

The Light in the Labyrinth

An Eldritch Tale

Edward J. Darenkamp

All Rights Reserved. Copyright © 2001 Edward John Darenkamp

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Author's Choice Publishing Agreement

For information, please contact:

iUniverse.com

5220 South 16th Street

Suite 200

Lincoln, NE 68512-1274

ISBN: 1-58348-XXX-X

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to my family on both sides of the river, with love and appreciation for their forbearance concerning my obsession.

Table of Contents

1. The Ring
2. Darkfire
3. Interlude
4. The Running Man
5. The Letter
6. Leopold's Dream
7. Aus der Mansarde
8. The Elephant's Proctologist
9. The Genius
10. Strange Distractors
11. The Power of the Lens
12. The Star Chamber
13. The Snag
14. The Cosmic Brake
15. The Lucky Stone
16. That Dark and Deadly Light
17. The Pilgrimage
18. Jack be Nimble, Jack be Quick
19. The Macula
20. The Land of Nod
21. P. Baumeri
22. Just Two Things
23. A Mask for the Medusa
24. The Black Pool
25. The Alter-End of Time
26. The Man That Might Have Been
27. The End by Jove

Chapter One: The Ring

The Dark Confines of Study, July 17th, 2003

The physicist teetered on the brink. He applied all he knew to the problem unlike any he had ever faced. The behavior of the celestial bodies he could calculate. The behavior of the subatomic particles he could estimate. But he could never aspire to correlate this:

He was locked inside an enigma like the convolutions of this own brain with only a few quanta of light from cold, green orbs to mark his way. He reached out and touched one of the hard, green nodules firmly fastened to something vast, but something improbably alive. The black canopy folded over him like a morning glory would a bug. Its pungent pedals inhaled, and then exhaled, ensnaring him in a cold and fibrous embrace. Bristles held fast his skin like millions of fishhooks. The rasp of a prehensile tongue, a moistened tendril, found his cheek, explored it methodically as if searching for a way inside. “Inside!”

His mind recoiled like a child’s tetherball. He refocused on the puzzles of the library, its confines in motion, its matter and energy in constant commotion. The swirling realities—the table and chairs, the piano, the books and papers, plus all possibilities hurled through the continuum at infinite speed. In spite of everything, but more probably because of it, he had told the histographer of his ordeal.

“The last thing I remember is her string of a hundred, round stones,” admitted the physicist. “We were entwined in the dark ... engaged in a desperate struggle. There was nothing else. Truly nothing. We fell through the void.” A pause. “We fell forever.”

“The void forever,” quavered the ashen histographer. When he moved or when he spoke a twinkle of gold flashed alarm from his metal rim spectacles. “The most lurid account of the labyrinth yet,” he added introspectively. “I have recorded quite a few, though one never so disturbing.”

The histographer, the world famous Nicolaus Hunczovsky, returned the ring to the equally famous physicist, Lloyd Baumer. The gold setting held a lustrous cabochon of unusual properties. The elements were quite simple—silicon, oxygen, plus a measure of iron and vanadium for its verdant perplexity. And though many had presumed to explain the green gem’s convoluted wonder no mortal being had succeeded.

Hunczovsky mused, “I have written often of the ring and its peculiar stone, but I had never expected to experience that dark quarlight again.”

Responsibility for the ring had been transferred from the Hunczovskys to the Baumers, from father to father nearly sixty years ago, but this was the first time the sons had met.

Then, so long ago the fathers had connected in their prime of life. Today, so many decades later the sons resembled embrittled relics, a pair of marbled bookends. Each suffered to accept his decline and the grievous, silvery crown of his patriarchy.

Hunczovsky rearranged several, shadeless lamps to better illuminate the table piled high with forbidden books. Markers of twine, of paper scraps and paper clips, even a mangled cigarette lay discarded like remnants of thought, of ideas past their value. A locking, leather satchel had been opened and emptied of its contents. The men perused the contents of the satchel, its diaries and letters of ponderous age.

Hunczovsky continued: “You asked how your father took possession of the ring ... how he came to know my father during that terrible time. To explain I must tell of an autumn night several years before they met. It was during the feast of All hallows. I was a boy alone in this room. I had been warned never to touch the ring, but on that night this was a warning I had to ignore. When they came I tried to hide the ring and myself but there was no place to hide. Standing in the corner near the tapestry a remarkable thing happened. The ring’s round stone seemed to grow until it filled my head with a fantastical idea. I found myself beyond time and space, in an unseen, unknown world of lights and shadows, of mind with no substance, of concepts with no rules and facts. I was alone and invisible to the familiar logic of rules and facts.”

Wet and shaking, Baumer looked like he had just staggered in from the rain. “You were unshackled from your self,” he whispered in contemplation of the three initials engraved inside the gold band. “Oddly in this state, you were finally rendered whole ... complete.”

“So ... my friend you understand ... what I saw with mortal eyes ... with only the sight of a precocious youth, now a tired, old cynic trying to understand the magical things that happened so very long ago.”

The uncertainty of lights and shadows reflected faces in the surrounding shelves of random books like the apparitions seen in a schoolhouse’s institutional bricks. As Baumer listened to the old histographer, he was once again the young student imagining the faces in the bricks. He was hypnotically drawn to one in particular, a pitiless face with flared nostrils and grooved, leathery cheeks.

The physicist coughed. He murmured huskily, “Dr. Hunczovsky, what do you remember of these men? Your letter rekindled an old curiosity.”

The histographer reflected, “As I gaze upon this room I can still see them. Sticks of furniture come and go, but the horror of that night long endures.” He shivered. “It was like yesterday and clear from the start what they wanted. When they could not find the ring after tearing our house apart they pulled my brother and sister from their beds. They savagely beat them. I was terrified for their lives. Then Father came ... gave these trogs what they wanted ... and what they deserved.”

Lloyd Baumer stated, “But your father recovered the ring.”

“Yes ... years later with little time to spare. The point is that the ring had to be delivered to your father. This was foretold by dark secrets handed down in legend ... in ancient books and dreams.”

Baumer’s mind reeled. He clung with his last vestiges of strength to the rim of the naked and gnarled table.

Hunczovsky confided, “It is a story much like yours. I hesitate to speak of it.” He inhaled and began simply. With quivering lips he recalled: “She brought it back. She brought it back herself.”

Baumer formed a tight fist around the ring and brought it close to his torrid cheek. With eyes blazing blue, he observed, “Things are seldom as they seem. This I’ve learned if I’ve learned nothing else.” The old physicist slowly rolled the ornate, gold band in his fingers as he added questioningly, “She must have run an impossible gauntlet.”

“Dr. Baumer, I cannot believe it,” admitted the histographer. “She had to slip through an ever tightening noose, evade the onslaught while crossing four hundred miles in only seven days. Incomprehensible to me that she could get through anything like this.”

“But how was this managed?” wheezed Baumer almost inaudibly.

“I don’t know. She arrived in a Red Cross truck. She was a wraith ... and unrecognizable. She had closely cut her hair ... changed its color ... now very dark. It was May eighth ... hours before our fathers met ... their first ... their last as fate would have it.”

“But where?” tolled the old clock of a man.

“Steyr ... not far from here,” explained Hunczovsky.”

“All right, but ... why ... why my father?” asked Baumer haltingly.

“It was ordained by our Johann that we must present the ring to the *auslander*, the scribbler, the scarecrow of a man wandering our shops and back streets.”

“Dad had that ... well, in those days such a man would not have been unusual,” the physicist replied.

“Ah ... but your father was indeed unusual ... a rare clairaudient for that haunting lament from the crypt.”

“It is more and more a longing and languorous lament. Dad was on assignment for *Stars and Stripes*. I remember the article about the shop in Steyr. It’s where he purchased his beloved music box.”

“Yes ... the attic niche ... *Aus der Mansarde*,” supplied Hunczovsky. “The box was the Serenata box, though he purchased a lot more than that. And it was very—”

“Expensive,” inserted Baumer. “But Doctor, please tell me of her. Why would she come here with the ring ... here ... to Linz ... of all the places on Earth?”

“She had questions. She wanted to know if her life were indeed over ... if the portent would come true. And she had to return the ring to appease your dream-struck maiden ... your dark and mysterious light keeper.”

“To preserve reason ... what remained of her sanity?”

Hunczovsky disagreed, “I’d say ... her soul. Call it superstition, but she had his stigma. She had seen them ... all of them ... peering over her shoulder.”

“I have no doubt,” said Baumer. It is the Devil’s own price ... a panoply of demons. The guilt-laid stone glows darkly inside our guilt.”

“So she claimed. She asked Father if her life was forever written in stone, but he could not answer her. Unlike you and your father, he was rarely troubled by his dreams, and never by the nightmare you recounted so eloquently. If she was driven by nightmare this was not all by any measure. He drove her too ... to the edge. And you know the gent I mean.” The old histographer added, “I believe he presented her the ring toward the end, his parting confection, so to speak.”

Lloyd Baumer stood only to return awkwardly to his chair. An arthritic pain gripped his knee. “As a statement of affection or disaffection? Doctor ... you speak glibly ... he ... as if he ran the corner bakery ... as if he baked strudel and chocolate cake for the kiddies.”

“Do you forget that I once visited one of his shops ... an ample establishment. I met many of his clients.”

Baumer painfully acknowledged, “Yes ... no one could forget your rending account of Mauthausen.”

“But Eva wanted to forget. I shall tell you what she told my father. She described that last night in the bunker ... the thing that terrified her ... and she was the original Lorelei rock ... not as shallow as the many correspondents have reported. Pardon me while I locate the passage. Father recorded what he could remember.”

“Dr. Hunczovsky, all these notebooks ...”

The old, prehistoric bird, replied, “My friend, don’t worry. I keep them hidden from prying eyes.”

Hunczovsky reset his spectacles, pushed aside a smeared snifter and round bottom flask, and consulted a tattered family journal seemingly older than it had any right to be. On its grainy, leather cover had been artistically applied in gold paint the title—*Arcanum Patri*. After wetting his forefinger he leafed through its many pages of faded and footnoted script. He found the passages that he wanted circled boldly in red ink.

“Ah ... here,” he exclaimed with relief. I will translate for you.

“On Monday we talked ... trying to decide what to do. He had shed that horrible melancholy. He was hopeful that at last the vile enemy could be destroyed. Some of his old fire returned. He told me of fantastic weapons that would rain vengeance from Valhalla before that last, brave twilight.

“As we drank our toast to victory a dark spell ... a transposition possessed him ... took him to that deadly field and to the Norn that tended it. There was suddenly in his place a stranger, but like one of them ... a marsh wisp ... just the afterglow of a man. And at the bottom of all our torments lay the ogre’s lying ring.

“If it was the **Ring of the Nibelungs** as our Fuehrer believed ... if it’s infinite power held out to us the world ... we were incredibly deceived. All we received was Alberich’s miserable curse. It drove our Fuehrer ... it drove us all to the pit fires of everlasting Hell.’

“My friend, this was all she said. It is odd that she said nothing about the initials ... or the dates engraved in the gold band.”

“Yes, this omission surprises me too. How could anything have been more misplaced? This should have aroused suspicion.”

“She said nothing more. Like a will-o’-the-wisp she was gone before anyone could interfere. What does it all mean? Dr. Baumer, I am afraid we may never know what happened ... to him ... or to her.”

“Never is a long time. But I confess a certain ignorance of this Alberich ... or this legend. And by the way, what is a Norn?”

“A Norn is one of the Norse weavers of Fate. It reminds me of your dream weaver. Your name for her was I think something like ... Ner ... Neergshah.”

There was a slight contraction of Baumer’s pupils. His noble eyes were his strength and his weakness. He replied, “Something like that. Nrczxa has many names and many faces. But this connection to the ring is new to me, though I suspect these images of the field and the ogre are manifestations of their horrible guilt.”

Not far from the table near the wall tapestry rested a marble statue on a marble pedestal. A naked Amazon queen held beneath her a powerful stallion with her powerful thighs. Her arms were extended in the quest for something more powerful than marble. Her head had been painted black in a grotesque parody of the infamous Maltese Falcon. The job had been poorly done, for the paint ran in streaks over her throat and breasts like black blood. The two men turned at once to the statue as if she had spoken, then turned to one another for a nonverbal exchange. Each understood these signals and kept silent. Hunczovsky subtly altered the subject.

“Dr. Baumer, when informed of your visit I listed those who had possessed the ring ... held it so to speak ... at least to my best recollection. I’ve listed fifteen names, many of them family, all of them with experiences ranging from inspiration to terror. There are thirteen men and two women. I have recorded everything in the journal. There is one

name clearly above all the others. It heads the list ... though barely legible. Sir, I could hardly hold my pen to scratch it on the page.”

Baumer responded emotionally, “The Light in the Labyrinth,” as he returned the ring to his finger. It fit snugly. The library seemed to spin. The wonders possessed him—a vast panorama of light and shadow.

Hunczovsky said, “You rarely speak his name. I think I know why. I’ve taken to calling him ... well ... you know. It is perhaps a lofty title, though I feel if it is fit for anyone it is fit for him.”

Baumer nodded. He agreed, but he added cautioning, “Others might not see it so passionately as you and I.”

Hunczovsky proclaimed, “I pity them.”

“Doctor, we have a great opportunity and a great responsibility. After so many years we now have the opportunity to solve the riddle ... the riddle of the ring and its transfinite lens.”

“Dr. Baumer ... the *Rhyme of the Ring* had to bring us together sooner or later. The auspices ... you know.”

The physicist corrected, “No ... something much more powerful. Your devotion to the man could never be ignored.”

“I confess I thought it was the magic that brought you here ... another glimpse through Lamia’s infamous lens.”

“I deal in science, though not often with clear, definitive results. Nevertheless, I believe that our stone enables connections, though weak, to the past or to the future. This remains largely unexplained. But I am convinced there is some basis for these legends ... the claims of Dr. Seitzler and the wizard, Kartoffan, before him. Even Aurelius Augustinus had hinted—”

“Ah yes ... near his final, terrible days.”

“Dr. Hunczovsky, I’ve had the crystal to experts in a half-dozen fields. We believe it is possessed of an extraordinary atomic lattice ... a fluid structure that responds to feeble vibrations, undetectable until quite recently.”

“Ah ... what you’ve done with your theories is remarkable. You connect paranormal to normal. And you understand dream. Am I correct that our premonitions result from the rotation of interdimensional planes?”

“The theory’s inadequate. For this reason the stone is critical. It’s faculty as a conduit backward or forward could reveal our essence, our being, even our ultimate fate.” The physicist caught his breath. He finished wheezingly, “Doctor, I must know ... I must know it all.”

“Dr. Baumer, he had premonitions perhaps similar to yours. I am convinced he wrote of them in his last letter ... his most important, but sadly the one that is now lost. If we could steal but a glimpse ...”

Baumer placed his hands above Hunczovsky’s many documents collected over many years. “With all this correspondence, his own and others, are there no clues ... none at all to shed some particle of light?”

“No. That’s why I’m slandered ... presumed an incompetent ... or worse ... an outrageous liar.”

“I too have felt it. I have often whispered in the dark with only my own voice for company.” Baumer fought off the vertigo, braced against the powerful pull inside of his head, though nearly outside of his control.

“In London they gave you a bad time. But I’m glad you came. You proposed an interesting theory. I agree with you that the letter could have been his last will and testament. But my dear friend you held something back.”

“Not my intent. I bring no proof, only intriguing possibilities. I ask you: What would be his final legacy? What would he offer us for a second chance? Doctor, you speak of it. You must suspect it as much as I.”

“You must mean ... his final, fated manuscript.”

“Certainly,” Baumer answered. “His sacred manuscript ... completed as he promised ... a promise he would never ever rescind.”

“But if true, if the letter and complete manuscript did once exist, it does us no earthly good now. Both are untraceable ... perhaps destroyed long ago.”

“I’m not so sure. I too hesitate to say it, but I believe the ring can lead us to the letter. And the letter could lead us to our lifelong goal ... to the lost manuscript ... or to the Light in the Labyrinth itself.”

Chapter Two: Darkfire

Looking through the Lamia stone

In the cramped, windowless room he signed his plea. He then returned the pen to the blue bottle. As spent as the bottle, he selected a frayed blotter and applied it to the expensive vellum. Holding it tremblingly, he revisited the whirlwind, the years of feast or famine, the palaces or boarding houses.

The most forsaken of men uncovered the letter after his irruption of doubt. It was all there, all said, both in words of hope and words of despair, an explanation for the manuscript, the culminating labor of what he believed were his final days on Earth.

Once secure and celebrated, he now faced grave peril. There was little choice but to use this final manuscript. He tied the letter and his labor of the heart into an irregular bundle. Winged Mercury would deliver these papers, that is, if they were delivered at all.

They were intended for one special, one he would probably never meet, a man that might not exist in anyone's time. In spite of this the letter and the manuscript seemed the failing scribe's only hope.

Fever burned in a body racked with pain. He had taken the black and margrave powders, but they were gradual to soothe him. He took a deep breath and his agony passed for the moment. But what of the future? What did the future hold out for him?

His swollen fingers were wont to cramp, an affliction he could remedy. He carefully removed the gold ring with its green crystal and placed it near the documents. The ring's promise of eternity was wasted on him. But he had dealt with it, leaving instructions that brother Johann should preserve the ring for that day of mellifluous juxtaposition, that fated day of the Muses.

But what was this racket, this loud rapping at the threshold? Had another vulture descended to pick the few remaining scraps? Indeed, he realized the grim truth. They came for his precious manuscript—a feast far more than flesh and blood.

The incessant hammering would not cease. He put aside his meditations and limped across the floor, his lamp faltering like the hand that guided it. But the thumping ended as he reached the door. Opening it he expected the worst, but discovered the least. No one had come. There could be only one answer. These blows were the figment of his tired and tormented mind.

Returning to the writer's table he received the final blow. The letter and priceless manuscript were gone. Only the gold ring, pen and bottle remained. He shook with rage

at this deception. They had distracted him to steal the manuscript. Until now the scoundrels had pilfered nothing more than useless scraps.

Close to tears he collapsed upon the hard durmast. His cubicle grew ever darker, ever smaller. The leaden air settled deep into his chest. It burned mortally with each frail aspiration. Ignoring the pain he once again consulted the gold ring and its crystalline oracle for the truth.

The truth absorbed him even as he absorbed it. He heard the words in that old and haunting voice:

“Master, your letter and manuscript are not lost. They are dispatched on their long journey. Even now the fleet carrier makes haste across the eternal void.”

The man was too tired to comprehend, too confused to even try. Rest was the answer—a blissful, eternal rest.

The man tearfully embraced the ring passed down in his father’s family for more than two hundred years. Its spherical stone was rumored to be much older. It was the stone that marked his route of escape. It was the stone that pushed him when there was nothing left to push.

But the stone imposed a price—a lifelike and perplexing vision of things good and not so good. It was a mere glimpse without any final resolution. The man’s reflection turned slowly, captured deep inside the shimmering lens. The stone held hypnotic power, and given time, he lapsed into an unearthly slumber.

The dream embraced him warmly then spirited him to a familiar place. The light in the darkness grew bright, shone through the shroud of his despair.

He was startled by the thunder as he stepped from the old Trattner house onto the street. The clatter of coach wheels on the cobblestones and the curses of the hackney drivers marked it unmistakably as the Graben.

Looking into the night sky he saw the storm that approached from the northeast. Still, he ventured out into the frigid air. There was the job that he must do.

The square was congested with dandies, dawdlers and strollers, with jugglers, harlequins and magicians, with every kind of thief, beggar, pickpocket and prostitute. All oiled and sharpened their talents. This was not unusual. This happened at Carnival and at other gala events. This one happened to commemorate an imperial victory against the heathen Turk.

The dreamer elbowed through the faceless crowd guided by lanterns suspended in the chestnut trees and upon the long ropes spanning the square.

He paused at outdoor market stalls packed with street-sellers hawking tangy sausages, sauerkraut, capons and mussels for the gentlemen and flavored ices for the ladies. He

considered having a sausage and vermouth, but dismissed the idea. He must keep a clear head. He must steer a straight course.

A fusillade of lightening shattered the heavens. He noticed something in the distance that jolted his tired memory. Maneuvering past the fountains he paused beside the Trinity Pillar, a stone's throw from the Milan coffeehouse. But it wasn't the coffee that he sought. It was a far different kind of thirst for a far different kind of throat. It was the adjoining Pawnbroker's Alley.

He ended his introspection and crossed the street bumped and jostled by the mob. The alley loomed dark and narrow. Who would enter such an alley at night? Some might, for it's privacy might appeal to the bursting crowd. But he remembered something. This passage was unique among the city's many nooks owing to an old and unsavory reputation for a macabre form of crowd control. Habitues called it the Devil's throat. Such stories were common in this city of tall tales and he tucked it away for what it was worth.

He awaited a sign. The approaching storm provided another revealing cannonade of fire. A placard posted near the alley's entrance announced simply:

Fortunes told—2 kreuzer.

The crudely painted placard twisted in the wind. At the moment there was no alley traffic. The dreamer remembered Johann's warning and the tome by that madman Kartoffan. Impulsively he gathered up his courage. He entered the Devil's throat careful to tread near the center. A faint and almost reassuring glow at the end of the long passage marked his destination.

The contrast between crowded street and lonely alley unnerved him. Claustrophobia created a narrowing funnel, but he pressed on driven by the light and the echo of his own footsteps. He soon reached his goal—a makeshift table lit with flickering candles. Behind the table sat an old gypsy fortuneteller of leathery features silently awaiting him with her arms folded into a bent and battered cross.

The dark throat of the alley resonated to a volley of thunder. He noticed that its shop doors and windows had been bricked or boarded—sightless eyes and wordless mouths suspended forever at their final moment. His lungs and nostrils ached. He feared the heavens would rupture and rain antiquity upon the city.

The pale, little man finally broke the silence. "Madam, I have a few questions to put to you. I'm told you are quite good ... most prophetic ... and—"

"Yes, the best ... and cheap," crowed the old crone as she placed her cards on the table. "And only half a kreuzer for a fine gentleman like yourself."

His knees trembled. He would have preferred a place to sit. Nothing for that purpose existed, but the filthy cobblestones. Thus he stood grotesquely rigid in a pantomime of rigor mortis.

Avoiding her wry stare he tossed a coin on to the table then inquired, “You know me, Madam. Will my life ... my work ... be counted among the good, the bad or the pathetically indifferent?”

She cackled. The hackles promptly rose from his clammy neck. As she spread her worn and filthy deck she croaked, “My good sir ... to find out you must accept a printed scrap ... choose but a humble card.”

He looked up at the moment of another heavenly burst. A thunderous, black anvil had descended to brush St. Stephen’s spire. There was not much time.

He selected a card after a moment’s hesitation. Trembling, he turned it over, then let it fall upon wax-stained planks. It was an exact likeness of the autocratic archbishop known to him as the Mufti. But the night had evidently bewitched the old crone, for the air around her danced, shimmered and sparkled. It appeared to consume her upon a spectral pyre.

Before his weary eyes the archbishop materialized displacing the old gypsy in the blink of an eye as if answering to the satanic god of cards.

The man grabbed the rickety table for support. He must be dreaming. But what in heaven spawned dreams like this? He had no option but to see it through, be it dream or something real.

Adorned in his ecclesiastical finery, the Mufti rebuked, “I’ll answer your impertinent question. You always placed yourself and your work above all. You’re most boorish and self-centered. And in my humble view you’ve not amounted to a sack full of dried beans. But others will come to give you some slight credit. Does this quench your thirst, satisfy your boundless ego?”

“Your Grace ... I have only tried to do my best. What may I ask will be the nature and extent of this slight credit? I beg you ... for I must know. I fear with all my heart that my time on Earth is nearly up.”

The archbishop snapped back, “To find out you must select another card.” Prongs of fire fractured the sky to expose the cruel Mufti’s vain, duplicitous face.

The little man turned another card. It bore the gilt-image of a high priest of Egypt. As before this triggered the arguer’s shimmering conversion from the Mufti to the high priest, a figure ennobled in sunburst and silk. This disciple of Isis had a kindly, though pocked-marked face with prominent hawkish features.

The priest said, “My dear friend ... you know I hold you in high esteem. The Mufti was unfair when he berated you. You will one day conquer the world.”

Agitated nearly to frenzy, the dreamer asked, “But what does this mean? How can I possibly conquer the world? And if so, is it to be like Alexander’s comet, brilliant for but an instant with no lasting significance.”

The high priest replied, “Master ... to suffer the answer you must expose another card.”

A cold northern wind whistled through the alley. Salvos of light purged the royal hues from the priest’s scintillating robes. Pungent, electrified air battered their inflamed eyes, burned their delicate nostrils.

Once again the questioner did what he was told. A third card was selected and silently overturned. This time it revealed his infamous Queen of the Night. He watched the shimmering transformation from priest to dark queen as if in a stupor. She radiated a dark fire from every part of her—from her black skullcap and blue robes to the ruby rings on her fingers and toes.

He muttered tristfully, “Your Highness ...”

She was surprisingly jovial considering their long and stormy history. “Ah ... how wonderful ... my long, lost vagabond. You’ve avoided me for so long I feared you were furious with me. I understand that you are still brimming with questions.”

“Madame ... I asked the nature of my conquest.”

“I know. I’m not deaf. Concerning your earthly victories ... they’ll bear little resemblance to Alexander’s. He conquered mere space and a small measure of time. You will have conquered considerably more than that, but at a great sacrifice.”

“Your Highness, I understand the price I’ve paid.”

“Do you indeed? I’ll tell you this for no extra charge. I can see your final act and it is a tragic disappointment considering your usual flair for high drama.”

“My final act? This is why I’m here. What do you see of it in the cards?”

“Good sir ... I will tell you. And mark these words. You will not attend your own funeral. So rude ... even for you. It’s strange, but I see your friends and your family standing in the rain gathered around a closed and weighted coffin.”

“My queen ... please. This funeral ... I fear to ask this ... but when and where is it to be?”

“Well, my inquisitive friend, I’m not so sure it really matters, but if you dare I suggest that you choose another card.”

Thor’s hammer fell once more infusing the sky with brilliant tracers. The queen’s lavender eyes burned pure-bright. But what they spoke he deigned not hear.

The dreamer reluctantly selected another card and was about to turn it over when the dark queen suddenly took an iron hold of his hand.

“No!” she cried. “You must not look at it. Not here ... anyway. Take it with you ... if you must.”

She added with a tragic smile, “But if you’re smart you’ll throw it away at the very first chance.”

As instructed the dreamer covered the card with his palm and placed it in the pocket of his frock coat. “My dark queen ... I’ll not thank you for your service. I’d argue for a refund of my half-kreuzer, but I must leave before the storm arrives in full force. It is my most sincere hope that I never see you again.”

“My sad, young man ... never is a very long time.”

Light rain began to fall as he turned and walked away with a curse on his lips. After several paces he swiveled to deliver more venom, but the dark queen had vanished like the others before her. The man aimed for Graben Square, but with each step he moved slower and slower until finally he stopped altogether as if glued to the cobblestones like a fly to flypaper.

Curiosity had triumphed once again as the night queen knew it must. He removed the card from his pocket. Ignoring her warning he decided to have a harmless peek. The man awaited the lights in the sky and the answer to his final question.

The card’s image was revealed by the storm’s pyrotechnics. But the image or the lack of it made no sense. The entire face of the card was solid black—a fathomless void—a waste of precious time.

The rain pelted him angrily with drops like hailstones. Just as angry he tossed the silly card away in disgust. When he next looked up he saw her—a motionless silhouette. The flickering storm had outlined the figure of a shapely, dark angel blocking the outlet of the alley. After a moment’s indecision he continued his slow walk toward the angel and the square.

She reminded him of someone he knew or would like to know. This intriguing apparition said nothing, but would not yield. He called several names, though this provoked no response. Within a short footstep of her he stopped to make a better appraisal. She was tightly fitted in a black funeral gown. A dark, gauze veil covered her face. She stood with arms unnaturally folded, as silent and as still as death as the wintry downpour gathered its strength.

Spears of cold rain pommelled the alley, fell to drench them. The faint lights of the square flickered and died. He drew nearer. They all but touched.

And though alone and unprotected the man lifted the black veil from her face. The sky lit up to punctuate the act, to lower the final curtain on his life. He felt the heat and the concussion of Thor’s final bolt as it pierced his open heart. In his chest Thor then left it to rise and to fall. The man reeled and fell back upon the cobblestones.

There the lonely man witnessed what mind would never master, what courage would never conquer—the grim face of death and despair. A twisted vision filled his head now primed to explode. He beheld a malformed, but wily creature that hid behind a woman’s skirts. As he gawked terror-stricken it cast off its deceptive cloak then multiplied its size

many-fold to reveal a Juggernaut—an air-breathing, earth-treading monster dripping from the mouth. It soon towered over him, swaying from side to side as if measuring him for a pine box.

Death paused briefly, then opened its mouth to devour his tender flesh. Gnawing and gnashing of bone and fiber produced a sanguineous blend of humors to be swallowed quickly and convulsively by the night. What remained of him was acutely sensitive to every horrific poke and prod.

There finally came the proverbial light at the end. The once great man could see God sleeping in his silvery bed attended by three shining angels. God's brain was connected to a massive machine that ran the universe from his dreams. The little man had arrived at the center of all things. But was this the end or just possibly the beginning?

Chapter Three: Interlude

From Tarelona Inis

It is a beautiful day on the Inis. I can see the full range of Argento Mountains from my veranda beside Solferino Lake. The sky is honey gold with the floral scent of mhir wafting in the gentle breeze. But it's always a beautiful day here, so there's little point in making a federal case of it.

I compose this narrative after a visceral search. I have paused more times than I can remember. I have suspired with each and every pause. I have suffered great pain to continue this bittersweet tale. But you need not concern yourself with this.

We've had a brief look at one man's nightmare, a vision not easily contained by one man's mind, a riddle shared by many, but understood by few. I confess that dreams and nightmares will underpin this eldritch tale—a collision of the best and the worst.

Have you thought seriously about your dreams? Do you even give two hoots? Maybe you do and would prefer I not discuss the subject. Eschewing my inclination for womblike complacency I fully intend to exhaust the subject. Thus be fairly warned.

So, what are these night interludes? How do they touch us? Do they connect with the real? But how could they, you ask. You are almost certain that they do not. Almost.

I will suggest a few possibilities. Dreams could mimic the fantasies conjured by brain housekeeping, a filing and sorting. Or not so pointlessly they could parody our hopes and fears—mostly the latter—mostly the things we would just as soon forget.

There is perhaps another answer more revealing in the long run. Our dreams could be the mind's eye into nature's organon—its cogwheels of creation, so to speak. For what do we commonly see of our daylight world that is complete and reassuring? More importantly, what do we know or think we know that we can actually hope to understand?

It is my purpose to delve into the magic eye of dream—to risk even nightmare. I have volunteered to guide this tour at the request of a special friend. It might be some malady or madness that compels me, but this is of little importance now.

And my name is not important, though as of this telling it is well known. It is enough to say that I offer a far-reaching perspective. This is not a result of my conceit. Quite the contrary. It is the result of painful trial and error. You may come to agree I'm something of an authority on painful trial and error. But I will offer a little hint. By necessity my name will pop up in the following pages a great deal more than once. Once again, I must insist that this is not the result of my conceit. The principal players that have scrutinized

and passed these pages have agreed with me on this essential point, since in many ways I've been more the editor than the author. How could one be the latter?

We will start ambitiously. We will start with **panigma**—the vast enigma itself—a riddle of time and space and possibility—logic's Gordian knot.

Our panigma will hinge upon a bundle of papers, a letter and manuscript authored by a legend, not a man, by Jove himself, if you would dare trust, to believe that old bibliophile, Professor Hunczovsky.

I will lay out a few details for your consideration.

Jove's letter, as I will call it, was delivered to a research facility in New Mexico at the obscene time of 4:35 A.M. on the 6th of January in the year AD 2006. The CCV was recorded as 806356.181. Look it up in your *Cosmic Calendar*, IS4035. In the enchanting, but archaic terms of the times, there was no postman, no postmark, and most important for this particular cosmic variant, no significant continuity.

No one in the little town of El Rasigo or at work beneath its geodesic dome, the landmark Institute for Physico-Psychic Research, had ever received a letter like this, or experienced the discontinuities that would manifest themselves so disconcertingly over the next several months.

Or could any of these people—the scientists, the humanists, even the bureaucrats used to the darker side—none of them on their worst days and nights could hope to imagine the fertile womb that spawned them. Or could any of them on their best days and nights comprehend the promise and possibilities of the letter and the light, of the manuscript and Jove himself.

I'll waste no more time. To get started I will present some evidence, then take my leave. But I'll be back soon enough. Pleasant dreams.

From The Washington Observer, May 19th, 2003

Washington, D.C.—The Senate's special hearing on extremism in America moved to day twelve with testimony from Sen. Thomas Emsley, (D-Ill.), Senior Chairman of the Senate's *Committee on State Security*. The recent victories of the far right have alarmed the political establishment and united Democrats and Republicans for the first time in recent memory.

Senator Emsley carefully traced the current world crisis driven by rising instability and unemployment and the resulting success of what he calls: "The politics of panic."

The Senior Senator reported: "What was once considered racist and demagogic campaigning is now taken seriously by the major elements of

mainstream America. This is due to the failure of two great political parties to protect the people.”

Senator Emsley was asked to comment on Senator Harold Clarke’s, (D-NY.), earlier assertion that the computer magnate, Leopold Hardan, was openly underwriting the new movement. The Senator replied: “Openly or not there is evidence that Mr. Hardan is the ardent supporter of certain extremist, reactionary groups.

“The problem however is not Mr. Hardan, but the failure of the federal government. So far, these opportunistic groups are disorganized. But we must be ever vigilant to oppose any charismatic leader that seeks to unite these splinters into a cohesive political party. It’s safe to say that Leopold Hardan is not anyone’s idea of charismatic. He is certainly not the savior that we seek in our current social and political crisis.”

It is expected that the President will express her views on this crisis when the session reopens tomorrow.

From The London Clarion, June 11th, 2003

London—Yesterday’s Royal Society meeting boiled over when the acclaimed scientists and authors, I.M. Kovrani and L.M. Baumer, delivered their overview of paradimensional relativity to a large gathering of the world’s leading physicists.

Dr. Kovrani, famous investigator of psychic phenomena, and Dr. Baumer, renowned cosmologist, were jeered from the hall before the former could take his turn at the lectern.

“This has never happened,” said Society Historian, Wilmot Petersen. Dr. Petersen had previewed the paper and expected a lively discussion. “We feast on fresh ideas.”

Lloyd Baumer more than delivered on that promise as he layered his new theory of continuity upon the old bedrock of Einstein’s relativity. He argued against the notion of dimension, whether four or twenty-six, as a fixed container for mind or matter.

“Dimension has number,” he said, “only as light has color and sound has timbre. I refer to perception. The finite brain must perceive the infinite universe from the inside out. The clay must fit the mold.”

He asked, “What would we see if one parsec was perceived from the outside in, if we felt the raw clay? We have self-constrained everything from the Big Bang to the size of the universe and the velocity of light.”

Dr. Baumer contended that the speed of light varies from zero to infinity. “Its magnitude depends upon the parathickness of space ... the parallax of possibility ... the dimension that glues together space and time.”

But Dr. Baumer went further. He claimed, “... Continuity would redefine mind and existence. We may tap the next dimension on those special occasions when the noise of space and time can be reduced such as in sleep, hypnosis or the mystical states. Mostly these transmissions are too weak for our receiver.

“How may we filter out the noise and tune in the wonders of paraspace? This idea is no longer whimsy, for Dr. Kovrani and I believe the tuner has been found. It’s practical application may be years, not centuries away. Are we ready for the light?”

