became non-Thoth.

The moment crystallized in the crucible of his mind: the great Skymother behind him, and a little to his left, standing apart from the crumpled wreckage of her spiked metallic nimbus somewhere off to his right. Nomo was not visible. Twaan half-stood, half-crouched in a ragged circle of faint light thrown into the subterranean depths from the tear in the platform above. He waited, not moving, not thinking, paralyzed with what had to be... (fear?) while years of battle training sifted through his memory like fine sand.

“Do something!” the voice of the great Lady of All Being lashed out, taking on a higher pitch. A small compartment of Twaan’s mind took note how the whip-like commanding tone had developed a undercurrent, a tremulous hairline that threatened to crack the veneer of that supreme confidence. What could be so horrific, he wondered, that it would cause The Breather of all Life to show even the slightest concern?

And why? It was just a noise, a slithering. A simple vibration of air. His mind was trying to erect walls of logic between himself and whatever was getting closer to this monstrous confluence of black tunnels.
And then there came another sound, sliding deeper beneath the first slithering, mingling with it, overtaking it. To tell you of it, you might think one could have listened to that sound and not been afraid. You might even convince yourself of this, only because you were not there. But Twaan was there, and he knew after hearing that sound there would be no bravery left in him, certain of it as if a whole limb had been cut from his body. The fear crawled inside his gut and latched on with terrible claws. It was more than a noise, it sought prey on the wind. It congratulated itself and ran impatient and hungry fingers on the eardrums of that prey, almost sensual, intensely mesmerizing, dangerous and delicious at the same time. Twaan knew in that instant he was dead. He felt he could not resist, or even care. He only watched, rooted where he was, until the coming of the source of that sound.

He felt himself separate into two beings. One stood motionless in the half-light, incapable of movement. His other self floated free outside everything he experienced, seemingly in a void, peaceful, looking at unfolding events with calm detachment. His floating self wondered at what had happened to him, but did not become alarmed, only vaguely curious. Time seemed to move in a languorous way, oozing like syrup. From impossibly far away he heard Isis screaming, a low guttural noise that flailed grotesquely against the many-stranded symphony of death, unable to quell it completely, incapable of matching its sheer power.

Almost dreamlike, the giant Sirenwyrm poked a many-jawed maw out of the tunnel entrance, still emitting the tempting song, clear and strong now that it no longer bounced around tunnel walls. The tug of it was irresistible, Twaan noted, floating outside the frozen shell of his body. If not wrapped in the void, he would have been pulled toward it just as the Great Lady was, even now walking trance-like and wooden toward saw-edged dagger-shaped teeth numbering in the millions. When the spindly appendages which might have been arms snatched up the great Skymother’s body and dangled it over an immense tongue of black, foul-smelling tar, his other self watched, rooted and paralyzed. Something very faintly told him he should save her, something in the flavor of a blood oath, but it was too distant, too far away.

[Of the many crimes he found himself charged with, this action (or lack of action, actually) was the one that sealed his honor, that compelled the Rector of Kreels to denounce him forever with the passage from *The Compleat Thoth Sacrament*:

“That which does not fight nor defend, neither wages battle nor plans it, neither protects the family of Isis or staff from assassination, nor aids in killing of enemies, shall be stripped of Kreel, no longer permitted to walk the pathways of light, allowed no further to be beloved of clan, regarded of kind, or respected as sentient. That ape’s name is no longer to be spoken, his presence shunned, his existence ignored. A non-Thothian ape, with no value to himself, his Kreel, or the Universe. A point of nothing where no life may remain. By rejecting death, becoming Death.

D’ahl-Geralmnun Blood Oath, Book 115: vs. 4–11”]

Had Nomo not awakened at precisely that moment, things would have played out much differently for the great Lady Isis. But Twaan was unaware of events that followed, for terror had finally reached his floating self, waves of it in fact, rolling into the void from his locked body, washing him in vitriolic fear that burned his soul, and disoriented his thought.

Strangely, in spite of or because of this chaos, or from some hidden reserve triggered by a desperate struggle to survive, a surge of will burst from his suspended consciousness, immediately filled the void in which he swam, and gushed out like a dam bursting, in a blob of energy that protected him and simultaneously shut off any outside stimuli. Inside the cocoon, Twaan’s two selves split and rejoined in a new, powerful way. He became something more than the sum of the two halves. In that golden orb of energy Twaan marveled at what he saw and felt. It was like drinking electricity and having it shoot out of your fingertips.

*The golden ape!*

How long he crested that surge of golden power, he did not know. When he finally collapsed, exhausted from the expenditure of energy, and the gold field evaporated, Twaan was surprised to find Nomo and Isis standing side by side,
staring at him. Both were covered in blood and darkest tar. Behind them the Sirenwyrm stretched, dead and broken. The shame in his aunt’s eyes was cold enough to freeze blood. The angry look he found on the face of the Most High Blessed Woman was feral and black. Neither spoke to him that day or since.

How his aunt had managed to knock Isis clear and do bloody battle with the monstrous creature, wringing final life from it, Twaan never learned. The rescue party which had too late arrived by rappelling down the shaft, took him into immediate custody. From there his life was a nameless prison, lived out in endless dungeons far darker in light and spirit than the Sirenwyrm Lair. He never again experienced the uncontrollable golden power which protected and shielded him. He resigned himself to dying forgotten and alone.

Of course, that was before the escape.

Sadly, Twaan realized, escape or no, he was again bound and prisoned, and when the rest of the odd party shuttled out the hotel room, leaving him there in the dark, he was also alone on a dark world that didn’t recognize he even existed.

Lieutenant Belnap had made many mental plans for escape. It was a necessary part of black ops training that once captured, your primary objective is to get away, that what is trapped in the bony lock box of your skull is worth more than a entire division of foot soldiers.

When the ape-like creature reentered the metal cabin and waddled up to where he was secured, all hope of escape vanished anew. In reaching up, she (it?) made another scratch on the inside of his wrist, rendering him nothing but a big rag doll.

“Cannot let you cry out, now. You wouldn’t want to display how stupid you really are,” Nomo whispered into his ear as she tossed him over her shoulder again. His view was restricted once more to what he could see in his straight ahead and to a lesser extent, his peripheral vision. His straight vision afforded him a more intimate view than he cared experience of the ape-thing’s posterior. When she turned quickly, his body swung like a pendulum, and it was during one of these swings that Belnap saw something he couldn’t believe. He was very familiar with these grounds, but couldn’t understand. What were we doing here?, he thought.

“End of the road for you, Dark Lieutenant.” Nomo muttered, almost to herself. Voiceless and defenseless, Belnap’s thoughts caromed off the prison of his skull as he tried to reason things out.

Why here? Lieutenant Belnap came back to this thought. Why the museum, and not the base?

If Nomo could read his mind, she gave no indication of it, as she brazenly walked across a grass field on which were mounted various retired aircraft, even what was intended to be humankind’s version of a space vehicle. She snarled at it in disgust, and strolled toward the entrance to the United States Air Force Air and Space Museum of Dayton, Ohio, acting as if it were perfectly natural to be carrying a paralyzed top-ranking black ops official over one shoulder. It was the cover of night, of course. And it was an Air Force installation, but Belnap’s hopes sank as he realized there would not be nearly as stringent a security force here as Wright Patterson Air Force Base. But surely, some security guards somewhere would be alerted by what must seem a totally bizarre situation.

Even that faint glimmer vanished when the doors opened and a guard hustled them inside.

“He’s waiting in the Darkroom, Mrs. McGinnis.” Crisp, efficient, no help whatsoever.

They entered a large unlit auditorium with rakishly angled seats, and Ross realized they were inside the now empty theater where wraparound movies were shown to enthralled audiences. Belnap was as confused as ever.

Suddenly, a guard loped past them and hit a button in a recessed wall plate, and the egg-shaped screen split into two pieces and swung out towards the seating area like gull-wing doors. Made almost impossibly tiny by the gargantuan scale of the screen, a dark doorway framed by alternating black and yellow diagonal tape stood in the exact center. Then the guard punched in a complex key combination on a number and symbol pad, took off his white glove and held up his thumb to a lighted square which shot out a beam of amber. A flashing red light about the size of a quarter changed to a steady green. The door slid open with a hydraulic sound, and as Nomo stepped inside, the Lieutenant estimated with surprise that the polished steel door had to a good eight feet thick.

“Watch his feet, m’am.” The guard cautioned as he entered the elevator after them. Nomo leaned over and set Belnap down on the stainless steel floor in sort of an undignified heap, and it was slightly uncomfortable, but at least he could see straight ahead and survey the door as it slid shut. There were buttons on the side panel to the left of the door, he noted. Not being able to do anything else, his blood pressure rose in alarm as he counted the buttons. Twenty-seven.
So, the Lieutenant thought, there is a top-secret facility underneath the museum, that goes as deep into the earth as twenty seven stories. What the hell do we have down here, and WHY DON’T I KNOW ABOUT IT? I have the highest clearance possible in this man’s army.

Instantly Belnap stopped that thought and had two more just like it, equally as unnerving: One, he obviously didn’t have as high a clearance as he thought he did (which opens a whole ugly can of worms he’d rather not deal with at the moment), and Two, maybe there’s no “we” about this installation at all. (which he’d damn well better deal with, and quickly).

Of course, that’s easy to say while you’re an immobile lump deposited on the floor of an elevator taking a fast ride to the bottom of the shaft, staring into space while people you’ve don’t dare trust systematically cut off hope after hope of escape with each passing floor.

*Whatever happens now is in the hands of the big Kahuna,* thought Ross Belnap bleakly.

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Ellspeth waited until the coughing fit ended before she handed the open can of Dr. Pepper to Wounded Bear. He wiped his mouth and reached for the can, keeping his ancient eyes on the highway. Jiro was still asleep in the back seat, and the only sounds besides his gentle snoring was the whine of the nearly bald tires on the road. Empty soda cans rolled back and forth in the floorboards, responding to Wounded Bear’s unsteady driving.

Smack dab in the center of the dashboard sat the silver buckle. At least, that’s what Ellspeth called it. Wounded Bear had never told her what it was really called, or what it was for, but it did vaguely resemble a silver belt buckle: oblong with rounded corners, and a square empty hole in the center. Around the edges were squiggles and jaggedy symbols that held no meaning for her.

When she had asked about it once, he put her on his knee, and spoke very gently, “Someday, when there is need, I will tell you. For now, learn patience, Girl Who Guards Between Nations, for patience is more valuable than knowledge.”

Of course, he didn’t say it in English, but in the special language that they shared between them. It was a lost variation of the language of the Shawnee people, allowed to be spoken only by a select few of a select few: The Hawk Spirits, the Shaman’s Shaman. It didn’t directly translate as “Girl Who Guards Between Nations”, it could also mean “Girl-child Between Worlds”, or “Girl Who Divides The World”. But Ellspeth preferred “Ellspeth”, a name she had read in a book in the library on the reservation, and chosen as her white man name, the one she used when entering the world outside the reservation. Her Hawk Spirit name scared her, just a little. After all, she was only an orphan girl, taken in by Wounded Bear when she was just a foundling. What worlds or nations would she ever stand between or rip apart?

Wounded Bear handed her back the soda, and picked up the silver buckle again, as he began to pull off for the next exit. The buckle glowed faintly and inside the hole, a red line appeared, pointing back onto the highway. He slammed on the creaking brakes, shifted into reverse, and backed onto the highway. He shifted into first again and headed the rusting hulk of the car back down the freeway, oblivious to horns honking all around them. Ellspeth nearly sicked up, she had been so terrified at how close they came to actually being in an accident. Jiro woke up and started crying.

“Hush, little Buffalo. We are held safe in the arms of the Great Spirit.” He winked at Ellspeth, and set the silver oblong back down on the dashboard.

“It won’t be too much longer, my children,” Wounded Bear assured them, “and then we can do what we have been fated, since before the white devil raped the beautiful land.” Jiro was silent for a moment, and then the old shaman added, “and maybe we’ll have ice cream.” There came a soft giggle from the back of the old clunker.

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Leviathan trudged the cosmic dust, bent over, disgusted. Anghii’s crystal voice continued in the void, falling like petals of light in the vast darkness between stars.

“...by destroying your prison, I’m afraid we have created another problem.”

“We?” the dark form pulled up one massive mountain of a shoulder and regarded his brother suspiciously, “‘We’ haven’t created anything together. ‘We’ don’t have a problem. You imprisoned me, you sprung me. Whatever results is your fault, entirely.”

“Still, it’s something that will affect you, dark one, whether you wish it or not.”

“Out with it, then!” Anger clouded Leviathan’s face, resembling a nebulae.

Anghii strolled a little further along the vacuum, momentarily silent. Then he turned, and faced his sibling with eyes brighter than a thousand suns.
“I’ll be blunt. Up until now, you and I played with infinite possible realities. Me, outside in the Universe Otho, the space between all things. You, from within your prison. This was so because the sphere which held you acted like a fulcrum between worlds.”

Smoldering eyes considered. “And...?”

“By removing that fulcrum, the realities are blending together. We no longer control destiny.”

“I never gave a tinker’s damn for your ‘Destiny’!”

“Nevertheless. The infinite possible universes have resonated into this timeline. Whatever happens from here on out, happens permanently, and only once. No second chances, no alternative continuums.”

“...and you’re afraid.” Stinga was not asking a question.

A long hesitation.

“Yes.”

“Well, then, welcome to my Hell, brother! I hope you flounder in it.”

In a nearby solar system, seismic activity fluctuated wildly. When the local scientists analyzed the pattern and replayed it through sophisticated equipment, it sounded like nothing they’d ever recorded. It boomed and vibrated remarkably like how the little purple scientists with eight legs imagined the Devil would sound if he were laughing.

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Any military base of size utilized several layers of security checks and protective subroutines to keep the public away from whatever inside existed that they had no business messing with. Wright Patterson Air Force Base was no exception. Even so, this did not prevent a young boy from simply persuading human guards to admit a group of intruders (later, after extensive debriefing in dark rooms, these same guards only recalled a vague feeling that their flies were unzipped, an impression that persisted for weeks, causing them to do a visual check several times a minute, crying, unable to prevent themselves from doing so). With the intruders, a man in a many-armed cyborg Halloween outfit appeared to have supernormal computer hacking abilities, and bypassed all mechanical and electronic roadblocks, opening up a highly top secret military installation wide as a ten dollar hooker in about 5 minutes.

The only reason they had even that much to go on was that a solitary security hidden videocam ordered to self-erase (like all the others had been, presumably by the Halloween character) actually malfunctioned. In a blind rush to obey, a portion of the tape folded back on itself. Thirty precious seconds of tape were not erased. The next day the surviving tape was spliced in a loop, that kept replaying continuously in the security monitor while frustrated agents scrutinized every detail. There was no sound, and the view was partially obstructed by the angle of the ceiling as it followed the contour of the stairway near the entrance. The total number in the party was unknown. As few as three and as many as a dozen. Tantalizingly, all faces were blurred, and resisted even the most sophisticated resolution enhancement. A young boy raises his right hand and makes a slow waving motion. The guard checks his zipper, and the party walks on by, but the camera only catches the oblique corner of the right shoulder of the boy, and the hindquarters of the Halloween dude. There are shadows that indicate others without adding significant detail. The guard’s face is crystal clear, of course.

Perhaps the accidental thirty seconds were merely a red herring, carefully placed to confuse them further, some gremlin electronic practical joke. After all, the same man appeared to be standing next to himself in one frame.

But the most bizarre part was, nothing of value was taken. And Jordan Taglin was certain. Because even in a place where top secret compartments were even kept secret from the people who worked in them, Taglin’s job was to make sure all inventory stayed right where it was. Oh, each little scientist or gun-headed weapons visionary, or plunderer of alien artifacts thought their individual secrets were, well, secret. But there is always a larger picture.

Jordan was a little more than just an inventory clerk. His bosses couldn’t be bothered with senate budgets, or interagency protocol, or petty cash. They were the people behind the people who thought they were behind all the other people. All those marionettes who thought they were manipulating other marionettes on down the line, etc., etc. Not as clever as they assumed, never noticing the strings that ran through their backs of their own hands, all the way back up to where the real power sat, confident, satisfied with the status quo because they MADE the status quo. And Taglin answered to them directly. Because they trusted him implicitly. And because that trust carried with it the certainty that his life was ultimately insignificant, existing only at their sufferance, Taglin lived up to that trust.

So Jordan Taglin was certain nothing of value was taken. Except the illusion of tight security. As he did brisk sweeps through each supersecret lab (while the absent scientists slept in their comfortable homes next to their comfortable wives, dreaming comfortable dreams of the best way to make their own particular widget destroy the world a little better, faster,
cheaper than the other widget being worked on by the other scientist in the other house 5 blocks over), Taglin verified for his bosses on scramble phone that everything was intact.

Taglin had no way of knowing he was wrong.

Paul spun around the corner of the stairwell, carrying a knapsack with some bulky object protruding from the outside pocket. Johnny Kley and Clay Jones were keeping a watch on either end of the corridor as Beratu and Herm shuffled in quietly behind Carla. Making one last check, Johnny closed the stairwell door after Clay jumped in. He continued to scan out of the crack in the door every few minutes, like a mental patient with an obsessive-compulsive tic. Actually, that wasn’t very far off from the truth. Dr. Schussel ignored him.

“We can’t get out of here, not just yet.” He said, absently pulling a small instrument out of his back pocket.

“OK, so we got it, whatever it is,” Carla began, “But I don’t care what you say, my heart is hammer-pounding a mile a minute, and I think we better get the hell out of this facility, and the hell out of Dayton, before they rip open this town with the world’s largest can opener.”

“The guard’s still checking his pants,” Clay observed from his crack in the door.

The doctor walked over to where Paul had slumped in a corner underneath a fire extinguisher and grabbed the knapsack. Reverently, he opened the outside pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a normal desk lamp, black, complete with fluorescent tubes and a boxy AC adapter plug. He handed the lamp to Herm, who produced an implement not unlike a screwdriver from his thigh. There was a whirring sound, and the AC adapter plug popped open. Herm reached inside and handed an odd-looking circuit board to Schussel.

“Ahhhh… now, lets see if this gadget has done its job.” The doctor jammed the odd electronic board into the instrument he was holding. Lights spun and twinkled.

“I thought you said we were leaving tonight, or doing something tonight at the base. Instead, we just go and pick up a lamp!” Paul blurted while rolling his eyes up at the ceiling.

“I know that’s what I said, but it looks like we have a change in plans.”

Clay walked over from the door and stood in front of the doctor in a challenging posture.

“Whaddya mean, a change in plans? Hell, I don’t even know what the original plans were!”

“Calm down, calm down. You wouldn’t want me to set this bucket of bolts on you, eh?” Herm grinned at the mention of his name and stared at Clay.

“No, but, I just want to know what’s going on, is all.” Sheepishly, Paul’s father shrank back a step from Herm.

“OK, I think I’ll tell you. Not because you deserve to know, but I need to think out loud and reason this through.” Dr. Schussel got up and began pacing the confined space in the stairwell landing, holding the little instrument that looked not unlike an electric razor.

“First, we had a successful break in, and they’ll never know we were here…”

“Oh, they’ll know something happened.” Paul countered.

“Eh?” the doctor’s head shot up.

“Well, you weren’t real specific about how to hypnotize the guards, and well, I might have made the suggestions a little too strong.”

“You’re kidding.” Tom Schussel said, but without much conviction.

“I couldn’t resist. The thought of them checking their crotches for three or four weeks just appealed to me on a certain level.” Paul apologized.

“Boys will be boys, right, Doc?” Clay beamed proudly.

“My ass! this means we’re going to have to go through with this tonight, anyway. Damn!” Schussel’s face had gone quite pale.

“What problem, Doc? not no food, right? you have food me, right?” Beratu was almost weeping.

“Shut up, you shag carpet! We’ve got worse problems than finding you food right now.”

“OK, what exactly are we having to deal with?” Carla demanded.

Schussel was silent for a moment, and then he began speaking very softly.

“The codes I have won’t work for activating the sunken runway. That shouldn’t be a big problem, because my little bug here was supposed to catch that if it happened and give me the correct codes. Unfortunately, the codes were temporarily changed by someone with a higher clearance than I thought possible, one I wasn’t even aware of. I’m not sure I can override them, even with trusty Herm, here. Not without calling in all of the Strategic Air Command on our heads. In two days the codes will revert back to the ones I already know, according to the little bug. We could have just laid low for a couple of days, but now, we don’t have that luxury. It may only take a matter of hours before they know security’s been breached, thanks to
your son, madam.”
Paul grimaced at that.
“We’re going to have to do everything tonight, and we’re going to have to bring the stupid monkey with us.”

When the party came back into the hotel room, Twaan had managed to work himself into a sort of awkward, half sitting position, propped up against the cheap floorboard air conditioner.
“Getting a little rambunctious, are we?” Schussel questioned the ape, one eyebrow quizzically raised. The doctor strolled over and ran some his instrument across the non-Thoth.
“Still holding.” he announced, which brought a relieved expression to Carla’s face as she crossed the threshold.
“The next question, herr doktor,” Herm said sarcastically as he quickly bounced the ape over his shoulder and proceeded out the hotel room door with him, “is whether our luck will be ‘still holding’ as long as the choral waves that keep this Thoth from attacking us. Who’s to say we won’t be walking into a trap by breaking back into the base?”
“Ever the optimist, tin man.” Schussel quipped as he hit the lights and ran out with Carla to join the rest of the party. His ancient mind was racing through the infinite possible traps that could indeed be waiting for them. He wasn’t comforted by surprises. Who changed the codes? and why? he asked himself, and even though he was probably the oldest living human, he didn’t have an answer.

Girl Between Worlds looked over at Anubis, the greenish glow from the odd console harshly spotlighting his wounds. He was horribly scarred, with one hand missing, the cauterized stump seared by sun-hot fire. A deep crevice trailed down one side of his face, running just below a now-sightless eye, and continuing along his neck into his massive chest. His back leg was twisted and crumpled, and every breath was a hard-fought challenge. He was dying, separated as he was from his healing chamber, and yet he still persisted in his goal, their goal. Nothing was more important. His life was meaningless if they failed. Ellspeth understood all of that and more, but it didn’t prevent her from aching in her heart over her battered hero.
They had come a great way together, thrown hopelessly against each other by the vagaries of fate, and had seen tragedy beyond their ability to deal with unless they broke it down into meaningless little bits. They were just concentrating on the task at hand, just doing what came next. To think about it any more was to invite madness, and they could ill afford that.
“How far...how much longer....how close are they?” Anubis weakly turned his sightless eye towards her.
Ellspeth looked into the oblong silver device she sometimes call her silver buckle. By now an expert in its use, she deftly depressed hidden studs around the undersides. A three-dimensional hologram burst from the center and showed a view of the inside of an old rusting hulk of a car as it hurtled across a highway. Ellspeth choked back a sob as she could see from overhead the bodies of Wounded Bear in the driver’s seat and Jiro in the back. Of course, in this universe they weren’t bodies yet. They were still alive, and the experiment hadn’t gone wrong yet. A whole galaxy hadn’t yet collapsed in on itself, taking 479 Triskaquadrillion sentient beings into nothingness, blasting a hole in the fabric of space that threatened to suck the rest of the universe into a nameless oblivion.

Not yet.
And perhaps not if they could do anything to prevent it. Just because it happened in the universe they had escaped from, didn’t mean it was going to happen in this one, did it? Just because time moved faster in their own universe, and they already knew what might happen in this universe before it happened, that didn’t mean it was an ironclad certainty to happen the same way, did it?
But in her heart she knew the answer. Everything was already happening exactly as it had before. That was why Anubis had used his power to shift them into this universe just as the veils between all the timelines dissolved.
Anubis knew the experiment must be stopped in this universe, probably better than anyone. Because the experiment was begun by a monster who had no inkling of its destructive potential. Because he was that monster. And the specters of sentient dead too numerous to contemplate deviled the conscience of the wounded Linkle. Ellspeth was sobbing again.
“yes, we’re, uh, they’re on schedule.” She began to disengage the hologram, when the little girl in the car grabbed a shiny oblong on the dashboard and stared into it. A three-D projection of her surprised head suddenly floated in the spacecraft. Anubis hurriedly reached over and switched off the holo-link, which was good because Ellspeth had frozen in place, staring at a hologram of her own face. Too young, too innocent, unaware of the cataclysm that loomed ahead.
In the back of their emergency craft the 99th piece of Leviathan’s brain floated invisibly, undetected by Anubis and Ellspeth. It, too, had been startled by the appearance of the floating head in the cabin. But then it reassured itself. When you start making a living of rolling dice, you have to expect the unexpected.

Actually, Mosaic (which was the name the 99th piece had adopted for itself) was enjoying the tumble of the dice, beginning to be slightly addicted to surfing through accidental happenstance, reacting to the tilt and slide of the whirls of chaos as they washed over this remaining reality shell. Mosaic had detected when the veils dissolved, of course. It was still linked to the mind of Siinga in a tenuous tether, like an undetected leech that injects the host with an analgesic to dull the pain and thwart discovery. Even now it felt the draw and tug as the two cosmic brothers pulled earthward toward the unfolding drama.

Capriciously, Mosaic flitted out of the craft and zipped over to an underground complex, to hover somewhere near the ceiling of a long corridor with an elevator door at one end.

The door was slowly opening.

This was going to be fun.

Another massively thick door whisked open and Lieutenant Belnap stared down a long hallway. The walls appeared to be painted a sickly yellow. He couldn’t make out the end of it, either because it really was that impossibly far away, or some trick of the way the fluorescent overhead lights were positioned. On either side of the corridor were alternating black metal doors with wire-mesh reinforced portholes. As far as the eye could see. There were signs over each door with writing on them Belnap couldn’t decipher, either made unreadable because of the awkward perspective, or unreadable because written in a language he didn’t understand. He couldn’t move to get a better view.

“Fourth door on the left, m’am,” the guard pointed out the open doorway. He didn’t offer to help the old woman (ape) pick him up off the floor. She had no apparent trouble, anyway. A line of drool hung from his lips as he was swung over her shoulder and carried unceremoniously down the hall. He felt oddly embarrassed, being unable to do anything about it.

Nomo came to the door and stuck her palm over a scanning panel, and then kicked her way in the door when the light flashed green.

“Sorry so late. Tried to recapture Paul, to no avail.” Nomo delivered the report with a crisp efficiency. Belnap still hung down her back and could see only her rear end. The next voice he heard sounded deep and resonating, with a slight accent as if foreign. He couldn’t place it, but it rang a familiar buzz in his memory.