Baumer’s colleagues were quick to attack. Cosmologist, Manfred Lendl, offered the outspoken criticism: “Dr. Baumer’s shopworn use of the flatland metaphor befits his entire theory—a theory without depth.”

London reporters pressed the angry Dr. Baumer for a response as he exited the auditorium. He had this to say: “Dr. Lendl is the quintessential modern theorist. In his arrogance, he will continue to invent dimensions till he shits hyperturds. The sad thing is they are still only turds ... impressive I admit, but turds nonetheless.”

Chapter Four: The Running Man

Mirabelle, California
January 7th, 2006

Ralph Seiper's latest beef was dogs, particularly unfettered dogs. They were the bane of most joggers, but Ralph could get paranoid or worse. For him the predawn was the worst, for the dog-masters could feign ignorance of what their darlings perpetrated on the likes of men like him.

The man they called the "Rail" kept his eyes open for what might lurk beneath cars or behind shrubs. Actually, the Rail was not exactly unprepared for a possible canine assault. The cunning beasts could not know that he had concealed a lethal surprise inside the pocket of his windbreaker. And in his fractured opinion what worked for dogs worked just as well for the other stupid folk of this planet.

But in the wee morning hours the Rail had seen neither man nor beast. He had run for over an hour on rain-slick pavement, tracing the Tarmac track through his working-class Los Angeles suburb. The temperature was almost perfect—just over sixty degrees. In another few minutes he'd be home for a quick shower and breakfast, then a key meeting with his brutish partner, Eddie "Roundhead" Reed of their Poxgang.

As he took pride and comfort in his long, graceful strides, in his splendid muscle tone, in his superb physical condition, Ralph Seiper noticed a rib tingle not so comforting. He noticed the low, smooth machine purr—a rattle like the warning from a big cat. While twisting his neck owlishly he spied the black, stretch beast, as it closed in from behind, by its stealth no less than a lean and low-bellied panther in hot and hard pursuit.

The vehicle had emerged from the premorning gloom with its lights off. Now it crawled along at a distance of about fifty feet. Annoyed, the Rail waved it on, but the limo driver would have none of that. Instead, he closed the gap to about twenty-five feet, and for a time held it there. The rate and volume of Rail's respiration changed just slightly as he reached into the distended pocket of his damp windbreaker.

The driver suddenly hit his headlights and the accelerator. In a blink the car was beside Rail, its rear door flung open. The lone passenger extended his hand. The Rail drew his revolver fully prepared to snuff passenger and driver if that was their pleasure.

A low, nasal voice from the back seat cautioned, "Mr. Seiper, please put that away. I must have a word with you."

The vehicle's courtesy lights revealed the Rail's frequent employer, his benefactor, the computer baron, the undapper and uncouth, Leopold L. Hardan. (The middle initial is rumored to stand for "Lucifer")

"Mr. Hardan," said the Rail as he paused near the door, "you shouldn't do that ... you know. In my line of work a guy can't be too careful. I often shoot first then apologize with sincerity to the corpse."

"Wouldn't want you any other way. And I'm sorry about the theatrics, but I had to verify that you were indeed you. My good friend ... get in. I've an urgent matter to discuss with you ... a matter of life and death ... as always ... both yours and mine."

The Rail slid in next to the multibillionaire. Anyone would think the man didn't own two plug nickels judging from his earthy aroma, his oily sweats, his sockless feet dressed in soiled, foul, fungal-gray sneakers.

The Rail thought: "Like following a wet yak with sour wind." But he would never say anything about Hardan to anyone. Perhaps Hardan's biggest tragedy was there was no one with the guts to tell him that he just plain stunk.

Hardan tapped the bulletproof glass, and with a mostly obscene gesture, indicated to his robotoid chauffeur that the man proceed with all speed to their next destination.

"Boss, you never seem to sleep, and where we going in such a big hurry? You should've called first. I've an appointment with—"

"Never mind that. Something's come up suddenly, and I desperately need your special talents."

"Mr. Hardan, my place is only blocks from here. We could go there and talk this thing over."

"No time for that. Just listen. I've a special project brewing in New Mexico ... in the mountains not far from Albuquerque ... a sore on the map know as El Rasigo. Few know of it or what goes on there. It's costing me a friggin' bundle, but I'm going to make it pay."

Dejected, Ralph looked back as the limo sped out of Mirabelle. The warm sun came up, but not for Ralph Seiper.

"Mr. Seiper, I need you to insure that it does pay. The big brains have stumbled on to something that will make the heavens tremble. But those traitorous bastards will screw me royally if they can."

"Boss ... how do I fit in?"

"Simple. I can't depend on them, but I know I can depend on you. You can start by keeping an eye on them. Then from time to time I'll have other jobs for you to do. You will be handsomely rewarded as always."

Hardan retrieved a folded paper from his pocket. He unfolded and handed it condescendingly to the Rail. “It’s the main roster of the Institute for Physico-Psychic Research. That ridiculous handle is just for the local yokels. I’ve built a geodesic dome on the outskirts of El Rasigo for some impressive and expensive gadgets.”

The Rail glumly accepted the paper and read the names and Hardan’s thumbnail comments.

Lloyd Baumer	- Inventor of Panigma Machine
Ivan Kovrani	- Project Co-director with Baumer
Leonard Moss	- Government Liaison/Ivan’s Stooge
Max Cole	- Handles the Dough/Baumer’s Stooge
Owen Klein	- Quack Medical Director
Henry Kincaid	- Egghead and Nincompoop
Larry Kato	- Director of Cybernetics
Allen Polk	- Director of Panoptography
Joe Fuller	- Laser and Panoptolaser Expert
William Hagerty	- Security/Baumer’s brother-in-law
Tony Mirigliano	- New Director Parapsychic Research
Julia Moffett	- Queen Bitch Incarnate

“This is colorful stuff, boss. But I’ve not the foggiest notion of what you’re talking about ... all the pan-this-a-ma-thats. What’s it all about?”

“My good man ... it’s about making sure that I know what they’re doing ... every minute ... when they run the Machine ... when they get their heads together ... even when they take a dump—”

“That I can follow. As for the background, I’ll need—”

“Fair enough. If you’re ready to listen I’ll give you plenty.”

With his purple cheek-scar glowing, Rail nodded affirmatively.

“Ivan Kovrani is a parapsychologist from Duke. He’s a prissy fellow with delusions of grandeur, but not overly smart, so I’m not worried about him unless he gets suddenly smart by accident.

“Lloyd Baumer is plenty smart and of questionable loyalty, so I worry plenty. I believe he’s achieved his breakthrough. I must know what he’s found. Since he’s a clever liar I don’t expect I’ll get any of it from him or his three stooges, Cole, Hagerty or Klein.

“Bill Hagerty is tough enough, but won’t make a move without Baumer. Assign him to a backup. Owen Klein has a sterling reputation and feeds off it. Of this queer trio Max Cole is the one to watch. He’s a shrewd, gutter rat that could bring us down. Don’t underestimate him. Seiper, I won’t say this twice.

“Leonard Moss is a bureaucrat from Washington ... was a friend of the senator, Thomas Emsley ... the guy that turned up dead just a few months ago. Tom Emsley obtained secret authorization from Congress to fund my Dome project. But as you might expect, I pay for everything while Congress sits on their fat asses.

“Moss is a glorified bean counter and nothing more. Incidentally, if Kovrani stopped suddenly Moss would disappear headfirst into his posterity.

“I’ve transferred Kato, Polk and Fuller from UltraNet to the project. Larry Kato built the first biocomputer. And Polk and Fuller have taken holograms beyond belief. They’re well compensated and have their special instructions. I’ve no doubt about their technical qualifications. But I need you to confirm their loyalties with respect to me. Use your gadgets on them, but take it easy on my dough ... not a bottomless pit no matter what you may have heard.”

“No boss, I mean ... yes ... boss.”

“Tony Mirigliano is new and not a factor ... yet. He’s found the men’s room and not much more. But watch him anyway ... just in case he suddenly gets wise.

“This brings us to Kincaid and Moffett. You’re to concentrate your efforts on them. Henry Kincaid is the naive, bookish friend of Lloyd Baumer. He’s great with fourth-order equations, but gets lost on his way to and from the office. Therefore he’s an excellent eyepiece into what Lloyd is really doing.”

Hardan inexplicably stopped his briefing.

The Rail asked, “Isn’t there one more? This queen bitch inco ... this dame, Julia Moffett.”

“I didn’t forget her. And you won’t either. Julia Moffett’s programmed the Institute’s computers, though they’re well beyond anything I have at UltraNet. She has the personality of a cobra and the brains to be as dangerous, so don’t discount her just because she’s a long-legged, brown-eyed bitch. We must deal with her as we must with Cole—”

“Boss, may I keep this list?”

“Of course my friend, but only in your head. Get to know them. And I suppose you’ll be using that cretin, Eddie Reed, to help you with the details.”

“He has his strong points.”

“Not between the ears. Keep him under control. I don’t trust your Poxgang whackos. Mr. Seiper ... any questions?”

“No. I can start in a few days, if that’s okay. Now ... if you’ll just drop me off I’d be grateful. I need a bath and some chow.”

“Sorry, but you’re going to El Rasigo by way of Albuquerque. I’ve your tickets and a bag packed with everything you’ll need. Mr. Seiper, if you haven’t noticed we’re headed for LAX. As for me, I’m flying to Denver then ‘coptering to Naja for a little skiing and relaxation ... and uh, a little unfinished business too. But fear not ... Mr. Seiper, we’ll keep in close touch ... very, very close touch.”

Seiper, never known for his warmth, or for any spark of humanity, could wonder if the malodorous, malevolent creature seated next to him was human or something extruded from the alimentary canal of the infamous, Bactrian sewer sucker (the huge, scavenging slug once thought to be extinct).

Chapter Five: The Letter

The luminous queen lay curled in her matrix, a taut hammock of living netting, of black twine sprinkled with multicolored, liquid pearls, of interlocking polyhedrons constructed more of humor than of fiber. Each vertex of this gossamer fabrication was held in space-time by chitinous hooks that were contingently invented and reinvented.

Her room, if room it was, could be entered from above or below, from yesterday or tomorrow. It could be entered from any chamber of her apartment or from any of the many combs and vesicles in the high and airy complex that was their central city.

Her living, breeding space, though thickened one-hundred fold, was sparse and Spartan, with gray walls and patches of black carpet, with the occasional gnug or pozzle suspended on pale yellow ropes that hung limp and lifeless from beneath her clever nightcatch.

Her basic necessities, her alternate realities, were always near and could be drawn close by the operation of lines like the many lines of a swoopcraft rigged for quick response. Light responded to her temper and was regulated by the living membranes that were the walls, floor and ceiling of her pods. Now, her temper and her pods were dark.

For at this critical juncture, Queen Nrczxa required solitude and distance from the approaching *xenonadir*—the ultimate collapse of all of their realities into one. She must escape time and space. She must dream of places and times yet undiscovered, yet untarnished. She must reeve her vast tapestry of life and death, reeve the arduous path and spare her children and herself from the hopelessness beneath the high city.

The Library at Pines' Roost
Early Sunday Evening, January 8th, 2006

He was the architect of the Panopticon—an immense dome of steel, of concrete and glass, and of other less substantial things. But many would argue that it was these less substantial things that counted the most. On this night in January there was no question that they counted the most with him. His was a name both feared and respected, though the famed cosmologist, Lloyd Manley Baumer, was both worn and weary in his heart and soul.

While stroking his silvered strands he contemplated the flames that thawed the grinning, bronze lions of his black, lava hearth. He leaned forward. He painfully cleared his throat. The fire danced in his vast, blue eyes. He sat quietly, for he was not feeling well. His arthritic knee had been acting up, and the cranky, old pump that was his heart was not cooperating either. But his mind still worked, though some would question even that.

Lloyd obsessed. He agreed, though it did not matter. His obsessions required care and handling, now more than ever. There was the recent fiasco of the lost letter. This in itself would have been enough. But there was one near to him who had decided he needed more conundrums to unravel. The truth was that she could reeve faster than he could rend.

Lloyd settled into a dilapidated chair older than himself. Its ferns and flowers on once bright fabric were rendered even more outrageous by the stuffing and the springs that jutted chaotically, sympathetically, with his tousled hair and his clean, but severely rumpled clothes.

The father of the Panigma Machine brooded in his study, among his rare collections, his treasured books, his precious LPs from the golden years. They lit the dark corridors, ferried him to remote times and places. In the soothing, ember-glow Lloyd could ruminate the remotest of possibilities. He could ponder the culmination of his hopes and his dreams.

He might see his father smoking, rocking and recounting his spine-tingling tales. He might even see his dear wife, Joy Marie, taken from him more than thirty years ago. And he might even catch a glimmer of light from the dark labyrinth—from its glowing globes of soft, pale light drifting in thickspace, lulling him to peace. On those very special occasions, for example Friday at about 4 A.M., Lloyd might see the sad and sickly man, though always the brave hero laboring by night and flickering candles.

But in the passing day and waning fire all of Lloyd's dreams went up in dense, black smoke. The light in the labyrinth went out. He was lost, left alone inside the cul-de-sac, left alone with his night, left alone with his fears. His melancholy returned him to Friday morning, to the camera extrema where and when that early rush of success had in one instant been hurled to Hell.

He saw two men very different, but with the same mischief, the same nearsightedness. Lloyd could only blame himself. The fact of Dr. Ivan Kovrani's meddling should have come as no surprise. As co-founders of the Institute, Lloyd and Ivan had been at loggerheads for many months, a falling-out over the Panigma LENS and its extension into uncharted territory.

What Lloyd had not counted on was the improbable and untimely appearance of that idiot of all idiots, that sloth of all sloths, Lou Konnick. With only the greatest of effort he purged Kovrani and Konnick from his mind. Kovrani and Konnick must not matter.

Lloyd closed the ponderous histography, "*A Tale of Jove*," written by his old and devoted friend, Nicolaus Hunczovsky. Lloyd gently moved the book from his lap to the table by his side. He reread a passage in his mind: "... in his latter years he was the slave of a dream solidified in rare stone."

This much was known—this and a trifle more. It was Hunczovsky's insights that revealed their hero, not the stereotypes. No stereotype either was Lloyd's other friend, slavishly by his side.

Max Cole sat silent and partially concealed. He sat near the hearth of iron, brass and black lava. If he possessed any of these qualities it was difficult to tell. A retired colonial, he was by his manner and appearance the most unmilitary of military men. Balding and pear-shaped, the ruddy, little friar had selected a chair that fitted him imperfectly. But there was far more to Max than his outward manner and appearance, a fact not lost on the Panigma Project's rich and ruthless benefactor, the computer baron, Leopold Hardan.

Like Max's intrinsic spirit, the library, though capriciously lit, radiated from some inner warmth, from some beguiling scintillation. Lloyd's space was a practical demonstration of how disorder can be organized into an expression of personal perfection. Move one book, one painting, one stuffed bird or beast, one petrified relic, one inscrutable gewgaw from a shelf or a cabinet, remove one stack of old magazines or clippings, and the room was instantly cast adrift, a ship with no moorage, a space stripped of its possibilities.

An octagonal table of glass reflected the uncertainty of the fire. Used plates and snifters were imprudently stacked. An ornate decanter filled with heavy spirits buttressed them. A baroque music box buttressed their heavier spirits. Scattered were old newspapers plus a hodgepodge—Lloyd's money clip, coins, pills and a small unlocking device attached to a jade shamrock, his memento of Joy always with him. The strains of a brightly lit serenade filled the room. Neither man would speak before this classic miniature had ended, though its timbres would linger.

Lloyd was the first to break the spell. "At long last we've beheld if not in fact breached that other side," he uttered reproachfully. "But from which side shines the light? Does the universe shine in or does it shine out?"

"Neither," proclaimed Max with a raspy voice. "The light shines only for the quest." The blaze revealed his round shoulders, his even rounder torso. This headless apparition added dolefully, "It is our frustration to be struck blind upon the threshold of sight."

Max rose to rouse the faltering blaze. When he returned the sight of Lloyd teetering so dangerously on the edge unnerved him. Lloyd lips trembled. The blue seemed to have been washed from the old man's eyes.

They both had to be thinking the same thing. It was an unsettling fact as much a part of the overall mystery as the ring itself, the stone and its quarlight—that constant, clinical scrutiny, that unwavering watching. So far, neither man had spoken of it. But as of Friday much had changed.

Lloyd whispered, "You remember me telling you of the shop in Steyr where Father purchased the music box and the ring. But I did not tell you of the tapestry, the mural that stretched across the attic. Father beheld the mind sway inside the mural ... the many dark eyes that watch ... but eyes that more than merely watch. These are eyes that weave the darkness. I've felt them cinch tight my fate. These eyes, told in history by Kartofan and Seitzler, guide busy implements. Max, I am concerned. Is it more than just a lucid dream ... something much more than a radically dilated LENS?"

Max replied pensively, “Yes, the eyes that never rest ... that never look askance. Well ... my dear friend, before you can mend your ailing dreams you must mend your ailing heart.”

The old physicist’s eyes glistened like the luster from freshly applied shellac. Color returned as he peered ruefully into the flames. The incandescence of the hot, ionized gas lashed back the blue.

“Of your heart,” Max persisted, “Owen will not easily give up. And why should you give up on yourself when you will not give up the dream?”

Their renowned cardiologist, Owen Klein, had been Lloyd’s physician during years of failing health. Owen Klein was an anachronism, a caring doc like those that made house calls in the days before fancy medicine.

Lloyd noted glumly, “Owen is counting my pills.”

“You take the medication as it suits you,” uttered Max sorrowfully. “Though we may look the part more and more, we’re not your nannies.”

“Max ... you both act as if I’ll live forever.”

“And what of all these incarnations?”

“To be assured by Owen’s little miracles? Such pills would tempt the envious gods. Our brave doctor wastes his skill on the likes of little old me.”

The friar lit his pipe igniting a glimmer that revealed his prankish, pixie face. “You’re too modest. If you’d take care of yourself you might live as long as that old prune, Nicolaus, whose obsessions so torment you.”

“These obsessions started long before I met Nicolaus. You know the story. I’ve told you about that night.”

“Forget that night. Lloyd, please listen. You wreck your health?”

The physicist gloomily mocked, “What health?”

“You live in that infernal chamber. You think because the dreamspace slows your clock you are somehow safe.”

“But it’s the same passage ... be it seconds or centuries,” Lloyd interrupted. “My clock is my clock. I’m stuck with it interminably.”

Max argued, “You’re not getting enough sleep.”

“My dear friend, this is all I get.”

Max exclaimed peevishly, “And you’re making too many mistakes. Big ones. Your piloting has slipped. I saw your power proficiency index from the CIC log ... down another two percent.”

Lloyd would never argue the facts and figures with Max.

The round colonel added, "I'm concerned about what could happen ... and not only to you. I place some value on my plump, old carcass too."

"Max, I have you to teach me humility."

"If you'd listen. If you'd trust Henry to help, you'd finish in half the time with half the risk. I still don't understand."

Henry Kincaid was co-inventor of the LENS and discoverer of a tear or crack in the fabric of space-time, a warptear known as Panigma Gate. But Henry was in every other way an ordinary man tending more than a tad toward malnutrition. It seemed so unlikely to Max that the often absentminded and colorless fellow could navigate the next dimension when he so often lost himself in the first three or four.

Max added caustically, "I guess I'll never understand this confounded pigheadedness."

"Do you remember?" challenged Lloyd.

"Remember? I'm not—"

"You're nagging. I'm reminding."

Max changed the subject as he had learned to do so well. "What do we do about Friday ... about Kovrani and Konnick ... and the purloined letter?"

Lloyd had been compliant if not pleasant. This changed as fast as Max had changed the subject, as its sound had crossed the space between them. Lloyd bristled. Max could see the resemblance between Lloyd and his Harpy, that stony raptress carved from blue lapis and condemned to reside among the bric-a-brac. Max feared the man might overreact in his current state of mind. He asked, "Why do you insist upon dealing with Lou Konnick yourself? Why not leave that chowder head to me?"

Lloyd answered vengefully, "It's important that I carve up Mr. Konnick ... gut what's left of his courage ... leave him not one single whit of will."

Max retested murky, troubled waters. He asked, "I trust you will not use Panigma Gate?"

"The letter and the manuscript must be returned ... undamaged." Hate or something close enough burned like blue incense in his eyes. "Max, I will not compromise."

Max spoke to soothe him, but with little success. "Boss, you are right. I agree that the buttinsky must taught a lesson."

"And he will. I can offer much knowledge ... a veritable feast." Lloyd's pupils exploded. He licked his lips, clasped his hands as if savoring a juicy steak. "I dreamed of that idiot last night. It was delightful. His eyes ran from their sockets when he saw her ... her cold, lifeless eyes. She sucked out his worthless, black heart. That stupid bastard withered and

burned like a worm in her belly. Max ... I just wish you could've seen the look on his face ... and on hers."

After a sudden shiver and what he hoped was a calming interlude, Max stated, "I have no desire to see. Have you finished this wanton sacrifice? Have you killed him enough in your dreams? Feeling better now?"

"There are dreams ... and there are ... the ... well ... you know what 'they' call them."

Max warned, "You must control them. You have within you an angel's heart, but at times your Harpy's rancor. What's more ... what's worse ... you have her boundless reach. But I need not tell you this."

"You'll save me yet ... from her ... even from myself."

"Boss, tell me something. How did Konnick time it so perfectly? I watched it all in horror. And why did you drop the ring into the box? Bad luck or just ... er ... how do you say it ... a poor angle of the light?"

"More like bad luck plus a bad habit," admitted Lloyd. "With my twisted nerves I twist the ring more than it twists its fate. The ring must have fallen in the box with the letter and manuscript. I would say the possibilities were too ponderous ... and almost axiomatic."

"Whatever. Of course I saw you stash the papers in one of Kato's empty OHM cartons, but I didn't appreciate the thing with the ring till I noticed your left hand. Lloyd ... quite naked without your green quarvine."

"We discounted Mr. Konnick. Too fixed on Ivan Kovrani with all his righteous indignation. It was that evil tapestry ... that attic dream that compelled me ... that altered the angle ... that loosened the ring ... that fed the box and our conundrums. Night after night ... another stare ... another stitch removed ... until at last the ring was free."

Max puffed purposefully on his briar pipe. He considered Lloyd's intriguing explanation. Lloyd would never jeopardize the ring and its precious stone. The story bothered him. It added to a long list of troublesome inconsistencies.

Lloyd explained, "I have Fuller's work schedule. He's assigned Konnick to the night shift. Things will be quite hectic tomorrow. I should be able to talk to the genius without drawing much attention."

"Not if you're seen anywhere near the man." Max changed gears and lamented, "When Ivan appeared we panicked. Why? If we'd just kept our wits we might have lied our way out of it, have protected the letter and manuscript, have prevented the crash and a roaring headache."

"It's not an event well-timed and spaced for our pleasure," offered Lloyd philosophically. "Max, I can still see your face. It looked as if I'd transformed the Harpy from dead rock to live flesh."

“Thought as much when you limped into the ‘con. Then Ivan appeared with his veins popping. It was like watching the light from our LENS, like no reality I’ve ever seen anywhere else. I felt less than a mere grain of sand inside the cosmic kaleidoscope. You remember the time you scanned the town and its people. I watched the panoptograph in awe, no terror, at the depth of a single leaf, at so much inside a single cell.”

“I used only a few μ -parads ... but it was still impressive. Nothing like Friday though.” He signed. “I can still see those ugly strokes on Ivan’s face ... that gross portrait painted by madness. I’d struggled into the ‘con itself ... still groggy ... drugged and disoriented.”

“Yes ... the ugly strokes we both know well. He was someone ... something else. I can see it as if the past is now the present. Lou Konnick shuffles in ... then out the door with everything, everything we’ve worked for. And we had to stand there and watch him walk. I called the kiosk, which I shouldn’t have. It’s now logged in. I searched every square inch of all four chambers ... plus the compulab ... even his locker when he—”

“Max, if it’s anyone’s fault it’s mine. But Konnick’s a bitter pill. Why does this bumbler suddenly appear out of nowhere?” Lloyd regarded suspiciously his blue and speckled Harpy. “It’s so diabolically diabolical that I wonder if—”

“Yes ... no more than I. I’m concerned there’s some deliberate connection between these two. Some foul play they’re running ... perhaps the hidden ring to prematurely force our hand.”

“Yes, though it’s hard to believe that they’re working together. I’ll deal with Lou Konnick tomorrow ... and carefully as you suggest, though with some ... expert help. Let’s forget them. It spoils the digestion.” A pause. “I’m okay ... really. Max, I’m fine.”

Max nodded uncertainly. He kept his worst fears to himself. “Boss, do you remember any of it ... you know ... any of it at all?”

Lloyd sighed. “No, of course not. There was no time. And my eyes were still affected by the mercolidine.”

“Do you think it was our manuscript ... I mean the manuscript ... his complete—?”

Lloyd sternly reminded, “Do not speak it, Max. These words have power.” This was Lloyd’s new idiosyncrasy. Even saying the man’s name was now taboo.

Lloyd added effusively, “But yes ... I pray that it is. All the evidence says ‘yes.’ The panoptograph says ‘yes.’ My heart says ‘yes.’”

Max repeated starry-eyed, “And complete ... the complete work?”

“The complete work. There is only Konnick to deal with and it’s ours ... the critical connection ... the final link we’ve sought.”

“Ah ... at long last. And what’s next? Will you—?”

“It’s all worked out, though they must not be told ... not yet.”

“I understand about Ivan, of course. But I still think we’re taking on too much. Do we have the right?”

Lloyd spoke firmly. “We have more than the right. We have the obligation. You have got to see that.”

Max said, “But we could miss something. It will not be just our gang of four that pays the terrible price ... if we’re ...” He stopped.

Lloyd rose. Max could see the man was upset. Lloyd tested his gimpy knee, limped toward the fire like old Methuselah. “There will be no mistakes. We have Bill and Owen. Bill has the compound nearly ready. And Owen is absorbed in our unique problem.”

“But we need Henry (a long, thoughtful pause) ... and we need her too.”

Lloyd said, “Ah ... Julia Moffett is a special problem. I don’t know.”

Max was more than drawn to the statuesque beauty with limbs supple, with hair chestnut brown. In spite of her sensuality most would agree that her persona and intellect were equally compelling. Most would say: “withering.” Julia had the knack of communicating a lot with few words, of saying a lot with opalescent eyes—a rare mix of earthen and lilac hues.

Max offered, “They’re too talented to be excluded, then left to their own initiatives when it all falls together. And it will for them if it hasn’t already. Who knows what they’ll do ... what she’ll do?”

Lloyd returned stiffly to his chair. He said, “Perhaps ... but I think it’s dangerous to involve too many, especially when one of them is our unpredictable Ms. Moffett.”

“And what about Henry? He’s your friend and collaborator. And he’s a wizard with the Panigma Machine.”

“Much more than that. Max, you may not understand. I think the world of him.”

“But you risk too much to protect him. Can you by this strategy of distance? It would be best for you to bring him in ... to tell him the truth.”

“But I can’t,” complained Lloyd. “Julia holds great sway over him. She will not see any of this the way we do.”

“The woman consults the Minerva file every morning. She knows.”

“Her silence gives her away. But I don’t dare get rid of her. How could I replace her? She codes our stuff like she’s seen it all before. Perhaps she has.”

His blue eyes were suddenly beaming boyishly.

Max had learned to read the mischief in them. He anticipated Lloyd and said, “She’s in orbit over this business with Faust. It started with the Gate and thintime ... and now it’s

the Faust Pill. She fears you're serious about thinspace ... first one extreme and soon the other even worse. She's gossiped around the coffee pot. Not much, but she's talked. Not to me, of course, but to Henry ... and her other confidant, Larry Kato."

"Listening in ... huh? She would know about extremes. The woman's driven like—"

"What if she's driven to stop us?"

"... Driven by her nightmares?"

"Yes," admitted Max. "This is what I mean. Do you really need the Pill? Lloyd, please—"

"It's a diversion when I need diversions."

"You're not trading old problems for new ones?"

"Well ... it's really an old one. I'd insisted it was insoluble. Of course this has hooked Henry like a prize marlin. Who knows? He could make it work. And there's one fellow eager to take his pills. Wouldn't need to count. Might add one, tiny tablet to Leo's next nightmare."

"I don't like playing cat and mouse with Leopold Hardan. He's certifiably insane. Any game we play with him could be our last. Your smart pill could get us eaten by the beast."

These words apparently struck Lloyd in that deep, dark place where fear crawls and slithers. But in spite of this he kept his response simple. "It's designed only to keep our two geniuses busy."

"It'll keep Julia in a snit, but don't count on it distracting her. Our problems are as enormous as your Faust Pill and its mnemonic power. By the way, has Owen solved his problem?"

"He's researching every shred of evidence. I'm sending him to Europe next week. He'll visit Nicolaus. Nicolaus has found more letters."

Max rose angrily from his chair, seemed wont to leave, but stopped just short of the door. He paused near the shelf of rare books, near the *Tetragrammaton* and all the others. He hissed, "I had asked you not to do this. You badgered Owen into agreeing."

"Max ... please ... please sit down."

On sagging, unfinished shelves Lloyd had arranged the various translations of Dr. Seitzler's polemics and Kartofan's incunabula—testaments to forbidden and ancient crafts. Like Henry More's infamous *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* these speculations left a bitter taste. Max turned his back on them. The rumped friar asked the question as if he asked it of himself: "Is this trip really necessary?"

“Max, there’s so much conflicting information. We must be sure ... must be ready for anything.”

Max uttered a feeble question: “Can we do this thing?”

“If anyone can do it Owen can.”

Max returned to his seat. He nervously rolled a magazine. He appealed, “Can you stay out of the dream chamber till Owen returns?”

“Max, there’s too much to do. We have so little experience using the quar in real space.”

“We should’ve done a lot more testing.”

“We’ve gone as far as we can with models and testing. The pilot must encounter real, not lab conditions. Would you want to pilot without this experience? We teach the Machine as much as she teaches us.”

Max stared glumly at his reddening hands tightly clasped around one of Lloyd’s cheap, pulp thrillers.

Lloyd spoke reassuringly. “Please don’t fight me now that we are so close.”

“You’re enslaved by your passions ... enchanted by this victory over chaos and death.”

“Are you serious? Max ... who would not be obsessed ... so driven?”

Max exhaled, relit his briarroot pipe.

Lloyd rose to rekindle the fire. Max watched in fascination as the crackling flames reflected upon the high ceiling and upon the man who fanned them. By some quality of the light its illumination failed to reach the corners as if they belonged to some distant time, some alien place.

Max asked, “What will happen when you’ve done it? It will not be possible to conceal it. The world will find out. And why not after what you’ve been through? After all, you do owe the Lendls something.”

“I owe them nothing. They can go to blazes for all I care.”

“At the very least tell them of the letter. At the most give them a safe sample of what you can do.”

“But it must be him!” Lloyd roared. “It’s the goddamned point! I’m not out to prove anything to Lendl or the others. I no longer care a bug’s fart for what they think of me. I think only of him. He deserves another chance ... a chance to finish his work in peace. When he’s with us and safe the Machine and all that goes with it will be expunged.”

All they had done and were about to do was pressing in—on Max, on the room, like the dark of night now fully and inexhaustibly dispensed. Only the faint glow from a few smoldering logs kept it out. “You can’t do it by yourself,” Max exclaimed. “How will

you shut down everything? Kovrani and Moss will fight for their LENS. Their commitment plus the government's has been staggering."

"If done properly they will be all too eager to cooperate. It will be easier than you think." Lloyd's words had their chilling effect on Max and combustion alike. But why now and why these words? These words were uttered no colder than those he had heard so many times before. It had to be more than mere words. Something was coming in, entering into their world and Max knew it.

Was a sudden draft of cold air pouring down the flue, quenching all arguments as well as the flames? Max braced against it and replied, "Tom Emsley died convinced of his vision of *panutopia*. He had Leonard Moss and the others convinced too. Just how will you talk them out of their great gift to humanity, their exalted place in history?"

"Hang around. You will see how it's done."

"I plan to ... hope to. So ... tell me how."

"We'll let them draw their own conclusions. But we'll help them a bit. We'll test their courage and resolve with a few panigmas. We may even have our old friend, Doc Faust, and his thin friends for some strategic help."

"The measurable probability of a warptear has them frightened ... and now this latest, deadly wrinkle in the warp ... this rumored probe of thinspace. They're on the verge of panic."

"Yes, and as bad as things are today they will soon turn much worse. And it can only go downhill from here. The pressure will build until it will be their idea to unplug the Machine ... not mine."

"That's what it will take," Max agreed.

"Max, trust that I have thought this through."

"Timing is important."

"Of course, it's everything." The old man paused before posing the question: "Max, what must you do when you lead an army into battle? What must you give or take to win a desperate fight?"

"What? What's this? I'm not sure what this has to do with ... Well ... I was only an officer of logistics and supply—"

"Never mind that. Answer me. What must you give or take?"

"Space?" came the uncertain reply. "Some breathing space?"

"No ... no. Time! You give them too little or you give them too much. You give them either too little time to think ... or you give him too much time to think. It depends. The trick is—"

“Ah, yes ... of course, the trick is knowing which to apply.”

Something had entered their space and time more than cold words or cold drafts. Max was sure of it now, but he did not know how he knew. It did not register on any of his senses in any way he could put words to. Actually, it was felt as a diminution of all sensory perceptions at once as if they were all being jammed by alien energy more powerful. If he was relying less on sight and sound he was relying a lot more on a new faculty till now neglected or rejected.

“There’s one thing more than just the time to think,” said Max, “that really scares me.”

“Max, I know. I must handle Leopold Hardan with extreme care,” said Lloyd. “We must keep him warm and cozy. I must promise him a cure for his nightmare ... his maze.”

“Nothing scares him,” answered a muted voice as if sounded far away.

“Oh, Max ... you’re wrong. There is one thing.”

Max turned pages heretofore unturned, backward and forward. He paged back to that Friday in the chamber, relived it all again. There was Kovrani ranting in the isocon, Konnick floating in the background. He paged ahead two days with astonishing ease. He was now back in Lloyd’s study with the skew-legged man standing by the hearth fanning the flames. He again looked ahead—the number of pages he could not count. He was inside the busy control room of isochamber four, standing with Owen Klein and Bill Hagerty, looking inside the oddly triangular room brightly lit, but surrounding something unfathomably dark. He heard inside his head his own silent scream. The darkness moved, then filled the room. With all his strength he closed the ponderous book. With all his strength he reset his faculties back to Lloyd and the study, back to now, back to Sunday, a very cold eighth of January.

Max leaned forward a bit too far and asked shakily, “What about our deal with him? Hardan is more suspicious now than ever.”

“He’s supposed to understand the plan, but I don’t trust that he’ll cooperate. He has his own plans. Plus, he has his own dark and evil spies.”

“I can have Bill Hagerty watch him,” suggested Max warily.

“That won’t work on Leo and you know it. Besides, there is a better way.”

“He wants his bone and he will not give it up.”

“Our Leo is used to getting exactly what he wants, but he’s never gotten exactly what he deserves. The Machine must be destroyed, but not until I’ve finished with it ... and with our inquisitive friend.”

If either man had looked up just then they might have noticed it. Or perhaps in their high-wired state things like this could be overlooked, chalked up to an overzealous imagination or seepage from their dream box crammed too full. After all, Lloyd had seen much worse.

But it must count for something when a speckled and bluish Harpy carved from the finest lapis lazuli can tilt its head just a little bit, just a centimeter or two for a better look.