“We know. Couldn’t be helped. Ahhh, so this is the Lieutenant? Good. I’ve been wanted to sink my claws into him for some time, now.” The voice sounded a little too pleased.

Someone has beaten you to that claw-sinking thing, pal, Belnap thought to himself.

His field of vision whirled as the ape woman dumped him into a leather chair. When his eyeballs readjusted, he was staring down a long table filled with uniformed men he didn’t recognize, but who had the air of being Very Important Assholes. At the far end, the owner of the voice (he presumed) sat in a much larger, gigantic chair, nearly a throne.

And, get this, Belnap noted inside his paralyzed head, it’s not even human.

Wounded Bear was drifting off now and then while driving, and Ellspeth had to nudge him in the ribs to wake him up. Jiro had given up trying to stay awake in the back, making her the only guardian of wakefulness to keep them from crashing. The highway at night was hypnotizing, she admitted. They were far between towns and their weak headlights just bounced off straight lines that seemed to stretch forward into impenetrable darkness, almost as if they were driving off right into space.

“Can I look at it?” she asked, bored.

“Girl Who Divides Worlds, it is a precious thing,…” The ancient Shaman began, but looking into her eyes, he gave up and shrugged. His weathered face crinkled around the corners of his eyes, and his laugh was deep, and strangely comforting.

“…and so are you a precious thing. I can no longer hold back the rivers of destiny, though my humble spirit is ornery, and doesn’t wish to give it up. Yes, child, you may learn of it.”

Ellspeth reverently picked it up off the dashboard and stared into the center of the silver buckle. A radiating red line pulsed and pointed the same way the car was heading down the highway. She poked her finger through the opening, but there wasn’t a screen, just air. The line appeared to slice through her finger, though she felt nothing.

She fumbled with it, and suddenly she felt disoriented. She was shocked as the car around her dissolved and something else replaced it. It was dark, like the inside of the car, but it was very different. There were different colored lights that threw a
glow all around the inside, like the lights on the dashboard of the car, but there were many more lights and many more colors. Two figures were outlined in the glow, one very huge and misshapen creature, and one human girl slightly older than herself. As her eyes began to focus in the darkness, she realized the girl looked a lot like her, enough to be her older sister. Uncanny, in fact, was the resemblance. Before she had time to really think about what this might mean, the connection cut off, and she found herself back in the moving car as it sped through the night.

“What is the matter, child of my heart?” Wounded Bear looked at her, sensing something had happened.

“I...I don’t really know. One minute I was right here in the car, sitting next to you, and the next I was in a totally different place, like a dream, only it seemed so real.” Ellspeth bit her lower lip, trying to piece together the jumble in her mind.

Wounded Bear pulled the car over on to the shoulder, and turned in the seat until he was facing her.

“Girl Who Divides Worlds, this is very important. Was there an animal spirit in this other place?” His eyes were intense black marbles, boring into her soul.

“Well, there was something I couldn’t quite make out. It was very huge, and had horrible scars. The head looked something like a dog, or a wolf, but I didn’t get a good look at it.” Ellspeth became more frightened by the intensity of the Shaman’s question than even by what had happened.

“You must make peace with this animal spirit, so it will not harm you. I will teach the prayer of the brother wolf spirit.” Wounded Bear started to shake his head, lost in his own thoughts. He appeared wary, yet he still gave off that feeling of great strength.

“Oh, and there was something else. I saw a human girl that seemed like an older sister. It was like looking in a mirror, only older. What does that mean?”

“You have had a strong vision, Woman Between Worlds,” Ellspeth almost gasped at the change of her name from ‘Girl’ to ‘Woman’.

“The meaning of it lies before you. I cannot find this meaning for you. You must hunt, and capture this in your own way. I can only tell you how to be strong, how to be kind to the creatures and the spirits, how to be one with the land. I can make you the bow, but you must pull the string. You must loose the arrow.”

Ellspeth could hardly breathe, and felt her heart must be literally leaping out of her throat. Her eyes brimmed with pride, and fear. Wounded Bear took the silver buckle from her, held it in both hands, and uttered a small, simple prayer to the Great Spirit.

“This is now yours, Woman Who Strides Between Worlds. For your magic has teased from it a vision, a dream of things to come. With it comes a heavy responsibility: you carry this for all men who have ever lived, and for all men who will ever live. This is the eye of the Great Spirit, handed down from Great Shaman to Great Shaman since before the white devils came. I will now learn from you, and serve you.”

Wounded Bear bowed down his head. Ellspeth was lost, and she realized from now on she would always be lost. She reached out her hand, and blessed him. She reached over and kissed the back of his head. She didn’t know what else to do.

4E. SCAR TISSUE

John 15:13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

Paul pushed his feet against the scratched, rusting sides of the old Ford van. There was no easy way to support his back as Schussel and Herm drove like madmen to Wright Patterson. A flash of occasional street lights and highway signs zipped through the storage area like Halloween flash bulbs. The strobe effect put Carla and Paul in a quiet, reflective state; a hiatus in the psychedelic whirlwind the times had brought to their family. Beratu, the furry Hydrosh, lie in a ball over the tire well.

“Carla...mother” Paul interrupted himself and softened the tone of “mother.” “We’ve been so caught up in this battle that I haven’t had a chance to really...” Paul went silent.

The banging latch on the back door syncopated with the rattles of the loose lug nut rolling around in the back right hubcap. It was musical and methodical. The hypnotic lights and rhythms pulled the mother and son into a deeper sense of peace.

Carla reached out, touching the side of Paul’s young, strong face. “It must be hard to tell me, even your mother, of the things you’ve seen and done. Compared to my simple life, up till now -- well, I have nothing to compare to your achievements, your growing up. Why did they take my baby? My baby!” Carla turned away from Paul, pulling her hand back into a clenched fist. He lowered his head, not knowing what to say, or if there was anything he could say. How could he answer questions he had never been able to resolve?
Paul felt a butterfly rise up as Schussel went up and over some hills faster than was called for in any situation. Paul banged on the divider, “Slow down, you jack-ass. We’ll get there soon enough!” He pulled back his hand and felt the heat and pain from his angry blows against the steel wall. “We always get there soon enough,” he muttered, trailing off into the silence.

“Is it broken” she asked.

“No, just a bit abused.” He chuckled, thinking of the time when he was first taken, how he had beaten against the bars with his fists.

“You’ve got your father’s temperament, Paul,” Carla said, waiting for a response.

“It’s not unexpected, considering I’m some kind of god-damn clone.”

The thunder from the old van’s engine continued to reverberate across the dusty interior. Paul could smell the fumes from the anti-freeze spilled below, in the spare tire well. It reminded him of the lotion of life Anubis had rubbed over his reptilian skin at least daily in his steam room.

“It’s about Paul, or Dad, or whatever I should call him.”

“I think Dad would be fine,” Carla returned.

“Can you still love what’s left, I mean, you know he’s really not like the rest of the people on earth?”

“You can’t really expect to know about such things, Paul, considering what you’ve experienced. With that thing raising you. But you still care for me, as your Mother?”

Paul reached over, swaying with the syncopation of the rocking cab, “You know I do, and I always will.” He touched her hand, lightly. Carla placed hers over his, and squeezed, afraid to let go.

“But, its more than that, Mother. It’s this love thing. I can’t get it out of my mind, and my dreams. Did you ever dream about someone coming to see you each night? Calling your name? Driving you mad?”

“Just before I met your Father, in college, yes. It was very disconcerting. But that isn’t love, Paul. That’s only an infatuation.”

“So it can be real? Isn’t that why you still love Dad? What is this love thing? How will I know it? Will there be someone for me? Doesn’t everyone have a twin soul?”

“Easssssy Paul,” Carla pulled her hair back from her face, took a deep breath, and rolled her head back. “I’m not the philosopher on the hill. But, you’ve got to understand, there are a couple of other things that can go on. There’s the animal attraction, the intellectual attraction, and then maybe the relationship deepens, like your Father and I have experienced.” She placed her hands over his again, easing his discomfort.

“That must explain it.”

“Explains what?”

“Why you stay with him. He’s practically a vegetable now. I remember what he used to be like when he came back from the hospital. Those camping trips were nightmares. He didn’t know where he was half the time. He still doesn’t.”

“That’s not fair,” she snapped, pulling her hands away from Paul’s. “You don’t know what he went through for years. The nightmares. He was the most brilliant engineer they’d ever had at Ohio State. Unmatched! And then the damn nightmares. I came along just when they were beginning. Never knew they’d get this bad. I was a nursing student, and of course I took him under my wing like a young fledgling, hurt and disarmed.”

“So love is just feeling sorry for someone?”

“Damn, Paul, give me a break here! This isn’t easy. You asked, so you’re going to hear it all.”

“Sorry.”

“So he went through graduation, under stress, and made it into one of the top civil engineering firms in the U.S. They would pay him anything to live in the big cities, and to travel world wide. But you know what he wanted, Paul? He wanted to find a quiet place to raise a family. So we settled in Bentford, and Clay commuted to Castle Rock to design small planes for a tiny puddle-jumper firm. Now do you understand what he gave up? He didn’t do that because he thought it would be nice. He did it out of love and caring, and to keep us from going through the hell and the snobbery that his other life would have brought. He gave up that kind of life for us.”

Paul drug his sore hand over the chipped paint in the van bed, searching for something to pick at and wrest free to satisfy the ache Carla’s story left in his belly. It wasn’t what he wanted to know, but what he probably had to know.

“But how could you stay with him when he got so sick? How could you be with someone who was less than whole? You could have left him in the sanitarium? What was so important about clinging to him?”

“Your questions make it so clear that I don’t just wonder at who you are, but at WHAT! Perhaps there is more humanity in Clay than in you. Maybe all this implant story is true. God knows I had enough nightmares about it before you were born.”

“You did?”

“Many times. Just like on television, but they would always have me on my belly when the implant occurred. And they didn’t do it through the uterine wall. Guess your alien has to get more personal.”
“I’d rather not know.”
“I’m sure not. And that dog-faced bastard had better never let me get the chance to put him in a doggie bag!”
Paul was stunned at first, and then began to giggle, slowly. It was contagious and Carla caught up with him. It released
the tension for a moment. They shared the vision of Anubis caught up in a left-over bag, waiting for the waiter to take him
away.

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“So, how can I know if these visions of this person are true, my old friend?”
Wounded Bear rubbed his gnarled, dry fingers over the arroyos on his face. Each rivulet, each valley told him a tale of a
place, a moment, or a woman he had loved and left far behind him in a world of memories tattered and flailing. His fingers
tried to squeeze out an amazing truth of some kind to answer the wondrous creature he had help raise to womanhood.
“I’m an old man, my child. I don’t know everything. Some days I don’t know anything. I think those might be my best
days. The world seems to be a bit friendlier when you’re ignorant to the possibilities the past wears.”
“Old one, you’re walking around the lodge.”
“So I am. So I am. Hmmm. So this man keeps showing up in your dreams. You feel so drawn to him. Does any animal
spirit come with him?”
“I saw the same kind of animal I saw in the Silver Buckle. Hideous. It is not the animals of our people. Not of any
peoples. Nothing could be more awful. And it hangs over this one I love like a dark shadow. They both look at me. They both
see me at the same time. The man steps to me, he is handsome, but I see the beast-shadow begin to raise his hand against
him.” She shuddered and huddled against the shaman, feeling the warmth of his flannel shirt. The smell of his sweat and
tobacco calmed her.

It was growing late in the evening, the time of the greatest power for the Great Spirit as it ushered in the stars to meet its
chosen people. The visions from the buckle had caught them both off guard. They were exhausted, as they stopped at last in a
public park. Nestled between the oak tree shadows along the banks of the Ohio River, they rested, listening to the cicadas
buzzing like a saw mill. The map on the floorboard of the tired Riviera convertible was partially crushed from the sudden
movements caused by Wounded Bear’s erratic driving. Lines and circles over the state boundaries, drawn during ritual
chanting, showed the strange, circuitous path taken from New Mexico to Ohio.

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Mosaic gathered its ectoplasmic mists and melted through the neutrino fields set up as barriers to advanced intruders--
advanced far beyond Earth terms, but not those of the Predecessors, the Creators. The consciousness of Siinga writhed down
the empty, soundless concrete and steel corridors, hungry for more information about the gathering energies: the forces setting
a pattern of their own doom. Mosaic was not long disappointed in its hunt as it passed through another high-tension coil of
strange particles, bound in the blue helix of wrapped and twisted neutrons, like giant blue grapes twisted around a vine of fire.
Mosaic moved through without interruption, into the sanctum of the dark soul. The dog’s lair.
“You’ve been most troublesome, Arch Adjutant,” Anubis roared, smashing his staff of power against the onyx table. A
flare of electrical charge rushed down and around its corners, slashing out to burn the skin along Belnap’s brass buttons.
Belnap screamed, flinched, and snapped upright in the chair Nomo had slung him into like a limp sausage.
“You’ve been my best, and most loyal servant, Nomo. I will speak to Isis of this. Surely this will release your people
from the reckoning. I will even overlook the continued failures of your nephew, whose name I cannot, and will not mention.”
Nomo slunk to a corner, breathing deep, huge, melodic breathes. Hope and fury intermixed in her. To free her people
from shame. But still, her lost love, the son she never had, continued to color the waters with failure. “I will do better, my
Lord,” she mumbled.
“Surely,” the dog lord replied, now turning his attention to the still smoldering uniform that held a withered, bewildered
officer of the Dark Hall. “And did you think that I would not notice your secret little cabal to raise your hand against me?
Well?”
“I don’t know what...”
“Silence,” screamed Anubis. The velocity of his voice tore at the ceiling tiles, threatening to bring the overhead down on
them. “Only once before has any--any--human come before me and dared to speak without my command given first. You are
not of his caliber, so do not try me again!”
Belnap nodded, and lowered his eyes. He thought of his terrorist hostage training. Be subservient, but not sappy sweet.
Do what they want. But shit, this isn't a terrorist!
“Nomo, do you detect an intruder?”

At once the eyes, ears, tongue and hairs of a thousand years of training were at high pitch. She felt the wall, leaned to hear any sound, any movement. But there was nothing. Even the deepest senses of fear instinct from the Exament-plexor Kree training left her blank. She wagged her head from side to side. Anubis was not as convinced.

Mosaic circled around the head of the dog demagogue, piercing its eyes, entering into its nose and throat, filling its lungs and bowels. The brain of Anubis was a playground for Siinga. The truth was now known. Far, in an approaching wave of high tension particles, a cosmic scream echoed through the vacuum of space, shattering planets and stars before it—“How dare you!”

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Schussel drove to the front gate, wondering how many guards had been replaced for being insane as they still opened their flies, relentlessly. What would they do as they were strapped to their infirmary beds, unable to fulfill their deepest need: Paul’s commands?

“Paul, get up here take Herm’s place. We’re going to go through the drill again. There’s little time. Just have them go to sleep. No joking around.”

Schussel’s sharp command startled Paul. He was in the middle of the most important conversation of his life, and there was so much to still ask Carla. He could see that his Father and Kley Jones were still in the second car, following behind. He wondered what they would be discussing.

Paul greeted the guards as before, asked directions to the correct runway, and then sent them off to sleep.

“There will be at least two more gates. Can you handle it? They won’t be as easy as this one.”

Paul blew a short wisp of disrespect from his lips and waved off Schussel’s question. Herm poked his head past the divider for the back cab.

“I suggest we move a bit faster, old chum. I believe I’ve detected the whir of new blades on my sensors. The plan may be detected. I also see another car behind us. Can’t tell who’s in it, but it is coming on very fast.”

Schussel looked in the rear view mirror and saw the bouncing lights of a car going far too fast for the road leading to the base gates. He waved for Kley to pull up alongside. He was there quickly, gunning the engine of the Camaro. Clay Jones leaned out from the passenger side.

“Someone’s coming. Better move fast.” Schussel commanded. “If you can, provide some interference. Get them off us. We’ve got two more gates to go. It’s going to be a wild ride from here on.”

“Got it.” Clay replied. Paul could hear just a bit of his Father’s voice. It was a different feeling than he’d had the day before. Just knowing the small amount Carla had told him. Maybe there was more to know about him. If there were just time to ask!

The two-car caravan rushed sixty and seventy miles-per-hour down the narrow and rounded corners of the base drives that were designed for fifteen and twenty-five. Schussel almost overturned the van. Paul looked back through the cab divider twice, to make sure Carla was alright. He saw that Beratu had his furry self wrapped around her, protecting her from any bruising.

They rushed upon the guards at the next gate. The guards were ready, weapons drawn. Paul had to use a more refined projection technique, one learned from the ape guards that protected Anubis. Soon the guards would be worn out as they ran through the fields pretending to be chickens, clucking and resting on invisible eggs. Paul could not resist.

Clay and Kley were still close behind, but the unwelcome visitor’s car was still gaining, not slowed by guards at the front gate. More threatening was the clearly defined silhouette of a large helicopter, cutting across the full moon, as they raced the van to the last guard post. This gate would not be so easy.

The Captain in the black helicopter lowered his firing visor and verified the target with projected maneuvers. He fired. The van stopped, however; an unexpected action. The missile fell ahead and crashed onto the adjoining sidewalk. The lights in every base home lit up as officers and enlisted men rushed to find their phones and their pants.

“Damn, Herm! Can’t you do something?” Schussel had slammed the brakes hard, anticipating a direct hit when he saw the flash from the helicopter. “They’ll be strafing next!”

“Not to worry. Have just the thing.” Herm opened the back of the van and pointed what looked most to be a laser pointer used by a speaker in a darkened auditorium. There was no flash, no power surge, no sound. Just the distant sound of blades striking against each other as sparks cascading above the van three hundred yards away, over the final guard post. The black canary fell, plummeting into and onto the unsuspecting guards. Flames and explosions overtook them all in seconds.

“I didn’t want this. They were only doing what they were commanded to do. You see that, don’t you Paul?”
Paul was still. The carnage was sobering. He’d never actually seen battle before. There had been exercises and tests, competitions, and holograms. But this was different. Those were real men and maybe women. They were dead, defending their country. No, Paul did not see this as necessary.

“Just get going,” Paul snapped. “We’ve got company coming up fast!”

Schussel barreled ahead and tore down the fence around the crashed copter. Kley Jones followed, then stopped and blocked the entrance with the Camaro. Paul could see his Father and Kley running away from the gate, towards the runway where the van had come to a halt.

“No time left to play games. They’ll all be on us soon. Give me the package Paul. The time has come to raise a little hell.”

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“Did you see that explosion?” Ellspeth cried. Her seat belt barely kept her in place now as Wounded Bear poured on the power. “We should have stayed in the park! Why did we have to come here? I should never have grabbed the silver buckle as we went to sleep!” Her head jerked to the front as Wounded Bear found himself blocked by the Camaro. He could see the two men running from the car, one of them with a pronounced limp.

“Quick, grab the buckle and follow them.”

“What about Jiro? Who will...”

“Go, quickly... go!” Wounded Bear had never talked to her like this. And to leave the child they had saved from a dumpster! She could not. Would not—till she heard the earth opening, like dry, hard bread being pushed under the rolling pin of a cook bent on making a fine stuffing. The sparks and light from below ground provide a backlight for the figures above the growing fissure. She remembered the vision. It was all happening again.

“Hurry, someone is coming to stop us,” Wounded Bear yelled, pointing behind them. They could both see a vehicle, bounding over the streets and sidewalks, driven by someone mad with fury to get to them.

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Anubis pulled away from Belnap, having already torn off and eaten one of his hands. Anubis needed a reminder, occasionally, at how the meat of humans tasted. How they writhed in wonderful agonies at having to watch their own parts eaten in front of them. But the meal was broken as the earth began to heave about him. There was something unplanned and disastrous coming through the Dark Hall. Nomo sprung before Anubis, prepared to protect her master and deny any intruder. But there was nothing to be seen. Only the dust and debris falling from the earthly gyrations above the Hall.

Anubis struck aside his play-thing meal, leaving it to die and whimper as it bled to death. He strode over Nomo, casting her aside as he rushed through the crumbling walls of the chambers. The blinking red and blue lights of the ceiling lead him to his escape route. As he entered the escape pod he could see Nomo close behind, barking at his heels to wait. She had been a diligent guardian, a trusted companion for centuries. Anubis slammed the cylinder shut, listening to the desperate clawing of Nomo as he lurched upward twenty-seven stories to a waiting ship hovering over the museum, leaving below Nomo’s tomb.

5. VOMIT AND VACUUMS

5A. CONCRETE BLOCK PARTY

- Mosaic
  Mosaic hesitated, recalculated, then formed a deep dagger of power and created.

- Dinty McGinnis (Nomo)
  Flushed with anger, and perhaps fear, Nomo scuttled along the hallway of endless doors. Half-crouched, she moved at amazing speed, seeming to flow like a liquid of pumping squat legs. Battle programming took her over like inborn instinct. Almost without thought she tried each door with a massive thump of her arms, alternating between right and left. She lost track of the number. She lost track of everything except the will to survive. More than a will to survive -- the hunger for revenge. She let the green-blood hatred drive her body. The fluorescent bars of light swung overhead like hung corpses. Nomo didn’t notice.
Almost, she missed it.

Several yards behind her, a faint rustle, a scratch, a door swinging open. She flung herself flat against the wall and looked back. The first thing to come out the open door was a rifle held by a white gloved hand. Nearly quick as thought Nomo bounded to the rifle and flung it behind her in a wide arc. The soldier attached to the rifle went right along with it. Stunned, the young man lay frozen while Nomo wrenched the gun from him. A blue-tattooed seven-fingered ape was hardly what he expected to encounter.

With a flourish, she bent the metal rifle until it snapped like dry kindling. The soldier shielded his face from the flying shards.

“Was is your name, boy?” the aped demanded.
“uhn, um, Corporal Lembec...but...”
“but nothing, corporal Lem-bec! you are coming with me, and double-time it!”

Drug by his wrist, the Corporal flounced along the floor and wall like a battered rag doll. Vainly he tried to right himself, but the ape-woman was stronger, and more determined. Endless nightmares later Nomo yanked him to his feet, but he was unprepared for what greeted him at the elevator door. Littering the floor was a gory pile of human hands, ripped from dozens of unfortunate souls Lembec could only imagine. Here and there entire arms tangled with the bloody mess, mutely testifying to the rank of the owner, who must lay dead or bleeding somewhere in the concrete hive of government secrecy.

“Apparently the filthy human has to be still breathing for it to work.” The ape-thing mumbled to itself. Before Lembec could run, icy sharp talons wrapped around his neck, and a seven-fingered blue hand held his right hand to the electronic sensor. The machinery started humming, and eternal minutes later the door opened. Fear stilled the scream in his throat as the squat creature punctured his wrist and paralysis seized him. Forced to watch her enter the carriage by unyielding neck muscles, his eyes barely opened in mild surprise as she winked out, molecule by molecule, and the door began closing on the empty elevator.

• John “Johnny” Kley
Kley Jones followed Schussel’s vehicle as it obliterated the gate.
“What the hell....?” he muttered, and looked at Clay, who just shrugged.
“Well, I’ll be damned if we’re just going to let anybody follow us in here, hold on to your nuts,” then spun the Camaro in a wide fishtail until it stopped suddenly, wedged into and blocking the entrance. They jumped out as if they’d been planning this together all along, and sprinted away from the gate and the car, whose engine continued to whine. Clay pointed, and Kley redirected himself towards the runway where his arm angled at Schussel’s van. It was stopped and parked sideways on the edge of the runway. Herm, Schussel, Paul, Carla and Beratu started piling out. Well, Beratu more rolled like a big furry ball than anything else.

• Ellspeth
Ellspeth ran, horrified and ragged, trying to get away from the automobile that was coming for them like a guided missile. She gripped the buckle in her hands so tightly it cut into her flesh, but she hardly noticed. Her attention was completely taken up with survival. Only one word blanked out her mind and screamed out of her lungs. It was so primal, so guttural, that her ears couldn’t comprehend the syllables, but her mind was locked onto the word she was projecting mentally throughout all space around her:
“RRRRRRRRUUUUUUUUUNNNNNNNNNNNN......”
And then complete and utter blackness slammed into her like a semi, and she was sure the car had finally caught up with her, and the nothingness that enveloped her was Death with a capital D, finally come to call.

• Wounded Bear
“Hurry, someone is coming to stop us,” Wounded Bear yelled, pointing behind Ellspeth. She turned quickly, and they could both now see a vehicle hurtling towards them. Ellspeth screamed something Wounded Bear could not make out, and then abruptly her voice cut off. Running with his feeble head down, he looked up to see if the girl was all right. Ellspeth should have been right in front of him. She wasn’t there. The surprise threw the running of Wounded Bear out of kilter, and he tripped over broken and charred earth. Helplessly he watched as the ground came up to meet him. He instinctively closed his eyes and braced himself for the fall, but the ground never came. Just a sickening tingle that went through him and a disgusting belly lurch. A pain in his chest rose like a trapped bubble, burning his throat. Then the sensation of falling. Then nothing.

• Anubis
Exultant, Anubis accelerated at a high rate of speed in his personal cruiser. The control lights reflected off the sheen of his excited skin. Red, green, and sickly yellow. He could hardly believe how well his plan was maturing. A navigational holocube displayed a roughly spherical shroud of red dots surrounding a green globe. They were thick like gnats, and gradually tracking globeward at differing speeds. The Linkle chortled, and then laughed. He caromed off the tenuous atmosphere as he rushed head on to meet his little seedlings. There were millions, billions of them.

With a heady rush, he opened up his comlink and began transmitting the very specific signal that would unravel mathematically over a span of 3 hours. It was one mother of a wakeup call, and it was going to resonate in the DNA receptors of all his experimental sentients. They were his living canvas. He smiled and eased back to listen to the almost musical algorithm being spun from his antenna array. He leaned back in the command seat, and took a short breath while he suddenly spun, horrified, into a tarry black nothingness.

† Herm

Herm’s personal threat alarm was banging away like a sledgehammer in his central nervous system implant. Unfortunately, his head felt as if it had been crushed between two crashing asteroids. Even thinking hurt. Automatically, his twin cyborg systems ran a damage inventory and found nothing wrong, in spite of the alarm. His optic centers had automatically shut off, but were otherwise unharmed. Which could only mean a proximate light source of greater than 9 billion candles per cubic angstrom in a single wavelength, or one that oscillated over every wavelength at unusually high power levels. His sensitive optics were too valuable to be burned out, and were designed to shut down in that environment to prevent permanent damage. His other sensory inputs were supposed to boost to compensate. Somehow that wasn’t happening, and the diagnostics weren’t providing any clues.