Chapter Six: Leopold's Dream

The Chalet of Naja in Colorado
January, 2006

Leopold Hardan made sure Ralph Seiper made his flight to Albuquerque. He then flew to Denver, the first leg of a return to the relative peace and seclusion of his Naja. He was grateful to be rid of Seiper and even more grateful to be home after many weeks.

Leopold had built his mountain retreat for protection. He had been haunted since childhood by a nightmare that portended a latent madness. For him its sights, its sounds and smells were as real as his days. Its possibilities were as horrible as anything he could inflict from that other sanctuary, that other remote hideaway, his lost coral isle of Laikani. Unlike his tropic island home, Naja provided some respite from his nights, but Naja's peace was never enough to break the nightmare's iron grip.

Sinister visions had taught him to loathe the quietude of sleep. He had learned to subsist on fragments. Ironically this had made his day world a living nightmare. Leopold never yielded to his fatigue without an heroic struggle. For him sleep was a snippet of death.

He was right.

Of course Leopold was always right. In business he had ruthlessly eliminated all of his rivals. An eighty billion dollar computer empire at age thirty was the artifact of Leopold's success, but it was also the stepchild of his fears. There were other offspring as well.

Now sixty, Leopold cared nothing about the price. He heard voices—a whispering hatred by day or by night. He had learned to isolate this venom as he had learned to lessen his once-dreaded hypnophobia.

There was however a persistent voice that he could not ignore, one too potent. This voice seemed friendly, well meaning. In time, Leopold had come to trust, even require this voice. Other than his vocal Vox, he had no one. There was no surviving family and certainly no friends. Associates assumed that money was his sole motivation. But wealth was only a tool for Leopold. He craved power and there was never enough.

The discovery of political intrigue and double-dealing had planted the seed. He had nurtured it lovingly. His power grew huge, but also dangerously hollow. He needed power to feed and infuse the ego, but he also needed something else, something with substance.

This something else drove him to Lloyd Baumer. It had produced an unholy alliance, though each had what the other desperately needed. Lloyd needed the tangibles, the money and the technology of Hardan's computer empire. Leopold needed the intangibles, though they promised to soothe the troubled spirit and solidify his power beyond any earthbound desire. In spite of this, Leopold's understanding of Lloyd Baumer was never more than superficial.

Hardan had learned of Baumer and his work through Dr. Lawrence Kato. Dr. Kato, a computer wiz employed by Hardan, had advanced the cybernetic field of neural architectures and interfaces. The culmination for Baumer and Hardan was reached when Kato met Baumer's associate, Henry Kincaid, at a Boston computer seminar.

Baumer and Kincaid advocated a new approach to the field theories pioneered by Maxwell, Riemann, Einstein and others. The former were able to unify the forces of nature without adding numerous imaginary dimensions to fill in the theoretical gaps. While their contemporaries advocated as many as twenty-six, Baumer and Kincaid solved the problem using the four existing dimensions plus four, mirrored dimensions for space-time's uncertainties, their own unique radicalization of quantum.

They combined these eight dimensions into a non-Euclidean geometry called "parathickness." Light was the theory's linchpin. In fact, the intrinsic velocity of light was not a constant (about 186,000 mps in a vacuum), but a variable quantity equal to the pressure of the light divided by the parathickness of space-time.

The second part of continuity dealt with space-time windows. Baumer was able to regenerate the old, but classic axiom—that space and time were perceived as phenomena not as noumena (the "*Ding an Sich*", the thing in itself). In this context the term "phenomena" referred to the appearance while the term "noumena" referred to the absolute.

Naturally, human kind's perceptual windows were limited to a specific size and shape—the result of clear evolutionary imperatives and the obvious physical constraints. This of course assumed nonamplification by external factors. Nevertheless, external factors were always of keen interest to the team of Baumer and Kincaid.

The theory of continuity was so controversial and unconventional that it remained buried in academia for years until the watershed seminar in Boston. In Boston, Kincaid had learned that Lawrence Kato's neural computers could amplify the mind. The phenomenal windows of perception could be expanded to immense proportions, to something approximating "reality" when augmented by Kato's new bioneural computer.

Baumer and Kincaid had at last found their external factors.

The final piece was added when Ivan Kovrani, the well-connected parapsychologist, joined the team. Kovrani needed Baumer's continuity to complete his own theory of the paranormal universe. And Kovrani had the useful ear and political clout of the able administrator, Leonard Moss, and the visionary Senator, Thomas Emsley, now deceased.

Paradimensional relativity and Dr. Baumer's theory of continuity led to applications in many fields and to the quantitative analyses of perception, memory, psychic phenomena and dreams. Their work led to the super secret **Panigma Project** in El Rasigo, New Mexico.

Anyone who could explain dreams was more than just interesting to Leopold. He was essential. It started with dreams, but would become so much more as Leopold gradually learned of the theory's full potential. One old nightmare was at the heart of the problem. It was consistent, varying only in frequency and intensity. Leopold's perplexing nightmare is chronicled for the record:

The Cornfield Maze

In the dream, Leopold was a boy in Illinois helping his father in their cornfield. It was late summer. The yellow corn was abundant, the stalks tall, the foliage green. Leo enjoyed the time spent with his father even though the day was hot, the work hard. They had been in the field for hours repairing a damaged fence. It was now near nightfall. Leo's father had noticed the late hour.

The man asked his son, "My boy, fetch my hammer from the center of the field. It will rust to a smudge if left out over night. We must soon head for home or your mother will be worried."

Leopold knew there was no such hammer and boldly said so. His father was annoyed, but accepted the explanation if only for the moment.

After a brief interval the man requested, "Son, fetch my shovel from the center of the field. Tomorrow I may need it for your mother's garden."

Young Leo respectfully refused to go. Neither he nor his father had been to the center of the corn that day.

But one objection was no better than the next. This odd ebb and flow continued for a considerable time. Why must Leo hike to center of the field? It would soon be dark. The trip would be pointless.

Finally his father commanded unequivocally, "Leo, fetch the truth from the center of the field. The time has come. I cannot do this for you. No one can. This journey must be made by you and you alone."

Leo thought this was strange, but he could no longer disobey his father. Besides, he could not argue against the idea. He knew of no better place to look for the truth. The boy reluctantly bent to the man's will and entered the field just as the sun dissolved into dusk.

It was dirty business, but the boy would keep his promise. If there was any truth to be found in the cornfield he would find it for himself. But Leo discovered something odd as he moved deeper into the corn. Here and there, but ever more frequently, he noticed that

the green husks were infected with thorns, worms and disease. He suspected this lethal infestation must emanate from the center of the field.

To add to his concern, darkness approached far sooner than he would have expected from the passage of time. Dusk repainted the sky from a sinister palette of dappled mauves and maroons. Its melancholy washed over him staining his eyes to match his anxious heart.

Leo was covered with sticky resin and itching beyond any cure. The worms grew larger, darker and more plentiful causing the weakened stalks to bend and split. This made his difficult passage even more difficult. Maybe it was his overactive imagination, but the blighted corn clung to him with a surprising tenacity as if he was an electromagnet for the tangle of bramble and rot.

Worms fell on Leo and the ground. From his matted hair he gingerly extracted several engorged pests, throbbing nematodes close to bursting. Leo grew tired of the worms and their sickening “crunch” beneath his hobnailed boots. The corn here had been all but destroyed. Where was the truth in this garden of death, disease and devastation?

Time passed without improvement. Night fell with a vengeance upon the limits of his sight. The boy shivered, though he was not cold. He noticed the pale moon effectively wrapped in purple cotton. It was a morbose moon that had died before it had ever lived.

Leo stared at the brindled corn, blotted by brown disease and black clouds. The field was so dark he couldn't tell one dead stalk from the next. The young Hardan wouldn't know the truth if it bit him in the narrow between the eyes. He sniffed the tumid air. Beneath the smell of the corn and the field and its distinctive mixture of resins, rusts and mildews was something fundamentally strong and pungent, and more animal than vegetable. Perhaps it was the musky scent of rutting deer. No, it was too early for the rut, and besides, the scent was too strong even for that. He slowed, turned one full turn to determine its source, but the wind shifted and he lost it as fast as he had found it. From his hollowed soul a spasm erupted with sudden and unexpected force.

The air fled his lungs in a single burst. When with time and with great pain he was able to refill them, Leo appealed to the corn, pleaded several times for his father's help, but he heard never a word, never a whisper in reply. This should have been his father's work. Why had his father not entered the field? Was this not his father's field to enter?

Leo was lost both in mind and in spirit. He paused to think, but thinking seemed of little use. The conventions of logic meant nothing. Boundaries and fences meant nothing. More steps just meant that more would be needed. His body and brain had reached the point of meltdown. He collapsed upon his rump with a pitiful groan.

The wind and field crickets shared a haughty laugh at his expense. The boy covered his ears. He would not listen. He prayed for a sympathetic moon to light his way. But instead of light he received a large dose of silence for his trouble. All the clamor had been stilled by supreme command. There were no more voices and no more laughter. He was quite alone with his thoughts. But was he really? Was something hiding, something watching from behind the desiccated stalks?

Leo had to get a firm grip, a good hold on his fractured nerves. He stood up, and once again set out to find his way. If he stayed to one row he would reach the safety of the fence sooner or later. A blind man could do it. Seeing the irony he giggled. The corn replied with mirth then fell silent once again. Such silence he had never known. Such fear he had never felt. It filled his belly, his throat and every cavity.

The boy held high his hands as a shield against the unseen truth. He whistled a simple tune, a pleasant tune his mother, Naja, had taught him, and it helped to settle down his nerves. Leo felt better thinking of his sweet and tender Naja. He had to have been a pathetic sight with corn silk and worms squashed in his hair and mashed in his clothes. Leo considered his sorry appearance. What would his mother say when he got home? Would this loathsome field never end?

The safety of fence could be yards away, but he would never know. The feeblest candle would have helped, but the veiled moon refused a glimmer, then mocked him all the more for seeking help. On he went stalk after stalk. He became aware of an even more worrisome problem. The condition of the corn never improved. This bothered him. He could be traveling in circles, or worse. He could be digging a deep hole.

When Leo could walk no farther he stopped to rest and revise his strategy. It did not take him long to arrive at a perplexing, but new conclusion. He tilted his head low toward the dark earth until he heard its beat with certainty. There was a distinct rumble. He called out for his father, held his breath and stood quite still. He caught not the sound of man, but an uncoiling that convulsed the field. It seemed to converge upon him from all directions at once as if he was the focus. Had he found the center? Had he found his father's truth?

Perhaps he had, for the tremor gained strength. Vegetation snapped as something crashed through the rotting field of corn. It moved in starts and stops as if dragging a crippled limb or a wounded victim across the field. His mind shunned the myriad and morbid possibilities that were too much to ponder.

Something fed upon the field. He was sure of it. But on the corn or on something else? The gnawing grew louder, the rumbling grew louder, certainly not the work of worms, even if numbered in the millions. The nightmare moved again leveling more corn as it lurched forward. Its enormity moved the stalks, the earth, the air, and his pitiful and pathetic soul. He thought again of Naja. And he thought of the one voice that had counseled and reassured him. Even this did little good. Where were they? No one would help him at this time of great peril. Was this the truth inside the maze, his father's truth?

Leo quickened his pace, but stumbled and fell face first. Luckily, he was not seriously hurt. In dismay he inched forward. The boy could not account for his tumble since he had entered an area of cornstalks conveniently crushed into a firm carpet. Leo crawled along the swath of vegetation and hard-pressed earth feeling for clues.

He found no obstructions along this path, but in little time guessed that his fall must have turned him around. He reluctantly reversed his course. It did not take long to find it, just a few, short yards away, the cause of his perplexing stumble. He suspected as much. He

verified as much—a large, motionless object radiating warmth, but no life. The splayed body lay in the furrow, its face caked with muck. Leo recoiled, but recovered sufficiently to check the man's neck for a pulse.

In so many ways, Leo was too late. There was no pulse, no signs of life. He rolled the corpse on its back. The man was coated with a smelly, but unknown concoction. Leo tried to remove a portion of it without success. His throat and stomach met someplace in-between, for this material was a heavy dough of dirt, vomit and blood. The latter flowed freely from puncture wounds in the face and neck. Many were large enough to receive several fingers. He considered testing this for himself, but his own vomit rose before he had the chance. Fittingly, he buried the face of the corpse with maggots as if this was all he was. The flow would never seem to stop. Leo's putrescence rose not from his gut or from the pit of his despair, but from a far deeper abode, the source of his singular voice, his Vox, the intestinal labyrinth of the field.

The wretch heard distant weeping. It may have been his own, for Leo had touched the bottom. He prayed again for light, for any chance at all. There was no accounting for it, but this time his prayers were answered. The field exploded everywhere in a light that blinded him. He vaulted to his feet expecting more than the rows of dying corn. He expected the lumbering beast and the angel of death. When his eyes recovered he saw there was no beast, no death, no foul and mutilated corpse.

Leo was alone listening to the mournful timbre of wind and crickets. Perhaps his imagination was more fertile than the field. It was then that he looked toward the sky. Something had swallowed the night. A golden light was everywhere, above and below, and it steadily gained power. Its gold shown from the kernels like billions of light bulbs. The heavens had vanished, consumed by the powerful surge of the field.

He was not upon this Earth, but inside an enormous, hollow sphere lined with luminous kernels of corn. It was no wonder that he could walk forever and never reach the end or find the center. There was no end or center to find. It was strange given the vastness of this place that every stalk remained so easily within view. His vision knew no bounds. And top could easily become bottom or bottom become top with no distinction of one for the other.

He had no choice but to continue. But in what direction? It hardly mattered. The concept had no meaning here. He set out in the direction that he found himself. Strange, but the field of his fears had made a remarkable recovery, for there were no more worms, bristles or blight, just a luxurious light. Leo thought he detected distant bells. It seemed that the weeping had become the bells of a glorious jubilee, but this almost pleasant sensation passed too quickly.

He now strode easily through the field. Or more accurately it was the field that flowed beneath him. Leo always found himself at the low point looking up. At least he could see again.

After a short hike, Leo noticed an enigma in the distance—a rectangle totally misplaced in a field of curves. It was a discontinuity that reset his course, that same swath of

mashed stalks that led him to a portal suspended in time and space. Arriving before the mirrored, gleaming monolith, smoother and more perfect than any object in his memory, Leo was soon less than convinced that it was actually an opening. There were no handles or hinges to validate this wishful assumption. He waited for an answer, but not for very long.

In reply to his silent question the monolith opened like a door. Leo stepped back as two strangers emerged from darkness, one short and fat, one tall and thin.

“Oh, shit!” he exclaimed ridiculously. “Who are you?”

He supposed they were hunters. They looked like hunters, but they were never exactly in sharp focus. He tried to place their faces, but he couldn’t penetrate the veil that clung to them like threads of silk. The pair carried impressive firepower that was always in sharp focus. Leo entertained the childish idea that they were big game hunters from darkest Africa.

Leo asked, “Gentlemen ... have you seen a man ... a man I believe to have been murdered? He was here in this field, lying along this hardened track. But his mutilated body has disappeared without a trace.”

The tall, thin one answered, “Naw ... taint seen nuttin’ live ner dead ... other ‘n you, my boy. But yo’re ‘live ... and not up to murder. Are ya, boy? Are ya?”

Leo persisted: “Mister ... are you sure you haven’t seen a corpse? It was covered with an awful nasty phlegm. And I heard something moving ... foraging in the field ... something that shouldn’t be.”

The bald, fat one laughed till it hurt. “That’s a real pisser sonny. Somethin’ that shouldn’t be. What ‘bout you ... eh? Ya ever think a’ that?”

The bewildered boy tried a different tack. “I can see you’re sportsmen and that you’re armed to the teeth. What are you hunting?”

The fat man replied with a smirk, “Not rabbits ... sonny.”

“Then what may I ask do you hunt?”

The other added, “Not squirrels ner ‘chucks neither. We’re after much bigger game ‘n that.” He laughed.

In fact, both men laughed heartily. Leo wondered what could be so funny, but he gave up. It was clear they would not cooperate even if they had a lick of sense.

Leo said, “I’m sorry, and don’t mean to be rude, but I must be going. I am very late and it won’t go well for me with my mother when I do get home. Gentlemen, good-bye and good hunting.”

One of the men saluted. “Watch out for them corpses and ‘specially your mutter. Ha-ha-ha!”

The coarse men and the bewildered boy parted company.

Leo immediately regretted his impatience. Since the mirror-door was useless he should have taken some note of their course. Though they seemed dumb it was remotely possible they knew something that he did not. If there was one door there could be more, perhaps a safe way home.

He turned, but they had turned first. The men stood rigid in the firing position with their weapons aimed at his heart. They commenced a withering fusillade, the short muzzles barking and flashing repeatedly. Fractions of seconds were stretched over many minutes by the surge of his adrenalin.

Leo literally counted the bullets. He observed their innocent yaw and wobble. In fact, each small projectile fluttered like a knuckleball as it drifted lazily toward him. If only he could move. He could have easily escaped. But he could not move even so much as the width of one projectile.

The bullets plunked indifferently into his chest. He watched splash after splash of bile and blood and was reminded of harmless pebbles falling into a rain barrel. With the final splash Leopold's cornfield imploded crushing him like a worm.

At this instant of implosion there was a single thought that always popped into his brain. It was the image of his father standing alone in the center of the corn. The man stood too far away to see his face or to read the truth in his eyes. But Leo could see the man beckoning with his arm—some kind of signal. The problem was that Leo was never sure whether his father intended him to come forward or intended him to go back. He suspected that one day he would find out. He suspected that one day he would finally learn his father's secret.

Chapter Seven: Aus der Mansarde

Another Man, Another Dream, Monday, January 9th

He woke with a question.

A single bead of sweat was balanced upon his brow. He lay quite still remembering, trying very hard to think. The warm bead swelled, ran tear-like to his cheek where it clung briefly before it was lost upon a satiny sea of lavender. He opened his watery eyes. It was as if the bandages had just been peeled away. His eyes adjusted to the stars.

It was a night for hunters, for the beasts were out—Sassanian lions, Mayan tigris, and Nubian leopards. These and more were held captive by their stony bonds—by lattices of nephrite, lapis, serpentine or carnelian.

He started to see things more clearly. Around or through the dense foliage he saw and savored the glowing embers that had earlier inflamed his passions, his innermost soul. It was the way their glimmer had anointed her cocoa skin and her chestnut hair, had ignited the nacreous, smoky sapphires—those impenetrable, purbrown eyes.

The clock on the wall said 3:15. The expansive skylight, the starry lumorama confirmed the A.M. The half-bed, half-sofa, low and circular, confirmed the house not his—her adobe bungalow on Cottonwood Lane.

His mind had conceived parangles and mnemonic power, posicubes and anticubes, discontinuities and S-T superwindows, thinspace and thintime, but had not, perhaps would not, could not ever solve the conundrum that was Julia Jane Moffett.

The mind, the man, the dream was the famous mathematician, Henry Kincaid.

He whispered gravely, “It was the attic dream once again.”

He rested on his back, on his pointy elbows. Her satin sheet failed to cover him. He paused to absorb the wonder that was Julia and her space—enriched by her treasured figurines, delicate and robust, by her rare succulents, soft and moist, delicate and robust.

“I was locked inside,” he added as he kicked one of her lacy pillows to the floor. “The windows were boarded. There was a door ... boldly numbered ... secured with a heavy padlock. There was an eerie glow all round me.”

She stirred sleepily. Like a waking lioness she stretched and extended a limber leg across the lavender sheets to caress his chest with prehensile toes. She traced the coarse stubble lower and lower before recapturing her bed sheet. As he began to speak to her, she pressed a cautioning finger against his slightly parting lips.

As she silently coaxed, he endeavored to coax from her a verbal response. “Julia, I searched for the key, but my pockets were empty.”

“No wonder. You have no pockets to search,” Julia murmured in a sonorous while slightly husky voice.

He stroked her thigh. He pinched her taut skin. Reflexively, she drew back, but returned to him her talented toes. She returned, as she always had on occasions such as this, to the means of her repair, to her universal antidote, to a measuring device neither purely English nor exactly metric, but a somewhat useful instrument mostly Scotch-Irish.

He lost clear thought in the absorption of her lavish landscapes—Kilauea, Serengeti, and rugged Tirich Mir. These wonders ringed her aptly named “Rimfire” room.

She fretted. She pouted. “The fire dies. You are suddenly so cold. Must I restoke the failing furnace?”

“You wound me severely,” he said, seizing her by her ankle.

She wore a Zuni anklet of silver, turquoise and jet plus some saffron thingamabob in her hair. She glowed more than the fervid embers in her flickering hearth.

Henry inhaled. His lungs tingled tremulously. He recalled that unfathomable aspect of time just moments before waking under the stars. “The room was enchanted. The dust in the air danced. It lit the room like fireflies. I soon discovered that I was not alone. There was a part-man, a part-bird ... a dazzling angel in rainbow plumage perched inside a gilded cage. Its doleful eyes reflected on its miserable confinement ... a hostage held in the name of misguided science. This creature would not speak to me, though I sensed that he could, if coaxed, speak volumes upon volumes to the world.

“There was an intriguing clutter ... a curule chair flanked by griffins, a marble bust of old Socrates, an astrolabe or some such thing, three delicate bottles, Klein bottles, I think, plus exotic toys and machines in various stages of disrepair. Puzzles and panigmas abounded in every facet of the room if room it truly was.

“I saw loculi spilling guns and knives, rings and shamrocks, scrolls and books upon moquette that only partially concealed roughly laid, pine boards. Every corner of the attic ... and there were many ... was a kaleidoscopic rapture continually filling space, time and possibility until it seemed the room or I would surely burst.”

He sighed pensively. “It was the crucible of my hopes and dreams.” A chill took its brief possession of his eyes and the telling of his tale.

She covered his long body with hers, a nearly perfect fit. “Tell me about the Kleins ... the bottles. “I’m curious about such curiosities.”

“Elephantine ... they were elephantine.”

“Oh ... were they huge?” she asked, intrigued.

“No ... not at all. The bottles were about four inches high, three inches wide, and rested on a small teapoy near the griffin chair. They were clear, glass bottles ... figurine elephants resting on their rumps. Each had swallowed his trunk ... and something ... uh ... green.”

“Ugh,” she exclaimed as she plucked him playfully where his trousers seldom fit. She plucked him again, this second time much rougher than the first.

He seized her just as roughly by the nape. He remarked, “Watch out, dear Julia. You know how this dream works. Out was in, then in was out ... in then out ... both too much and not enough at the same time. You know the drill.”

“Unhand me rude sir ... then tell me something. I know the shape of these queer bottles. You’d have to enema the elephant to get anything in. Maybe I don’t want to know, but what’s inside these glass pachyderms?”

“Surprised you would need to ask. It’s a quarvine like that one in Lloyd’s gold ring.”

“Should’ve known ... what else? That gizzard buster comes up like a bad oyster. Gives me the creeps the way that crystal stares. You say ... in your dream ... and on your honor ... there are now truly three of these demon stones.”

He rested a warm cheek on hers. “One inside each Klein bottle ... inside the elephant’s clear, round belly as pleased as shit on new, white shoes.”

“Perhaps it is these eyes that power your attic and your crucible,” she whispered furtively.

“They draw their power from the bottles. They have infinite power when blown infinitesimally thin. And these exquisite bottles were blown incredibly, impossibly thin.”

“Not sure I follow. You mean ... the power of thintime ... or thinspace? Either property of the light itself could crush if wholly revealed.”

“No ... I mean the awesome power of the topology itself.”

Julia exclaimed, “I think I see. It is drawn from the bottle’s single side ... its odd dimensional twist inside the greater container of the cosmos.”

“Yes, like Lloyd’s manifold with its warps, with its time-breach of space, with its space-breach of time ... you know ... the elephant’s probing trunk.” He sighed. “And to think that he dreamed all this up in his sleep. And I’m supposed to be the lucid dreamer.”

“I should tell you mine. I should tell you my dream of the man down below.” She paused. “Henry, I’m sorry. This stitch in time is yours. I’m your warp. Please weave your yarn. You know I’m yours completely. It’s your turn to make faces and terrify the monkey.”

And although he complied, Julia inspired less irksome thoughts, plus a timely pause for gentle weaving, for she was a supple fabric stretched over a subtle warp.

She bewitchingly purred. He prolonged her purr.

Finally, he uttered with a smirk, "Tell me of your man ... down below."

She had curled into a ball. She intoned dulcetly, "I have two dreams ... actually of two very different men. One's a chameleon of sorts. I call him my Artful Jack. The other man ... well, he's my Fire Stoker."

As he lay in every way exposed, his head tilted toward the stars, he detected in her voice an uncharacteristic break in her confidence that he had not discerned before. "I think Friday's computer crash ... its implications have finally given your heebies the jeebies."

"Not at all." She uncurled, nestled in his arms, nuzzled him, and reached low to apply an exquisitely sensual massage with long and powerful fingers.

He murmured, "Ah ... such fine fingers. But of Friday ... you must know the LENS drivers were literally fried to a crisp."

"I know," she said. "The Light Shell, the AIs ... everything was hit hard. I heard that Max was in the 'con, Owen in the lumitorium when Lloyd emerged with his panigma ... when all the computers winked out."

"Ah ... you heard this from ... from our resident genius, Lou Konnick?"

"Yes ... something about an OHM box. I fear it's true. No one else will open their mouth."

"And would you ... I mean ... open your mouth?" he asked coyly.

She contemplated it. "Definitely not. Too much ... far too dangerous an opening to make. I'll apply some Finesse Juliesse."

"Well ... I may not like this kind of finesse. What will you do?"

"You know ... just a little nibble."

"Perhaps ... a somewhat risky, somewhat nasty nibble down below?"

"You are beastly! No ... no! Definitely not enough to arouse them ... but enough ... enough I think to discover why our angry Ivan was so concerned about Lloyd's scan. If Lloyd ran the panoptoscope I should be able to recover the panoptogram ... reconstruct some of Friday's elusive dreamspace ... enough to learn of the cause and consequences of Lloyd's latest and greatest panigma."

"You might pilot the LENS yourself ... that is if the Machine ever runs again."

"Hmm ... not likely the former. I'll pilot at Hell's Gate," she countered, quoting his own oft-used expression for the grand warptear, the break of all possible breaks.

"I will have you on the dream couch yet."

He caught the glint in her eyes. In the low firelight it was the glint of deep lilac. She noticed his attention and batted her eyes fetchingly. Her sweet locks fell over his flushed face. He inhaled her. She smelled like the honeysuckle from his lost youth. He suckled tenderly and eagerly, her golden, ripe honey.

She molded her body to his. "I will tell you mine if you will tell me yours," she offered temptingly with pursed lips, dark like two blood rubies in the moonlight.

"Dear ... my lips are just too dry to speak a word of it."

She kissed them ... then kissed him longingly hither and yon. "Better?" she asked seductively.

"You really want to hear about the attic? Now?"

With her cheek pressed against him she nodded that she did.

"Well then ... I'll tell you ... tell you what I can. Have you ever been locked in a closet or an attic? Once ... by accident ... I locked myself in our basement shelter. You know ... one of those sixties bomb shelters. I was six or seven. I'll never forget the feeling. My attic dream captures all the helplessness ... and a good deal more."

She insisted, "What is more? What is worse? Some bugbear in the corner ... some mansard manticore?"

"No ... not really. It's a quality of dimension. It's our LENS ... its phase tilt ... where space grows thicker ... where time grows thinner ... omnipotential reality ... where all things can happen ... and usually do before the nightmare has finished with your being."

"Henry ... this dream is only a snippet of possibility. It cannot breach the barrier between fantasy and reality."

"Julia, I disagree. As I recall the details I am persuaded that this dream is much stronger ... a breach ... a rift ... a portal of real power. I'm feeling it again, right now, an intrusion of some kind into the world of common sense and the commonplace. I know this is childish, a return to youthful fantasy and susceptibility and hardly science. But there is the suspicion, much more than the suspicion, that I must find the key ... find the way out of the attic before it's too late."

"Too late for what? Perhaps you see no key because you are the key ... or I am. Look at me, Henry. What do you see? I'd like to know the truth."

With magic fingers she kneaded him, comforted him, relaxed him. Her "needing" lifted him. Within incremental time the enchantment subsided. He located his voice if not the answer to his innermost question.

"I'm feeling better." Henry described the mansard: "In the center there is an escritoire, filthy gray. I see it as clearly as I see you ... a disturbing clarity that grows stronger when it should fade. This dream has a stubborn cling ... like millions of tiny fishhooks ..."

She replied, “I’ve checked the CIC database. You’ve logged over two hundred hours in the chamber, second only to Lloyd himself. Your PPI is sub par. And you say you’ve not been sleeping well. Henry, you need—”

“Need a rest,” he finished. “I know. Looks like I’m going to get one. But that will depend upon your skill in restoring the software.”

“You need to get away. Forget the Machine and you will forget these dreams. There are better things. I’ll help. I will help you now ... help you purge the poisons and the pachyderms. But you must cooperate as I know you can.”

“But Julia, I can tell this quickly. I’m okay ... really. I need to. You said you wanted to hear ... or that you were willing.” He looked into her eyes. “I sense you must.”

She fell against him with a desperate sigh, with a deep rattle of resignation.

He encircled her. “Where was I?”

“Here and now ... and here with me.”

“Good sign ... eh? Attic is fading ... and Julia is repairing ... replacing. My attic is almost gone.”

“Weenie wax! Henry ... if you must ... please tell it and be done. I’m waiting.”

“Well ... I suppose you’re right. The dusty writing table in the center of the room looks promising. Somewhere in all the clutter I expect to find the latch key that let’s me out of the attic. Under the copious layers of dust I discover an old-fashioned quill pen, a nearly empty bottle of ink, an imposing stack of papers, but nothing more revealing.

“The dream’s taking me too deep, taking me too long. I’m searching now with less deliberation. I notice the carpet. An oil lamp had been dropped on the floor ... its oil spilled. Flame had burnt through the carpet to expose some of the ill-fitting boards. The darkness seeps up from below through the cracks in the floor. I am drawn to look. I am expending too much energy, processing too much space and time.

“A peruke ... I think they’re called ... one of those foppish, powdered wigs ... lay like a slain rabbit near the lamp. I raise the fallen wig with my foot expecting, but finding nothing underneath.

“There’s a wall tapestry that reminds me of our Dome mural, excepting that it’s alive. With unseen hands it is knit and reknit over and over again, the same scene I think as if to get it right. Or perhaps it knits itself. I gaze intently upon this vast panoptorama, and though there is rich detail, real depth, color and dimension, plus a tantalizing psychic tug, my brain will absorb none of its deeper fabric.

“I’m pondering the imponderable, discovering no clues. I turn to investigate an étagère colorfully stocked with ampoules and flacons of rare aromatics and essential oils, then to boxes and chests concealed under cloque fabrics. But I am to discover no key in these

mysteries ... no way out. The key becomes my obsession. By now I'm desperate. By now the space inside is growing thick and rich with possibilities."

"But you are the key ... you ... your mind ... your sight. You are the way out ... don't you see," she repeated with brutal emphasis.

"Julia, I see everything and nothing. To some end I riffle the pharmacopoeias, the manuals and manuscripts, the books on dusty shelves ... *Metaphysicum*, *Volsunga Cycle*, *Oneiros*, and even Goethe's *Faust*. Ironic.

"The toys, the mantic devices, the instruments are powerless. The antique rebecks, flageolets, sackbuts and cembalos are stone silent. I scrutinize a pellucid crystal, an orb with not one iota of error. It's light blinds me. I turn away in severe pain. By now I'll try anything. I rummage everything ... anything ... a cuspidor ... the cushions of an old chair. I am frantic for escape. Space-time thickens to crush me ... an implosion of light and supercritical space."

There was that quality of crescendo to his voice that frightened her, that was dangerous. She rested her forehead on his. The fall of her hair calmed and caressed him. "You should stop and rest ... or the day ahead will crush you even more. It will not require any help from your overdeveloped dream muscle."

With two fingers Julia stroked his eyes as if to charm them closed. "What must I do to soothe you?" she asked.

He held his breath as if afraid to let go. "Please let me finish."

She repositioned her hands. "Please let me." There seemed nothing beyond her reach, nothing beyond her powers of tactile persuasion.

"You create a wonderful diversion," he admitted. "But I've started something that I must finish. I must tell someone. And I want to hear about your dreams as well ... your dreams of Artful Jack and the Fire Stoker."

"Of course you want. But what you want may not be enough. Finish before you implode. Do you ever find this elusive key that so torments you?"

"I'll defer the answer for a moment. Under muslin I uncover some fascinating toys. At first they seem harmless enough. One's a battered doll ... actually a rosy-cheeked marionette with tangled lines ... a hopeless knot. The cause of the fouled lines is another doll ... no I'll not call it that. It's a head under a cowl attached to the back of the marionette."

"Henry ... how do you do it? You see the most perplexing things."

His voice cracked around the edges. "One must risk his eyes to see."

"His mind ... his sanity? Dear, it's the dark shelves where you look."

He shivered. “This bodiless, faceless creature frightens me. I pull back its black cowl to expose a sucker-face. An ugly gnome stares up at me through its one green eye. It actually grins at me. The eye opens and closes like it’s signaling. I toss this twisted, two-headed monster back into the toys. Fortunately there are other faces less intimidating. In fact, I am suddenly the intimidator.

“Another creature, a plenicorn... a unicorn with many prongs gazes up at me horrified as if I’ve come to do some harm. I retreat ... and nearly trip over a box ... a large jack-in-the-box that until now I hadn’t noticed. In my palm appears a large crank handle. I insert the shaft into the gaily-painted wood thinking it’s my key. The box expands.”

Julia released her gentle grip, ended her expert massage. “My Artful Jack?” she wondered. “Perhaps it was my Jack that frightened your plenicorn and not you.” Both near and far at the same moment, she seemed to be seeing or reliving something not of this world. Her eyes had surrendered their remarkable purbrown and appeared suddenly gray and lifeless.

He massaged her neck and shoulders allowing some time for her case of jitters to subside—no less a case than his own. Peering up at the stars through the skylight he explained, “I turned the crank. Out came the weasel tune, then as expected, the lid sprang open. But there’s no Jack. He won’t come out. I know he’s in there. I can hear him ... a zealous scraping. I impulsively reach inside. I can feel him in there squirming and struggling like some wild beast. Using both hands I try to pry him out, but it’s no use. He’s wedged in tight. In fact, I’m lucky I get my hands out before they’re cut to pieces. When I do look down I can see that both are amply streaked with blood.”

Henry’s telling of a quaint and simple toy had produced an odd and unexpected twist. He could see that Julia had been hiding, denying even to herself the vivid episode of nightmares that had been troubling her for a long time. She finally spoke: “Someday I’ll tell you about Jack ... and about Jill too. But not now ... not tonight.”

“I think it would be better if you got this horrible weight off your chest.”

“Do you really expect me to tell it now? We’re here alone telling stories like this in the dark. If they were only stories ... well ... that would be different. I wouldn’t care if they curled my hair ... wrinkled my tongue. But we both know they’re not just bedtime stories. Besides, I can’t see anything more than the fire and a few dim stars. I can barely see you. For all I know you’re a less than artful Jack ... an unauthorized copy.”

“A romantic notion, but Jack’s a dream and nothing more. Without Nettie’s core the probabilities are well below the causation threshold. They’ll never be more than free, random consciousness and we both know it. But I am sorry I started this. I’ve scared us both for no good reason ... for no good reason.” He inhaled. “We must remember we’re reasonable people. We’re (with a smirk) scientists.”