His multi-pac workload servos were powered up and functional, but movement was extremely restricted. Herm experimentally tried to flex an armature casing at various vibrational frequencies, but succeeded only in stressing his own structures to their tensile limits without appreciably improving his motion. External pseudo-skin sensors relayed data that certain extremities, namely feet and ankles were mobile, but nothing else. He could rotate opticals, but they were shut down anyway. He could intake air to sustain the biologicals, without having to resort to internal stored oxygen banks. Thank Anghii for small favors.

† Dr. Thomas “Tom” J. Schussel

The doctor’s first sensation was of iron bands constricting around his chest. As he heaved into consciousness, there was an initial slam against his muscles as he tried to move them. Angrily, he opened his eyes and was immediately blinded by a bright flash of rainbow light. Cursing to himself, he shut his eyelids and opened them more slowly, gradually acclimating his ancient eyes to the brightness of the room. It was basically an elongated oval, chinked with alcoves from which the heads, arms and legs of statues sprouted. The walls were a dense black, with chips of brilliance that reflected back light. Something held his head in place, so he could only observe what he could from his peripheral vision.

In the middle of the chamber was a raised dais, about a meter off the floor, made of the same ebony stone. The source of the powerful light seemed to hover above the dais and was constantly changing shape and color. Schussel avoided looking directly at it, and consequently could not make out much of the dais structure.

Suddenly, one of the alcove statue arms moved in corner to the left of him, and with a shock the doctor realized it was Carla Jones, stuck in the black concrete like a fly in amber. Fast on the heels of that thought came his unwilling certainty that his own immobility must be a mirror reflection of hers. Briefly, irrationally, he struggled against the solid dark granite, but could not budge himself even a hair’s breadth. All he gained by his efforts was weary and painful muscles, and trickles of sweat that ran off his bald head and into his eyes. He would have paid a large sum of money to be able to just wipe his eyes.

Around the room, from what he could perceive by not looking directly into the pulsating beacon, the doctor was able to make out other members of their improbable collection. Paul was stuck higher in an alcove than his mother, and most of his upper torso was free, albeit with the elbows stuck in the wall behind him. He was unconscious, or dead, and drooped forward, his head hanging low. His trapped elbows held him from completely doubling over. His forearms stuck out at odd angles, and the doctor in him worried there might be broken bones. But even if not, it effectively prevented any useful range of motion for the boy. The rest of his young body disappeared about mid-abdomen and ran back into the unyielding dark block.

Herm was snared, his entire torso buried, with just his metal calves, ankles, and feet protruding. The upper crown of his bucket head rode past the surface, with his eyes, nose and mouth exposed. His view would be only of his own feet, if he was awake.

Schussel sensed the others in other parts of the room, but couldn’t turn his head to verify this suspicions. By trying to feel along the edges of his body, he was pretty sure he was pretty well stuck, except for the face, his left shoulder and forearm, and
his left leg below the knee. Breathing was limited how far the blackcrete shell was restricting his lung expansion. He shuddered to think how worse off he would be if he had been exhaling instead of inhaling when he was captured.

Schussel tried to mull things through his overlarge brain, but even his great intellect kept coming up with insufficient information. If there weren’t enough answers, he decided to mentally make a quick checklist of the burning questions that nagged at him:

-- Where were they? he didn’t know. No place he recognized.
-- How did they get here? no clue. Presumably teleportation of some kind, but without the metal tang in his teeth he normally got as an aftereffect. Or else he could have been asleep a long time. Still, yet, no clue.
-- Can they escape? Apparently not immediately, or at least not easily.
He saved his biggest mysteries for last...
-- Who brought us here? and Why?

He heard movement in the central chamber, and decided to feign unconsciousness until he could come up with some kind of plan. It was maddening, because with his eyes closed, he could hear the unmistakable sounds of a large man walking in armor.

• Qlay
Qlay bent closer to peer at the ersatz black concrete. He delicately rubbed it with a forefinger and found it slick to the touch, even though it looked rough. Veins of sequin-like sparkles ran through the ebony material, and appeared to move like undulating seaworms, but Qlay knew appearance might be deceiving. He stepped to the left to get a better look at the sequins when an ornate blade clove into the concrete where his head had been a second earlier. Calmly Qlay turned to observe the body of a young male mongoloid child desperately trying to remove the embedded blade from the black rock. The bejeweled ax wouldn't budge, and the tiny creature began to saw the immense weapon back and forth in a frantic fashion. Qlay leaned against the wall and casually crossed his arms.

"So. It has to come down to mere physical attack? After all this..."Qlay waved a hand around the room, encompassing the cubicle hollow with its entrapped beings half-buried in the walls around them." after all this manipulation of reality, you really just want to fight?" Qlay's eyes widened in amazement, then slowly narrowed.
"Why Jiro? where is his soul while you're in there?"
"um,...." Jiro's body labored vainly at the ceremonial executioner's blade, " If you'll just wait a minute....unhh, oh,...screw it!" Jiro's body slid off the ax handle and positioned itself defiantly near the center table where holo-projections blazed like exploding rainbows. The light silhouetted the small child, who folded his arms like a small psychotic Napoleon, " He wasn't doing much with this body anyway, and ..." the boy shrugged," ... the paths of least resistance, and all that." Jiro's body swept the sweat from its eyes.

"MY master uses this body with express permission." Qlay spoke reverently.
"yeah, whatever." with that, Jiro's body attempted to utilize surprise and launched itself at the much larger (and better conditioned) Qlay. The only real struggle came from Qlay trying not to injure the lad, yet still avoid being injured himself. Carefully, he extricated the boy from his legs, and tossed him lightly across the room. Jiro landed in an undignified heap, started to get up, and stopped.

During the mismatched melee, while the combatants were otherwise occupied, Beratu surreptitiously was hyper extending his pseudopod appendage out of the tight black concrete mold that held him. Having a boneless, malleable body can sometimes be an advantage. His body stretched pencil-thin as Beratu slowly deposited more and more of himself to what he hoped would be a point behind the central apparatus that would remain out of the line of sight for the two battling creatures.

"well, shoot, this isn’t getting me anywhere," Jiro’s body smiled finally, breathing heavily.
“What is it you’re trying to do? That configuration simply isn’t stable,” Qlay pointed to the bizarre apparatus in the center of the room. Roughly it described a raised platform with seven pedestals, resulting in an asymmetrical polygon. On four pedestals sat solid artifacts, like the one Dr. Schussel had called, “Tet A’Ur’Et”. On the other three stood mere holograms of a Tet A’Ur’Et. Lines of power and light arced in twisted lightning between the solid artifacts, and shattered into disorganized fract at the ends where only a hologram stood.

“There are only four Tet A’Ur’Et of power, anyway.” Qlay’s eyes turned cold as he regarded Jiro’s tiny body. “Why do you need that much power? That’s enough to render this galaxy asunder.”
“Well,” Jiro leaned forward as if in friendly confidence, “ it’s true there are only 4 Tet A’Ur’Et in this timeline, and the good Doctor was kind enough to locate the fourth for me...” the boy pointed to a slightly discolored artifact, newly placed in a pedestal.

“But it was my intention to gather the other three from timelines most closely aligned with this one.” the young face twisted downward in a frown, “but then something happened, and the other timelines ceased. That introduced instability into
the configuration, And these...” he waved a hand in the direction of the beings stuck in the black amber. “were so full of potential space-time energy I had to immobilize them until I could get the Powerfuse calmed down. When I’m done, I’ll let them go.”

Jiro’s head jerked up at Qlay, and he excitedly asked, “Do you know how to get the timelines back? Do you know what happened the them?”

Qlay became very still. When he answered, he did so very carefully. His eyes sparkling like crystal. “Outwardly, spiritually, you appear to be Siinga. But, if Siinga were your master truly, you would know already. Who... are you, really?”

Qlay assumed a fighting stance so quickly, it was almost imperceptible.

“No, I am truly Siinga, taking over this weakling body. I...”

Qlay glared, threateningly, saying nothing. He hefted the blackened blade and rose it higher.

“wait...wait. OK, I’m not the black God, merely a portion of his being, gone and unnoticed. I call myself Mosaic.”

“I say again, what are you trying to do with all this power?” Qlay demanded.

“I wish to destroy my master, and take his place.: Jiro’s body sighed resignedly, and collapsed like a marionette with cut strings. The being that called itself Mosaic rose above his form like a heat haze. The next thing Qlay heard, he heard in his head as hard as a wedge of stone.

“And I WILL DO IT!”

Then mosaic disappeared, and the onyx wall behind Qlay leaped out and pooled around his body, trapping him fast in the blackcrete. Qlay hesitated a moment, then made a dimensional turn, and winked out, leaving a mold in the dark stone like a victim of Pompeii.

By this time, Beratu had fully deposited himself on the other side of the apparatus, shielding his orbs with a free limb from the brilliant light and power. He shuffled up to Herm, and pulled a molecular vibra-scalpel from Herm’s ankle-pack.

• Twaan

Dreams chase through Twaan’s head like moles in criss-crossing earthen tunnels. Realities coalesce, and break up only to reform into separate, differing truths. Alone, and naked he stands on a many-skinned platform, ready to face...what? Shift, and wrapped in energy coils, he struggles against a giant python, whose body contained an infinity of stars. He dares not look at the trillions of suns, because the vertigo threatens to swallow him down, to destroy him by individual strands of molecules, rip him to spiritual ribbons. Shift, and falling, he spins in rivers of molten lava, weightless but flowing in rich columns of superheated air. Pain, and the searing oxygen fuses his lungs. Shift, and Twaan is bound by countless chains, each one a different aspect of his soul. The lock is Kree1-shame, smelted and redoubled a thousand times like a samurai death-blade. Detached, he realizes the lock has no key. Shift, and a gossamer worm unhinges its jaws, and engulfs him, forcing his arms against his body. He can’t move. He can’t breathe. He swims for air. He thrashes with stars, wrestles giants, conquers nothing. Loses himself on the crest of the surf of time, disappearing in the foam. He chokes on millennia, sputters centuries up to run from his chin like drool.

Shift. He opens his eyes, and finds himself trapped in black concrete, inky granite. His head, arms and legs project out of the ebony stone. A rainbow of light shines in his eyes, forcing a vestigial nictating membrane to slide over his eyes. Thus shielded, Twaan recognizes patterns in the light that shouldn’t be there. He forgets for a moment to breathe. He feels he is still dreaming.

• Carla Jones

Carla hovered in near-sleep, near death, and heard the interchange between the two mismatched combatants almost as diaphanous whispers in her ear. Suddenly, a palpable emotion overtook her, as inexplicably, a mother’s instinctual fear for the safety of her child overtook her and startled her awake. She caught an infuriatingly inadequate peripheral view of a young, mildly retarded boy collapsing to the floor. Near her on the other side, she could see her son Paul from a profile as he hung limply from the wall. He looked dead. She wanted to scream. Actually, she did scream, but it was soundless because rock was clapped over her mouth. Frantically, she struggled, soon tired. From somewhere out of her line of sight, a blinding bright light kept burning afterimages into her retinas. It was almost hypnotic, and she oddly felt as if something were feeding her energy, gradually.

Then a voice, one that was unfortunately familiar, cursed and said, “Well, hell, I don’t know what that was all about, but if you can get that thing to work, you walking dung-heap, carve out Herm first, and then let him do it. I don’t overmuch trust your precision with that scalpel,” it was the voice of Schussel.

The next voice she heard was her husband, and he WAS screaming.

• Clay Jones
The pressure that used to be in the back of Clay’s skull had increased tenfold, so that when he came awake, the presence of billions of other clones converging on the planet had taken up residence in every part of his head, and it was so overwhelming, he couldn’t think apart from the meld. He couldn’t help it, all he could do was scream. He felt it as a physical extension of himself when his scream woke Johnny Kley. Then they both started screaming. They were still screaming when Herm had cut them free with the scalpel and laid them on the floor. They clutched their heads and curled up into fetal positions. Nothing Dr. Schussel tried made any difference until they cut Paul free and then revived him.

Paul Jones

When Paul opened his eyes, he felt the two clones relax and stop screaming. His father merged with him first, and then Kley absorbed in. When they locked into place like well-tooled gears, Paul felt, or sensed the entire clone web resonate. He gasped as his point of view expand to billions of pairs of eyes. The perceptive result was staggering, but some unknown part of him began to assimilate the input, and process it. He began to sense and understand things so vast, he never contemplated them before. It was so powerful, so mesmerizing an experience, he only partly heard his mother say in a frightened voice:

“my god, my god, his EYES! what has happened Paul’s eyes?!"

5B. SHEDDING THE SKIN

For eons earth tribes had worshipped the snake, the coiled one, the holder of all wisdom with each scale a single reflection of time. How fitting, as the tempest of time rolled and touched and re-rolled again over itself in the vagrant texture of the reptile’s skin. A covering so tenuous it was replaced regularly, with the old cloth left as a sodden, white shadow hung to waste away under rock or shrub. A decaying shadow of what remained. Was the old upholstery the real snake, or was the writhing, vibrant breathing creature the real entity? The question puzzled the ancients for it left a complexity of concerns for the eternity of the soul, and of consciousness.

A sparkling mist rose before Paul. It snapped and whirred in a cyclonic furry. It pressed towards him and then receded, far back behind the black resin prison, behind the band of time travelers now all but freed by the cryoknife. Beratu and Herm wondered at the growing intensity of the splinter from Siinga’s dark heart. A heart closing in. But it could not come any closer to the thing evolving before it.

All of them felt it, even Twaan, still trapped beneath the frozen tar. Beratu had been held back by Schussel from freeing the Golden ape. A twirling, cold, friendly star burst kept spinning in their minds, awakening them. Tying them. Strengthening them. They had seen it in Paul’s eyes. The dark pool of ink that flashed and flared with the same twisting cacophony of dazzling sparkles. The sparkling sounds of glass wind chimes that flowed with it and the smell of sandalwood from the old temples. They were gathering to the force he brought; the focusing of total consciousness, as the splinters rushed toward the home planet.

The hissing sound began. A radio of static. A record playing aimlessly at the end. An empty garment bag blowing in the wind. All of these sounds, writhing and twisting together in the laboratory. The blind force of the Leviathan, the creature of the cosmic murk, began to release. Blackness uncoiled from blackness as the sticky blackcrete moved, rustled, and slid with a crackle away from the tortured captives. Some lived. Some did not. The body of Anubis...Anubis from time two...lay twisted and deformed, asphyxiated and crushed. Only parts of Wounded Bear were to be found, along with the Bear Clan necklace, now tarnished and blue from the caustic transfer. Ellspeth stood before Paul, in duplicate, twins of power. Each held the buckle in her hand and held it out toward Paul as the Leviathan unraveled about them.

“Paul, do something,” Carla screamed.

“Herm, find a way out of here, fast,” Schussel commanded, as he grabbed Carla by the arm. “This is no place for us. Things are going to hell. C’mon.”

“I’m not leaving my husband...my son...I” she stumbled over her words as the rays of iridescent light began to flow from Paul’s eyes to the sparkling buckles. A shower of multi-colored lights and fragments of spinning crystal began to fight the Leviathan for the room. Time and space were at war, and energy was the battlefield.

Beratu was dragging Twaan from the puddle of dead bodies and parts. Herm buzzed away at a wall where a hollow sounding suggested a passage beyond.

“Leave that thing here,” snapped Schussel at the Hydrosh.

“Need him. Know we need him. He has the way. Has the way.” Beratu was uncharacteristically stiff in his demands.
“Whatever,” Schussel snapped, “Damn, Herm can’t you cut any faster?”

“Almost there, Doctor.”

The colored florescence now spun in a helix around Paul and the twin Indian maidens. The dark reptilian power spun around that, trying to crush, surround and maintain it, to no avail. At every touch of the light, Leviathan repelled back in shock, pain, revulsion. The light strengthened and then surrounded the outer walls, with no effect on the escapees as they began to crawl through the hole Herm had fashioned. The ebony python twisted, striking towards the team. A wall of pure white light bounced it back, back deeper into the twisting mesh of light. It struggled as the web spun ever tighter around it, like an earthworm caught in the dew fed web of a grass spider long gone from the grass fields. The hissing turned to roaring and a dense humming that shook the building.

“Where are we, anyway” asked Carla, as she struggled along the blue and gray corridors. The lighting lead them past one sealed door after another. There were numerous warning placards, cautions, restrictions and security restriction signs. It was clearly a strong hold for some type of research.

“Worst nightmare,” Schussel muttered, “Damn Dark Hall. Means we’re right under Wright Patterson. This place tunnels all the way to D.C. from Ohio...oh, I see you find that hard to believe. Huh!! People have been hearing the high pitched tunneling all over North America for years. These bastards are planning to move the entire US military and their dependents underground to survive whatever might attack them. That’s why they call it the Dark Hall...cellular manipulation for long-term genetic changes of the species. It’s all a plan to change the species to survive. Problem is the Red Cell is down here too, and they’ll kill us sure as hell if they find us.”

“Got help. Got help,” Beratu interrupted. He was leaning over Twaan, bring him out of his stupor, slowly. The Golden Ape struggle to consciousness and immediately took a defensive posture, surprising Beratu.

Herm stepped back an let a blast of energy fly from his belt.

“What the..” Schussel exclaimed, “Get that thing under control!”

Twaan was changed from the incarceration. The blood hunger was strong now, but not for these. He knew now the target of hate, and it lay dead back in the laboratory. Twaan waved them off and knelt before Carla, offering her his hands, palm upward. Carla had no idea that her looks would ever save her. The black tar had blackened her hair and for some reason, her eyes were now almost entirely black without whites. She was the reflection of Isis, Mistress over all the Toth.

“What do I do?” Carla was shaking, unsure how to move or react such that the entire company might not be slain by this indestructible warrior.

“Take his hands,” Herm whispered, “And draw this sign on them.” Herm quickly scrawled the design of the all seeing eye on a pad from his belt and passed it to her.

“But it doesn’t mean anything,” she questioned.

“Just do it, silly earth person....oh, why must they always be so stubborn?”

Carla complied and Twaan bowed completely. His mind now opened to her. Carla could hear him pleading for her command...for her guidance to move forward. What action? What target? What battle? She was stunned at the clarity of the ape’s mind, and its integrity.

They heard the sounds of heavy boots moving down on them from the hallway just before them.

“Take his hands,” Herm whispered, “And draw this sign on them.” Herm quickly scrawled the design of the all seeing eye on a pad from his belt and passed it to her.

“More will come,” Schussel snapped. “I don’t know how you got him to do that, but good work. But now we’ve got to find a way out, fast.”

Carla directed Twaan again. “Find a way up. Safety. Escape!”

“He’s going the right way, according to my readings,” Herm said. They followed the ape as he sped to a ladder and pushed open a duct hatch above them. The smell of fresh air wafted over them.

The night sky swallowed them as they crawled up and out of the man way, after the Golden Ape. Twaan seemed to shimmer in the moonlight. To be gold itself, as he let out a hideous battle cry. Carla winced and grabbed Schussel arm.

“That should provide a nice, quiet escape,” snapped Schussel.

“Quick, the guards are coming up the ladder,” warned Herm. They slammed the heavy metal lid shut over the air vent. The clang roared down the conduit and meshed with the echoed curses of the soldiers below them. The black soldiers of the Dark Hall. The ricochet of bullets pattered against the cover like popcorn in the microwave.
The escapees rushed through the dark field of wet, thick grasses. The dew of the Ohio nights was heavy and soaked their feet and ankles. But it muffled their steps. An alarm was going off in the distance as they reached the first fence and the remains of the cars they’d brought.

Strangely, a blue glow began to rise up out of the earth and cascade over the field. The soil burst as a crypt blown open with azure lightning. The sound, deafening.

“Look,” Beratu yelped. He pointed up into the sky. Strands of red and iridescent green were swirling about, tearing into each other, and wrapping around the moon in a hissing ribbon. The Leviathan’s Breath, Siinga the evil one, twirled and massed above the blue light. The pressure of the dark destroyer now filling the heavens such that no light from any star was visible.

The pressure grew more ominous, as the air around seemed stilled. As though all living being were waiting to be judged in a moment of final justice, final atonement.

“Get behind the van,” Schussel screamed.

They ran like cockroaches, hiding beneath the giant foot about to descend. Ebony bolts of force struck the base and it was gone. Carla could see the lights of Dayton, and suddenly they too were gone in a single blow of petulant rage.

A maelstrom began to solidify over the blue light, still growing below them. Then it stopped. And the maelstrom froze. The heavens set to stone. Two figures rose from the pit. Paul and the Ellspeths holding the buckles of Isis, the stone of fate in their entwined hands. All of life bore fruit before them. The light of day spun from them. The fields renewed. The base appeared back from its ashes. The lights began glittering again from Dayton. They were the power and the glory of what rose from beneath them. Anghii. And around him a golden snake with eyes of ruby, coiling and boiling with blue flame out of its every scale.

Bullets began to fly past the van. The Dark Hall was committed to annihilation of the intruders. They were blind to the presence of the battle around them. The force of Siinga drove them, mindlessly. But theirs was the blindness of death for out of the burning sepulcher of the night stood Twaan and beside him his aunt, Nomo, come to enter the balance of justice. Come to protect the truth lost to the house of the Exament-plexor Krel. Born to stave off the darkness of the unrighteous beneath the power of the Buckle of Isis, mother of the Mother. All the forces were now joined in battle.

5C. EULOGIES

In a still inner moment, Nomo pondered the crushed enemy/lover/traitor Anubis. Before her battle instincts took over every nerve and sinew, a tiny part of her wailed and wept the deaths that have come, the deaths that will come. She blessed the tallow wick of pain that was herself, and all of her kind. Thoth, the brilliant will, the razor-well, the race that was the hand of the eye of Isis, the God-mother. In a nano-second span, a prayer against dying, a prayer for dying, a prayer to Death. It was the pre-battle sacrament that flexed the clear resolve. Exhaling a declarative breath, she was pleased to hear her nephew/clawbrother echo the same breath at her side. Bitter memory of his past cowardice was swept away in the newfound forgiveness that sprang from her eight-chambered heart. Then the throttle of the battle programming took over and all rational thought that did not have to do with killing or wounding, of blood-berserk fever or strategy, left her like rain off the back of a gagwan fishcatcher.

Several hundred feet below, scarred Anubis from another timeline was left to mourn his own broken body.

Carla huddled under the van, cringing at the screech of bullets and god knows what else slamming into metal. Forces of the Dark Hall erupted out of camouflaged tunnels in countless numbers. Explosions threatened to shatter her eardrums. The sound ravaged from all around her. Silently she cried, and felt the loss of something gone forever, her life in a little house with a picket fence and a son to rock and whisper over. Clay had been dead to her in one form or another over the years, after countless mental episodes which defied explanation until now. At least part of the picture stood starkly clear. Her husband had been no more than a puppet or lab rat. Perhaps it was too late for him. She thought that likely. But her son. Her Son!

That which hovered over them surrounded in unearthly light was not her son, Paul. It was something that used his body, that displayed Paul’s face, no longer cherub-like, but it was older, unfamiliar to her. Nothing in her life was familiar to her anymore. Reality ceased to be the anchor on which she hung her perceptions. She would give anything to have things back the way they had been. But none of all the gathered powers offered her that.
Her tears ran in rivulets down her cheek but failed to cleanse her ebony stained eyes. They remained black as pitch, with whites and irises as dark as the pupil. She saw them in the distorted reflection off the chrome of the van trim. She no longer recognized herself. She appeared eerie, frightening. Her outsides matched her insides, she thought.

In mid-sob, a shrapnel fragment slammed into her left temple. Oddly, she felt more pain from the way her neck snapped backward from the impact than from the portion of her skull that drove into her brain. And then she felt nothing for a long, long time. In her coma she unknowingly prayed for death, but it eluded her like an angry lover.

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The elder Ellspeth had more to mourn than any. Her mentor and high-shaman would nevermore mark bright paths for her. Jiro would never giggle when she crossed her eyes. She had suffered both of their deaths now twice. First in one world, and then in this one. It did not go down any easier knowing it was going to happen. None of it went down easy. Harder still, she knew if things did not start unfolding differently, there would be none left to mourn because all life would be crushed beneath the thundering mountain that Paul was becoming.

But then, she smiled to herself in a tight, bloodless grin. She remembered that in her world, there had been no elder Ellspeth. This was a different pattern, if only slightly. The danger was still very real, but she now represented the unknown variable. But what she could accomplish with that small advantage escaped her.

Quickly, she prayed to the Great White Spirit that her meager life would be enough of a difference. She prayed to the spirit of Wounded Bear to share his power and wisdom even as she shed huge tears at the loss of his earthly body. And she prayed to herself that courage would come from somewhere, anywhere to force that commitment from her, willing or no.

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Clay and Kley no longer existed in separate thought patterns. The converging mass flotilla in orbit was reverberating crystalline concept at faster than the speed of light. Each individual splinter of life that was a real person with different personality and insight was melting together into something else, something larger, something uncontrollable. The psychic feedback threatened to brain-burn them both.

The tiny part of Clay Jones that still thrived inside his brain was desperately clinging to the edges of the hive-mind torrent as it rushed past him, uncaring. He looked over at his wife, Carla. Her cheeks had become sunken and pasty, and her eyes were from a horror movie. She was crying, and he wanted to comfort her, but it took all the mental integrity he had to seal off his ego away from the cataclysm. He had to survive.

Before access to his own senses were cut off, he was stunned to see her head erupt in blood and tissue. Then he had nothing but darkness in the solitary of his own mind. His thoughts howled a ragged dirge. But none heard, not even Clay.

5D. THUNDERSTORMS AND SLUICE BINS

Between rapid black strikes of the ebony python, flashes of brilliant light surrounded the young trio like a protective energy field. On Paul’s left hovered dark-haired youngster Ellspeth, the woman between worlds, survivor of Wounded Bear and inheritor of his Shamanic aspect. Her eyes were closed in rapturous joy, her hands cradling the silver buckle, from which shot occasional ribbons of light that wove themselves into the pattern of force whirling around them and blocking the gargantuan viper.

On Paul’s right, Ellspeth’s more mature alterself writhed in non-compliance, captured like an insect in multi-colored amber. White knuckles clutched her own silver buckle, carried over from the doomed reality which spawned her and the now-dead scarred Anubis. Patterns of immutable force twisted her limbs into agonizing restraints. A low moan escaped her bloody lips, but was drowned out by the abrupt chatter of machine gun fire spread by the military shock troops surrounding them. Flung bullets lodged into the inky crystalline worm that attacked them without effect, and were instantly dissolved into the energy shell that spun like cotton candy around them. Their transcendent battle raged and hovered over the bewildered soldiers. Errant lightning struck from the core of that battle, discharging excess potential energy and leveling large areas of ground. Soldiers perished, and others replaced them.