“Ha! Back in the ‘Lab’ and light of day I might agree with you. I’m as semi-logical as the next person. After all, I’ve preprogrammed the world’s most advanced biocomputer. In the bright light of day each event correlates unalterably with the next. Most attics are

safe. Jack doesn't usually jump out of thin air. And Jill survives her nightmares. But Henry, this isn't the Lab or the light of day. It's a dark night and we're alone. You're telling me your dreams ... dreams you cooked up on a machine that could run the solar system."

There followed a long pause. "Do you want to hear the rest of it?" he asked somberly.

She laughed in spite of herself and it jolted him off his lofty perch.

"Henry, you're a rare find ... rare indeed. You've been arguing vehemently both sides of the cube and it does not seem to bother you. Go ahead. Did you conjure up our Jack?"

"Nope, the lid slams shut nearly taking off my head. Never got a look at him. But there's one I did. Do you remember I mentioned a half-man, half-bird locked inside a golden cage? This creature is adorned in purple, gold, green, and scarlet feathers like Quetzalcoatl. Maybe this is the reason I didn't see it right off, the damned key that is. All this time the key was held in its tight bird's beak.

"With some legerdemain I insert my hand through the bars of the cage. Nevertheless I'm defeated. The elusive key transforms itself into a serpent and slithers past me. The man-bird bursts into an angel's song and makes his escape by turning sideways, first disappearing, then reappearing outside the bars. Once outside he is even more remarkable. And that song is ... is from ... from—"

"God ... I suppose? Hmm ... this goes on and on. But the bird was a valuable lesson learned," she said. "One can't sing or maneuver with a snake in their mouth. You agree?"

"Yes, though some will crow. Julia, I track the man-bird high into the rafters, finally losing him in a beacon of unearthly light. But snakes crawl low down and dark. I've no problem following this one ... an ugly reptile with a man's face. You know this face. Care to say?"

She covered up with soft satin before she answered: "I can picture deep grooves cut in leathery cheeks and crusty caverns filled with shadows that flow into his mouth like the primordial ooze."

"Very good. Of course, the anathema of the LENS, none other than Leopold Hardan, the one and only serpent."

"He is not a handsome man. When this reptile shows up in your dreams it is time to worry."

"No kidding. Well ... the snake spies the box, sniffs out a flaw, a tiny slit near the lid. He crawls in for a snuggle with our reclusive Jack."

"Whom should I feel sorry for?"

"Me! It's my nightmare. What I do next might be called stupid, but what is stupid in a dream?"

“Depends on how many bytes of power you’re pulling ... remember?”

“Don’t know. Don’t want to. I first try to tip the box, but it must weigh a million tons. Since it won’t budge I lift the lid, but I can’t see a thing. In desperation I grope for the key, my key, presumably the snake with Leopold’s leathery looks.”

Julia was concerned about the dream’s mnemonic power. She seized his arm. “Stop and think! Have you measured this one?” she asked fretfully.

“If you mean the dream ... no. My guess is about 0.2 cics, but I don’t really know. I do know that my arm goes in full-length. It seems I might go in too, for this box of dreams exerts a tug on the hollow of my gut. Then I touch something unexpected ... and quite incomprehensible.

“Julia, it’s the story of the blind man and the elephant. What I touch makes no sense. There are all kinds of sharp and dull, hard and soft. There are all kinds of shapes ... nodules and spurs, tubes and toroids. It’s our Panigma Machine packaged into a neat gizmoidal bundle.

“All my options have been reduced to one. I must remove this machine from the dream box if I’m to escape. I anchor my toes and wedge them tight. I pull. With everything I have I pull ... till out it comes ... a loculus ... so simple, so perfect when seen with the eyes. It can be seen throughout and strangely through in, cube after cube *ad infinitum*. In spite of its depth and its substance there is simplicity.”

“Finally the momentous moment has arrived,” said Julia. “You hold within your hands the panoptic panigma of the LENS and the elusive key ... the infinite cube. So what comes next for this endless confabulation?”

“You guessed it right ... the endlessness itself. I want to look forever, but I must transform the key before the thickspace of the attic does me in. I extract a 6-d cube from infinity’s labyrinth. I disassemble the cube’s dyad. The weight of the 6-d cube takes its toll on my strength, but I am able with great effort to solve all of its loculi and separate the 5-d posicube from the 5-d anticube.

“The anticube itself I return to the dream box. I never truly see it, its depth or its substance, though I touched both briefly.”

“At least you didn’t select it for the scrap heap.” She diverted her eyes. “We may need it someday to pump out the dark light ... the day when all our sins are called to an audit by central accounting.”

“But not yet I hope. The 5-d cube I flatten into its ten equal quars. From a new dyad or paracube I tear off one quar and pitch the rest away. I hold the hypercube ... one 4-d cube or quar with sides and corners and edges like any box, only with many more of them. It makes cubical shadows on the walls. Cubes beget more cubes, only smaller and smaller until they disappear eventually into the asymmetry of time.”

“You unlock the attic door and have a sneak peek?”

“No, not just yet.”

“Ah, yes ... I think I see. You must flatten the hypercube as you flattened the posicube if it is to fit inside this lock with only three spatial dimensions.”

“I press it flat ... till it’s all inside the three dimensions of length, width and breadth. Its surface-volume ... I will call it this ... is the same as the hypercube ... the same as eight regular cubes.”

“You’ve made a tesseract, but how can it fit the labyrinth inside the lock?”

“The eight cubes are arranged in a kind of twin crucifix. I insert the tesseract into the lock and turn the cubes. The key melts and molds itself to fit, collects inside the complex mechanism like hot wax. The door opens easily. I look out ... into space now infinitely thin. But the pieces do not quite fit the puzzle. There is something dreadfully wrong. This I somehow know, but I don’t know how. I then wake ... and it happens all over again. I can’t remember jack shit ... not a goddamned thing of what I’ve seen through the attic door. I feel real bad. Like I just barfed the best meal in my life.”

“I see and I’ve felt. But have you considered the price of remembering ... of knowing?”

“Who would not pay it? Well ... Julia, that’s my dream. I admit the allegory perplexes me. No matter. Now ... tell me yours. And if it’s not the right time to reveal your Jack, at least tell me about the Fire Stoker. Or is this time and space too dark for him to come out too?”

She relocated his pleasure and applied sufficient pressure in long, rhythmic strokes. Fires were re-stoked and re-ignited. While her thoughts appeared a million miles away, he was distracted from his whimsical abstractions of thinspace to practical realities much thicker.

“Think of Hardan and that maniacal grin of his stretching from one ear hole to the other,” she said. “That image would quench Lucifer’s atom furnace. Now my lovely man ... how about a teensy, tiny confession ... eh?”

“Now? Whose is it you want revealed? Mine or yours?”

“Both. I’ll admit I’m here because of a dream or two, not for my technical credentials.”

“Scandalous ... but you’ve marvelous credentials.”

“Do you admit to the same motivation?”

“They say ... one size fits all.”

“What does that mean ... precisely?”

“Don’t know ... don’t care precisely.”

She turned suddenly serious. “You know Henry that we’re no different from Kovrani’s lab kooks. I suspect that doctors and subjects alike share the same nightmares.”

“No surprise. Misery loves company. Brown frogs prefer brown frogs. But tell me yours before I burst from curiosity.”

“Gad, no! I wouldn’t want your curiosity on my nice, new, satin sheets. But I must warn you that my dream is almost over before it ever starts.”

“I’m too near to knowing what you mean,” he confessed.

“Well ... if you want to hear it ... I dream about a man laboring to save the world. He is immense, bare from the waist up, shoveling mountains of material into an infernal boiler. Perspiration rolls down his arms, his chest and back. His effort is frightening. Pulsating veins are ready to burst. The size of his scoop is enormous, on a scale that numbs me.”

“His scoop ... really enormous?”

“Listen if you can. The man looks down, smiles, but does not falter. I feel the tremendous heat as if it’s real. The shoveling goes on. Load after load is fed into a fiery hole.”

“This is interesting. Load after load disappears into the furnace.”

“You think this is funny? I don’t, for I finally notice what he’s shoveling.”

She located and then squeezed hard his highly aroused curiosity. He complained using random and ridiculous syllables, but not too much, not so much that she would stop.

“Would you like to know?” she asked enticingly.

“Dare I say no,” he moaned.

“Then I’ll tell you. He’s shoveling the masses ... thousands of screaming people ... thousands of living souls into the fires of Hell.”

“But who is this man ... Satan ... I suppose?”

“Henry ... I hope not. I pray not. He is my dear father. He died four years ago in Phoenix, a decorated veteran of three wars.”

There was nothing more to say. Minutes passed. Demons were chased—for a time defeated. She at last mounted the supine beast, impaled herself on its florid horn, rode it heroically, rode it like a Valkyrie, from Hell to Heaven.

She was a shadow on the wall. And how thin is a shadow? How much power is there for a shadow held in space and time?

Chapter Eight: The Elephant's Proctologist

The habitats of El Rasigo, Tarpley and La Sierra were slow to recover from the recession-nearly-a-depression of '02 and '03. That they ever did is subject to doubt. They had been gradually dispossessed of everything except for a rail line and one state road. The decline of the economy had started the El Rasigo Flow (not to be confused with the El Malpais lava flow 25 million years earlier). A good measure of their resignation was seen in the loss of color. The people stopped cleaning. The dust bonded to anything that did not move and to some of the things that did. The people stopped painting. The impoverished homes, schools and businesses simply peeled away. The towns turned as gray as an old horned toad. With nothing to recommend a future, those capable of leaving left.

All of this changed around February of 2004. The reason was both apparent and not so apparent at the same time. It was in this month that a highly unusual structure began to appear on the mesa for reasons that no one knew. At least no one talked of it if they did. This was odd because almost always, especially in this part of the country, at least one person could be found who knew something or thought he did or could be counted on for a damned good story even if he didn't. Talking is what they did in El Rasigo, Tarpley and La Sierra. Its citizens had little else to occupy their time and temper.

By September of '04 the outside shell of the great geodesic dome was almost complete. It's effect on the local folk, on their way of life was far-reaching, even if no one talked about it much. The architecture was incongruous to say the least—a sudden eruption of gleaming metal in the middle of grassland and disintegrating shacks. From the time of September, and from who knows where, the silvery hemisphere cast an ominous shadow over the region. Not surprisingly the *Tarpley Banner* disagreed, as it did with nearly everything—the political crisis of the far right, even the bungling over the economy. Their owner-editor announced: Government builds new science dome—Bright future ahead for El Mal (three towns of the El Malpais region of New Mexico).

The Institute for Physico-Psychic Research

The El Rasigo Dome, Monday Afternoon, January 9th, 2006

The dome shadows on this afternoon were harsh near to grotesque, and all but impenetrable. Institute staffers, Moffett, Fuller, Polk and Kato were by now computerized into catalepsy.

Julia Moffett consulted her Digitex watch as she left the compulab for her cubicle one flight up. It was already five o'clock and her blood sugar was too low to sustain her current pace. Her psychological clock had warned her that the unwinnable battle of

human versus machine had only just begun. Lloyd's panigma, started three days ago, seemed total and irreversible.

She had fed the data through her simulator for each of the key loop tests. Minerva had analyzed the frequency, the amplitude and other characteristics of waveforms that would destroy the Machine if permitted to continue. Minerva had no opinion as to the source, no indication as to whether the instability was caused by hardware or software gremlins.

Julia took a seat in her office in front of her glowing compset console. Minerva displayed a list of her programs and her files, her impossible schedule for the week. She leaned back, exhausted by the sight. She shrugged the tension from her neck, found a peanut butter cracker in her handbag partially crushed. She unwrapped, then consumed it in two bites with the hope that anything was better than nothing.

Julia had been pondering Henry's attic even as the difficult day took its toll. She decided to take a break, to resign for the moment from her insoluble code in order to investigate the attic's elephantine topology.

She returned to the compset and offered Minerva a challenge. She asked Minerva to help her create a Klein bottle. Julia drew the bottle on the screen. When satisfied with the picture she asked the computer to enter the coordinates into the field model. After a second or two of housekeeping she asked Minerva to map space and time on the bottle, to assign space (S) and time (T) as dimensions on the Klein surface.

As she fiddled with the field intensity ratios the bottle's proportions changed. The opening of the bottle she reduced to zero diameter to represent the panigma of the Big Bang. When satisfied that the bottle looked like a reasonable universe she stopped fiddling.

The Klein space-time map displayed a reasonable expansion and contraction of space, a reasonable flow of time. There was continuity, but also discontinuity where the elephant had swallowed his trunk. And on this model unlike so many of the others every S-T event was causally connectible to every other S-T event. There was a good reason for this.

The intrinsic velocity of light was transfinite while space-time was finite, but unbounded. The Big Bang-Big Crunch had not been swallowed, but only just barely tasted by the elephant, leaving a slight dimple or depression in the surrounding space-time continuum.

She decided she'd make a second bottle—with Minerva's help of course. As before she set up the tensors and dyads. On this bottle she assigned uncertainty (X) and time (T) to the 2-d surface. Uncertainty increased to a maximum then returned to zero. Time started at the Big Bang and ended at the Big Crunch. Or was it the other way around? She recognized continuity and discontinuity. And every X-T event was nicely connectible to every other X-T event. Fine so far.

She decided that she needed Henry's third bottle. On this bottle she assigned uncertainty (X) and space (S) to the Klein surface. Uncertainty increased to a maximum then returned to zero. Unbounded space expanded, was eventually consumed only to be reborn. It was

the same as the others, implicitly dependent upon the others. Every X-S was connectible to every other X-S. It looked good on the flat screen of the not-so-flat Minerva.

In the upper corner of the screen Minerva had plotted S-T-X on Cartesian coordinates. The figure resembled a jug handle, but nothing exciting. It was not yet Lloyd's elephant—for Lloyd's elephant was infinite. She thought awhile about what might bring these computer simulations to life.

Yes, of course. She had the answer. She would supply the quarvine, add it to the bottles. She would add vibration, add a little music. But what tune would she pick? She asked Minerva to patch in what she knew of Lloyd's problematic waveform—that sudden and undamped lumoscope oscillation—the full weight of Friday's LENS crash. Minerva chewed on the problem for several minutes—a considerable time for an OnNet 210 computer.

Finally, the jug handle and the bottles began to dance. The handle developed curls and loops then tied itself into a zillion knots. The big bottles shattered into zillions of little bottles that reassembled into one, zany bottle, just like the others only more so. Infinity had been conceived within a patch of finite space-time.

Julia beheld a beautiful strange attractor.

As strange were Minerva's remarks:

Initial condition error of the first type
 Bio-memory is insufficient for transcausality.
 The c scalar is limited to 2.997925×10^5 kilometers per second.
 Generate 3.5 cicabytes of bio-memory, then recreate the S-T-X continuum.

Joe Fuller was their crusty chief of engineering and maintenance, and to his chagrin, Lou Konnick's boss. Joe's prime responsibility was lasoptotronics. He had one or two days to finish a long list of tedious repairs. The Panigma Machine was needed for critical LENS calibrations. Joe didn't stomach the title role as Dr. Kovrani's scapegoat.

Friday's crash had wrecked hardware, software, plus some reputations. It had threatened to shut them down for weeks or months. Each lost day cost them about \$500,000, not counting the replacement cost for some of the world's most expensive and hard-to-obtain gadgets. He had just realigned the panoptolasers that enabled the Machine's resolver. It was tough work, his third realignment in less than two days.

Joe responded with a long sigh of relief after slipping gingerly through the manway that connected the resolver's interior with its external machinery. When inside the world's largest and most advanced kaleidoscope it was nearly impossible to discern reality from reflection. He reattached and tightened the electrical coverplate. He then carefully elevated the 3000-pound lasoptopak by hand and locked it into position. This was no problem since its weight was perfectly counterbalanced. Satisfied with the hardware he crawled out using the narrow service tunnel. He must verify that other critical jobs were not being ignored.

The tunnel ended in the laserium theater or lumitorium as it came to be called. The egress was always claustrophobic, and all the more so when Joe was in a hurry, which he was today. He craned his neck at the lumoscope. The theater was dark, but the viewing scope glowed of its own light—a product of construction and selection of materials. Joe paced the circumference of the device. It was no ordinary viewing scope. The silvery hemisphere known as the panoptoscope was a colossus eighty feet in diameter—a complex collection of mirrors, lenses, lasers and machinery that created the parascan or panoptogram.

The first question was inevitably: “Why so damned big?”

To answer the rare few with the opportunity to even ask, Joe always suggested portentously, “Hang around for the next show and you’ll see for yourself.”

The output or panoptogram was the ultimate hologram. The lasoptopak synthesized three-dimensional objects. But more importantly it could simulate the vast panorama of paradimensional space. But these wonders did not come without a price. Unfortunately the paradimensional insertion produced a kind of space-time vertigo that Doctor Klein had dubbed the panigo. The panigo was said to be worse (or for a few, better) than the plunge down a mountain-high, rocket-propelled roller coaster.

Joe would never forget his first encounter with Pandora, their pet name for the eighty-foot lumoscope. Larry Kato and Julia Moffett had prototyped the black singularity of Andromeda, which had nearly raised the lid (all 40,000 tons) off their geodesic dome.

For a time Joe Fuller reflected. The pearlescent orb returned the favor. He was the scope expert and knew her innards better than the lines of his face. Its resolver was composed of three sensolates that responded to software drivers. One of these sensolates could be rendered opaque if something went seriously wrong. The resolver served as a high-resolution screen or parascree depending on the mode of operation. Mirrex™ and rocentrix assemblies were mounted below the sensolates. The spectrostereoscope, a kind of very accurate optic nerve, and the lasoptopak, a servomechanism, were positioned beneath these devices at the base of the hemisphere.

The lumitorium was the culmination of their geodesic dome. The dome was nearly double the size of the famous enclosed roller coaster. It’s laserium had but twenty-five seats or cars on a train running along a circular track. The position of the train was fed back to the computers. In this way its navigator could adjust perspective, make the panoscene all but real. Usually, the number of limp spectators could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The top inside surface of the lumitorium was Mirrexed™ to enhance the paradimensional effect. Joe was convinced, as were the others, that Pandora needed no enhancement. “A criminal waste of raises,” he mumbled shaking his head. He had tried to tell them. So had Dr. Polk.

Dr. Allen “Sloe” Polk, the principal inventor of CEP, Computer Enhanced Panoptography, stood silently waiting as Joe circumnavigated the hemisphere. They had

been teamed together on holograms and lasoptograms at UltraNet and other Hardan enterprises for many years. As good friends, one picked up the other when the other was down. But the “downs” were beginning to outnumber the “ups.” Over the last few months their nearly inexhaustible optimism had been nearly exhausted. By all logic they were panoptographing the impossible. This rapid recalibration of their reality meter had severely challenged old bedrock of natural resiliency and good humor.

Allen said despondently, “Joe, I’m plain running out of ideas. The machinery’s possessed. Nothing explains the ghastly oscillation.”

The two holographers paused at this critical intersection, perhaps triggered by the cornucopian sight of Pandora herself—so many layers, so many dimensions, or perhaps by their memories, or even their premonitions of what her screens and mirrors might reveal.

Finally, “Sloe ... I’m real tired of going in there.”

“You shouldn’t have to. No need to test the drivers again ... till we get some answers.”

“Mechanically the resolver is fine,” claimed Joe, “which leaves us with a thorny problem. One of us must debate that last Eulerian with our Valkyrie.”

Joe had assumed the honor of delivering the bad news would be his and his alone. Bad news had always been Joe’s responsibility. The Valkyrie had been converting their usual disagreements into epic confrontations, particularly of late with ‘scope anomalies on the rise. Allen surprised him when he offered, “Why not flip this time for the privilege?”

Joe thought that Allen must be feeling lucky or light-headed. Allen operated much better at sea level and they both knew it. Allen extracted a quarter, tossed it and called heads. Unfortunately the coin turned tail and punched him out.

Joe was elated. “Allen, you’re clearly the best choice. The lady tolerates you while I’m currently *numero uno* on her excrement list.”

Allen complained, “Wow ... I’m suddenly dizzy. I don’t relish dancing with Brunnhilde. I’m at the end of my rope.” His already wide pupils expanded even further. Allen had just comprehended his own metaphor and didn’t like it.

Joe laughed disrespectfully. He did a little dance of his own, in Sloe’s honor, a kind of ridiculous jig in slow motion, punctuated now and then with a gruesome twitch. “The end- of-my-rope dance,” he expressed as unpleasantly as he knew how.

Allen ignored Joe’s performance as he lamented, “Julia’s spent two days inside the Light Shell ... has not even started the AIs yet. How can I begin to confront her?”

“She’ll flash those killer eyes of hers ... those pointy, purple daggers ... and you’re fried to an asteroid.”

“They’re like power lasers,” replied Allen. “They penetrate the surface for gristle and sinew—”

“—Or the lack of both. Sloe ... tell me something I’d really like to know. Why should software that’s worked for months suddenly go completely nuts?”

“I’m no expert, of course, but it’s no ordinary software. It’s the ultimate code. Improves itself with each probe of the continuum, each enema of the constipated beast.”

“What do you think happened on Friday that unimproved it so much?”

“Can’t get the straight scoop. All I know is that Lloyd was piloting with Max manning the isocon, Owen ... in the lumitorium. Then Ivan shows up in a royal snit over Lloyd’s lack of proper authorization or some bureaucratic humbug ... a strict point of procedure.”

“Ivan never attends any of Lloyd’s scans. So why now the fuss?”

“Yeah. So what was he doing there at five in the morning ranting and raving like a maniac? And there’s that story about a bundle of papers.”

Joe rubbed his bewhiskered chin. “Scrolls ... I heard ... something about ancient scrolls ... and an OHM box ... an OHM box. What a story ... huh?”

“What could be the connection? And where did these so-called scrolls come from? Out of the blue?”

“Also when ... Sloe? That’s the other question that bothers me a whole lot. “Where and when? Where ... and when? This damned machine. Can the knowledge we gain be worth the pain?”

Allen admitted, “Well ... I’m procrastinating. Let me have all your Gauss-Ostrogradskii data. I’ll humble myself ... beg for her majesty’s mercy.”

“Sure ... all done ... over an hour ago. I dropped the data down to your compset. All the data you’d ever want and then some. Too bad ... it will not help one byte.”

“Joe, if and when we ever fix this thing I’ll give you a peek at my latest synthogram. The graphics are my best so far. They’ll blast you right out of your skivvies.”

“I have no doubt of that. That last one had my shorts buzzing for over a week. Are you sure you’re not peddling them on the Black Net?”

“Would I tell you? But it’s time to slay the dragon lady. If you can break later for some chow ... call me. And wish me a schooner of Luck®.”

“Sloe, all the Luck® in O’Flattery’s taproom won’t help you.”

As Joe left the lumitorium he spied his relentless nightmare—Lou “The Genius” Konnick reporting for work. Lou had heard, but never objected to a moniker that he clearly failed to comprehend. Lou reported late as was his habit. He was an expert in every field of human activity except a full day’s work. But when you were as smart as Lou thought he was, you didn’t have to worry about performance or punctuality.

Joe overtook him, which required no real effort. Joe inquired sarcastically, “Good evening Lou. It appears you’ve a busy night. Will you finish the work order on time?”

Lou mumbled as he fanned the air with Joe’s instructions. “I’ll paint the goddamned place in my spare time. It’s not gonna be possible to replace all the SBIs tonight. You should talk to somebody before you hand me this kind of crap. You guys on the first floor have no idea what’s going on. I ought to just quit.”

Lou had the relatively simple task of maintaining the isocells of the four isolation chambers. Regardless of the assigned task he always complained more than anyone.

Joe lied outrageously, “Lou, you’re one of my key guys. I know I can count on you for the tough jobs.”

“Then pay me like you mean it. Heh ... I’ve gotta get goin’ ... can’t hang ‘round jawin’ with the management. Won’t look good.” Lou sauntered off at his usual amoebic pace.

Joe had to forget about Lou Konnick. It was crucial that he talk to Lawrence Kato, their director of the compulab and cybernetics. Larry’s sophisticated neural computers were the brains of the Panigma Machine. To reach Larry and his cyberplex from the lumitorium, Joe descended two levels bypassing the first floor offices, the meeting rooms and the few amenities. The basement contained the compulab, the cleanroom for maintenance, plus the four isolation chambers. The lowest dome level or subbasement was exclusively Joe’s territory. These “catacombs” had become his shop and storeroom.

Joe left the bright corridor of the basement and entered Kato’s lab poorly lit. Shadowy figures like black, cloth cutouts collected and dispersed like hobgoblins in a moonlit field. They gathered around the core analyzers remindful of huge, old-fashioned vacuum tubes. Occasionally a dark, cutout head would rise up from one of the scattered workstations, parked at all angles like Coney Island bumper cars, before disappearing once again inside the darkness of their consternations.

Joe moved forward carefully as if he glided on a layer of fog. Larry had to be somewhere among these shadows. It was not easy to understand how anyone could work in such a place, even with the light from below. Though somewhat enfeebled by Friday’s crash, the abundant floor space of the compulab was aglow like a hotel’s pool after dark. Larry Kato rose up unexpectedly from his crouch. The sight of his green-glowing face, of arms and legs rising as if from the depths of the sea was a bit unnerving in spite of the fact that Joe had seen this “rising from the water” many times.

Larry was engaged in the reassembly of parallel OHM processors rendered fluorescent in green, floor light. Joe cringed at the sight of so many intricate components scattered over the clear Lucinite. But it never helped to mention this concern to Larry.

The fit and trim, broad-faced Larry was in an affable mood in spite of the two million dollars on the floor. He whispered mindful of the others working in the lab: “Nettie will be ready, but we’ve still got problems with Pandora. Julia’s taking a break from me. And I’m taking one from her.”

“Where do you think I’ve been all this time?” answered Joe in a voice too loud for the uneasy comfort of the lab technicians. He simmered down. “I’ve just realigned the L-optics for the umpteenth time. Sloe’s bracing before he goes in to question her expertise.”

“Well ... a good one. Love to see it, but I’ve got important things to do. The lady’ll show extraordinary patience and forbearance, explain things to leave no reasonable doubt. Then she’ll melt him down with her laser eyes and suck him up for a midnight snack. The red hourglass ... underneath ... I can see it now ... filling with her deadly rubicide.”

“What ... rubicide?”

“Worse than cyanide ... a fatal red like a dose of blood poison aimed for the heart.”

“Whatever you call it ... however you describe it, it won’t be pleasant.”

“Horrible. By the way, Joe, you should also know that Ivan the Terrible was down here asking questions about Friday. But what could I tell the guy? The man stirred the shit.” Larry loved to stir a little himself. He also referred to Dr. Kovrani as Dr. Psychic and Dr. Baumer was Dr. Physic, the elephant’s proctologist.

At various locations of the lab, Minerva reported in rich holographic detail of red laser lines and numbers the current state of the shell and core. It was Greek to Joe. He inquired, “What does Minerva have to say about Friday ... about Nettie?”

“Nothing of much use ... though there is one thing. I can tell by this OHM_{ic} catastrophe on the floor.”

Joe stared at Larry as if the latter had mutated into a little, green sprite with hair standing wire-brush straight as if galvanized by the OHMs.

Joe found his voice. “You’re gonna tell me the—”

“Yeah ... the mnemonic power was enormous ... a new record. Where do you suppose it all went?”

“By my reckoning and reconnoitering into Pandora’s lasoptopak,” said Joe.

“But the ‘scope’s not our only problem.” Larry whispered, “There’s the field.”

A narrow, holographic beam transected Joe across the chest. He dodged the laser light unnecessarily and asked, “You mean ... the contingency?”

“Yeah ... the local background value.”

“The likelihood?”

“The unlikelihood.”

“What about it?”

“Steadily going up since we started measuring this stuff six months ago. And since Friday it’s jumped up a whole bunch.”

“Supposed to do that?”

“What do you think? Kind of like the temperature of the deep ocean or the ozone concentration in the upper atmosphere ... it ain’t supposed to change too much too fast. When the field increases it could mean we’re nearing a hole ... a weakening in the premises of cause and effect ... one thing making any kind of sense from the prior event.”

“Discontinuity?”

“Might be. Well ... I hope not ... but at a minimum it’s inimical to the LENS and your Pandora.”

“Have you ... you know ... told Kovrani?”

“I didn’t mention any of this to him. He’s not been exactly candid either. Everyone’s so slippery these days. Who’s to trust ... only you and me ... I guess?”

Joe replied, “I don’t even trust myself. And what’s this big scan that he has cooking. Know anything about it? He’s a basket case. Now, he’s turning me into one.”

“He’s connived something with Leonard Moss. Joe, that’s all I know. It’s not even logged in. Supposed to be a high, government secret.”

“Has Baumer been in today?”

“Saw Lloyd and Henry a few minutes ago. They’re practicing for tomorrow’s meeting ... a real ugly prospect. I’m thinking seriously of coming down with a case of panoptophobia plus a little of Nettie’s revenge.”

Joe felt a painful, sympathetic twinge in his lower bowels.”

Larry continued, “We’re lucky that Nettie checked out, but who knows if she’ll stay checked. This is my last OPM. We’ve completed all of the CICs. So ... we’re—”

“But Larry ... the damned software?”

“Joe ... tomorrow ... it must all come out ... it must all be said ... what’s happening ... what’s wrong with the project ... what’s wrong with the Machine ... no matter what. Joe ... no matter what!”

Chronicler’s Note: More about Hardware and Software

Julia Moffett had programmed the Panigma LENS, Panigma Gate and the panoptographic software. She had also encoded the Panigma Button that was used to implement an emergency shutdown of the Machine if the conditions of the core’s contained continuum went suddenly supercritical.

The Machine's intelligence was comprised of four elements—a human pilot (or dream scanner) attached to an interface, some artificial intelligence, plus a number cruncher that was in itself two things.

The LENS pilots were linked to the network through the SBI interfaces installed in each of the four isolation chambers. Each of the isolation chambers contained three rooms, an antechamber, an isocell for the pilot and an isocon for a highly trained med tech.

Each LENS pilot also required a special computer called a Cybernet IC or CIC that enabled the translation between pilot and the supercomputer OPMs or Optimal Program Machines. The OPMs were the artificial intelligence hardware for the AI LIAR® software.

Each OPM was linked to the OnNet 210 that consisted of neural processors and memory units of two types—optical units called OHMs (Minerva), plus bundled tessera grown from a remarkable media (Nettie). The OnNet's primary function was to solve complex paradimensional field problems using the techniques provided by Baumer and Kincaid.

The heart of the OnNet 210 was the paracube or the software receiver for paradimensional space-time. The LENS, the Gate and the drivers that operated the panoptoscope were installed on the OnNet. The Panigma Button ran on two, independent OHM computers and power supplies that tapped into the entire network.

Of course all of this techno-babble is little more than boilerplate. And like the former and the latter it is much less than it sounds. The soul of the Machine answers not to any of their nicknames—names like Minerva, Pandora or Nettie. It is a single word that does not pass easily through human lips.

Chapter Nine: The Genius

Later that same Evening

A palliative blue emanated from inside the dome stairwell. This cold compress for the eyes was Allen “Sloe” Polk’s ergonomic inspiration intended to minimize retinal shock when one entered or left the lumitorium. Of course because of the glow’s unusual source, the walls and ceiling were uncertain, hence never precisely there. But Sloe’s “bluing of the brain” could not minimize the effect of Pandora, nor could it soften Joe’s steps as he descended the stairs after another inconclusive test of her central nervous system.

Following coffee and commiseration Julia, Allen and Joe, though tired, had parted in repaired, but not altogether restored spirits, for there was at least one more hurdle to overcome and it had little to do with Pandora and her finicky lasoptotronics. Joe made his mental notes for tomorrow’s staff meeting. He dreaded this particular meeting more than exorcizing their eighty-foot kaleidoscope.

As Joe left the laserium he spied Lou Konnick as he bolted from the change room. Lou carried a shoebox-sized carton conspiratorially against his chest. The man’s inexplicable transition from amoeba to jackal had Joe Fuller concerned. This, plus the puzzling fact that the Styrofoam carton was made to store Optical High Memory Modules or OHMs. Joe knew there were none listed on Konnick’s work order, one he had himself written.

It had not appeared that Lou had seen Joe, so Joe decided to follow. The business with the OHM box fired another painful ripple through his already tender bowels. Everyone in staff these days was preoccupied with OHMs and OHM boxes. Indeed, January 6th had fired a painful ripple through the entire complex, and like Pandora’s transient oscillation, the probability of an acceptable explanation grew more remote with each passing day.

Lou jaunted down two flights of stairs. Joe had a fair idea of his final destination. The subbasement storerooms were once notorious and nefarious hideouts. Less so these days, for there was a little problem with the subbasement that had literally grown larger over time. Any entry into the dome’s lowest circle was rendered a degree more exciting than would normally have been expected for a drab depository of spare parts.

The men descended through Nettie’s stratum, through the annulus that connected the basement and subbasement. Joe noted Lou’s reaction. It was really no different from his or anyone’s as they passed underneath Nettie. The idea of Nettie’s stratum hastened everyone along, made the trip to the subbasement a full cicabyte more interesting. Joe’s compensation was simple. In order to insulate and occupy his mind he recited the entire *Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag*. He repeated the whole thing as fast as he could as he held his breath. The symbolism of the descent would not have been wasted,

even on a numbskull like Konnick, but it was not the symbolism that caused the problem. Unlike their passage to the lumitorium the steps and railings were not the instruments of this illumination. Neither were the walls or the doors. Nonetheless, there was that intense blue-green glow. The source would not have been Joe's or even Sloe's choice.

The light inside the stairwell shown from above, from a relatively small patch of ceiling composed of clear Lucinite. For the past few days the light had waxed and waned. On this night it was unusually bright and thick. This kind of illumination had the unusual quality of being not only bright, but also thick. Joe Fuller, an expert in light and optics, had observed the thick light from only one other source—their panoptoscope, Pandora. In either case, it was easy to imagine that he descended into a preternaturally lit pool, its glow percolating at the periphery of the mind's eye. There was that persistent feeling that if he took too deep, too direct a look he would drown inside his own fear.

Both men buffered the anxious descent by mumbling old lessons. Emerging in the subbasement, Lou executed a laser line for storeroom B. The storeroom was replete with the expensive refuse of the past year, gadgets any mad tinkerer would trade his right ratchet for. Mercifully, the ceiling here was metallic and opaque and did not transmit the disturbing light from above. Instead, the corridor and rooms were illuminated in the conventional way, with a distribution of glass bulbs and tubes passing electric flux.

Lou burst into “B” as Joe held a smidgen back. Joe would wait, then catch Lou in the act, whatever his act was. As the door was closed the light erupted. To Joe's surprise he heard the unmistakably husky voice of Director Doctor Baumer. What enterprise could bring these two men together? Joe made a decision. The adjoining storeroom A was unlit. If the interconnecting door was open he might monitor the entire episode. He stepped through door A and proceeded with well-practiced care across an obstacle course of catoptric calibration equipment.

The interconnecting door was ajar, the room dark. Joe watched and waited. Suddenly, Joe wished he were far away, at O'Flattery's Pub swilling tall schooners of Luck® Pale Ale with his buddies. It might have had something to do with Lloyd and his appearance. The man stood poised like a pregnant polar bear awkwardly balanced for ambush.

“Mr. Konnick, you've kept me waiting,” growled the bear. “You were to be here at precisely six-thirty. It's now almost seven. Not feeling good? You don't look so good. I'm real concerned about your health.”

“Dr. Baumer, I'm real sorry sir, but I had to wait till the coast was clear. You know? People were late finishing up. You told me this was ... was just between the two of us.”

Lou gingerly set the OHM box on a large, unopened crate. They stared at the box and then at the crate as if both were ticking bombs ready to explode. “Did you look inside the box?” Lloyd asked. Lou Konnick turned suddenly white.