They continue to fire, even though they know it futile./ Leviathan muttered disgustedly as he materialized behind Anghii, several football fields tall, but insubstantial as dark fog.
blood fury at his attacker. The fugitive part of Leviathan temporarily found itself distracted away from his intent on the needle-sharp teeth into the tail. Earth-shuddering screeches rattled everything in sight.

Terror had flattened Beratu to a pool of plasm an inch thick that quivered on the asphalt. Nearly retching, Schussel shifted position to avoid touching the puddle of alien flesh. The good doctor was protecting the most dear possession he still possessed, now that the Tet A’Ur’Ets had been stripped from him -- he was gripping his balls.

Bullets, shrapnel and debris rained down like bizarre hail in the unnatural energy thunderstorm that continued to increase in destructive potential. Zaps of force lightning erupted intermittently, accompanied by the smell of burnt ozone.

Too swift to follow with the human eye, Qlay struck into the roiling coils of the ebony worm and sank thousands of needle-sharp teeth into the tail. Earth-shuddering screeches rattled everything in sight.

Hiding inside the black worm, Mosaic experienced pain on a fundamental spiritual level at the bite, and struck out in blood fury at his attacker. The fugitive part of Leviathan temporarily found itself distracted away from his intent on the...
hovering trio. In a move faster than instinct, he manipulated the inky crystalline jaws as they clamped tight on the tail of the serpent-warrior Qlay. The air blazed as they pulled and jerked on the end of the tunnel bodies of the other combatant. Rage increased the speed and violence of the attack. As the ultimate extension of the white-hot anger fueled the exchange, the mirror opposite pythons spun around, lumbering at first, then swifter and faster, closed maw to tail. They spun and whirled in mid-air until they appeared to pulse from black to yellow-white, ebony to milky light-mote.

The twisting ring began to suck in the power that Anghii was feeding into it, and to unleash the dense crystalline stored potential energy of the darkened serpent, until the combined force surpassed what Paul and Ellspeths were already weaving. An immense whir added to the din, the sound of a rushing freight train exponentially increased to an eardrum-splitting pressure. Anghii projected too much of his power into Qlay, and was trapped in the ring by his connection to Qlay, who was even more hopelessly snared by Paul.

Elder Ellspeth hung crucified in a web of amber power that flowed through her body like water sluicing through a wire screen. She felt she was drowning, and worse, the feeling was too familiar. The sinews of her hands stood out in fine detail as she involuntarily clutched the buckle of Isis. Diffracted light ribbons spurted out and ran down her arms. After that, they were whisked away in the rapids of Paul’s vortex of force. The last time this happened, it had been an epiphany of resolution, beyond joy, beyond orgasm. She opened her eyes and confirmed that Paul’s other acolyte was caught in the throes of the same rapture. A beatific smile threatened to split the younger face. It made her nauseous to remember how quickly that joy, her joy, would turn to riven sorrow.

Woman between worlds tried to expel the choking amber field, and could not. Tears ran down her face from the pain of the effort. She felt the end of her tether coming.

“Great White spirit” she prayed to herself, “Do not let my weakness overpower your strength. Save me, save your children before they all perish. Take my body, use it”. Ragged sobs escaped her, but her muscles did not obey.

Near her, the force from the spinning ring of snake eating snake buffeted her body like a searing wind. It felt like an intensely frightening roller coaster as she bounced in the heated air. She could sense the impact of bullets and mortar being swallowed and absorbed in the energy maelstrom. She wanted to wipe her glistening tears, but couldn’t release her hold on the buckle.

Suddenly, Paul’s arm snapped out, and a pseudopod arm of rainbow force, larger than a football field mimicked the gestures of his small fingers. The glowing limb deftly snatched the circlet of roiling snakes and placed them around the sphere which housed Paul, Ellspeth, and the elder Ellspeth. Like a child’s toy, the gigantic hand spun the wheel even faster, until there was no longer black, or white-yellow, but a gray smear. The whine jumped to a higher pitch, and energy fields flexed and twisted.

During this flux of unnatural force, Ellspeth unexpectedly found answer to her prayer. A momentary lull in the tractor field that held her opened up beneath her feet. Finally, she was able to snap shut her own buckle, and neatly sidestep into the void. Freedom, yes, but too soon she realized the price as she plummeted helplessly earthward.

Power balance shifted like loose cargo on a ship in a storm. The gyroscopic force of the rapidly spinning snakes wobbled wildly until Paul’s giant pseudoarm was able to right it. His eyelids opened on sockets not quite empty, but full of endless space as he tried to locate the missing Ellspeth. The glowing limb started to reach down to snatch her back when an incredibly powerful explosion rocked the embryonic Paul-construct gestalt. The Dark Hall had started unleashing the big guns. Not yet nuclear, but damned nasty enough.

Enraged, Paul’s face distorted as the massive energy of the explosion was absorbed into the shell. Then smiled as he felt the influx of power.

“Hit me again.” his supercharged mind broadcast to any receptor in the area. Soldiers that were closest struck the ground, screaming, while blood ran out of their ears. Lightning crackled down in rainbow colors, horribly beautiful, and deadly. Unable to resist the compulsion, Dark Hall specialists in charge of the massive secret weapons unleashed them simultaneously. Ready this time, Paul neatly absorbed the energy influx. When a missile hit the shell, it would flare almost as bright as the sun, but no sound or heat or concussion escaped. As Anubis had observed on many occasions, Paul was a very quick study. He was getting better and faster at assimilating and converting the destructive energy.

In an armored troop carrier, just out of range, Jordan Taglin observed the fray via night scope video. He was frozen to the screen in disbelief at the negation of all he considered right and real. He was alone, his vehicle abandoned, as wave upon wave of troops converged on the center of the unraveling of his known universe. Strangely, he really needed to void his bladder. A vermilion bolt of energy struck the front grille of the armored personnel carrier and he did just that.
Unnoticed by Paul, Ellspeth tumbled hard into a treetop. Interior limbs near the top of the tree broke her fall. They also broke several ribs and her left forearm. Her body rattled within the bole of the tree on the way down. She desperately tried to latch onto a branch, until finally she found herself wedged in a fork between massive limbs, about twenty feet off the ground. Before she lapsed into unconsciousness, a barely aware part of her brain noted that the buckle of Isis had been welded painfully to her right palm. How that happened, she had no idea.

The two guardian apes finally started to tire. The concussions of the explosions all around them had added stress to bodies already stretched to the limits by the hand-to-hand melee. Although dozens of humans are no match for a tattooed Thothian, hundreds would eventually exhaust them. It was getting close to that now. Drenched in blood, Twaan took a quick look at his Aunt.

“We need reinforcements.” He sliced through a soldier’s bullet-proof vest with the claws on his seven-fingered hand. Blood fountained up in a stream. The next man took the corpse’s place.

“Keep fighting. Deal death. Become death.” Nomo dispatched three soldiers at once after a macabre pirouette in place turned claws into fatal spinning blades.

“But we are separated from Lady Isis, and cannot protect her. We must angle over towards the van.” Twaan drove his head forward into the midsection of a doomed fighter, and hoisted him over his head while his toenails neatly cut the ankles of the soldier behind him, severing his feet from his lower legs.

“What?!!” Nomo shouted, frozen. A bayonet bounced uselessly off her back, and she snapped out of it, ripping the gun away from the man so swiftly his arms yanked out at the shoulder, the hands still attached to the weapon. Nomo smiled briefly and began using the stock of the gun as truncheon. “Isis is here? I would have felt her!”

Twaan pointed back at the van, where Carla lay on the ground, unconscious. Nomo followed his direction and squinted her eyes tightly.

“Nephew...” She sighed, “that is a mere earthcreature, Paul’s mother. True, she resembles her Godness, the Royal Lifegiver,” blood spurted from a clipped jugular vein as an unlucky man collapsed at Nomo’s feet,” That is definitely NOT her. I lived close to her, jowl by cheek for many an ungodly year, watching the little prince.”

“But...but...she gave the fealty sign in my palm.” Twaan’s elbow crushed a larynx, and his knee drove a man’s testicles skyward in a fatal insult. Nomo glared at her nephew in such a way that brooked no disagreement.

Crestfallen, Twaan’s death blows became even more listless, his purpose for fighting vanquished within him. Secretly, he had hoped to undo his shame by doing the duty he failed to at his ten-year aborted ceremonial battle. His inner disappointment gave way to a more intense emotion. Anger and frustration started to course through him like a sheet of burning acid. His glistening skin began to give off a subtle light. A mounting rumble in his throat built into a full-fledged battle plaint.

Nomo smiled to herself, but was disturbed by Twaan’s mistaking of Carla for Lady Isis. How could he? Carla’s eyes were green, not black. A soldier stared down openmouthed at the space where his chest used to be. It seemed an incredible waste of the 45 seconds of blood his brain had to work with, but that was his decision. Calmly, she hoisted another man’s head off his shoulders and efficiently reused it as a projectile. It made a satisfying noise as it caromed off three other heads, inflicting damage along the way.

God, she loved battle!

The emergency hail beacon inside Herm’s neck kept transmitting on substellar space strength the galactic equivalent of S-O-S. It was an automatic program that Herm himself would have shut down, had he been functioning. Because as far as Herm knew, there was no ship in this system that would read this particular code. Pleiades craft were light years away. Certainly not close enough to offer them assistance in enough time. This is precisely why beacons are constructed to be automatic. The cyborg hosts have just enough left of the original carbon-based life form to arrive at dangerously wrong conclusions.

Lightning forked down in a collection of improbable colors. Even real lightning mixed in, catalyzed by the ionic residue of the unnatural energy flashes. The ground was scorched by hundreds of contact points for the destructive fire. Rainbow flares lashed out from the spinning snakes.
The sky above started to display the oxidized entry shields of thousands of arriving craft. It hurt too much to witness any of this directly, and the thousands of soldiers were forced to hold up hands they couldn’t spare to block the blinding glare. This, of course, made them a little more vulnerable to the incredibly swift strikes of a non-lightning variety -- those being dealt by the highly efficient pair of battle-apes. Nomo and Twaan, now battling with their backs to each other, fought as much out of desperation as purpose. Nomo was not in position to notice the ever increasing golden haze that spun around them, nor the source.

Schussel vomits all over himself, in abject fear, or disgust, or some unknown emotion. He seems unaware of the bile looping down his jacket. His swollen head throbs, and indistinct mumbles escape his lips.

“What wrong?” the voice of Beratu vibrated from a malleable diaphragm formed in the puddle next to the doctor. “What happening, Doctor?”

“Horrible. horrible. Anubis wins after all. Oh my dear sweet Alemsis...” Schussel continued to look down at the pavement. His huddled form sagged against the van.

Each explosion that Paul absorbed into the amber cocoon sent a neural shockwave through Clay Jones and Johnny Kley, rocking them with convulsions.

Kley reacted with a feral animalistic self-mutilation. Sharp snapping sounds came from each joint or bone he broke in his unthinking agony. Before long, every finger in his left hand was twisted and broken as he vainly tried to combat the massive neural override signal.

Clay had already retreated inside himself and become an observer, watching the rest of him wash away. Not so conflicted as Kley, his body merely shuddered with seizures.

A supple pseudopod extended towards Carla’s shoulders, and shook her, hard.

“Wake up, lady, wake up. We go. We go now.” Carla doesn’t hear Beratu’s voice. Carla doesn’t hear anything. The bulk of the rest of Beratu flows along the extended limb, like a pig through a python, until the mass vibrates and reforms into the Hydros’s more familiar shape. He throws several reassuring smells at Carla, but she is oblivious to that as well.

Beratu swivels his head, and chooses an objective far on the outside of the fray. Grabbing both wrists, he starts to drag Paul’s mother across the tarmac amid a hail of gunfire. No one notices them leaving. Schussel is weeping to himself at the enormity of what is about to happen. Herm is deactivated. Kley is overridden by immense power. Clay is hiding inside his own head. Nomo and Twaan now surrounded by a strong golden glow.

And Carla’s son Paul is busy becoming.

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Over all of them, powers and forces warp reality as the impinging ships spin above, embers of atmosphere entry swarm like fireflies, attracted to the glow of energy and death.

The air around Paul and the younger Ellspeth begins to shimmer like the air on a hot summer highway. The very fabric of space creaks as it starts to fold in on itself. More and more ships of every conceivable variety float down and pick up the spin of the vortex accelerated by the maw to tail whirring loop.

Directly underneath Paul’s cocoon, an inversion of air and time start to lift up debris from the ground. Above Paul, the visiting ships stir into a bizarre whirlpool with Paul at the center. Two arms of force reach out, in exact imitation of Paul’s limbs. Violently, they grab handfuls of soldiers and equipment, and then squeeze them until bloody pulp and stressed metal oozes out between hellish fingers. This deluge of horror repeats to screams of the maimed and dying. Soldiers are crushed in the abattoir of the thing Paul is becoming.

The ground runs with ankle-deep blood.

Metal ships have spun so close, they collide, crumple, burn and fuse overhead.