Lloyd took an intimidating step forward that caused Lou to chirp like a bird. Joe bit painfully into his lip and held his breath. He repeated the *Pledge of Allegiance* just in case.

Lou answered timidly, “Y ... yes ... I ... When you put it in with Sondra’s stuff I thought you meant for me to carry it out. You know? You were acting like you wanted me to get it out of there, so I did what I thought you wanted. I was kind of surprised later when I opened it.”

“Did you tell anyone what you found inside the carton? I mean anyone ... any of those turnip-brained guzzlers at O’Flattery’s? You see I know all about you, Mr. Konnick.”

“No sir ... not a word of it, Dr. Baumer, to anyone,” repeated Lou with a voice that cracked under the weight of the lie when he reached Lloyd’s name. Joe knew Lou lied. But Lou wasn’t the only liar.

The air had acquired a thick charge that flowed from storeroom to storeroom. Joe Fuller felt its prickly, corrosive heat sizzling over his sensitive skin. His mouth was cactus dry.

“I mean ... did you say anything prior to our little chat this morning?” added the bear as he moved in nose-to-nose with the famous loudmouth now atypically differential.

“No ... no ... nothing. Believe me. I didn’t think it was a good idea to talk. Dr. Baumer ... sir ... I agree with you that I should’ve returned it. I just sort of forgot ... didn’t think. I mean ... I—”

“Mr. Konnick ... you must understand me. You must understand that this box contains classified information. It would be best for you if I don’t inform him ... I mean ... Leopold Hardan. Do you get my drift?”

It did not appear that Lou did, but he nodded vigorously in agreement. His smart mouth, his genius, had suddenly abandoned him. His upper lip began to twitch. Lloyd’s eyes locked on to the twitch. He studied its amplitude and frequency like the scientist he was. He clearly enjoyed Lou and the situation. “Did you know there is a reward for the carton’s prompt and safe return?”

Joe watched this scene as Lloyd manufactured a smile as black as the septic pupils of a rabid dog. He then noticed a most unusual smell as if some strong chemical was burning. It was not electrical, this Joe knew.

“Dr. Phyz ... er ... I mean ... Dr. Baumer. That’s great, but sir, I don’t expect ... ner want any re ... ward.”

Lou tried gamely to smile, to show that he had some manhood left, but his face hung as limp as his ill-fitting trousers. The odd chemical smell grew steadily stronger. Joe thought that maybe it was burning hair, though he wasn’t sure that he had ever smelled burning hair. He ran a trembling hand through what was left of his own damp and matted strands.

“You must sign this government paper and the matter is over and done. You’ll get your reward in a matter of days. I promise.”

Lloyd placed an official looking document on the crate and indicated the exact spot where Lou was to make his mark. This Lou did quickly. He then risked a direct look at Lloyd Baumer for the first time. Lloyd forced Konnick to drop his eyes to the floor. “By the way, Mr. Konnick, aren’t you forgetting something very important? This forgetfulness is getting to be a problem for you.”

Lou’s perspiration flowed copiously like the Ganges during a monsoon. After a prickly pause, Lloyd asked, “Remember my gold ring with the large green stone? I asked you about it and you said you could get it back for me.”

“Of course, Dr. Baumer. One of the fellows here on the morning shift swiped it out of the box. But ... but ... I managed to ta ta ... talk ‘em out of it. I ... I ... I ...”

Lou removed the ring from his pocket and handed it over, careful not to touch flesh. Lloyd examined the soft band and the green quarvine. Apparently satisfied that both passed some key test he placed it on his little finger. The gold band fit snugly.

Lloyd appeared to enjoy an hallucination—some delightful mayhem at Lou’s expense. Time changed gears. Joe felt the switch—a painful resonance inside his skull. He swallowed a large, phlegmatic lump, then sourly burped it up. He didn’t remember ever feeling more nauseous with nothing substantial to throw up.

Lloyd asked, “Tell me truthfully ... Mr. Konnick. You having any problems ... any nightmares ... you know ... any real bad dreams?”

“Watcha mean? What’s this to do with ... with the ring ... the box?”

“Maybe very little ... maybe a lot more than you might think. I need to know some things if I’m to help you ... if I’m to help you make it through the next few nights. Let me put it this way. Are you noticing any queer noises? Do you sense anything hiding under your bed at night ... more than just your loyal dog Penny? Do you feel it on the back of your neck ... or in your crawl space?”

“No ... no! Course not. Heh ... how’d ya know I had a dog named Penny? I don’t tell no one ‘bout my dog.”

“Last night ... late ... or early ... at about two A.M. ... did you wake from a dream ... or think you had? Were there ropes ... hundreds of pale ropes dangling from the ceiling ... swaying in a breeze that you could not feel on your skin? Was there a strange blanket spread across your bed you had never seen before ... awfully cold and black? Were there orbs like eyes knitted in the wool looking up at you ... following you? Does the blanket do something queer? Does it suddenly unknit itself into hundreds of little creatures? Do you remember any of this?”

Lou did not speak. His eyes, distended, remembered if his weak brain could not.

Lloyd chuckled. “Exquisite needle work, but no gift from your Aunt Fannie ... Mr. Konnick. I can assure you of that. No gift from Fan.”

“Jesus! No ... no ... I ain’t seen nothing like this.” Lou started to back away.

“Wait just a minute ... Mr. Konnick ... I’m hardly through with you. There’s something else I want to help you with. Sometime later ... at about four that same night ... you open your eyes again. This time you’re back at your old job at Felton Packers. You’re a gofer in the rendering plant and you’ve gone down to the grease pits below the big wooden vats. You know? In these open vats they boil the fat from the animal hides and entrails. You recall any of this? Remembering any better? These questions are just to help you with your memory. I must if I’m to save you from a bad night’s sleep. How about it ... Mr. Konnick?”

With glazed eyes and dilated pupils, Lou nodded in the negative. He slumped. His hands went shakily to his knees for whatever support they might provide.

“Ah ... you’ve got it now, Mr. Konnick! The ceiling is so low down there you have to walked stooped like a monkey. It’s so slick and dark you have to feel for each step like a blind man. The slippery walls feed cockroaches as big as sparrows. But then you know all about it.”

Lou Konnick licked his lips. The man looked as if he was ready to chuck his lunch along with half his insides. His eyes were scanning rapidly as if suddenly returned to that night and its nightmare.

“You’re looking for something, but can’t seem to remember. That bad memory again. Tisk ... tisk on you ... Mr. Konnick. The one light bulb in the place shatters plunging you into darkness. Sadly ... there is no OSHA in your dreams ... Mr. Konnick.”

Lou assumed the puking position while making gurgling sounds.

“You grope blindly along trying to stay clear of the walls and the sumps. Don’t want to touch the oily walls. Don’t want to fall into one of those sumps. You bark your knee on something hard. You strike your last match and discover a large crate that is badly stained. Don’t need to say too much about the kind of stain, do I, Mr. Konnick? You know better than me what kind of stain it is. Lot worse than the brindle brown in your skivvies ... I can assure you of that.”

Lou shook, but finally managed to agree. He nodded affirmatively as he stared at his unpolished shoes.

“You touch the crate, press your palm against it, your ear against it. You feel it. You hear it too. Your match goes out. What did you hear, Mr. Konnick?”

“Breathing! I heard a thing like breathing from inside the crate.”

“Yeah ... the thrumming of life ... or was it ... was it ... life?”

Lou hyperventilated. “I think I’m gonna puke.”

“That grease pit is like this place in some ways. Maybe it is this place. And I’ve got a crate just like the one in the pits, Mr. Konnick. Got it just for you. If you open your

mouth too far, even to puke, I'm going to show you what's inside the crate. Do you get my drift ... do you finally see my point? I hope you do. I don't want you on my conscience ... Mr. Konnick. I might give myself bad dreams."

"Y ... yes. Please ... please stop."

"Good. Then our business is over. But remember this if you remember anything ... anything at all. Keep your stupid mouth shut ... or it's the crate. I'm not kidding."

"Yes, Dr. Ba ... Baumer. I un'erstand."

"Konnick, get out of here. Get back to work. And if you're smart you'll never come down here again. Never even think about it."

Lou Konnick scampered off as he gave his reward some serious consideration. Joe Fuller didn't move, couldn't think where to go.

The current crisis neatly averted, Lloyd Baumer broke into a boyish grin. He must remind Max Cole to see that Mr. Konnick received his reward. He crumpled up the bogus government document and stuck it in his pocket. There was nothing special about the storeroom crate either, though something special could be arranged if needed.

He studied the OHM box, then carefully removed the lid and looked inside. Everything seemed in order, and it didn't contain optical hi-mem modules. It was just the first empty container available on that fateful Friday morning.

Lloyd removed and unfolded the fine, high quality papers. His hands trembled slightly as he first checked out the letter. He sat down on the crate. He read the delicate script. Two short paragraphs near the end of the letter caught and held his attention:

In English:

"... the heavens confound me. Why am I suddenly denied their precious gifts. I speak not only of my life, though it hangs by the merest thread. I also speak of being handed the watch key only to find that the watch itself is broken. This is the cruelest punishment—far worse than the mockery I have endured from the lowest men.

"But I do not despair. It leaves behind a sour note. Trusting that you can distinguish the wheat from the chaff, a sincere offer is made to you—my beloved manuscript. Please accept it as my best effort and with my hope that it is worthy of your indulgence. Preparations are nearly complete. I will wait for your decision and your sign. Please spare me from a relentless Fate, for there is still very much to do."

The author had signed it. It was certainly not a modest description of events or his offering, but factual in so far as Lloyd could tell. The man's shaky signature held Lloyd's attention for several seconds. It had a magic of its own that never failed to grab him.

Lloyd carefully refolded the letter and returned it to the box. He now opened and studied the lengthy attachment. Lloyd absorbed the sublime manuscript with less trouble than the letter. He understood its special meaning. But even the author had underestimated it. It was worth more than words could ever tell.

This day had gone well, but tomorrow would present other challenges. He collected his treasures, headed for the door and Pines' Roost.

Chapter Ten: Strange Distractors

Tuesday before Dawn, a cold January 10th

Fatigue sought every fissure, every crack and crevice as if their once soft convolutions had been hammered from quarry granite.

Larry Kato entered the Emsley Room a whisker ahead of Henry Kincaid. Neither man had slept. In contrast to this disheveled and bewhiskered pair there were two that lent a little dignity to the room. A portrait of Thomas Warren Emsley hung beside his close friend for many years—the President and Chief Executive of the United States.

Other historic portraits dignified the room—the groundbreakers themselves—Boltzmann, Maxwell, Helmholtz, Hertz, Mach and Einstein. Also as prominently displayed was the Institute's quixotic mission:

The Institute for Physico-Psychic Research is both enabled and invested by an Act of Congress to explore the peaceful application of Light Enhancement by Neural Synthesis (LENS) for the general welfare and prosperity of mankind.

Though none of the staffers were able to repeat it, all could quote the incredible cost of the LENS project. And all could quote the weight of the glass, conduit and steel in the Panopticon, the largest geodesic dome ever built. To those with some degree of imagination it may have resembled an immense, but overturned, silver bowl. Subtending about fifteen degrees of the arc of the bowl was the Emsley Conference Room resembling a notch in its metal rim masked with clear tape. This is where analogy and clarity ended, for last night's probe had produced only anomaly and opacity or in their more appropriate words: "The grandmother of all panigmas."

Larry and Henry took seats at opposite ends of the table—a kidney-shaped monstrosity that weighed a couple of tons. There was no warm New Mexico sun shining through their gloom. Henry stared into his mug of cold coffee, at its cream coalesced into oily balls and strings. He had been summoned at 2 A.M. to help repair the LENS. By 6 A.M. his head and stomach traded places like the ranks of a brass band on maneuvers.

Three more bedeviled and beleaguered staffers shuffled in. There was Allen Polk and Julia Moffett followed by Joe Fuller—like the before poster for the Sleep-Ez Caplet Company, ironically the largest employer in the dreamy town of El Rasigo, pop. 3300. It was an angry and anguished convention before it had even begun. Tony Mirigliano, their new Director of Parapsychic Research, entered full of good mornings. It was clear by the alabaster of his eyes that unlike the others he had not been up all night.

The government's special representative, Leonard Moss, harangued and hounded Maxwell Cole. Max kept up the accounts, which forced frequent dealings with the officious Moss. Budgets were the farthest thing from Max's attention right now. Max grunted, adjusted his bifocals, and took his seat next to Henry as he pretended to peruse the Albuquerque Sun's want-ads. The latter noticed, but preoccupied with his plight did not look up, did not acknowledge Max's theatrics as good fellowship would have prescribed.

Doctors Kovrani and Baumer appeared next in this cast of characters. The bearded Kovrani ceremoniously removed his Lenin cap and greatcoat while appearing to stare through the oak table at something prostrate underneath. The psychologist was not so revolutionary as his garb would suggest. A hatless Lloyd, warmed by old gifts—his scarf and his genuine Sherpa coat, removed both with Julia's cool assistance. An unusual signal was passed from one to the other, a kind of panigma all its own. Meant to be unnoticed, it was, except for Max who missed little, but said even less.

Polk and Fuller milled about the room as if zombies in the *Night of the Living Dead*. The other staffers had already collapsed into their leather, comfort-recliner seats. With no joy, Ivan prepared to convene the meeting.

All were jolted by the unexpected appearance of Leopold Hardan. He stepped from the corridor into the large room now suddenly too small. Surprise and alarm passed like a dark and evil nimbus over Ivan's face. The flamboyant Leonard Moss continued to babble. Ivan cleared his throat, took his seat, before launching his gambit. Moss recognized the cue, clamped down painfully on words still hatching in his mouth.

"We'll get started," Ivan began, "but let's all welcome Mr. Hardan to our meeting. Mr. Hardan, we're pleased you could attend. If I'd known you were in town ... I ... well ... er thanks for joining us."

"Smooth," muttered Larry Kato into his collar as Hardan took a seat not at the table, though there were several open, but along the wall under the portraits.

A lazy bobbing of heads followed Ivan's lackluster and impromptu introduction. Hardan sat motionless. He made no indication that he wanted to speak. After an embarrassing silence, Ivan continued, "First, I'll present a summary of what's happened since early Friday morning." He inhaled. "I arrived here around 5 A.M. to a serious situation. I was informed of certain things. Mostly, I was told very little. Later, I had to discover for myself that the computer core had crashed. To make things worse, I could find out nothing of the parascan itself ... nothing of its objectives. But I had my suspicions."

Ivan paused dramatically to let his thinly concealed warning sink in. He glared at the circle of mannequins—a reflection of stuffing and plastic that had become the look and feel for these tribal confrontations. With careful modulation he continued: "The LENS normalizer (Panigma Button) had not engaged to mitigate a LENS transient. As a result, the panoptoscope was hit hard by the shock. To further complicate the complicated, all subsequent attempts to restart the core, shell and LENS, plus the other subsystems were unsuccessful.

“After two frustrating days we agreed to start over. We reloaded the operating system, most of the high logic, except of course for the AIs themselves. We also rebuilt the lasoservers. Mr. Fuller realigned the lasoptopak not once but many times. Gentlemen and dear lady, these are the few facts I’ve been able to sift from an incredible morass of inconsistency. Evaluation has continued until very early this morning. Now ... let’s have your recommendations. Mr. Fuller, please go first.”

Lloyd interrupted, “I must caution everyone that we still don’t know what caused the crash or why the Panigma Button failed to save the core. To date, we cannot recover the databanks to any useful degree, but we’re still sifting through the morass (snicker). Dear colleagues, I can only conclude that Panigma Button did not detect a fatal error. This has me concerned about the cause of the crash.” He stared coldly at Ivan Kovrani as he continued, “But we must be cautious. To connect people to the computer before we thoroughly understand the situation is irresponsible and unforgivable.” He gripped tight the final word skewering his bearded, though weak-chinned opponent with each syllable.

The circle of “mannequins” waited stoically for Lloyd to loosen his hold.

Ivan responded sarcastically, “Anything else you can think of? My dear Dr. Baumer, I intend to act responsibly. I don’t appreciate the insinuation I am unforgiving after three years of your shameless flimflammy.”

Lloyd replied, “As usual you’re not listening. And what about last night?” He bent his smile into a sword that cleaved another slice from the bearded edifice. Satisfied with the result, Lloyd leaned back and waited.

Ivan collected his thoughts and argued, “Last night’s test was carefully monitored ... the input power level and amplification were extremely low. Last night was not the problem. Friday ... Friday morning was the problem!” Ivan reverted to a whiny tone. “Naturally, Lloyd, we’re interested in hearing your conclusions ... once you’ve concocted your story. For now, I’d like to hear from Mr. Fuller.”

What Lloyd had concocted he now revealed to some small degree. His counterfeit smile was shed laboriously like a spent snakeskin. Underneath this mask there was another, the spirit if not the embodiment of an entity briefly exposed to life. Max was reminded of the Harpy that brooded in the Roost. But this was something much more than an ordinary ogre in human form. It was something hatched from Lloyd’s dream cocoon. He had seen enough to scare him even if he had not seen it all. He had seen enough to fear for Lloyd’s frail heart with Owen Klein hours away. He turned to Henry for sympathy, but there was no definitive response. Max could see by the helplessness in Henry’s eyes that it was not because the man did not want to help. He did not know how. This was an aspect of Lloyd, for that matter of any human being, that none save one had likely seen before.

Several seconds were painfully stretched out. Lloyd unclenched his fists, then his look of almost inhuman malice. Breaths were expelled. Lungs were refilled. Joe Fuller nervously coughed. He reshuffled, then searched through his myriad statistics, finally setting them off to one side. Printouts slid off the table to a “damn it” of frustration.

Joe tried to restack them, but gave up. He began, "Sloe and I were finally able to focus the 'scope manually. We still don't understand the crash or the impossible power surge of the lasers and prelasers. It's left us with a huge problem. Neither Light Shell nor LENS can control the tracking. Sloe and I feel the instability is the result of the primary software. In plain language it's not the 'scope. It's the machine code." Joe waited nervously for what he knew would follow.

Julia did not disappoint. "Joe, it's too easy to blame code when the underlying mechanism is at fault."

"Not blame, Julia. Not blame at all. It merely follows from the Eulerian response. Don't you agree?" Joe looked to his buddy Sloe for help. None came that was to any measure noticeable. Sloe appeared only half-awake.

Julia added, "Consider the big picture. We've run the 'scope drivers for months ... not recorded Pandora for months. So what's the plausible answer? Joe, you tell me."

"Julia, have you considered the current state of the LENS ... and the artificial intelligence?"

Julia nodded triumphantly. "Mr. Fuller ... Joe ... this is my point."

Allen "Sloe" Polk stirred, finally interceded. "Julia, that's what Joe's saying. He's not questioning the software."

"Allen, listen to me. I don't mean that he should not question any of this. We all should. But the whole system's at issue. It's not the same. Nettie's not the same. What was most affected by the 'scan of January 6th? Joe said it himself. Jesus ... we all know what's going on ... but no one will wrap their tongue around it, taste it, and just say what we all know is the freaking truth."

"We've a bad situation here," advised Larry Kato. "As you all know we decided some time ago to give Nettie virtually a free hand. Today we pay for this decision. This new intelligence once in will not so easily be removed. The engrams have adopted a new structure ... our computer crystal, so to speak, has assumed a new morphology."

Julia hastened to add: The reconfiguration of the biotesserae have consumed enormous energy ... energy we didn't have. Where did it come from and where did it go?"

Larry interrupted: "Julia, I'm afraid they don't understand. It is not easy. My friends, think of the energy stored in a single strand of DNA, then think of all the strands inside Nettie. This is how it works. I'm telling you ... we must reconsider ever restarting the Machine."

"Larry, this is ridiculous," scathed Ivan. Look around you. Do you not see it? What is all this money and talent for?" Larry counted the knots in the oak between flashes from his burgeoning ophthalmic migraine. He stiffly replied, "Ivan, I'm trying to tell you something. This last Eulerian is symptomatic of a discontinuity in space-possibility-time. There is incredible tension ... incredible resolve on the other side."

Ivan interrupted again. “Larry, this is pure claptrap and getting us nowhere. Henry, you piloted this morning. What do you think? Are the AIs possessed with ... with some dark and sinister purpose between the lines of code?”

“Lines of code ... lines of code,” Larry repeated with disgust. He left his seat and walked toward the window with all eyes following him.

Henry puckered his lips scholarly and philosophically. “Purpose?” he repeated. “We forget that we’re still dealing with a machine, though a very adaptive one. And Larry’s right about the lines of code. Let me say this: Nettie creates patterns while knitting a vast, but subtle tapestry.”

Ivan asked, “Please, Henry, explain yourself.”

“There are extraordinary patterns. As to purpose ... it’s true we’ve encountered considerable mnemonic power at an incredible parangle. And though interesting I believe it is benign. I also believe that it can be explained and probably circumvented. I am talking about nonlinear behavior far from equilibrium. I’m talking about a strange attractor ... deterministic chaos with its theory for snowflakes, tornadoes ... the origins of life. I’m talking about a dimple, a disturbance in the continuum of paraspatial probability, the acausal fabric of space-time.”

Larry contemplated the sun, a common star, rising over their azure blue mountains. With his remote controller, Fuller adjusted the timbre of the bipolarizing blinds eliminating the weblike diffraction pattern cast upon the wall. Larry returned stiffly to his seat. Leonard Moss mumbled something profane probably meant to sound quite profound.

Ivan asked, “Henry, is this possible with a computer? Do we face an entelechy ... a kind of digital demon like Larry suggests?”

“Such an attractor is possible. As for digital demons, I know nothing about them. If I were to personalize this phenomenon I’d refer to our adversary as a lunatic-genius ... hardly a demon. His artistic creations would be beautiful if not so frustrating to our ambitions.”

Sloe Polk asked, “Can we eliminate your attractor with some altered panoptoscope parameters?”

“Goes much deeper than parameters,” advised Henry. “It goes right to the nature and power of mind ... of Nettie herself.”

Larry exclaimed, “That’s what I’m saying! I don’t mean to sound melodramatic, but something extraordinary is going on. Conventional wisdom, strange attractors, your tornadoes and snowflakes will not explain this rare glimpse of infinity.”

Julia was reminded of the zillions of zany elephants, the dancing bottles of Minerva’s simulation. It seemed ill advised to mention them now.

Tony asked, “I don’t understand this concern over the artificial intelligence? Can’t we just reload the AIs and start over?”

Julia explained, “The AIs are not like lines of code. They augment our standard code using rules that evolve from actual pilot experience.”

Henry added, “They’re essential. Without them the LENS would be mnemonically ineffective. The AI rules represent many months of tedious and expensive trial and error. A reload is out of the question if we—”

“And of course there’s another matter. It’s just flat impossible,” snapped Larry. “There is the practical matter of the biomass. There is no way to reverse the process of bioneuresis without placing a small nuke inside the neuroplenum.”

There was a look of shock from around the table. Ivan looked at Larry as if he had just farted in front of Thomas Emsley and the President. “Let’s not go into that. Sorry ... Larry,” snorted Ivan, “but we must go with Henry’s attractor. What’s next, Henry?”

“Do we need more parascans?” asked Sloe Polk. “Don’t understand how they’ll help. But what else will?”

“Some time to think,” responded Henry.

“We agree. After some rest,” suggested Julia.

“I mean time for Nettie. She just needs some time to mull over what’s happened to her. Now that the LENS will run, I think Nettie can isolate the attractor and heal herself ... that is ... if we have any patience left for patient thinking.”

“Henry ... how much time?” queried Ivan insipidly.

“We’ll have to ask Nettie. But I feel we’ll know something within a few more days. The best way to find out is to scan with a soft voice at low power ... to talk to her through the CIC interface. I’d like to give it another try. I can start another test tonight ... that is ... if everyone agrees.”

“I most certainly do,” said Ivan. “We seem to have nothing better ... er ... well ... really nothing else at all.”

Lloyd warned, “Henry, you know how I feel about this kind of scanning with no safety net.”

“Went okay last night, Lloyd. We used the new preamp monitor plus a lot of attention to the CIC.”

Lloyd cautioned, “I’m still concerned that we have no Panigma Button. If you encounter another transient only a healthy Nettie can bail you out.”

“Julia’s working on it. We won’t attempt another parascan till she’s completely satisfied.”

Julia assumed a sarcastic pose of satisfaction.

“Then it’s a go,” Ivan proclaimed. “We must get back on schedule. We’re losing more than money. Our thin credibility’s at stake.” He deftly switched topics. “Tony, how’s the screening of our test group coming?”

Tony suppressed a sneeze. He fluttered the words: “Sondra has interviewed twenty new candidates. It’s been her experience that no more than half will actually make the final cut.”

“Please have one ready by Friday night, another in three days. Let’s get this project back on the schedule before—”

Unexpectedly Moss asked, “Tony, is Jean Phillips on your list?”

Ivan sputtered, “Ah yes, Tony, the lady with the ... uh problem ... the bad ... er ... what’s her current status?”

Tony acted surprised. “Dr. Kovrani, I don’t know for sure. I don’t recall the name ... Jean Phillips ...”

Ivan explained, “She’s very important. You must fit her in. We should discuss, though there’s no need to tie up the whole team now.”

A furtive, bewildered glance passed like a foul joke around the table. Ivan requested, “Let’s have all the issues resolved no later than Thursday. I know you guys are exhausted, but we must get back on schedule. There’s one more thing, then we can all get back to work.” Several of the group expelled low and weary “hurrahs.”

Ivan announced, “My esteemed colleagues, we’ve been afforded the special opportunity to justify our time and a considerable investment.”

Max looked cynically, then quizzically at Lloyd, but the old man betrayed no reaction. Ivan dramatically clasped his hands and waited.

Hardan finally spoke. “Well, Ivan, don’t keep us in suspense. We’re all dying to hear what you have to say.”

Ivan obliged his audience. “As you all know, we’re required to investigate the psychotherapeutic properties of the LENS. Leonard and I have been informed of a severely ill patient—”

Lloyd roared, “We aren’t even close to anything like this. Computer time’s too valuable to be wasted on grandstanding.”

Ivan flushed to a chronic shade of vermillion. “Grandstanding!” He emitted a string of gibberish before finally ejecting the words: I know what caused ... what happened ... what you did. You used the drug. You dilated the LENS to the point of tearing the fabric of space-time. Now, you can’t close the wound ... can’t ever know the damage done.”

“You’ve been listening to all those little voices inside your head again.” Lloyd folded his arms as he leaned back smugly. “You have demonstrated, time and time again, an abject failure to comprehend.”

“And by God, you’ll be the smartest man in Hell.”

“And you’ll be the most pigheaded. You’ve still no idea what I’m trying to do?”

Ivan spit, “The problem is that I do.” He was now forced to explain something of what he knew. “Project reality with sufficient power ... capture its reflection with sufficient power ... and there is no difference between them. Anything is possible with enough power.”

Although many in the room might have responded in a similar way, have explained the material transposition as a macroscopic collapse of the classic, quantum, wave function, Lloyd preferred field theory and of course the belittlement of Ivan Kovrani and his pararelativistic theories at every possible opportunity. “Ivan ... stick to metaphysical speculation and leave the real science to the scientists.”

“Gentlemen,” pleaded Moss, “Let’s remember we’re professionals not street brawlers.”

Ivan’s face had sprouted an array of angry splotches. He looked like one of the rusting wrecks that had made a joke of the town. He said what he had intended to say all along. “Lloyd, you can insult me all you want, but the truth is that you’ve opened a hole ... opened Panigma Gate.”

“How do you explain the hole in the raw meat above your shoulders?” croaked Lloyd.

The retort came quickly. “You’re truly an arrogant bastard. Perhaps you need a few reminders. You don’t feel any obligation to keep Leonard and me informed. I know all about the missing OHM box. Max, could tell us about it. Owen too. So could one other. You’ve all forfeited your common sense, your humanity, if indeed you ever had them.”

Julia suspected silently as the others probably did that all this had been carefully choreographed at Ivan’s expense.

Lloyd replied, “I report the results of every test. It is true that we simulated a discontinuity. We had some problems with the LENS that I won’t deny. I accept full responsibility for the costliness of this failure, but the potential of the LENS does not end with dream research. We must explore all of the theory’s ramifications. If we don’t others will. Besides, nothing is ever gained without accepting some particle of risk. Look at the risk you’ve taken running the LENS without its normalizer. Our problems will be overcome. We just need our share of time without the interference of your bureaucratic meddling.”

Ivan had lost it. He was totally wasted. No one could bear to look at the wreckage. Even the so-called expert in this kind of bombast, Leonard Moss, had wilted under the Baumer barrage. Something hit the floor with a sound like a bludgeoned deer. It was heard, felt, but not seen. Startled faces probed the confines of the room while Lloyd ignored the

disturbance, and for a second time, shed his plastic mask. Dark blue orbs beamed from deep inside his glowing enmity. In their bewilderment he pressed home his advantage. “You’re consuming precious time and money with amateur psychotherapy.”

Ivan regained a semblance of composure and injected weakly, “We are required to explore the possibilities as spelled out in the Emsley Committee Charter. It does not go beyond our commission. Our funding ... our money ... our—”

“Must I remind you, Dr. Kovrani, that most of your money comes from me,” said Hardan, “and not from the government. I have interests beyond Emsley’s committee or his idiotic charter. I insist they be respected.”

Julia whispered, “Checkmate.”

“I’m not discounting your extensive contribution, Mr. Hardan,” Ivan lied, “but we have the opportunity to help a young man with a rare and severe form of schizophrenia. His name is Lester Holman. His family has given their consent ... has signed all the legal papers. He’s only eighteen. They’ve tried everything, but nothing works. He only gets worse and will die without our help. Leonard agrees.”

“It’s a famous case, Mr. Hardan, and should generate good publicity for the project,” added Moss eagerly, but it seemed much too eagerly.

“We don’t want publicity you jackass!” Hardan barked. He excoriated the government man, Moss, with: “This is a secret project, not a Madison Avenue stunt. You stupid panjandrum ... your brain’s jammed up your ass tighter than a bull queer’s bazooka.”

“I know this case,” snickered Lloyd. “The boy is supposed to be possessed by the devil. They’ve even had him to exorcists. You will expose us to the worst kind of vilification. Haven’t we had enough?”

“Let’s calm down!” Ivan implored. “The Holmans did not leak that story to the press. And this is no stunt, Mr. Hardan. I only ask that we give the Holman case three days under tightly monitored conditions, and by all means absolute secrecy.”

Ivan panicked. “Lloyd, you will obtain the time you need to evaluate your theories if you will keep to the rules ... keep to the simulations until—”

“All our experiments use the simulator,” delivered Lloyd pompously. He was satisfied, but manufactured an expression of deep concern for Ivan and Leonard’s benefit.

Ivan asked, “Mr. Hardan do you support this ... this compromise?”

“Ivan, I’ll cooperate fully. And I apologize to Leonard for my rude outburst.”

“That’s kind of you, Mr. Hardan,” answered Ivan. “I too should apologize. But we’ve all said far too much. Let’s adjourn and get back to work before they sack the lot of us.”

Leopold Hardan chuckled fatuously through his long, brown teeth.

Henry took Julia by the arm. "Let's have some coffee and discuss our strange attractor." They followed their infamous wall mosaic (The Man in the Mural) to the first turn and entered the break room that they would have to themselves. The security camera tracked them silently to the table. Julia remarked that they ought not have spies in the break room. As she spoke the lights flickered on and off. She paced as Henry asked, "What has you in such a lather?"

"I'm not a horse. I just wanted to know what you thought of that."

"A fine meeting ... eh?"

"A sad exhibition. Reminded me of two men facing one another in a canoe, each one a maniac paddling furiously in the opposite direction."

"Reminded me of my attic niche, something from deep inside the tapestry, especially when Lloyd flipped out ... I have never ... Well, I knew it would be bad, but I didn't know just how much."

"But you didn't know about Hardan. Why does he show up?"

"He smelled blood, I guess. He's the one who should be exorcised, not that poor boy ... that Lester what's-his-name."

"His name is Holman, I believe ... Lester Holman. Were an exorcism possible," she expressed sardonically. "Hardan's I mean."

"Of course." He appeared to read her thoughts. "They'd be grateful demons ... yes?"

"Yes, but I was really asking about Larry's entelechy. Do you think he has something? I noticed that Max betrayed that beastly bitten look."

Henry muttered, "Larry is very tired ... and overworked like all the rest of us. He was distraught and upset and—"

"And you were less than diplomatic."

"I noticed that you didn't rush to his defense. You really think there's more to this than just Nettie and all the possibilities locked inside her vast neurocomplex?"

Julia rested her lilac-brown eyes, not unpleasantly, upon his hazel orbs and youthful face. "I know that Lloyd's scan left exotic shit. So does Larry. And so do you."

"Unimpressive if you ask me. Let's change the subject before it ends in a fight." He added irritably, "Okay with you?"

She shrugged. The room was suddenly cold, made colder by the angular shadows and the morgue pallor painted from yellows and grays. They both seemed to be thinking the same thing. He smirked and suggested, "In keeping with all the melancholia of last few days ... don't you think?"

“I think Lloyd’s full of shit, or in the least, a severe overdose of bitter prunes. Jesus ... he said it with a straight face ... simulated a little ol’ discontinuity. Real sorry ‘bout it Ivan. Mucked up a sixty billion dollar computer and turned reality into a rat pellet. But what do you guys care? None of you are probably still around anyway. Just shadows of your former selves ... erased like one, big, fat mistake.”

Henry poured coffee. “Here, this’ll warm you up, take some of the dill out of your pickle.”

“Won’t take away the smell. Farts! God ... he left farts ... vile, reptilian farts. I can smell them and they stink of that lizard, Hardan. I’m not exactly a rookie translating Nettie’s engrams and endotypes ... you know.”

“I know. So take your problems to Lloyd. There’s a real good chance you’re misreading the quar. Why wouldn’t Lloyd be totally straight with us?”

“How do you explain the Eulerian ... all the power ... plus things hidden inside boxes ... hidden in their schemes and bald-faced lies?”

Henry replied, “And you think this fellow Konnick has credibility?”

She bristled. “Ivan saw it too ... saw Lloyd with the OHM box. Why are you defending these guys?”

“I’m not saying there wasn’t something going on. It all goes back to their snit about the direction of the LENS. Konnick found himself in something that he didn’t understand.”

“No question, but divert some blood to your brain for a change and just think about what’s going on.” They looked up alarmingly at the lights as they blinked rapidly, then steadied after a few seconds.

Henry spoke. “You could listen to me for a change. It was their running battle and Konnick only made it worse. And this big deal about the papers is giving everyone nightmares ... the last thing we need. I’m sure they were some of Lloyd’s cals. Can you imagine for a minute what a tensor expression would look like to that imbecile Konnick?”

“You wanna bet everything on an assumption like that?”

“You wanna bet everything on an imbecile?”

“Which one?”

“Okay ... you win ... but—”

“It’s not about that. Let me try a different tack. What do you make of this renewed interest for ultra-thin space? ‘It can’t be done,’ he’s always said ... that was ... till now.”

“My dear, we’ve discussed this subject *ad nauseum*.”

“Thintime ... and now thinspace. I found his note file ... not so thin on the subject of the Faust Pill.”

“You’re right. It isn’t thin at all. It’s only warp ten against the solar drift. Nothing so ultra-thin just yet. But Julia, we should be working on the attractor. We’ve only till Thursday to cure Nettie ... to get her mind and ours pieced back together.”

“You talk like ... well ... I just think Lloyd’s renewed interest in tilting space ought to tell you something about what he’s really doing.”

“Of course. It’s an opportunity like we’ve never had. Thinspace! You marveled at the concept yourself. Don’t you recall?”

“Someday ... and soon ... we must explore that thin, but incredibly malleable substance between those two, radar receivers of yours.”

“It’s not so thick and brittle as some I know.” Henry leaned close, his nose merely six inches from hers. “Would advanced civilizations use normal space to communicate if thinspace was available?”

As she was about to speak, Henry answered his own question: “Perhaps our failure has nothing to do with the absence of extraterrestrial intelligence. Perhaps we’ve just been too stubborn to search the mode that makes the most sense. The traffic in thinspace could be legion.”

“We’ve legions of theory, but just a few OHMs of fact,” she warned as Henry railed on about the possibilities.

“Think of it, Julia. Many of us tap this superconductor without ever knowing it. Its existence could reveal the hidden universe.”

“I think you reveal more than you know.”

“Why must we always take opposite sides? I’ve worked out the basics. I’m not finished by any means, but why not take a look. Tell me what can be done with the Eulerian and Gaussian transformations.”

She attempted to coax him back from the stars to his home planet. “I’ve been trying. You aren’t listening. It has the disgusting aroma of Hardan. There’s a perverse logic to your Faust. I feel we’ve been duped into arming a deadly trap.”

“Nonsense. It’s called scientific curiosity.”

“It would be too easy for someone to tamper with the power, enlarge the window to lethal proportions. The brain would be roasted to a briquette. It would be like plugging a 60-watt bulb into 10,000 volts.”

“Julia, we have safeguards, security and the Panigma Button to ensure that no one gets hurt.”

“Henry, I’ll look at what you’ve done, but I’m going to think before I add your gimmick to Lloyd’s lethal bag of tricks. I don’t intend to be snagged by Faust, nor do I intend to snag someone else.”

“Julia, could we really be that stupid?”

“Hmm ... you stick to smart. I’ll stick to careful.”

Chronicler’s Note: For some the message had been received. The first phase of the project was over. The second was soon to begin.

Chapter Eleven: The Power of the LENS

It was a choice between survival and extinction. Nrczxa had learned to divine the heavens. And she had learned a modicum of tolerance for other living things. But for her kind, a notable exception was the biped, an acquirer of facts and artifacts, though no acquirer of knowledge or wisdom.

Could he be taught restraint? Probably not. But he could be taught respect. His gadgets were a prime example of his thoughtlessness, particularly his LENS and offspring far worse.

“When facing death turn the other cheek(s).”

The Institute in El Rasigo

A Blustery Monday Morning, January 16th

The little town of three thousand was besieged by its worst storm of the season. The local citizens expected seven inches of snow by noon, but twice that amount had been predicted for their azure mountains. Many El Rasigans rejoiced in the anticipation of a weekend of skiing, fun and frolic. The scientists that labored inside the town’s silvery landmark labored under none of these misconceptions.

Tony Mirigliano intercepted Julia as she trudged past the solemn guard. Tony exclaimed, “You’re late and we need you. We need Henry too. Can you reach him?”

She unbuttoned her coat, removed galoshes, gloves, knocked the ice from them. “You notice what’s going on out there?” she said with mild annoyance.

“Julia, what happened to your compuphone? Been trying to reach you for the past two hours. And Henry’s too. We all assumed you’d both be here.”

Tony blocked her path. He tried to smile.

She was a bit short of breath and temper. “He beat the storm ... I hope. He’s driving to LA to see his parents ... a few days escape from our lunacy. We should leave him be. Assume there’re no phones.”

“You ready to tackle another one ... you, me and Larry ... without him?” He gave up on the smile.

“It’s not the Holman case?” she asked anxiously.

“Damn ... I’d forgotten that one. No ... it’s not Holman. Been postponed. Don’t know for how long. But we had a real bad scan in any event. Crashed the computers ‘bout three last night. I got called in at five to help Sondra with a frightful mess.”

Julia closed her eyes, carefully removed her hat so as not to douse the carpet with a brimful of slush. “Are we talking down to the core ... to the bioneural itself?”

“Larry says just to the shell. Operating system and drivers seem to be okay. It was one of the Kovrani group that did it. Still don’t know why it happened. And there’s a complication. We really could’ve used you ... you know. Nettie is kind of your baby.” He added impudently, “It only took me a half an hour to make the drive on my balding tires.”

She moved reflexively like an unfolding flower. Using the wide brim of her hat she poured slush over his shoes. Registering total shock, he responded with something akin to: “Yikes!” It raised guard Conovar out of his chair, and for the moment, out of his trance.

She politely asked, “Can you give me a little more info than that ... something to take to my compset?”

“Why’d ya do that?” he asked while dancing deftly in frozen Loafers. She flashed her appreciation of his fine and fancy footwork with a vixen’s smile. The smile was fleeting. “What did Larry tell you about the LENS?” she insisted seriously.

Grimacing in icy cold shock, Tony replied, “Nettie shuddered for several seconds, then died for good ... will not restart for anything. Kind of like before. And once again there was no Panigma Button.”

She had him rapidly back-pedaling. She removed her coat, folded it to match the crook of her arm. “And how is our Pandora?” she inquired as he wrung ice water from his cuffs, during an awkward, bent and backward retreat to safety.

“Julia, what’s got into you?” He looked her in the eye. “Unlike you, our ‘scope is fine ... wasn’t in use. We can replay the scan whenever Polk and Fuller are ready. We need to take a look ... and the sooner the better.”

“Is it all there, Tony, both foundation and superstructure?” She looked him over worriedly.

“Larry says we caught a break ... everything’s intact ... with all the foundation we’d ever want.”

“May not be such a break. Well ... does Larry have any theories? We cleaned out Nettie real good. Does he think it’s more of Henry’s snowflakes ... or his own malignant malefactor ... the mother of all resolve?”

“Larry’s real sensitive about this, Julia. Since the LENS has run without incident for a couple of days he says it’s now yours or Henry’s problem to figure.”

“That’s Larry all right. So ... who’s in charge?”

“Dunno for sure. Maybe you. Dunno. It’s not Dr. Kovrani. He left in a hurry to see someone. Something that couldn’t wait. But he’s called in several times.”

“Distance helps clear the mind.”

“Well ... Fuller and Polk must have the ‘scope ready by now. We’ll see for ourselves. As I—”

“I’ll need time to settle in ... to look over the logs ... over the data. That is ... if you don’t mind?”

“No ... just don’t take too long. As I said—”

She shouted as she strode off: “I’ll meet you in the lumitorium in about thirty minutes. You can fill me then on all those pseudoparalogical theories.”

“Bye,” he said. Tony watched her. He thought: What a strange woman. So predatory. He wondered what it would be like with her. He dismissed the idea. He spun around with a squish, and then sloshed for the stairs.

Once inside her office she set aside her hat and coat, took a break with hot tea. She flipped on her compset. It required about ten minutes to absorb the tantalizing flavor of their problematical parascan.

Power and parangle had exploded off the chart. The system interpreter had documented about a dozen fatal LENS errors, but like Tony had said, the Panigma Button had never engaged to halt execution. The LENS had finally collapsed of its own weight. Even more significantly, the S-T superwindow had continued to expand eight, maybe nine seconds after the LENS had died, well-beyond full OnNet power until it too had vanished. And she knew full well that none of this was actually possible.

Julia felt like Dorothy in Oz. She gathered her notes and headed topside for Tony and the lumitorium.

He paced in the narrow aisle with one eye on the panoptoscope, one on the door. Earlier, he and Larry had agreed to warm up the prelasers of the lasoptopak. Julia burst into the room without warning.

Tony blurted, “Larry’s warming the panoptoscope.”

He received the full brunt of a cryogenic glare. His plumbing froze. “I can see it, feel it, Tony,” she declared with a voice that scraped like a tungsten-steel rasp.

“Yeah ... well ... we’re ready for the replay. First, I need to give you some background on the case.”

The panoptolasers reached their threshold power. A bluish-green light percolated inside the eighty-foot ‘scope. The strong odor of ozone was unmistakable.

“Tony, I failed to check the schedule. Who did we have in the isochamber? I’d like to talk to him before we replay the parascan. I assume that he can see me.”

“Not going to be possible. It was Jean Phillips. Remember her? She’s being treated in the dispensary.”

Julia’s eyes went desperately dark. “How bad?”

“They think she’ll make it. Your CIC interface probably saved her mind.”

Julia tapped her fist, then her notes several times against her thigh. “Tony ... how much CIC was—?”

“Thirty to forty percent of full capacity.”

“Shit!” She inhaled. “Tony, these are legitimate warptear values. Does Larry feel we had one?”

“He said he hopes not. Sondra’s gone nearly ballistic. Spent most of my time just trying to calm her down. Suppose this puts a slight damper on some of Dr. Kovrani’s theories of the healing powers of the LENS.”

“Hardly a joke, Tony. Why wasn’t she taken to East County General ... taken there immediately?”

“I don’t know. I think they called for an ambulance. And called her physician. Maybe it’s just the freaky weather. Maybe they can’t get through the jam of ice.”

“And Owen ... our Owen Klein ... does he know what happened?”

“He cancelled his trip. Came in ‘bout seven. Has worked with her for over an hour. They said she had some seizures. I know she’s in bad shock. So am I.”

“Any lawyers show up?”

“Not yet. But Moss has consulted with our eagles. I’m not privy to any of that. It is clear that no one wants anything to do with him. You know how he gets.”

“What’s von Baumer had to say?”

“He was here with Max Cole. Didn’t have much to say. I did review the case history briefly with Max. Dr. Baumer left before Kovrani did. This all seems so odd with Baumer and Kovrani. I admit that I don’t understand the game they’re playing?”

“Neither does Kovrani.”

The ‘scope performed a self-test of its power lasers firing several bursts at phantom targets displayed by the resolvers. This light show was over in seconds. However, its metallic “kapooms” had startled Julia. She had avoided looking directly at the panoptoscope, and as a result, demonstrated a rich vocabulary in a laserlike burst of four-

letter epithets. She soon recovered her poise. “Sorry ... you were going to go over the Phillips case history and I’m cursing a blue streak at you.”

“Jeez ... for a moment there I thought I was back in high school with Ben Smuts. He had some zingers like that. Hadn’t heard some of those words in years.”

“Nostalgia is great. May we continue?”

“Sure.”

“Well—”

“It’s kind of interesting. She’s sixty-two. The interview states she’s had debilitating nightmares for more than ten years. Phillips has been in and out of institutions and psychotherapy. The problem involves her father who disappeared with a friend under curious circumstances years ago.”

“From approximately where? Do we have any idea?”

“They were last seen in a place called Carrizo ... no Carrizozo. Funny ... a name like that.” Tony fumbled with his notes. “It’s Carrizozo all right. I jotted down some things, but it isn’t much. Most of it deals with Jean’s medical history.” He handed her his ratty looking notebook.

Julia scanned his scrawl, then inquired, “Tony, you know this place ... Carrizozo?”

“Never heard of it. You know of it?”

“Yes ... I do,” she added without looking up.

She paged through the remainder of Tony’s notes. “Tell me something, Tony. You’re the psychologist, not me. Why was Phillips allowed to participate with this kind of medical?” She hastily added, “Oh ... why must I ask?”

“You have the idea. It provides data outside the so-called norm. And Doc Kovrani goes for the real nut cases. Remember ... he’s this decade’s great healer.”

She rebuked, “Nice attitude ... nice mouth.”

“I know. I’m supposed to be a professional and not an insensitive yokel.”

She glanced at the monitor and at Larry waiting in the compulab. “Careful, Ivan’s looking for a few more yokels. What else? I can see that our cyber friend is getting a trifle anxious to hit the switch.”

The ‘scope appeared to expand, to fill the laserium with shadowy blue figures in all manner of size, shape and degree of reality. The reinforcement of the Mirrexed™ dome contributed to the feeling of being trapped inside Pandora, the 5-d kaleidoscope, on this occasion, like on so many others, a blue, submerged cavern. Tony and Julia were for all practical accounts, deep inside the hemisphere. All angles of reflection—back, front, left,

right, even past, present and future were tantalizingly revealed to their eyes if not to their common credibility.

Tony finished his briefing in spite of this surreal encounter with panoptography. He said, “Her father was a notorious character. I don’t think Jean gave his name. To summarize her story, he was something between a half-baked rancher and the local fool or tinkerer. The point is that he had a dandy feud going with the military. It was over land or something. Apparently, the locals still tell of it.”

“I qualify as a local ... well almost, but don’t recall a story quite like this.”

“You’re a local yokel, I guess.”

“Yes, a local yokel. And Dad was career Army.”

“That’s right. I forgot. But there’s more to it. Her old man resented the Army and the Army resented her old man. He may have been the more resourceful, for he played some nasty pranks. It grew very tense, a full-scale war between old Dad and the military police. Like tickling a bad-tempered dragon.”

“Yes ... the dragon,” she said staring into space. She was for the moment somewhere else.

“What? What’s that, Julia?”

He heard her whisper, “ ... tickling the dragon. I know all about this particular dragon. Push him too far and you are a cold statistic ... a martyr for science.”

Tony tried again. “I still don’t understand—”

“Understand?” she sighed. Never mind. The point is that the Army didn’t tolerate jokesters ... that is ... not if they weren’t safely their own.”

“Jean insists they locked him up ... then sort of forgot. Jean has been a first-class pain in the ass. About ten years ago the recurring dream started.”

“Specifically?”

“Better than me telling. Larry’s ready. The ‘scope’s ready. Let’s see the thing for ourselves.”

“Well ... then tell Larry to switch her on.”

Tony said, “Julia, we were lucky on this one and can save a lot of time.”

“How’s that, Dr. Mirigliano?”

“She’s cloaked her dream in layer upon layer ... worse than Schliemann’s Troy. She’s really crammed our banks full of interpretive superstructure.”

“Dr. Ding-Dong, just how will we get through it? This is being lucky? You said there was foundation.”

“That’s what I said. These layers are discrete and pliable. We can easily peel them away and expose the foundation, the underlying reality, and the root cause. We should go right for the root cause. Larry and I have set it up that way.”

“Of course. Let’s get going before we consume our year’s allotment from the power company.”

“It’s just that the actual event has been captured totally intact. I mean totally ... everything. We’ll see everything for the first time.”

“That’s the big point ... right? I thought you were in a real big hurry.”

“It’s these tricky details. Larry’s corrected for the light Doppler, so the S-T track will look almost normal ... that is ... almost.”

“So?”

“It’s an extremely high-level source. He’s compensated for that ... but it might be a problem.”

“Why are you telling me this? Are you going to rerun the scan or slowly jaw me to death?”

Larry’s voice crackled over the intercom. “Come on guys. What’s holding us up? The meter’s running.”

“Tony, can I tell him we’re ready?”

“Well, it’s the panigo. And Joe and Sloe aren’t here ... and—”

“You blame them? Don’t wimp out. I don’t like this panigo business either. Besides, there’s more in that ‘scope than just panigos. Tell Larry to start.”

Tony timidly waved the start signal to Larry.

Larry inquired, “Should we use the S-T sequence delay?”

Julia answered, “By all means engage, but not for the standard ten meter-seconds. Make it a thousand.”

“Hmm ... well ... okay ... you’ve got it.”

They took their seats on the train to Phillips. They both knew too well that the panigo could be worse than the nightmare. It was the price of entering paraspaces, of extracting its secrets. And they had no way to make the journey any easier. They had no pill, no program. And Dr. Klein had given the topic a great deal of thought.

Then it happened. Space-time turned inside out. The 'scope ruptured spilling a light as terrifying as it was beautiful. Its flux took their breath away. Tony grabbed what was handy, which was Julia. At that moment she didn't care. They witnessed a vast being with tremendous power and potential. It was no deity in the usual sense of the word, but the complete and essential Jean Phillips—a boundless continuum.

This happened because the paracube transfixed everything and discarded nothing. This included the possible along with the real. There was no essential difference since Jean was more than what she had been and done. She was the things she could have done, the things she had thought and dreamed. Paradimensional space was a book of the possible with pages somehow translucent and transfiguring, revealing the remembered and the "not remembered" with little preference or distinction. After all, there was none.

Though her being had no boundaries Jean did have a center. It moved or appeared to move. And it was the tracking of this center that caused the panigo. Few observers could teach the senses to ignore it. The panigo roller coaster occurred because the mind had to make sense of form and function whether possible or not. The center was the remembered Jean, the perceived history. It unwound backwards past her birth into alien territory. There it slowed to a crawl. And with it ended the panigo.

Tony and Julia were now inside Jean's dilemma looking upon a vast and desolate country. It was a dark night without moon or stars, without anything to recommend it. A breeze ruffled sparse vegetation. It was an inhospitable place, a landscape to avoid. A dark silhouette of mountains buttressed a purplish sky. Surprisingly, it was Julia that buttressed Tony. But Julia was no mountain. The scene reminded her of *Jornada del Muerto*—the desert with an ancient curse.

A tiny star appeared between two distant peaks. The star became two, twinkled, shimmered and grew bright. The two stars sped toward Julia and Tony. But these twins were nothing more prophetic than headlights. A military jeep came to rest in the desert, though it was no longer a desert, but more a wash or a wallow. Three of its four passengers de-jeeped, splashed rain that had collected in a ditch. The fourth man fought the dials of an old and out of date radio.

The first man out of the jeep prodded the other two. They walked a rocky path assisted by a single flashlight. They were soon joined by the nervous radioman. Two of the four men were uniformed MPs, the prodder and the radio operator. As they talked, the former's face was lit briefly by the prodder's beam as it darted back and forth between his and those of the two prisoner's. As if prodded themselves, the MPs finished and doggedly continued their march.

Tony noticed that Julia fidgeted, had forgotten to trim the angle of the train. He nudged her back to her business of steering Pandora from their locum car.

The other two characters, dressed in little more than rags, were possibly indigenous to the desert. Each face seemed etched, seemed worn by years of blowing sand. Light reflected from heavy, hand manacles, as they stumbled ahead of the MPs. The torch holder aimed

his beam at a rough-cut fellow that resembled a sand-weathered Walter Brennan. It didn't take a lip expert to get the gist of what this dingy ragamuffin told the MPs.

The two MPs were in a hurry, though their disheveled prisoners did their best to "unhurry" them. Each man cursed and kicked as though their very lives depended on it. Progress was slow, but they finally reached a small shed about one hundred yards from the makeshift road. One MP opened the door while the other tossed the vagabonds inside with a smooth and well-rehearsed motion. The MPs closed and padlocked the door, then hurried back to the jeep. They accelerated down the road and disappeared into the night. Nothing happened for a while. A weak light blinked on, then off, then on like an idiot's excuse for dashes and dots.

The Walter look-alike suddenly burst through a corrugated wall propelling tin siding several yards. He rolled over the siding, then collided with a large rock. Mostly mud and pain, he was joined by his irked companion preoccupied with a finicky, kerosene lamp.

The battering ram was wobbly, but had enough spunk left to berate his friend at some length. The exchange appeared in shadowy pantomime. The debate ended when Walter happened to remember his wounds, which gave his friend the chance to ponder their dismal surroundings.

The ponderer's gloom gave way to excitement, for he noticed something of promise in the distance—a bright beacon of hope. Their decision was made for them. The handcuffed pair recommenced their journey. It took the exhausted twosome about twenty minutes to reach a large and well-lit dump. Disappointment was clear from their stride and posture. There was no sign of the living, only a collection of every possible specimen of junk. Apparently, its previous tenants had cared nothing for housekeeping.

Broken machinery, steel beams, concrete, cables, tent remnants and even mattresses were scattered on the wet ground. They poked around like bums looking for hidden treasure. They looked as if they could have used some food and water. Walter opted for a stub of brass pipe using it to hammer the cuffs. This did him little good. The other fellow gave up early, found a relatively dry place from which to sit and grumble.

The morning sun peeked through the craggy mountains projecting brilliant violet and orange tracers. A bright flare exploded high overhead in a night sky. Walter argued again with his companion. Quite suddenly they stopped arguing to gaze upon the central structure—a ramshackle, steel tower. They both retreated for no clear reason as if startled by a horn or a scream. There was only eerie silence for Tony and Julia in the lumitorium.

The darkness was fractured by the burst of searchlights. The red glow of a single bulb appeared at the top of the tower, then a second, then a third in rapid succession, as if the bulbs were counting down. The third bulb remained lit as everything stopped, the searchlights in the sky, the rustle of a few remnants of tent, the measured drip of water from a sagging span of cable.

Walter fell to his knees. His friend froze to the sand. A single nanosecond was stretched over nine normal seconds.

The panoptoscope's primary resolver lapsed dark. Its emergency opacitor had deployed. The darkness pulled the parascopers from their seats as if a great pump had sucked out all the light. What happened next was worse than any panigo the pair in the theater had ever witnessed.

A magnificent blue-white star collided with the lumitorium. The dome rumbled, roared and relentlessly shook itself to bits. Tony thought earthquake. Shards of mirrored glass rained down. They both sought cover, though there was no cover. They pressed tightly against the floor and each other. Tony watched his life roar past. Julia yelled something he could not make out.

Electrical discharge pumped pungent ozone into the air. The machinery chattered as the panoptoscope fought its death struggle. It dimmed, but remained aglow briefly following the initial impact. The machinery and the delicate sensolates were on fire.

The pair struggled to their feet risking a look at the panoptoscope. It survived long enough to provide a glimpse of Hell. They stared in amazement at a boiling caldron of glowing ash and plasma—a tornado of fire. The scope's convexity exposed a concavity that had once been desert. Then the semi-orb went still and black as if the gift of light would never shine again.

Alarms and sprinklers went off drenching Tony and Julia with black, foul water. A chaotic and noisy evacuation ensued. Looking like drowned rats they were among the last to escape the smoke-filled dome. They soon joined a stunned and shivering Larry Kato in the crowded parking lot looking like a war zone.

Whatever had happened was mercifully over. It had been over for Jean Phillip's father and his companion for more than fifty years. Julia now understood why the connection had persisted for eight or nine seconds with no LENS. This connection needed little help.

A large crowd had gathered to watch the fire equipment arrive. Jean Phillips lay wrapped in blankets in the rear of a pickup truck with Owen Klein and Sondra Clay huddled over her. Tony noticed a coatless, freezing Leonard Moss bumped and jostled like a buoy in the surf.

Wind-driven ice pelted them. Tony recovered from his funk and noticed Fuller and Polk sitting relatively warm inside Joe's car. As the three negotiated their way to warmth, Larry asked his shivering and spattered companions for an explanation.

Their Valkyrie, their always-tough Julia was in tears.

She knew what they had seen, though she spoke not a word. The LENS had transported them to Alamogordo, New Mexico on that fateful day of July 16th 1945 and the Trinity test of the first atom bomb.

Courtesy of the LENS they had experienced and survived the hypocenter. The bomb had burned a hole in time, had replaced the power of the LENS with a power all its own. Julia was reminded of another LENS—the device's critical plutonium-239 implosion LENS.

The use of the bomb in 1945 had saved many lives, but at the considerable cost of many others. The successful test in New Mexico would ignite epic human misery in three weeks, but sixty-one years later it would add another personal tragedy to the list, for Julia had recognized the second MP.

The man, the radio operator, was her father, a young soldier merely twenty years old.

Julia had another dream about her father that night—one that linked with Jean's, though the pair had always been linked, their dreamy destinies forever intertwined.

Julia's father used his great scoop to stoke the monster furnace. Julia could feel its intense and suffocating heat pierce her soul. The man blazed blood red looking like Beelzebub himself. Before him was a great heap of struggling humanity. He put down the shovel to consider the sorry state of man.

Something held his attention. Two little men on the stack of life shamelessly mocked and tormented him. This he would not permit. He reached into the human race and extracted these tormentors in the palm of one hand. The little men cursed and kicked, but it was pointless. Her father tossed the vagabonds into the fire with a smooth and well-rehearsed motion.

Chapter Twelve: The Star Chamber

Laikani, Saturday, January 21st

For a time he had no concept of where or of when, only of dark labyrinth. As the light coalesced he recognized his surroundings, a trail of trinkets, a cache of loot, the cookie crumbs of a bleak life. Vermeer's Geographer, the bronze Brutus, the Grand Mogul's carpets, the Sultan's Dragoon Colt—treasures he could not buy or coerce had been stolen by his gangsters, his Poxers.

But there were far deadlier creatures, far darker demons in hard pursuit. He wandered the corridors of his cavern, a maze transformed from corn into steel and masonry. His vision of the field was overpowering. It ruled his days just as it ruled his dreams. Each day, each night it cut another furrow, laid another tier of adamantine to his temple.

His nightmare might possess him at any hour of the day or night. In conversation he might suddenly swoon, then fall upon the field from a great height, enough to kill many times over. But he lived many times over. Each fall, each return was crueler by a multitude. The specter of the corn and his day-world traded places, flesh and blood melted as the phantoms congealed.

Standing on the cold mosaic of marble, he realized that his dreams were no less than his life, his life no more than his dreams. They had proved a prolific pair.

Patterns emerged from the rock, from the grains and branches like his leaves and stalks. At his hands and feet he suffered simmering eyes and murmuring lips, anguished faces in a sea of malefaction. There was one face that remained a mystery, one lost in the fetor of blood, blackbile and bristletar.

"Leave the field," pleaded the disgusting corpse. "Leave the field before it is too late. This place is your everlasting torment, the threshold to no ordinary death. It is the Gate to Hell, an eternity reserved for you.

"We are not so different you and I, not in any way that counts. We share the nous (noose). This shall be the everlasting rub. For like our morbose moon we have died, the both of us, died before we have ever lived."

This voice then softened to one that danced the perimeter of dream.

The manservant found his master standing on the western veranda staring into an ocean of aquamarine.

“Mr. Hardan,” he repeated respectfully, “I’m very sorry sir, but your visitor is here. I’ve shown him to the chamber as you’ve instructed.”

Hardan was jolted back to Laikani, his lush and lavish paradise secreted near the Isle of Palmyra in the central Pacific.

“Sh ... shank you, Kendall,” lisped the man with a face like that of a marine iguana. “Just see that ‘e is comfortable. I’ll join ‘im momentarily.”

The minutes concentrated the spent seconds like dead corpuscles in the legs and feet of the young man waiting silent and alone. The man stood poised upon the rampart, on its highest tier placed deep inside the sanctum. He regarded suspiciously the centerpiece—a sturdy, round table covered with evergreen felt. He counted twelve chairs evenly spaced around the table. The man could see that these antiques had been slavishly cared for, that they had been expertly restored and polished.

Hardan entered through a low and recessed door the young man had failed to notice. The lizard said nothing as he switched on a bright lamp. The young man turned mechanically and observed that the strong beam was narrowly aimed and focused. Hardan lingered under the light for a moment before starting his measured ascent up the hardwood staircase. The visitor’s attention was drawn from his abhorrent host to something else. It tarried upon the machine under the harsh light. What it was, was not immediately clear, for the light and its acutely angular shadows played tricks on eyes accustomed to the dark. His eyes left the machine returning momentarily to Hardan and his silent approach. The sinister figure climbed to the first tier, then to the second of a dais stacked like two devil’s food layers crowned with green icing.

The many sculptured rails and massive oak beams cast shadows as would tall timbers, cast them upon the hall’s stuccoed walls, the shelves of brown books, the red-blooded originals by David and Delacroix. A fire roared in the hearth. Gas lamps lined the walls. But nothing outshone the “red” beneath their feet.

Hardan’s reluctant guest, small, but firmly built, was gaily fitted for eighteen or nineteen holes. He looked anxiously at Hardan standing and eyeing him contemptuously. The young man was used to this. He adroitly averted his gaze, looked down upon the device concealed beneath the glare. His heart pounded as a lifeless hand neither wet nor dry nor human stroked his neck. His throat tightened around an expanding knot. He would not risk a sound, for it was an old, but cold instrument that played taps upon his spine.

Finally recognition! Even this was unexpected. The latter may have accounted for the sluggishness of the former.

From the lights and shadows the device emerged from its fundamental utility, its lower timbers darkly stained to match the red-enameled floor. It was no less than what it was—a guillotine, vintage 1793. Its oblique blade rested atop two, tall timbers. It was complete and ready for use, its wicker basket pondering eternity’s peephole. The rough plank had been retracted and covered with an ugly, black tarp. Underneath the tarp was something

large, something motionless, something detached menacingly from the rest of time and space.

Hardan said with a nod toward his unusual toy, “Actually, she is quite old, though still spry for all of her years.”

The young man blathered, “I had not expected ... nor comprehended ... It’s a—”

Hardan finished: “Yeah ... it’s a chopper. I’ve had it beautifully restored. Spent a fortune. In fact, it’s the machine that truncated poor Robespierre, Danton, Hebert, and (chuckling) the King and Queen of France.”

Hardan brayed like an ass. Guffaw followed guffaw. He suddenly stopped laughing to stare soundlessly at his horrified guest. Hardan’s eyes were pitiless, the look of a carnivore with thoughts only for his empty, distended belly. This mien too was fleeting. With a blink the beast transformed himself into the gracious and gallant host. “Have you tried our raw bar one tier down? Everything is fresh from Sanni’s on Palmyra. I never touch the stuff myself, but I’m told it is *tres bien*.”

“Thank you sir,” said Larry Kato as politely as he could, “but I’m not real hungry. ‘I’m a bit out-of-synch from the long trip and time change. I will take something to drink ... a club soda or ginger ale ... something with plenty of fizz.’”

A smiling Hardan made no move to assist him.

After an awkward silence, Larry remarked, “This is a spectacular place, Mr. Hardan ... your home ... the grounds, particularly the splendid view of—”

“That’s exactly right,” came the snotty reply. Hardan’s distinctive transformations between human and subhuman continued unabated. It was the one constant in Kato’s association lasting nearly ten years.

Hardan proceeded to bore his guest with an unsolicited history of the island and the mansion that would have rivaled even Xanadu. This icon of overstatement had been inspired by more than corn maze. It had been modeled after the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the ancient ziggurat. Hardan continued, “My fine fellow, please help yourself. As you know, there isn’t an earthly pleasure I can’t provide.”

Larry descended the stairs. A sumptuous feast had been provided on the first and lowest tier. Larry poured a short drink from an amply stocked wet bar. He marveled at the spread, but touched no food. As he returned to the uppermost tier he realized that he was followed.

The manservant ascended with a covered platter, his thick muscles rippling through his sheer, silk blouse. Larry imagined the burnished, brown locks of Marie Antoinette dangling beneath the platter’s linen cloth.

Hardan gleefully clasped his hands. With eyes closed he rubbed his palms together like a serial killer recalling his most heinous crimes. He suggested, “Ah ... this you simply won’t believe ... young man ... this you simply won’t.”

Kendall placed the silver service on the table. He lifted the linen cloth with a flourish. Larry took the full measure of each piece. It was unbelievable—a glutton’s gastromania. The platter was stacked near to overflowing with an assortment of cream puffs, jellied donuts, cakes and chocolates. Larry released a breath held too tightly by his turnover collar.

Beaming, Hardan took a seat. Kendall fussed over him like a spoiled child, poured his tea, arranged his sweet rolls. Finally, Kendall sat a plate with one small, strawberry Danish on the green table in front of Larry. Larry stared blankly at its gooey, red center.

Kendall exited in his servile, though majestic fashion while Hardan munched fastidiously. “Please sit down,” he invited as he munched.

“I’ll be frank, Mr. Hardan. How can we be sure that Lloyd doesn’t have the LENS focused on us right now?”

Larry took a seat in front of his cold pastry, his back to the cold reality of the blade. Hardan had just inhaled a cream puff. “I guess we can’t. But you’ve told me it can’t be so easily tuned ... like radio or TV. Certainly, I’ve asked you often enough. Have you been truthful, Dr. Kato?”

“Of course. It’s just that Lloyd is very clever. If anyone can ... can do it—”

Hardan transformed as he hissed, “He might watch us. I suppose that’s possible. This place isn’t lined with lead ... you know,” He hee-hawed disgustingly between open-mouthed chews.

Larry tried valiantly, but was unable to fabricate even the trace of a smile. He managed a polite taste of Danish, then an inelastic swallow of soda.

Hardan added, “He certainly can’t hear what we say. I’d worry if I thought Lloyd could read our thoughts ... even our lips, for this is just our little secret ... just between you and me. Do you get it? Yes ... yes. I see you do.”

Hardan giggled. “Another thing works in my favor. Not counting some Navy brass, my staff, my pilot, only you and I know that this place even exists.”

“Mr. Hardan, I keep all our business strictly confidential. Sir, please believe that.”

Hardan swelled like a toad. His grin quickly reached his ears. “Oh, I never worry ... not a lick, since no one leaves this place on his own two feet.” Larry effervesced soda from the nose and mouth. Hardan roared, offered him no kindness, no assistance.

Hardan joyously proclaimed, “Everyone loves my dry sense of humor. Don’t you too ... my dear young man?”

“Yes, of course, but your dry humor gave me quite a drenching. Mr. Hardan, I ... I ... thought—”

“Just trying to put you at ease. Don’t you see it? Don’t you see the joke. Pardon me, I’ll explain it.” After another fit of laughter Hardan offered, “No one could leave an island on his own two feet.”

Larry tried to muffle his sarcasm. “You are truly a riot ... sir.” Though Larry had failed in the attempt, Hardan did not indicate offense if indeed he perceived any. Instead he gushed, “Humor is good for the digestion. Relax. Calm yourself. You should eat something to settle that queasy stomach of yours. Relax, young man. Relax.”

“I wish there was another way to do this. I feel like a traitor to those people.”

“Those people!” spat Hardan. “Who cares a lick for those people. Who is it that pays your damned salary anyway? You should learn the meaning of the word as it applies to you. You are here to serve to me ... and no one else. Failure is unacceptable. This is the only thing you need worry about.” Hardan finished his speech gulping for air like a Grouper.

The shadow of Madame Guillotine loomed over the green table like a black widow. The shadow of the blade was parked not coincidentally on the wall over Larry’s fragile head. Only Hardan could appreciate this juxtaposition of Larry’s substance with the widow’s deadly shade.

Larry daubed sticky soda from his hands and face as he considered the blade and his inauspicious position. “I know this. It just doesn’t make this business of informing on my friends any easier.”

Hardan switched to a fatherly tone. “I can understand. I’m not the unfeeling monster you seem to think I am. But let’s get down to why you’re here. Then maybe they’ll be time for you to enjoy my Laikani. There’s no better beach anywhere on Earth. You’ll not see another human being. I can promise you that.”

Larry winced. With difficulty he found something to say. “I’ll have a tough time explaining the sunburn.” Larry screwed together his courage and asked the pivotal question. “Did you hear about Monday?”

Having consumed all of his treats the lizard’s eyes were wanting. “Hmm ... that’s why you’re here. I can’t trust those people to tell me anything. What happened and who is responsible?”

“It is incredible, but true. A serious accident occurred during a LENS paralog of one of Kovrani’s test subjects.”

“The spectacle ... or should I say (a chuckle) the specter of Lester Holman?” asked Hardan perversely.

“No, a woman named Jean Phillips. She had the LENS trained and tensored on Alamogordo ... and the first A-bomb test.”

Hardan’s eyes sparkled diabolically. He puffed up again in toad-like splendor, the swell absorbing the deep grooves in his checks. “Go on my good fellow. I’m all ears.” He was right, but Larry bit the words from his tongue.

“They replayed her parascan on the panoptoscope,” continued Larry “There was considerable damage to the hardware, not to mention certain human ware.” After an anxious breath, Larry added, “Julia’s father was connected to the event. Jean’s father had been lured to the bomb tower ... to ground zero. Julia’s father was an accomplice in the man’s murder. Julia is devastated. We feel so bad for her—”

“Again ... that bitch! So what’s your point?”

Larry aimed his eyes at Hardan. “Julia is our friend.”

“Aaargh!” Hardan snorted. “Don’t provoke your bowels into a shit storm. You’re not here to discuss her.”