Anghii is repulsed, trying to interfere. Too much of his own power is being pulled into the spinning Qlay-snake and He is drawn inexorably closer to the rainbow potter’s wheel that is molding an unknown terror. Too late, he realizes the error. To himself he wryly thinks of how easy it turned out to capture a God. His very essence began to drift into the whirling mass, adding his own power to the amber egg that was giving birth to the Paul-construct. Wearily, he resigns and releases the portion of his power that is irretrievable, collapsing with what remains. He looks on as the huge spindle gathers in speed and force.

Out of nowhere, eight brilliant flashes produce a pattern of Tet A’Ur’Ets, materialized out of thin air and outlined in amber light. Siinga is undone to see such items of power effortlessly fabricated. A tickling of fear begins to creep into even the Bringer of Dread.
What is this unmaking of my spawn, my get? Arghhhhhhh. I have no power, you stupid crystal head! You dared to emasculate me, and now yourself! Get up, Anghii!

Anghii was too drained to answer.

Millions of ships rained down and spun around Paul. The Tet A’Ur’Ets are the only stable unmoving parts of the machine. In a great wrenching of metal and flesh, Paul’s pseudoarms form the twisted metal of crumpled spacecraft into a form that is at first nothing but a vortex mass, a twisting, bulbous monstrosity. Anghii shields his eyes at the brightness of his own stolen power fusing with Paul’s. Many of the few remaining soldiers are blinded, with their eyes seared from their skulls.

Convulsing behind the van, Clay and Kley are sucked into the shattered mess of technology and humanity. The van goes with them, and Schussel is whipped by the power, but left collapsed on his knees, looking up at the Nightmare he fought to avoid. Herm lay as one dead, his emergency beacon flashing spaceward.

Twaan is levitated, and the golden sphere snaps shut around him. He is lost in the reverie of power that flows out of him, and through him. Nomo falls to the ground, and looks up, stupefied, as her nephew lofts into the air in a golden bubble. Her blue woven body slips in the muck of her many kills.

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Thunderstorms of apocalyptic scale range for miles around the battlefield. But closer in, where Paul was becoming, there occurs a sudden calm, a deep silence with only the light whispers of the universe rubbing against itself. Younger Ellspeth stills wears the mask of rapture, and a sheath of amber power begins to collect around her paralyzed form. Debris from broken metal space machines whip past her, but flow around her. She is protected by the force flowing out of her silver buckle. And, of course, by Paul.

The universe grates and skips. Cords of liquid metal whirl around Paul’s head, the friction creating cosmic heat. Finally, the shape of what is forming begins to be apparent.

A thousand feet high, the tornado of power and matter begins to collapse, condense. The amber egg that protected Paul spins outward and completely dissolves the spinning snakes, absorbing them. The egg becomes an immense torus that opens wider, allowing gravity to pull the orbiting debris into the center, where Paul and Ellspeth are now entwined.

As if with a mind of their own, or magically guided (which in a sense, they were), the eight Tet A’Ur’Ets pull into the center, and mirror his body structure. There is one for each shoulder, one for his neck, one for his waist, both hips, and knees. The pattern expands until it is several football fields high. The remains of the ships and their suffering occupants roughly form floating limbs in the spaces between the Tet A’Ur’Et joints. The construct becomes a mountain-sized robot man. The differing styles of ships and technology seem as markings or tattoos on the skin of the ersatz flesh. Hideous wails escape from the trapped clones enmeshed in the unnatural silhouette.

Clay and Kley are sucked into the irregular eye sockets, and the partitioned identity of Clay is horrified to feel his body and brain used as a focusing point for what the robot’s perceptions of the world. He could sense a bolus of damaged mortal flesh being pressed into metal technology. The screams were deafening, and threatened to unravel his protected walls.

Although much of the ship debris crushed and fused, technology still functioned in localities, and even new uses for cobbled together machinery were instantaneously invented. It was a mysterious process that involved God-like powers of spirit, intellect, and tissue. The hive-mind of Paul and the snared clones melded and increased in power exponentially.

The arms of the Giant Paul snatched the floating bubble containing the Thothian ape, Twaan, and secured it to the massive structured forehead. The bubble of golden light burst and Twaan’s body was painfully twisted into the shape of an Ankh. Somewhere inside that mass of tortured flesh and machine beat the hearts of Paul and Ellspeth, along with the countless clones.

When the golden bubble dissolved, the shell flowed down the forehead and coated the blood-drenched simulacrum of Paul until the entire shape was sheathed in the glow. Immense metal eyelids closed in concentration, and the form was surrounded by a caul of amber light. When the power-induced fog lifted, the creature had morphed and smoothed into a more perfect gargantuan copy of Paul, but with titanium-hued skin.

The Golem turned and strode away over the shattered Wright Patterson Air Force base, skyscraper sized legs pounding holes in the earth. The abandoned battlefield became deathly still. Even the moans of the not yet dead ceased in wonder.

Abruptly, Dr. Schussel recognized this horror from centuries back, in Saxon times, in depraved Druid times. He remembered the Eve of Samhain and brutal bonfires lit underneath similar structures. Doomed victims that were hopelessly trapped inside an overlarge hollow effigy of a man. He remembered the stench of burning flesh, and the piteous yells for mercy after the fire had begun. But the fire in the eyes of the ones who stood outside the structure burned intolerably hotter,
and without humanity, or compassion. He remembered because he had witnessed it, not because he’d read it in a book. Tom Schussel recognized the ancient ritual of the Wicker Man.

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AFTERMATH:

Beratu and Carla were gone, Schussel knew not where. And that was just the beginning of his worries. He couldn’t reactivate Herm, even though he’d broken into several of the cyborg’s thigh-kits, and tried everything he knew to revive the Sympasiun, even some things he didn’t.

About a half hour after the walking mountain left, an older female ape claiming to be the other ape’s aunt loped over, covered in blood and ichor. Luckily for the tattooed monster, most of it wasn’t hers. She’d sat and whimpered, which looked a mite out of place for a creature that severe. Her nephew was gone, gone. (Well, so join us other unfortunates), Schussel thought. He was too tired and horrified to make any value judgments.

Naturally, centuries of planning and scheming just evaporates in one day. It spoke volumes to the good doctor’s brand of luck. But then he thought again of the clones, and their painful prison before being assimilated in the Wicker ‘droid, and realized he should stop complaining. He was maybe lucky in a way, at least luckier than some. He made a quick Druid prayer over their battered souls.

Unbeknownst to the doctor, Herm’s emergency beacon finally wiggled out, running out of power.

On another section of the battlefield, Taglin woke up and found himself face down in gore and torn uniforms. He heard a high-pitched wail and looked around for the source. Red-faced, he realized it came from his own throat.

As if enough weird things hadn’t already happened, out of the pre-dawn gloom, two powerful lodge spirits came a’ calling. Anghii and Siinga became visible, and appeared first to the woman between worlds, gently lifting her out of her wedged hideout in the tree. Anghii smiled at her and his voice slammed into her mind with a crystal clarity.

/You prayed to me, little one. I am here now/
/Are you....are you the Great Spirit?,/ her voice quavered as she lay in the loving hand of Anghii.
/That is one of my names/ the voice answered.
Suddenly, the grief overwhelmed her, and she beat against the Godhand, screaming, “Don’t let it happen again, Great Spirit! Save us! Save us all!” Her demands reduced to weeping, and then to racking sobs.
/We don’t intend to let it happen, little servant. It is good that you have saved the buckle. that will help/ Anghii’s voice was soothing, compassionate.

But Ellspeth wondered to herself, Why would the Great Spirit need my buckle?

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Siinga regarded his brother of light
/release me/

Sadly, Anghii reaches out his other hand and makes a twisting motion with his fingers. Something dark and pointed wells up out of Siinga’s chest, breaks the surface, and dissolves in countless tiny black crystalline scales.
/Your freedom, my brother. In exchange for your valor/
Leviathan seethed with the reinflux of his vitality. Barely, he contained himself from lashing out and destroying everything. The power unused cried out to wielded. With great difficulty he turned a deaf ear to those pleas. There were other fish to fry.
/agreed, let’s gather up the survivors/

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High over the now-empty battlefield floats the Golden Nimbus, having returned in response to the dying ember of Herm’s distress call. Arriving too late to aid, but in enough time to unravel the spectacle, a solitary female form tilts the cloud to gaze over the plain of blood. The morning sun has risen enough to swath the plain in brilliant scarlet and rusty brown as the river of blood flowed and clotted.

Her eyes, blacker than a sackcloth of hair, scanned the area. A fundamental righteous anger began a slow but mounting burn within her.
The real SkyMother Isis has returned, and she is royally pissed.

5E. ALL THE KING'S MEN

All the King's horses,
And all the King's men,
Couldn't put Humpty
Together again.

Children's Rhyme

Colonel Thompson's men were spent shells. Their carcasses were strewn through the untrimmed grasses between the splotchy runways, repaved a hundred times since WWII, and now repaved with human blood. Thompson looked through the night scope, grinding his teeth. The core mind of the Black Hall was beyond fury. Beyond remorse for the losses before him. Only the deep seething hate for anything left alive on the field...filling him to the flash point of steel.

"Goddamn them all! All of'em!" Thompson reached for the firing mechanism. His last resort. The black, unreflecting tones of his skin hid him in the crevaces of a bunker's peek hole. "To hell and back," he swore, twisting the red switch to its ignition position. A hard click set perdition in motion.

A hooded beast rose up from the tarmack, cracking away the soil and brittle tar. A weapon of mass destruction, they called it. A neutron war head. Meant to take life—all life at this range. The latches opened, exposing the field shroud. There were no protests from the black ants that lay crushed and broken about it. Only the survivors would know the flash and the blinding heat. The sleeping sheep in Dayton would not know. But, Thompson thought, most of them are white, anyway.

Anghii's hand push outward, the buckle of Isis snapping away from it like David's missile. The flash was overpowering and then pulled back into an encasement of steel membrane, formed by the stretching, impervious buckle. The flash hung in time and space, and then was swallowed under the membranes embrace.

Thompson waited for the reckoning in a black heaven, a Valhalla he had preached secretly to his followers over the decades. The scent or roses, the white handmaidens and men servants of the souls of white people who must serve the chosen ones in the after life. But no handmaiden approached him. No searing heat ate his flesh away. Just silence and a flash that imploded on itself. No long enough to blind anyone, and without a sound, not likely to waken even the paperboy sound asleep in the South Dayton slums.

His strong, trained form jumped from the bunker. "Damn you beasts, you craven Gods. Damn you all! Where are you, you mighty Set? Where is your messenger Anubis? Where is the master Siingia, my Lord and Master? Aaaaaii?" he screamed, charging toward the end of the runway. His pistol drawn, firing at the true handmaiden of the Gods.

Bullets bounced off and away from Ellsbeth, who was Ellsbeth no more—but truly the girl who bridged two worlds. The soul force of Wounded Bear rushed through her essence as she and the belt defended the growing form of Paul, and whatever he might become. They grew together in the great light he now exuded, flashing and challenging the rising sun's splendor. A minor flash careened across the cold tarmack, the runway, and Colonel Thompson was sent to his maker—wherever that might be. Isis had seen enough....and all. Isis was not amused.

The thunder grew loud over the Midwest as a blue blazing turmoil spun out of the heavens and onto the rolling hillsides of central Ohio. Alarms went off in the National Weather Service. It was a cell of doom, as interpreted by a bleary-eyed meteorologist, as he rushed to call the state's emergency operations center in Dublin.
Her power was multiplied in the rarefied atmosphere of Earth. She had been away for thousands of years, perched in her deep, moist havens of the fourth planet of the Pleidean star Earthers referred to only as part of a group of M45. Unknowing were the sky observers that one of the great galactic empires, the Talus, had risen from this myriad of blue stars. The old Gods of earth having visited for but a day in their time, establishing order and civilization among a surviving band of broken peoples left from the downfall of earlier civilizations that had passed by even before Isis and Osiris.

Here, her glory and self-contained authority were undeniable. The irresistible, compelling force of her will—flowing, yet raging through all things it passed. She was the Mother of All, for she was the creator of all anew that passed through her field. Glorious was her love; hideous her anger. Hideous indeed was her form this morning of the gathering.

The Pleidean's arrive and meet with Isis, for a great pact has been broken. Her children were not to have the powers to play god. Now with Anghii and Siinga fractured, there is a loss of order in the universe, and in time space. The ability to jump through worm holes is being endangered by the absorption and reformation of Leviathan...the formalized spirit of the universe's birth through chaos.

Carla begins to change and manifest new capabilities. She begins to take on a stronger role in the team. Schussel is baffled. She brings Herme back on line.....forgiving him his flaws. She and the team head for what Paul and the Indian Maidens have become------a new gargantuan life form with the powers of cosmic consciousness and unlimited energy.

Carla and Isis come face to face......the manifestation is clear now.......Isis is humbled as she views the face of her own creator coming forth from the mother of Paul.

It is a time for the old Gods, the old universe, to be revamped, revised and reordered. Paul has a major stand off with the remaining forces of the Black Hall outside Yucca Mountain, Nevada. They are no more. Paul begins to pull the stars together in his mind. A web is being woven to make a new way......a new path. World events reflect this wave of love and forgiveness. Nomo finds the gargantuan......the giant golden egg....the humpty dumpty.......and there the great gold ape that was her nephew son thing blends minds with her and shows her how her people have been redeemed.

Isis appears, along with a resurrected Anubis, preparing to depart with the Pleideans to a new part of space, left untrammeled by Leviathan......leave this new universe to Paul, his mother, and the new alliances.