Larry’s eyes remained hard. He bravely looked the maniac down and added succinctly, “No ... not here for her.” He then steadied himself by the trick of recalling better times and places. He recalled Julia and a better time and place. He smoothed his collar and waited.

The lizard was squirming. “Let’s get back to the point. What kind of damage are we talking about in terms of my dough? Money, sir!”

“The parascan hit the software too, but most is recoverable. It’s real odd about the software. The S-T track ties in with the episode of January 6th, but we can’t account for this linkage. And there’s more.”

“Go on. I must know the cost of this screw up so I can carve it out of Kovrani’s flabby ass.”

Larry reported, “The dome mirror was destroyed, but we can do without the mirror. The opacitor was wasted too ... as were the servo computers from overload ... hit hard by the induction of EMP. The opacitor must be replaced. Mr. Hardan, the ‘scope damage is the main cost, though the software crash will require additional time and money too.

“The blast nearly ripped through the warp itself. Mr. Hardan, you might imagine what the high yield tests have done. The surge burned the resolvers. Fuller feels most of the damage is confined to just one sensolate. But this could leave us without Pandora for several months.”

“Damn it ... not acceptable ... not months ... not even days.”

It was Larry’s turn to squirm. The seat of his pants was soaked with sweat. He wanted to stand. He wanted to excuse himself, but there was no possibility of that and he knew it.

“Sir, no one could have foreseen an atom bomb at the hypocenter of someone’s dream, not even Nettie.”

On this possibility Hardan pondered awhile.

“In a way I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I suppose it was spectacular ... might have been worth all the dough. I’ll bet the town Laundromat had a big boom of its own that day. Were you there? Speak, man!”

“Mr. Hardan, there were disturbing phenomena. The electromagnetic effects reminded me of a troupe of suicidal dancers chasing one another inside the inferno. They would crash together then fly apart, their arms and legs ablaze. I had the feeling they were more alive than life itself. Shadow ... or reality on the other side? Illumination of the warp by the kilotons of the bomb ... perhaps a kind of Star Chamber? My god, it was shockingly beautiful ... a tantalizing glimpse of infernal death.”

“Yes ... Death’s final triumph,” mused Hardan, “when all is made right, when the angel’s choir ascends in their charred sackcloth to toll for thee.” He was about as far away as a man could get. He suddenly snapped back with a demented and demonic cackle that reverberated in the rails and beams, tall timbers, stuccoed walls and shelves of brown books.

Hardan was having a cumulative effect. Although this sick speech was perhaps no more psychotic than one of his usual, senseless tirades, Kato could not manage to forget that he was isolated and unprotected, that he was chatting with a certified maniac a thousand miles from nowhere. He sealed in his fears and risked the maniac’s wrath: “This incident has us questioning going any further with the project. Someone could have been killed. And there are other implications that have us just as concerned ... for example, this odd linkage across the warp of time and space.”

“Spare me, Dr. Kato. Spare me please. We will obviously continue with the project. Don’t try to snow me with your scientific-sounding humbug. How long will it take to get everything put back together? How long, man?”

“Maybe a week for the software. It will depend on Julia. I gave you Fuller’s timing for the ‘scope. Of course, Kovrani is nuts to start on the Holman case, and will hound us all like the very devil. I might as well tell you. Fuller figures the cost at more than twenty mil.”

“I’ll call Kovrani just to hear his convoluted line of shit. He’ll tell me they lost a twenty-million dollar box of memory chips ... lost by that idiot Konnick.”

“If he gets the idea that you know more than you should I’m in a serious jam. I’m in trouble.”

“Thank you for your brilliant advice, but I’m not a complete idiot in spite of what you may think.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply you were.”

“Tell me about this Lester Holman. It’s almost as interesting as this Jean Philman ... er Philson case.”

“They’re going through with it. Holman’s been to El Rasigo with his parents and their physician, Horace Pattison. Pattison has spent some time with Owen Klein discussing the particulars of Lester’s illness.”

“What does Klein know about psychiatry?”

Larry looked uncertainly at Hardan and suggested, “He may agree with you. He’s left to take a crash course in Vienna.”

“That’s completely nuts! What in blazes are you talking about?”

“It’s supposed to be hush-hush, but that is the rumor. These days ... up to our ear holes.”

“You guys have been peeping at too many nightmares. Or you’re all out to hoodwink me. For the moment let’s get back to Lester Holman. Have you seen him?”

“Yes, briefly. Unpleasant. He’s emaciated and psychotic. He’s semi-lucid only on rare occasions.”

“I’d like to see him, but I don’t suppose that’s going to be possible. I do have more than a passing interest, particularly in this business of demonic possession.”

“No one thinks it is just schizophrenia. The usual psychotropic drugs have had no effect. His so-called lucid state ... if one calls it that ... amounts to rituals and the chanting of gibberish. It’s never been really analyzed to my knowledge.” Larry paused. “I think this is a lot more than Lester Holman. Too many coincidences have cropped up.”

Hardan flashed his trademark psychotic grin. “Your cosmic entelechy ... Dr. Kato ... or something even worse?” It looked as if the lizard had just swallowed a tasty sea cucumber, or perhaps it was only his tongue exploring the caverns of those furrowed, sunken cheeks.

“Sir, I never called it that. But regardless of what you want to call it the boy is very sick ... is being tortured by something more than mental disease. It’s been going on for two years. Prior to this the boy was perfectly normal, a good student, a good kid.”

“No brain tumors, dementias, that sort of thing?” inquired Hardan as if he ordered treats from a menu.

“They’ve drawn a complete blank ... seen every expert ... had every test money can buy. A few months ago his parents relented ... started the exorcisms. There is perhaps a justification if you’re susceptible to this sort of medieval hocus pocus.”

“Dr. Kato, I’m susceptible to the truth. Let’s have some.” With each glance at the perched blade, at its attendant shadow, the madman’s thin cheeks pulsed. Larry was reminded of something that he thought he had forgotten. It was an old and disgusting

picture—the pulsations of pap in the belly of a large boa constrictor seen as a boy at the zoo.

“The Holmans are archaeologists,” answered Larry. “They muck around for bones and bracelets. They were all digging at *Mont Auxois* when the boy’s symptoms were noticed. At first it amounted to some attention loss and insomnia, but it turned rapidly into a manic state.”

“What or where is this Mont?”

“Somewhere in France. The point of my telling you is that Lester found something in a small grave ... a black metal relic ... but not so large he can’t conceal it, which he does pretty well. He won’t give it up, clutching the thing while he chants and moans with white eyes. His parents say they’ve given up trying to take it away. Odd, but they will tell no one what it is.”

“I want to know the facts ... what this relic has to do with Lester’s condition. Use our code to contact me when they start scanning.”

“Kovrani is convinced he can be helped. Everyone else is extremely nervous about being involved.”

“Dr. Kato, though an interesting case, we assume a great risk. Someday, Kovrani will stick his neck out too far and turn everything into a circus. Perhaps he should be taught a thing or two before he does.”

“The Holman case is all he thinks about.”

“All of you should do as I’ve ordered. Has there been any progress programming the anticube?”

“Not yet. But if you want all the physics—”

“I don’t! Your crepuscular theories mean nothing to me. I’m dealing with either a pack of liars or consummate crackpots.” Hardan gnawed his own raw cheek.

Larry could not bear to look and turned away. He pretended concern over his shoes. “Mr. Hardan, you’re getting it all. I’d be crazy to hold anything back.”

“Enough of this rot. I really brought you here to discuss this ... uh ... warping thing ... yes ... the warptear, I think its called. I’m not interested in gossip and speculation. Is Lloyd following my explicit instructions?”

“Naturally any new tests will have to wait on the restoration of the software. Fuller has—”

“Stop ... stop! Tell me about the papers, man.”

Larry repeated quizzically, “Th ... the papers?”

“Yes, the Kovrani papers or the Konnick papers ... to whichever moron you prefer to grant title. Don’t go imbecilic. You know the papers I’m talking about. You understand why I’m concerned ... why you’re here.”

“Oh ... you’re speaking of the sixth of January.”

Hardan screamed, “Yes, yes, yes ... specifically the box of papers! What is their connection to our work ... damn it, our work? Speak!”

“The papers are just papers ... not at all what you suspect, Mr. Hardan.”

“How do you know what I suspect?” he screamed again. “The pages were full of mysterious symbols. I want to know what they are.”

“Konnick won’t talk. But even if true it means nothing. That stuff’s all over the place ... tensor and vector differential equations out the ying-yang.”

“So ... Konnick has turned dumb on the matter?”

“Yes, Mr. Hardan. He smarts.”

Hardan smiled satanically. “Well ... you might be right about that (a drool). Tell me more about him.”

“I’m sure I’m right. He fueled a furor when he butted in. He was after some attention and he got it. Now he’s just poor misunderstood ol’ Lou. Unlike the big mouth he is, he suddenly won’t talk.”

Hardan’s anger flared. “And neither will you. Even a numbskull like Kovrani knows the papers were the whole point. They were hidden for a damned good reason. You know this as well as I. I think you’re lying, Dr. Kato. I’ll show you something that should jog your lying tongue.”

Hardan stood, then descended the long, red staircase. He stopped at the base of the dais, pausing beside the black widow next to the covered plank. He ceremoniously lifted up the tarp that had earlier captured Larry’s attention. The lifting of the tarp lifted Larry by his loin strings, for the man strapped flat on his back looked exactly like Lou Konnick. Lou’s eyes stared up vaguely, but he said nothing. He did not stir as if he had been drugged into a state of semiconsciousness.

“And now my astute, Dr. Kato, for my first feat of prestidigitation, I am going to chop the big dummy into two pieces.” Hardan bowed to the knees. The spotlight was on him. He performed a dance grotesquely chilling. With a flick of the wrist and an ugly smirk, he added, “But I can’t promise to glue this world-class idiot back together. Yes.”

Hardan pushed the immobilized man into position. Konnick did not struggle when his head was inserted through eternity’s little peephole. Uncharacteristically the victim looked up at the blade and not down into the basket. The machine and Hardan appeared to be ready. Hardan spoke loudly that Larry could hear, his words reverberating inside the huge chamber room. “My slant on this ... my twist, if you prefer, is that my brilliant

assistant should see it coming. Dr. Kato, I want so much that you should see it coming.” Hardan imitated a drum roll as he reached out for the widow’s heartstring. He paused, fondling it lovingly.

Larry slumped in his chair. Hardan released the blade. Steel and shadow plummeted, steel for Konnick, shadow for Larry. The heavy thwack of the blade raised the floor and separated Konnick from his mouth and his brains. The head plopped into the basket accompanied by several dark spurts from the neat, but gaping slice. Hardan produced a large towel from seemingly nowhere and expertly wiped up the repugnant discharge.

He promptly attended to the wicker basket and its contents, making a few minor adjustments to what rested inside. Hardan actually talked to what was left of Lou Konnick. Apparently pleased with the results he proudly returned to the green table with the basket in hand. He sat it down next to Larry.

Numb struck, Larry dumb-eyed what was left of Lou’s headgear inside the basket.

Hardan snickered. “My good fellow ... just a real dummy ... a gag ... a remarkable likeness made with the assistance of Kendall and my computers. Humor is good for the digestion ... and sometimes ... for tongues. Very realistic. What do you have to say now, Dr. Kato? Speak, man!”

Larry said, “I’ll tell you what I heard ... what nearly everyone heard. According to Konnick’s original version he found a manuscript filled with characters like runes. Of course, Konnick wouldn’t know a rune from a rutabaga. Everyone also knows that Lloyd hid these papers in an OHM box that he’d found in the isocon ... hid them from Kovrani ... I suppose. The story goes on to tell us that Konnick slipped into the room while Cole, Baumer and Kovrani argued like lunatics. For some reason we’ll never know, Konnick took a shine to the box of papers. He hid them in the cabinet where Sondra files her reports. I guess that Max Cole didn’t know about the cabinet. This story’s like succotash ... like picking fly shit out of grains of pepper—”

“But these papers came from the isocell,” stated Hardan. “My question ... is where did they come from ... come from originally? We know it wasn’t the isocell. I know as well as you that Lloyd opened the Gate on January 6th.”

“I’m not as convinced as you seem to be. The power for a warptear was certainly there, but it was even higher on Monday when we scanned Jean’s A-bomb. There are so many variables, Mr. Hardan. Most of the evidence is as lost as Konnick and these preposterous papers.”

“These papers don’t fit the game plan. Since you are so ignorant inform yourself. Lloyd’s papers are your assignment. I’ll take care of the rest, but never mind how. I have ways to verify information. You may not want to forget this my fine, young friend.”

“Mr. Hardan, I take this ... our business seriously ... like a dark spot on a smoker’s lung.”

“That so? That’s good. Just what the doctor ordered.” A pause. “Well ... since you are so good with tensor equations, tell me something. Why was the LENS machine so difficult to restart after Lloyd mucked it up? Why? Speak!”

“It relies on the artificial intelligence.”

“More of your shit about weird attraction?”

“Henry’s strange attractor, Mr. Hardan, not mine. It’s a possibility, though it does not satisfy me.”

“I know this. Tell me something I don’t. Speak!”

“There is no simple answer. One might say that the artificial intelligence was derailed ... or trapped in an infinite loop, something initiated from the warp itself.”

Hardan boomed hollowly, “You know this warp-stuff for a fact?”

“For a fact? No ... of course not.”

Leopold Hardan seemed to consult a faraway voice. He swooned as his eyes rolled behind his thick lids. Drooling and clawing the green felt he fought hard to return to real time and space. He was inside his own Star Chamber. He saw again the fathomless eyes, so many and so darkly lit resting hungrily upon him. Finally, his elusive door of hope closed behind him. Soon came the pain and the darkness. Hardan opened his eyes to himself and he found nothing there.

Larry had seen these attacks before, had attributed them to epilepsy. Hardan gradually returned like a drowning man to the surface. Finally, the man bleated, “Larry, do ... do you know what we ... we face?”

Kato offered him no sympathy or assistance.

“Who can know? Dr. Kincaid thinks it’s nonlinear behavior. That could be. Others think our machine’s possessed by another machine greater than ours. Also possible. Others think we’re about to enter the fifth, perhaps even the sixth dimension, where dream and reality are one and the same. A good theory too ... I guess. I see the problem differently. I feel we face the mother of nightmares. She’s searching for just the right chance ... a large tear in space-probability-time through which she may escape from Hell. I believe there are two others that feel about the same way.”

With a strained voice, Hardan asked, “And these two?”

“Of course ... Lloyd Baumer and Max Cole. Who else?”

Hardan lowered his eyes. Larry’s words appeared to take root. The seconds crawled like snails. Larry could see that Hardan was an empty shell pretending to live when all he really knew was potter’s field. The man looked up. His eyes sprang suddenly to life. Like the phoenix bird, the vile, old beast had returned.

“I must give Lloyd credit for playing it clever. And I almost went for it. He’s been leading you like a puppy. I can’t trust anyone ... Lloyd ... not even you. Damn it man! Why can’t I use the LENS myself?”

“Mr. Hardan, I’ve tried to explain the LENS to you. You just can’t dial up target events that easily. It requires skillful piloting and experience. Besides, it would be almost impossible to get away with it right under his very nose. And even if you did succeed you would always be several steps behind him. You must not—”

“I need options should Lloyd betray me. I must learn to use the Machine myself ... learn Panigma Gate. The special item you said I would need I have obtained with great difficulty and expense just to provide for this eventuality. But Dr. Kato, you must do your part. I must have the real password and not Lloyd’s hokum. Are you preparing instructions for operating the LENS and the Gate as I’ve ordered? Do you hear me man ... I must have these instructions! I must! I must!”

“Yes, but as I’ve said it’s going to be extremely difficult for you to walk in there and pull it off.”

Hardan shouted, “I don’t care how difficult it is! You’ll rehearse every detail with me till I can do it in my sleep. I’m not punning ... trying to amuse you.”

“It’s no joke. The Machine scares me to death.”

“I’m aware of your phobias. But I’m not taking chances with Lloyd or anyone else. I have two highly trained specialists ready and willing to handle any emergency. Maybe I should introduce you to Ralph and Eddie. You’d like them. And even better they’d like you.”

Larry retorted, “This doesn’t add a minim to—”

“If I can’t use the Machine I’ll use my Ralph and Eddie. But my specialists are not as precise as your LENS. They like the shotgun approach. However, you do have a point about Lloyd. He will expect me to bird dog him. Instead, I’ll dog his little fishes. They should keep me very close to that great egoist.”

Larry’s heart and hope shrank. “Whatever you say, Mr. Hardan.”

“You’re damned right. That’s the way it has to be. When this is finally over everyone will feel that way or regret it inordinately.”

“With some training and experience you’ll be able to use the LENS to watch whomever you want, whenever you want. You will be like ... God.”

“That’s nice, but you’re a minor leaguer. When I have the Gate I won’t need your confounded LENS.”

“Of course, you’re quite right. I forgot.”

“I have one more little task for you. I want you to add a little spice to Kovrani’s cake. You can do it.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Hardan? Spice? Cake? I—”

The deep, ugly grooves that ran vertically on the lower half of Hardan’s face he made even deeper, even uglier than Kato had thought possible. With thick, twitching lips, the iguana-faced man croaked, “Well, I’ll tell you, and listen to me carefully, for I’ll not say this twice. No ... no, not twice, not even to you.”

Chapter Thirteen: The Snag

Though he had not a man's eye Carvorix could see farther than the keenest of the keen. A unique seer among the druids he was imbued with the vision of the gods. Even the great roschiefs feared the power of his penetrating green eye. Alone in a copse of fir and spruce he could at last loosen the hood from his face. The problem was less the hood more the face, for it offended all but the blind, all but the dead.

Carvorix had arrived on Earth with practically no face at all—with no ears or nose that anyone could see, with a fish mouth where a nose would normally be, with one blind eye on the left side of his face, with nothing at all on the other. The eye had been replaced by the elders, but nothing more was within their power, for they had given everything to him.

The fate of the Tribes was now up to him. He removed the totem from his neck pouch. He had earlier cleansed the burial site with blue marl. The totem itself he had tightly wrapped in dried hides to protect it during its long journey. Everything had to be done with the utmost precision if the Geasa, their most sacred of rites, was to prevail.

The druid placed the Eagle's symbol inside the tiny grave and trickled the libation of mistletoe over the blue clay. He repaired the wounded earth and appealed to Nerscha of the Dark Light. Nerscha was greater than Mother Epona. And though Carvorix could entreat her even Carvorix could not see her.

In times of trouble Nerscha would come and sit beside him, so near he could feel her might—as real as the sky—as real as the forest. They soon would be one, for she held him like a vessel in her hands. She had taught him about the world and about the afterworld too. It was told that Nerscha had first come while he was still in his mother's womb. It was told this explained the way he was. He was glad this was so.

His spiritual mother would soon return more powerful than ever and ready to wreak havoc. And he was confident that Nerscha, his donor of sight, would finally reveal herself to him.

The Geasa was the legendary sword of his race. In a matter of days a decisive battle would be fought with their nemesis from the south. The druid had promised his temporal lord that the sacred ceremony would light their way to complete and total victory.

Carvorix had reason to believe that all would go well. After all, his agent, Elenas Ulas, had entered the enemy's camp, had stolen the totem and had left without detection. He had delivered the sacred object into the high priest's hands. Moreover, it was the high

druid Carvorix who had the special training to well use what the adroit Elenas U. had taken.

Years of tutelage under the Cymric Vate had imparted the required knowledge. But his real power was the eye borrowed from Nerscha while she slept. When a boy the priests had replaced his blind eye with the eternal and exalted eye, found in a holy mountain crypt by their tribal brothers to the east. Possessed of divine vision he could foresee the future. Except that now the great sooth eluded even Nerscha's magic—somehow the mischief of the bronze Eagle.

Thus the need for the sacred Geasa. The druid knew that failure to deliver victory would require his death, but he would gladly take this chance. Never had his people faced a greater threat, for the Eagle was the charmed favorite of the netherworld.

This made it crucial for the Tribes to do more than just crush their foe. They must prove their gods, their magic superior to his, for now and for all time.

There is perhaps that one, bold chance taken in dream—the journey beyond who we are or who we think we are, beyond the snug rules of reality and reason, to that uncertain realm of the impossible universe. We may not like it so much for who we should meet there, especially when that “who” is simply ourselves.

The Holman Scan, Thursday, February 9th, 1:30 A.M.

Henry climbed the thirteen steps. Each chimed a dire warning. This unholy hour, this unholy business conjured ill humors, did mischief to the mind and injury to the heart. Why did he climb the scaffold when sanity and reason railed so intensely against it?

This might be another man's construction, but it's consummation, its deadly trap was his and his alone. Henry halved his steps, but in spite of everything, the mathematician arrived at a door haloed in an electric blue light. At his slight touch the door slid open to clanks revealing an orb half-buried in a heavy platform of steel. He drew a deep breath and braced. Henry invoked the fool's blessing and crossed the threshold. The door closed behind him resoundingly like a vault. Three dark angels stood clustered together like headstones, nearly eclipsing the blue Pandora. These were Lester's angels and his last chance on Earth.

Henry had not planned on this. There were other priorities. He had been hard-pressed to finish Faust, the infamous, thinspace algorithm for Lloyd Baumer. But an ailing Allen “Sloe” Polk had altered his plans and contravened precious sleep. Henry knew he could expect no sympathy from his three, dream-weary cohorts.

He mounted a false attack, greeted the threesome with counterfeit bravado. “Good evening or I should say ... good morning. I feel so slighted not being invited to play on the first team.”

Lithesome Julia rejoined in her old style: "I'll bet. On my soul I don't know why you're so chipper. We've had two dreadful nights."

He found nothing to add, no reply, even as she brushed tenderly the back of his hand.

"He just couldn't stay away," joked Tony. Their psychologist was the only member of the team that manifested a smile.

Julia changed tactics, jostling him in her flirtatious way to coax a reply. Like the others she was confined in icy shadow, though she seemed recovered from the revelations of the 16th. She proposed, "We thought you were above this sort of thing ... so mundane a task as to bore you as thin as your anorexic Faust."

Tony applied more force to his smile, but nothing convincing was made of it. Like the others, a flicker of anxiety shone through the fixity of his pupils like lamps down a dark shaft.

Henry tried to sound upbeat as though this was an ordinary affair, a static test of machinery and nothing more. He replied, "Just filling in. Sloe picked the perfect time. Honestly guys ... I'm not planning any work. I've got more important things to do."

"Ah ... too good for us. High theory," suggested Julia. "That's what we thought so we started without you." She wiped the gore from her rapier thrust. "Can't say any of us would do differently if given half the chance. I would give just about anything to be far away right now."

"Anything?" wondered Tony mostly to himself. "Really? That bad?"

"Not so bad as I feared," suggested Henry. "I see no drooling ... no levitating. I detect no chanting in mystic tongues. You guys must be observing the *Exorcist's Safety Manual*."

Tony was actually glad to see Henry. He had some news his friend might find interesting. But it was not the concoction one served too quickly. It was a heady brew that should not be quaffed, but dispensed gingerly upon the discriminating palate.

Tony began mysteriously. "No real progress to report. Been twice up to the plate, then twice to the bench after flailing at hallucinations. Tonight we'll send in our best slugger to face the cosmic ace."

Henry mocked, "Comrades ... noble work ... this heroic struggle against the forces of superstition and darkness."

"Give us a break and cut the crap," snarled Larry. "We've had two miserable nights. I can't decide the worst ... the hours of boredom or the weight of the rope." Tony gingerly explored the white contours of his neck as if he felt the fiery bite of the noose.

Henry scanned the group for a flicker, for a glow more than six faint lamps, for some encouraging news they could take home and sleep on. His eyes rested on Julia. "What's going on? You guys act like you've seen ... well ... like you've seen Kovrani's nightmare levitating in the corridors."

Tony stammered something about Ivan cavorting in bed sheets.

Julia answered, “So far nothing to see. Lester’s managed to block the LENS. Tonight ... ah ... tonight ... we’ve schemed an act of pure desperation.” She let her words dangle—a silence that fell like black crepe upon black water. Henry was suddenly struck by an horrendous thought. In Tony’s words, who was to be their best slugger? More important, who was this cosmic ace?

As was his habit when reason failed, Henry paced. His mind raced, his face revealed the strain, the lack of sleep or perhaps something from his attic. He recalled the serpent with the face of Leopold Hardan inside his box of dreams—inside with Julia’s secrets—inside with Jack. He remembered reaching in the box and touching something strange, something beyond form, beyond time and space. He turned uncertainly toward Larry. With bloodshot eyes he silently begged Larry for a clue.

“Henry, we’re using a double dose of mercolidine. He will dream. The CIC indexes and logs him in okay. Our ‘cube acquires the source. The LENS amplifies the light. Then with nothing to account for it our connection’s severed, the window collapses just as the LENS converges. The parascan is aborted with no hint of a source.”

“What is it?” asked Henry testily. “Is it the LENS or is it Lester? Is it the drug? Please ... tell me something I can use.”

Larry replied, “Could be any of these. The point is ... it doesn’t matter. We’re out of our league and we all know it. We should cut loose the rope before it breaks our necks.”

“I’m not arguing for any of this so don’t misunderstand me,” inserted Julia, “but I think our problem’s neither the LENS nor Lester.”

Larry disagreed: “Lester must provide some mental horsepower to steer the LENS. Taking into account his reaction to the drug, plus the psychosis, I feel his connection’s feeble ... his will ... well actually ... even more feeble.”

She responded, “I don’t question any of this. But Larry you’re leaving things out. You’ve got my head spinning ... Grundling in the aether ... or worse ... more lost than that poor, sick boy. We both know—”

Tony said to Henry, “Julia thinks someone has a negative LENS ... one powerful enough to cancel ours.”

“I can tell it,” she insisted. “Larry knows too well that our target time-space is unique. He said as much himself. I’m telling you they can reverse the field. They can pump light uphill ... against the prevailing wind. They can pump light from the future to the past.”

At this revelation Henry stopped circling. He looked at Julia with amazement if not a modicum of shock. He was struggling to remain objective in the pure light of possibility, the antithesis of his scientifically trained mind.

“More like suck,” snorted Tony, adding a rude sucking sound for his own emphatic mark of punctuation.

Henry asked incredulously, “You’re telling me, really telling me, that someone or something has ... well ... sustained dyadic space inside finite time, reflected a space-time anticube from its posicube.”

“Yeah ... I’m telling you this, if this is the kind of lingo you prefer. And as long as they’re pumping photons from us we’ll see nothing ... learn nothing ... that is, not without their wanting it.”

Larry pondered, “If Julia is right this same pump could suck us up ... create an anti-window perhaps large enough to rip a hole in our local continuum.”

“And if they have the power to reverse the field,” suggested Julia, “just think what they might do in the positive direction.”

“I am thinking about it, and if this is true, if you’re right,” said Henry, “they could sustain one helluva superwindow ... open a gate you could launch a planet through.” He recommenced his nervous pacing in ever-tighter circles, death-spiraling like an Olympic skater ending his performance. Perhaps he was. The look in their eyes underscored the point. It was then that Tony reminded him, “We must return to the point ... to the CIC interface ... not necessarily so feeble.”

“This is the point,” responded Julia. “It’s a matter of power. And we’ve got the preamp aperture set much too high.”

“Yes ... yes. Ivan’s orders,” said Larry. “With this preamp power he expects Nettie to punch through the heavy warp.”

“I’m not going to ask where you’ve set it.” Henry searched for a way out. “Is the boy’s family here?”

“Yes ... they’re waiting with Doc Pattison,” Tony answered.

“What’s their opinion? They want this thing for their son?”

“They’re willing to try most anything,” said Julia. “We’re the only game in town, Henry. And it’s getting late.”

Henry wondered, “I don’t understand why Lloyd’s not here for this ... this merge ... this mind melt with the boy?”

Tony uncorked a particularly uncouth “whoop.”

Henry assumed Tony stared too long at Pandora’s churning blue light. But instead the others stared back at him in childlike disbelief.

Larry relented and offered Henry a clue. “You haven’t figured it yet ... what has Ivan cavorting in sheets.”

Tony asked, “Don’t you want to know what he’s doing ... why he’s not here with us? Henry ... where’s your scientific curiosity?”

“At wit’s end. I’m waiting ... really expecting an explanation.”

“Ivan’s bedded down in chamber one,” said Tony. “He will be Lester’s copilot for tonight’s nightmare.”

There was no discernible pause, no moment for assimilation. Henry shrieked loud enough to raise their infamous dome echo: “He’s linked to Lester Holman!” He placed his hands on the back of his neck. He looked as if he wanted to fly away.

“That is the overall putridity of it,” said Julia. She punctuated this declaration by sourly pursing her lips as if she was withstanding a particularly pungent pickle.

“Ivan’s going to psychoanalyze Lester from inside the boy’s head,” added Tony. “Our good Dr. Psychic had better be careful. He might bump into Lester’s shy, but likely-to-be-lethal friend.”

“He has nerve I’ll admit,” croaked Henry, “but where’s his common sense. We have no idea what we face. Ivan’s daft. He’s certifiable. Why hasn’t anyone tried to talk the man out of it?” It was of course a question that he did not need to ask.

The LENS could connect two dreamers, though it had never been tried. It was a foolish risk. Theoretically the CIC could absorb and link the essence of Ivan and Lester’s memories and personalities. And it would presumably restore everyone and everything to the proper place when the session was over. But with a finicky LENS and Lester could Ivan depend on it? Henry considered pulling the plug regardless of Ivan’s greater rank and pull.

“Henry, we’ve been assigned to monitor Ivan in chamber one,” said Tony. “Klein, Pattison and the Holmans will monitor Lester in chamber two. Julia and Larry get Pandora thanks to your taking over for Sloe.”

Henry played his final, desperate card. “Has anyone called Lloyd? We should not accept the responsibility for this.”

“Henry, you’re ignoring the facts. Everything is set,” said Julia. “Ivan’s running this scan, not Lloyd. There’s no real point in further debate. As we chat so amicably Ivan and Lester sleep the great sleep. They hang upon the flimsiest of threads. All depends on what we have done and will do to bring them back.”

“There’s still time,” argued Larry. “I agree with Henry. If Ivan won’t listen to reason we should call Doctor Baumer at once. This is ... is insane.”

“Insane or not, Lloyd will not interfere,” she reminded them. “You may recall their dance ... well, what you might call their desperate deal in the dark.”

The panoptolasers surged suddenly to life. The laser light skirmished on four, blue and desperate faces each a field of dots—paint points of a deep and indelible stain.

“Henry ... are you going to do something?” asked Tony. “There’s no time left for screwing around.”

Owen Klein ended the stalemate. He bleated loudly over the intercom, “Navigators take your stations please. It’s started. Our two sleepers have REMed and Martoffed, have started their descent into their dreams.”

Tony exited for the dream chamber. The reluctant, indecisive Henry followed with no other choice. Julia assumed Pandora’s lead chair, took the throttle of the viewing train’s lociputer. “Strap in Lawrence. I’m afraid we’re in for a memorable ride.”

Their night train to Lester Holman departed the station. Slow getting going, the panigo began innocently enough. The panoptoscope expanded with a slight dizziness and ringing in the ears. However, it did not take long for the pressure to be felt in the sinuses as if they descended too rapidly into deep water. They could see and hear, but each nerve’s receptor was heightened to the point of pain, to the point of rupture—too much time and space and too little capacity. Hungrily, space-time stopped and turned around for more.

Space and mind space melted as the walls of the dome ran like blue wax to form deep, dark pools at their feet. Each looked down. Larry and Julia watched in silent and helpless horror as both plunged in—feet, legs, torso, and arms—things that were firmly fastened, plus things that were not.

Pandora violated their time and space, invaded their brains, dilated their window of infinite questions. Time roared backwards along Ivan’s past and past possible. There was so far no sign, no hint, and no thought of Lester Holman. When the panigo could get no worse it did anyway. Speed and space stretched to the brink of rupturing delicate membranes, vessels and cells. The dreamer had them everywhere and every when.

Larry cursed the light of the LENS in his head, the pulsations like high voltage in his limbs. He was sick to his hair and fingernails. It did not help to close your eyes. The panigo reached inside your skull like a draconian surgeon to excise mortal tissue. It was not just gut wrenching, it was gut seething—mental suffocation from an incursion of too much time and space.

As these two observers roared through paraspace other men were busy two levels below. Henry and Tony manned the isocon of consoles and instruments—the life console or biocon and the navigational panel or navcon. Tony checked Ivan’s vital signs—readings that were reasonable given the stress of his absorption of paraspace, of his merging with the OnNet computers.

Ivan slept on his personally contoured couch. He was masked and wired to the system’s CIC or interface computer, the device that stretched his mind to match the size and contour of the vast new world he entered. His isocell, like Lester’s, was lit surreally in red like the bridge of a submarine.

Owen Klein worked the isocon of chamber two. He also faced the barrage of questions from Dr. Pattison and Lester’s parents. The isocon’s machines terrified them. The

Holmans sensed correctly that the machines had absorbed everything that was their son, plus everything he would ever be. Nell Holman tearfully took hold of her husband's hand. She squeezed, but husband Holman was elsewhere.

The activity in the isocon contrasted sharply with a pacific Lester Holman, a rosy china doll inside a glass chamber.

Owen suggested to Dr. Pattison, "Doctor, shouldn't we remove the object? He could be startled to wakefulness. If that happens he might seriously injure himself." Owen only knew that the object in question was metallic and from eight to ten inches long. But John and Nell reacted diffidently to his suggestion.

Pattison intervened. "Dr. Klein, this would be a big mistake. As weak as he seems you'd be surprised by the amount of fight still in him."

"He's never hurt himself or anyone so long as we ignore it," added Lester's father. "It's just an iron and bronze figurine. Please, Dr. Klein, leave it be and we'll all be better off."

Klein was not satisfied, but decided to drop the subject. The LENS had finally found and locked on to the target event. Sondra Clay in the compulab confirmed Ivan's S-T-X, his mnemonic power and parangle. Nettie, the OnNet computer, was busily performing tensor calculations, aiming, aperturing and otherwise adjusting the Panigma LENS to balance the power source with Ivan's delicate neural receiver.

For Julia the pachyderms were back. The same strange attractor she and Minerva had synthesized from the field model and Lloyd's chaos now diverged inside Pandora's blue orb. Each elephant grew extra trunks and singularities. These in their turn grew more trunks and more singularities in a continuous cycle. But Julia was given no time to ponder, for Pandora and the paracube pounced, struck a sparkling chip from the invisible warp, the deeper fabric of space and time. Its light rose majestically like heavenly robes.

Pandora revealed a pleasant, wooded landscape of scrub pines on gentle hillocks. Julia and Larry saw hundreds of fires, perhaps miles away at the other end of a wide clearing. They also noted the signs of a great host, probably thousands of men. The gathering appeared less than a town, more a great bivouac with siege works, traps and trenches.

Julia whispered in sympathy with the still forest, "Larry, I hope I can sit through this."

"Julia, we still have time. We must."

"I'm afraid, Larry ... I'm awfully afraid we don't."

Larry Kato knew in his heart that she was right. Like the bundled tesserae in Nettie's skull his mind throbbed. There was after all a nasty snag.

Ivan Kovrani was thankful when the LENS converged. The dreaded panigo was unavailable to the dream pilot, but this did not make his job easier. From the dream pilot's perspective the experience varied. His equilibrium depended upon his mental

agility. For those in control it was an exercise of concentration in concert with the neural interface.

Experts were aware of their computer-enhanced state and could maneuver in coordinate space. For rookies the LENS was an avalanche in an earthquake. They often accepted the experience as reality and would panic without help from a highly trained and highly skilled technician.

Ivan likened the LENS' focusing phase to the passage through a whirlpool. At least the passage was a sign that the LENS had found something. The second phase or dream tour was easy for Ivan since he knew better than most that the sensation was only a dream. And everyone knew that dreams could not hurt you. Still, this was a bit more than an ordinary dream. There was the power of the LENS. And there was the uncertainty of Lester and his psychosis.

However, there was no sign of the boy, none of the expected synaptic clutter, none of the clamor or the impedimenta of primitive, limbic reflexes. Ivan found himself submerged in a dark and desolate mind space with less sensual impact than from a falling leaf. Then from seemingly nowhere came a faint sign of hope, a scant ray of light revealing a mysterial wood enshrouded in fog. But hope soon faded when the light did not.

Ivan drifted along a pebbly chase, beneath a moon obscured by low and wind-spun clouds. On his left the conifers and hardwoods endured a virulent blight. On his right the forest had already succumbed. The fog, stained to match the moon, spewed over an eroded crag that bristled with rotting stumps. Here and there wildflowers grew in the detritus of the stumps, their petals full though ink black. The sulfurous mist gathered not to nourish, but to mortify the swollen blossoms and the few surviving trees. The black flowers of the forest followed him like the soulless eyes of an attic portrait of Dorian Gray.

Ivan was reminded of the days of the hallucinogen, LSD. He felt nothing, saw nothing to suggest mortal man or beast. This dreadful loneliness caused him to question his sanity. Ivan reached for Lester, but touched less than emptiness itself. Had Lester died in the vortex? Would Ivan die here too? Despair clung tenaciously like the fog, obscured any glimmer of hope. The LENS had failed. Ivan had failed. The young man was lost. What would he tell his suffering parents?

"Nothing," wafted the forest.

Ivan had caught a murmur so soft as to be hardly there. Again the forest whispered, "nothing" as lightly as the moon-glow caressed his cheek. It seemed that his loneliness now had a voice.

He turned swiftly to the right from whence came the voice. He could not really be sure it was a voice so faintly had it sounded. He rose blindly, sometimes over the steep and bristling crag, but more often through worm-infested earth and decaying roots. He finally emerged at the apparent source of the blight, a blue scar in the center of a clearing, a shallow depression ringed by motherwort and nightshade.

Near the edge, the vegetation withered and died. In the clearing all the soil had been carved and hauled away leaving a sink of cuprous, blue clay. A few large stumps clung to the remaining clay like the gray, twisted hands of an old hag. Ivan paused near a particularly gruesome snag once a living thing. Its twisted oak trunk, its crusty limbs and torso were remarkably mantoid and more preying than praying. He could not unhitch his eyes from it, nor uproot himself from the greensand and gravel pit when his scanning power should have easily permitted a psychic escape.

A third and stronger “nothing” was followed by a tickle on his shoulder, soon more a tap than a tickle. The tap became a poke, then a pommel. Someone or some thing stood quite still, behind him and out of view. He experienced painful muscle spasms almost everywhere at once. Squiggles hatched from the oak snag consuming his eyes in worms.

A bony hand seized Ivan’s scruff and gradually tightened its grip on his neck. Panic all but blinded him. It ran like poison over his face, washed down his throat. The forest spun—the stumps, the snag, the moon, and the few faint stars. They all spun round and round as if caught up by Charybdis. He gagged on saliva or perhaps worse. He sucked in all the air that his muscles could control. This was not much, but this seemed to lessen the spin and the wiggling worms in his eyes. The sly and slippery hand remained tightly fastened, even as he executed the difficult turnabout. It was nothing compared to what Ivan saw, for his turn was taken to a sight that ossified the marrow of his bones.

The learned and widely acclaimed psychologist, a man who had known mankind in every state of mind and deprivation, looked down a dark well into the worst of the worst. Hopeless eyes, like the blackest of caves, heralded the specter of Lester Holman, a walking cadaver approaching microbial liquefaction.

Lester opened his mouth, gave Ivan a toothy grin and tugged hard on his coat sleeve. Something, perhaps a rotting tooth or a malignant nodule fell from Lester’s mouth to land on Ivan’s sleeve. Before Ivan could react, the sleeve and nodule were one, forever joined by a viscous adhesive that no amount of mental force could dislodge.

A foul rot consumed the boy, gnawed the flesh from his bones, dined on his corruption. This dream, if dream it was, had the earthy feel and smell of an open grave. Ivan attempted an evasive turn, but bumped into the old snag still rooted in the center of the pit, its trunk bent low, its dead limbs extended in their quest for flesh.

He had been cleverly pinned down by both the snag and the boy with nothing he could do. The scrofulous wretch tugged harder, giggling and slurring, “Follow me and behold the mas’er, and if you’re lucky ... his love ... his lovely nyct-mis’ress ... not so far away ... and getting closer (a chuckle) all the time.”

This thing-once-a-boy burst into a horrible laugh at something, perhaps something he’d said that was to him and him alone excruciatingly funny. After measuring both Ivan and the oak snag intensely, though differently each in their turn, the boy lifted Ivan out of the clay, and by means of a firm grip on his collar, took him securely in tow.

He led Ivan from the scar into the forest, through thorny brush, over low growing coltsfoot and harebells. Ivan had no choice, for something had come over him, or more accurately had become as much a part of him as his terror. It was as if a bright light had been switched on inside a remote region of his brain, a light that pointed the way to greater knowledge. Like a panigma it pulled, poked and prodded, though it never revealed more than it had to. There was always just enough light to pose the question, but never enough to reveal the answer. Ivan followed his curiosity into this strange land of lights and shadows, of flux, of time and space more like the wet paint than the dry canvas.

He went where Lester went, saw what Lester saw, felt what Lester felt. He was in fact more Lester than he was Ivan. They were no longer two, woeful creatures wandering the forest, but one—a single being, one mind and one body reassembled from the worst of both.

Continuing alone in the wood Ivan clutched something sharp, something powerful against his chest. When he looked down he noticed not only the iron and bronze totem, but what he now was, what in dream he had become. Ivan stared at Lester's ripe carcass now equally his.

His open chest exuded grayish pus that glistened on two flesh-bare hands. He reeked of death and decay. A fullness rose suddenly in his throat, an eruption of bile lasting several minutes. When the torrent stopped Ivan peered up at the livid oak that had uprooted and followed. There was just the two of them, or so he thought, or so it would appear from the pictures in his head. The snag leaned and reached, lifted him effortlessly into the air by his protruding collarbone.

The process of transhumanization culminated with two strange visions or dream sights for the mnemonic being only two parts human. The first dream sight was pure nightmare. The oak snag split open revealing a witch cloaked in blue-black. Her hands dripped red as she squeezed tight his throat. Prominently displayed around her throat was a talisman of perfect green stones. A dark cowl concealed her face, all of her features except a beak.

The second dream sight was pure insight. The ubiquitous illumination had once again been switched on inside his brain. Only this time it was many candles brighter. All the questions were answered. He remembered things, woke as if from a long slumber. The light in his head was an eye, though like none he could possibly imagine. He saw all-round and through as if he was a bright star floating at the center of the cosmos.

She returned him gently to the ground, ground he could feel, ground he could smell for the first time. He tried to smile, but could not quite manage it, could not quite find the parts for it. She let her black cowl part just a tad to expose her myriad eyes. He sucked in all the air he could. He could taste the air, taste the mist. It was the taste of her. She spoke to him in singsong, bade that he follow. He was powerless but to comply. The two enrobed travelers embarked upon a winding, tangled course into the dark and twisted wood.

She led this amalgamation of souls, this improbable transhuman (Ivan, Lester and one other—all they ever were and ever would be) to the top of a knoll, to a clearing dominated by a roaring fire and an encampment of armed and highly agitated men.

Larry and Julia counted over two-dozen men. They were a motley crew in crested helmets and a quilt-like mix of trousers, tunics and cloaks. Some wore nothing more than torques, belts and blue tattoos. They had formed a loose semicircle facing the fire and footpath.

A tall chieftain stood near the fire stroking his red mustache, passionately addressing his ill-fitted troops. Standing nearly seven feet he needed no helmet, wore no helmet to hide his crop of lime-washed hair. His men cheered, beat swords against swords, beat helmets against helmets, or with little restraint, heads against heads.

The mustachioed chief leaned upon a long, iron sword decorated with snarling chimera. He pointed to the trail and an ascending line of torches. Another band of men in bronze helmets and breastplates approached cautiously. They made up for their lack of bulk with heavy armor, assorted weaponry and a bold, defiant spirit.

Leading this procession was their chief, not as physically imposing as his counterpart, but distinctive in his own way with stoic eyes and chiseled features. Less heavily clad than his guard, he wore a purple tunic, leather greaves, cuirass and helmet. His helmet bore a brave motto, his sculpted cuirass a brave eagle.

The leaders exchanged curt formalities. The wary newcomers would not relax, but huddled close to their leader. His piercing eyes surveyed the camp and reflected the wisdom in having carefully prearranged the site. The two chiefs negotiated through interpreters. As they parleyed each tossed a stone into the fire to signal their desire to speak. The force of each throw was a clue to their temper. Each toss went into the fire harder and faster than the toss before.

Ivan's cynosural guide was invisible to the soldiers in the camp and to the dream watchers in the lumitorium. In times past or present she might be identified simplistically as a spirit or a ghost or a phantom depending on the local, cultural predilection. But there would be no identification, at least not now, not in the dark of the dream or the light of the camp, not for a very long time.

Ivan and the cloaked witch watched one man in the camp with keen and calculating interest. Huddling at the perimeter Ivan watched the man's every move. He never once lifted his single, green eye from the Eagle chief, clutching the iron and bronze totem that he himself had exhumed from its holy site, the tiny, symbolic grave in the blue and sacred marl. He and the instrument of his revenge were all powerful—a secret protected by posterity and sorcery. A clear view of Ivan's face was obscured by hides and horns as his nyct-mistress whispered impossible instructions into his lobeless ear.

The biocon had warned Julia and Larry of Ivan's mortal danger. Pandora suggested the reason—the creature with the twisted body, with an even more twisted and malformed head—a head with animal horns—a face with a single, glow-green eye.

Julia used the locum to move their viewing train along the perimeter of Pandora. This provided a new perspective on the panoscene and a closer look at what hid among the thorns and shrubs.

"We've lost Kovrani. He's fallen through the net."

Tony peered up from his biocon monitor. Henry's words had cut deep into his being. To his horror they supported a conclusion he was loath to accept. Nothing in Tony's experience or training had prepared him for Ivan's bio-facts that rapidly disappeared into a kind of OHMic black hole. The convulsive disappearance of a major portion of Ivan's CIC memory now triggered in him the recollection of an old but persistent premonition, his own disappearance. He was being propelled down an unlit corridor in the arms of a mob, on more legs than he could count, then dropped down a dark well into the deep pit of his own despair. Tony could not open his eyes to the rest. Suddenly, thankfully, he was back at the isocon next to Henry. Unfortunately, nothing in his current-probable time and space had improved. In fact, Henry's words continued to confirm their worst scenario.

Henry's voice rippled, his larynx struggled to overcome an almost paralytic spasm. "We've lost his CIC index ... his PPI ... his navigational tensor. Tony ... call Doc Klein. I want to shut down the LENS, but we must be ... be very careful with the Cybernet computers.

Tony called Owen in chamber two. The former was given no opportunity to deliver his report. Sweat streamed down Owen's chin. "We're screwed!" he cried. "No ... we're glued, screwed and tattooed! The isocell is on fire. I mean ... it's approaching 102°F. And Lester's PPI has jumped from next to nothing to a hundred and ninety percent. How is this possible? And I can't get his Martoffs from the 'con or the lab. Nettie says he hasn't any. Sondra says he hasn't any. Tony ... are you there? Speak to me man! Our insurance ain't gonna cover this kind of royal screw-up."

Henry bumped Tony aside. "Owen ... Henry. I think we've lost Ivan. The Light Shell's still running ... but just what it's doing I can't tell from shit. It's running the subroutine from Hell for all I know." The camera moved and locked on to Henry. "You get that, Doc? You hear what I just said? Ivan's been scrambled! I can't validate one byte of him in the CIC or the SBI safety buffer. You hear me?"

"Yeah ... 'fraid I hear ya. No worse than here ... Henry. You know what I think? I think the boil of our curiosity has finally burst and ejected the pus of prophecy. It ain't gonna be sponged away either. We're trapped inside our own malodorous mischief. Henry, to add to it we're consuming far too much mnemonic power. Henry ... a sec please ... I need to check the ... wait ... what the f—!"

Owen had moved beyond camera range. He returned to report: "There's no doubt about it now. Wasn't sure at first that I wasn't seeing things. But it's there ... big as life ... or maybe ..." He suppressed a perverse giggle. "A kind of combustion ... that's the only way I know to describe it ... and it's drifting like a firestorm across the 'cell heading right for Lester Holman. It's so bright the thing inside is nearly black. I know this sounds crazy. But it's so bright it blacks out the eyes. From all the 'swack' that it spits it seems to be rotating. I can't make it out, but the thing that's inside the light is trying to break out into the room!"

Henry's viewing screen went instantly gray with an electric sizzle. He barked at Tony, "Get Owen back."

Tony played frantically the keypads of the console's vicom.

In a few seconds Owen Klein was back on video. His neck had erupted into angry, red wheals. He gasped, "Henry, who set up this scan? The guy must have inverted all the math. We're in a discontinuity or I'm President Rice herself. Calculate your fourth order equations real fast 'cause I think we're gonna need every friggin' one of 'em."

"Owen, we're on the brink of a serious temporal rip. It's no fold in the fabric either. It's a legitimate warptear ... a hole of 0.6 gigaquins per cubic meter-second. There may be nothing we can do. I've reduced the preamp, but nothing I do keeps it from expanding into our current concept of time and space."

The Holmans had crouched and covered their heads. Nell emitted birdcalls like a hen bewailing the slaughter of her nestlings. Dr. Pattison, staring into the isocell, had shielded his eyes from the energy induced by the expanding hole in space-time. At the event perimeter, light was popping like a thousand flash bulbs. A particularly powerful concussion rocked Pattison off his feet, deposited him on his backside gracefully in a flowerlike, slow motion crumple of helpless arms and legs.

Sweat collected on Henry's lip, ran along the bridge of his nose. He gnashed teeth hoping the pain would prevent passing out. The dizziness passed, though he had bloodied his mouth. He rechecked Nettie's power. The window was too large for the parangle and aperture, too large for the CIC, too large for Ivan and Lester, too large for the time they had left.

Their exquisite theory of time and space was about to pulverize them, for the event window had swelled to pure contingency. Henry had no way to know where the impact of the massive discontinuity would take them?

It could not be proved, but the unlikely proximity of the powerful contingency field had altered local time and space. The so-called "fun house effect" was producing distortions of about ten percent for Klein, Pattison and the Holmans about twenty feet from the event perimeter, and about one percent for Henry and Tony nearly eighty feet away.

Perception was slowing down, the reality of the moment was stretching out, time's arrow was turning, and space was curving. The process continued as the hole in space-time

expanded. It could not be proved, of course, but local time had turned. It now trickled from the future toward the past. Klein and the Holman's were remembering the future, though only small snippets, and no longer the past. They had no way to know which memory it was because there was really no difference.

Henry repeated the process of verification with the dexterity of an alcoholic. He shouted as he fumbled with the navcon's artificial hand. "The Gate is open!"

"The Gate?" whimpered Tony, appearing somewhat exaggerated about the ears, the nose and mouth, and somewhat squat in the lower extremities for a man as trim and fit as he.

"Yeah ... Panigma Gate ... the genuine article ... no computer drill. Don't ask me how. And I can't attenuate the window enough to extinguish its thick light."

Tony commenced punching console buttons. Suddenly he stopped, his hand poised over the trigger. Tony lifted the safety cover, and before Henry could stop him, he mashed down on the panic button with all his strength.

The dome erupted in horns and lights.

Henry knocked Tony aside in the hope of reaching the panel in time to cancel the action. But there was no way it could be stopped once it was started. Panigma Button had been manually activated. The special OPM sequencing had been started. The process would play out. They could watch Ivan and Lester's minds unravel and evaporate. Henry waited for the collapse of the LENS and the disconnection of the two dreamers. The problem was that the CICs had lost track of just "who was who" and "who was where."

The shutdown was a horrible chance to take. What would be left of their minds? Only the simplest autonomic functions would remain. Henry assumed they would end up vegetables, even if they survived the chaos of the computer scram. They waited for the Machine's acknowledgement, but the LENS did not flinch, did not falter. He confirmed the results from his panel, results that made no earthly sense.

Tony cried, "My God, what have I done?"

"Nothing ... Tony. Apparently you did nothing. I can't begin to understand, but something else has control of the LENS. We couldn't shut it down if we wanted to. Try to call Julia ... try to get her to the compulab. There's no time. For god's sake, call her down." For Tony, Henry seemed to fade. Tony's legs gave way. Fortunately there was a chair beneath him to collect the pieces.

The Eagle was in trouble. He moved as if mired in wintry molasses. Soon, he could barely move at all. Furthermore, he was flattened as if rolled out by a steamroller. Suspended in some transient dimension the Eagle grew flatter, slower, and fainter.

His loyal guards recovered, reacted and drew their *ferri* or swords. This proved to be too little and too late. The spike-haired chief had encircled and pinned them down. He did not immediately release his camp guards for the expected attack. Instead, he released

reserves that he had concealed in the dense brush. They poured into the clearing through the ranks of bellowing men. In seconds dozens of crazed, blue banshees filled the camp.

The Eagle could not be helped, even by his brave centurions. They clustered around his fading shade in what looked like a lost cause.

The chaos in the camp was matched only by the chaos under the dome. Julia ran from the theater, bolted down two flights to the compulab, leaving Larry behind to deal with the panoptoscope, its locum and navitor. The effort was excruciatingly difficult with no way to account for it. The closer she thought she got to the lab the further it seemed that she had to go. It was like climbing to the top of a hill with no top in sight. When at last she entered the lab, Julia discovered that its attendants had only managed to cancel the alarm horn and lights. The rest was up to her.

For Klein, Pattison and the Holmans it was like gazing through a cracked lens. In spite of this and a feeling of heavy sedation they could still move about the isocon one foot in front of the other. But there was also a disquieting loss of identity, of any connection to the past or a life on firm soil. They shared a sense of bleak finality and foreboding with no purpose to being or having ever been. The result of looking straight ahead was normal enough if one ignored the distortions, the slight exaggerations of form that made caricatures of the people, animated cartoons of the inanimate objects. But if one turned too much, if one did not place one foot firmly in front of the other, one might see the familiar in an unfamiliar way, oddly ahead of itself or behind itself with respect to everything else, as if their world was coming apart, meter by meter, second by second, quark by quark, hairy lepton by hairy lepton.

There was no time for wondering why.

Owen Klein placed a frantic vicom call to Henry as Dr. Pattison and the Holmans could only watch. "Henry, don't bother me now with parangles. There's no time. Our womb's ready to bear a litter ... god knows what." After several seconds he exclaimed, "Wait ... Henry, I'll get back to you. We've a new problem. Lester's waking ... and not on cue."

Lester opened his eyes, sat erect and alert as a feral cat. He snarled to reinforce the feline effect. Nell screamed and fell like a gunnysack to the floor. Lester's eyes were glued to the human form that slowly rotated inside the hole in space-time. The man rotated and was flat, though by some queer mechanism his flatness did not rotate with his body, but seemed fixed to one of the too-many axes of the room.

This trick made little difference to Lester. The boy extended bony hands to expose not the expected bronze and iron figurine, but a ten-inch, black dagger. Lester vaulted to his feet ready to strike with all his strength. Carefully, Owen Klein descended on his heels into the isocell about a step ahead of Dr. Pattison. It seemed that he was exempt from falling even though the expectation was overwhelming. The boy swiveled to repel both men. Owen slowed to a stop, surprised by the agility, acuity and savagery of the boy.

Both men could barely walk much less maneuver. Pattison closed his eyes and lunged out attempting to flank Lester, but the boy would not be flanked.

Pattison yelled, "I'll try for the knife, but feel free to help. He looks awfully quick and I don't trust my feet right now. They feel like two beached whales. No matter. I'll count. On three, go for him!"

When John Holman entered the room Lester threatened him as well. But the boy was only concerned with the man about to emerge within his arm's reach. The heat of the room was unbearable. The friction of time filled the room with luminous emanations, phantoms indescribable.

Pattison counted and the three attacked. The knife hand was free to do its work for a few seconds. Pattison gained a brief advantage, then promptly lost it and a piece of flesh. A knot of bodies fell upon the chamber couch that collapsed in a chaotic heap. The struggle continued chaotically across the isocell floor. The luminations that escaped the open Gate made it almost impossible for Nell to see what was going on.

The melee finally ended, though each combatant had received some share of the knife. With John Holman astride Lester's chest and Klein pinning an arm, Pattison pried loose the dark dagger, painfully, finger by finger. It clanked harmlessly to the floor.

With the separation of the boy from the dagger the luminous apparition burst and disappeared from the isocell like a huge soap bubble. The time rift with its unearthly fireworks and distortions of space and time disappeared as well.

The fight in the camp had been brutal. Many men were down preparing to die if not dead already. The Eagle's elite guard had taken the brunt of it. Then with the flash of his sword their fortunes changed.

By forces unseen the Eagle was re-inflated, reanimated, revitalized. He fought back furiously as if possessed by Mars himself. His guards cheered as he hacked to death a blue savage, partially decapitating the man that had flung himself suicidally into the fray, his head dangling by a single muscle thread. The Eagle's heroism rallied his men. Locking shields around their general they counterattacked in a cutting wedge.

Their ferocity and tactics surprised the tattooed men. The Eagle and his guard broke through the line after felling their enemies with blows to unprotected torsos. They rushed down the hill in a tank-like *testudo*. Only the mustachioed giant remained calm. He reformed his swordsmen for pursuit, confidently barking orders. His blue men, eager for blood and revenge, pursued the Eagle and his flock like a pack of wild dogs.

Fortunately for the flock the execution of their tactics had created precious breathing space. They had also prearranged the devil's own surprise—an ambush that required singular discipline and courage. The Eagle had placed a trap below a kink in the trail, at a narrow and blind angle. He waited as all his troopers cleared the sharp angle in perfect order. He unsheathed his sword and severed lines that released an iron-studded trunk, a

barricade that fell across the trail. He waited one breath, looked both directions before playing his final, deadly gambit.

The astute general had concealed several dozen of his Thracian bowmen in the thickets below the blind angle. As the blue horde descended, the archers charged perpendicular to the trail from both sides forming two ranks as a second, lethal obstacle against the rush. The execution of the savage horde required less than a minute.

The blue men charged down the trail, but were slowed by their number and the dark. As they roared around the blind angle legs entangled legs. The spiked-tree that had been dropped across the trail entangled many more legs, impaled unprotected chests and bellies. Thus their first rush was coldly mowed down by hard oak. Those that did vault the studded barricade beheld a bristling beast.

The Eagle's first rank of archers kneeled as his second rank volley-fired. They dispatched the blue men as efficiently as hawks dispatched pigeons. The first rank rose and fired as the second crouched to reload. A third round was ready, though beyond necessity.

Dr. Pattison witnessed Lester Holman's smile for the first time. It was a pleasant smile contrasting the often vacuous, sometimes venomous persona he had been used to. Doctor and parents felt fortunate to have him back after two years of unspeakable horror.

In isocon one, too little advantage was made from the brief lapse to sanity. Space was once again gnarled and coarse, except that the lumps and folds, twists and turns now measured in meters and not centimeters.

Time was wheels off track. Tony's brain was several frames ahead of his eyes. He was remembering things he had not yet seen. All of his inklings were coming true just a few seconds after they happened in his head. This made it feel like time was flowing backwards, though he knew that time was not supposed to flow backwards. He asked the only question that his mind's eye had not already answered. "Henry, I don't understand." His words flowed backwards, but he continued: "Shouldn't we be able to wake him?"

"Tony, I'm afraid Ivan no longer exists in any way we'll ever know. It's Julia's negative LENS ... in control of everything, extinguishing everything at its point of penetration."

"And the Gate?"

"Most certainly the Gate! This one's more powerful than the first, nearly 1.2 gigaquins per cubic meter-second. I can't override. I can't even think inside this contingency flux. I hope Julia can do something, for I cannot. I am finished. Finished!" Then Henry did a strange thing. He shutdown the navcon and biocon with no explanation, the latter by using the power switch directly in front of Tony. He stood up shakily regarding the rich contours of the room. Selecting just the proper seam in space-time, Henry strode for the door like a man delivering the mail. Unclear even to him, the mail had already been delivered.

Tony called after him: “Henry ... what on Earth is going on? Have we opened the gates ...” Tony’s trailing words failed to reach even his own ears, backwards or not. Computer power was spiking fast. They would soon be blown to blazes if they weren’t already there. The small star near to Ivan in isocell one was about to nova.

The Geasa had failed. Whether called Kovrani or Carvorix he had failed too. He untied his priestly robes, set aside his ram’s horns. His face was exposed for all to see. He prayed to Mother Epona as his lord approached. There was no malice in his lord’s eyes. The great roschief, the defender of his race and tribe, approached Ivan with respect, looked him sadly in his single, green eye. And although a part of him longed to flee, would seem to break the bonds, tribal law was tribal law.

Ivan recalled his other lives. If they taught him nothing else they taught that a life was but a single branch. The loss of any one branch would not kill the trunk. And he had suffered many branches.

He remembered his birth in the Carnute village of Cori-dun. He remembered his initiation into the holy order some years later. He remembered the elder’s implant of the oracle, an eye like none invoked before or since. And he remembered his first meeting with **Her**.

He was ready. He tried to smile, but had nothing to use, no real face. He stretched out as tall as he could. The time had come to amputate the ailing branch. With rippling arms his great lord brought the sword to his shoulder as if to coax and cock the snarling blade.

Ivan watched as the chief took careful aim. The sword remained suspended for an eternity. The tattooed giant gave Ivan a wink that penned volumes. The iron blade traced a wide arc for Ivan’s chin. There was a great rush of air—perhaps the wind leaving his chest. For a time, who knows how long, he felt free—shed of a great burden. He knew why. She sat beside him, his love, his nyct-mistress, Nerscha.

She sat beside him as she had done at those times of great pain and hardship. Ivan’s attention drifted to her lap and hands, to what she held so tenderly. The sight of it transfixed his soul. In her bloodied hands she held his severed head. And though he looked upon his mangled and malformed face for the first time with the eyes of a man, he was not afraid. Ivan looked past himself, past time and space, past her mortal disguise into eyes myriad and ancient.

Larry had watched the battle unfold from his front row seat. The fact that he was on a paracircular track had created the illusion that he could go anywhere on the battlefield—as large as the memory capacity of the OnNet computer. He had been virtually in the fight.

The ingenuity of the Eagle and his soldiers had permitted a harrowing escape, but at a considerable cost. Those left behind and alive had been dispatched by a blue warrior who

had slit their throats. He had then removed ears, hands and other sacred parts within his right.

Larry had adjusted the locum several times to better follow the action. It was clear that the sorcerer had failed his people at a time of great peril. He had been the source-provocateur from the beginning. Larry had witnessed his brutal execution seconds before the Machine had crashed leaving behind the sickening smell of electrical overload.

Larry sat alone in the semidarkness. And though certain that the others needed his help he could not move, for he could not understand how it could have happened. He could never have done what that maniac Hardan had ordered. Then how could that dark dimension—that cold quarlight have coalesced from the tenuity and uncertainty of space and time? Who or what had exposed the rift and opened the Gates of Hell?

The Panopticon was dark and silent, the kind of silence in the dark that was not right, was not good. It was the kind that rises upon its haunches and looks into your beating heart.

This silence was suddenly disturbed by clicks in the corridor. Henry cycled the switch of their flashlight as if repetition would shock its weak circuits back to life. But nothing helped. Nothing improved. The computers, visicoms® and battery-powered lights, the separate and redundant systems had failed. Henry complained about the light, but returned to a topic one notch darker, one heartbeat more important than hardware and software. “You took a terrible chance.”

Julia followed behind a half step. “You know what was at stake. What else could I have done?” she asked for the third time, her voice rising and whistling like wind under eaves.

He thumped their Jiffy Mart special back to life. “I don’t know.”

“Nor I,” she replied, “or I’d have done it. I had to kill the power.”

They reached chamber one’s anteroom soon enough. The door to the isocell was open. The room was dark except for a second frenetic beam of light. The two beams crossed. Henry and Julia stepped cautiously into the dark. Henry’s light found two motionless bodies on the tile. One limp form was propped maladroitly against the dream couch and belonged to their Co-director, Ivan Kovrani, attended by Klein and Mirigliano.

Kneeling, they worked desperately to revive the parapsychologist. The other body, whether a man or a beast, would never be revived. Henry avoided the mangled creature and the expanding pool of blood between the body and a misplaced knot of flesh and fur. The knot was not large and reminded him of a rabbit skinned by hungry hounds.

He aimed his beam at the knot. “What is it?” he asked furrowing his brow. He looked to Julia for the answer, but she was too busy with the living. He poked his flashlight around the room as if he expected it to reveal other grotesqueries. He seemed gratified there were none. Henry approached the couch, retrieved Ivan’s electrode cap and mask, and with this small act he appeared to be reconnecting to the familiar world.

Minutes passed without a noticeable change in Kovrani's condition. A respectful minimum of questions were asked by the respectful few. There finally came the faint rattle of air. Tony proclaimed excitedly, "He's breathing! Doc ... he'll be okay."

Ivan moaned in pain, uncrossed his cricket legs, and slowly opened his eyes. Owen advised him to lie still. Julia placed a pillow under his head. She mentioned that he was dangerously hot. Doc Klein nodded yes.

Ivan struggled to speak. His eyes fluttered. He emitted gurgling sounds. His impoverished face betrayed no clue to his mental state or physical condition. The house lights came on to robust cheers from Tony and Julia. The latter exclaimed, "Finally ... a good omen. She said to Henry, "We needed something ... anything."

Tony pleaded, "Dr. Kovrani, speak to us. Are you okay?" Saliva trickled from a contorted corner of his mouth. Julia dabbed dry his mouth and forehead. "He's so hot," she repeated worriedly.

"Is he going to be all right? The disconnection?" asked Henry anxiously. "Paradementia?" he wondered aloud.

Ivan exercised his lips soundlessly. He sipped some water with Owen's help, but would not touch the glass. His skin remained red and clammy. Owen rechecked his pupils and found them barely responsive.

Henry whispered, "It looks as if he's staring at the back of his own empty skull."

"Quiet!" ordered Klein not so quietly.

"He's disoriented," said Tony. "Post-LENS shock. He'll be okay once the CIC interface wears off."

"Damn ... give him some room to breath," exclaimed Julia.

Ivan demonstrated no recognition of his surroundings. He returned only a vague stare. Nothing made an impression until he noticed the creature crumpled nearby. At the sight of the gore or the beast, Ivan stiffened, babbled incoherently, struggled to stand, but the man was weak and easily restrained by Klein.

"Jesus ... that got his attention," exclaimed Tony.

Ivan's eyes rolled back into his head as he passed out. He fell limp as if shot through the heart. "Fainted," said Owen to Tony as he caught Ivan under the arm. "Let's get him back on the couch."

When Ivan finally recovered it seemed that their Dr. Psychic had returned. The set of his mouth, the glint of recognition, the anima of urgency in his eyes was unmistakably Kovrani. But the prostrate man was suddenly hit by an invisible blow that lifted him off the couch. He came down rod-straight. He gasped, "Some water ... 'lease ... on fire!"

Owen cautioned, "Dr. Kovrani, drink it slow."

Trembling, Ivan stammered, “It’s hard ... hard to think. My head’s fluttering ... hissing like steam.”

“You piloted the LENS. Do you remember? Do you remember Lester Holman?”

“Yes ... yes, I remember Lester. He’s ... he’s dead.”

Owen corrected, “No! He’s fine ... fine ... and cured. He’s a little bruised and battered like the rest of us, but the boy will be okay. Sondra’s taken Lester and his parents to the emergency room. Only routine. No signs of psychosis. The credit, Dr. Kovrani, is all yours ... all yours.”

Ivan repeated timidly, “The credit?” It took three men to get the wobbly man to his feet. He whimpered as he slipped through their grasp. “Dizzy,” he said. “I ... I’m gonna ... gonna be sick.”

Which he was—impressively. When the effluence subsided Ivan looked up sheepishly. He apologized, “Sorry ... delayed reaction ... something I remembered. It’s starting to come back ... clumps of it ... the nightmare in bits and pieces. I don’t like the smell ... the taste. Oh Julia, I’m so sorry.” He sipped sourly from the water glass.

The cleanup that was left to Julia was raw and ineffectual for reason of no materials available for the task.

“I’m feeling better, but having trouble clearing my head. It’s full ... with fears ... with eyes and teeth ... with sounds and shadows that make no sense. That lump of flesh ... was alive ... and me! I used to think that our devils couldn’t reach us in the house where we live.”

“Ivan,” said Henry, “you gave us a nasty scare at a bad time ... too little time with too much to do. Thought we’d lost you. Your parascan had triverged. The LENS had veered dangerously out of control.”

Julia took Ivan’s hand, squeezed it reassuringly. “Welcome back, Dr. Kovrani. You were very lucky. You just don’t know how much.”

“Dear people I think I do. It is great to be back inside ... with me and only me ... I hope. What a ball buster. I saw Hell. I was Hell. I was Lester ... his putrid, decaying corpse ... and that poor beast too ... a shaman of sorts ... all hammered into my head like hot metal.”

Julia said, “Pandora revealed the shaman. Of course at the time we didn’t know that he was you ... and that you were actually Lester. It was that schizoid CIC link that had you in everyone’s head at once.”

Ivan added emphatically, “That’s the technical part ... which doesn’t explain a damned thing. Unfortunately, I was inside the headman when all of us inside suffered the fatal embarrassment ... the ultimate humiliation by the headsman. Execution! Decapitation! I

felt the emotional rip ... the physical rip as if time had stopped forever. It had, and even now, grinds almost to a halt.” A pause. “Oh, Henry, you do look bad.”

Ivan had candidly answered Henry’s earlier question for which the latter was totally unprepared. Henry faded to a hue of pale green and held the backs of both knees for leverage. “Whew ... kind of sick,” he admitted after catching his breath. “Didn’t see the connection ... er ... the disconnection ... till just now. I ... I must admit ... I didn’t see it. Not so tolerable a sight when you know ... you know.”

Tony replied, “Yeah ... don’t look. It’s worse than you think.”

“How can you know that?” Henry wet his lips, came painfully close to performing a Kovrani imitation. His former color returned slowly.

Julia asked a practical question. “Who is going to clean that up? I guess it won’t be Henry.” They exchanged haggard smiles of relief.

Exercising a morbid and technical curiosity, Owen inspected the slain druid, but would not disturb the placement of his stained robes. When he came to the severed head he observed wryly though sincerely, “He’s really no movie star.” He nearly used the metal object in his hand as a surgical probe, but quickly withdrew it. “It seems that our friend has been decapitated using hasty battlefield technique.”

Julia stared curiously at the object that he held. Henry asked, “Julia, what’s wrong? You’re so far away.”

“I was just thinking about Lester’s fetish.”

Owen held up the black and bronze dagger. He handed it to her. He said, “Have a good look. It’s in excellent condition, though it appears quite old.”

She examined it before returning it handle first. “Do you know what it is?”

“I think I know a knife when I see one. It’s a dirk, a bare bodkin. What else is there to know? I know it’s sharp enough to do the job.”

“It is more precisely a *sica*. Did you happen to notice the words engraved in the handle?”

Owen held the knife up to the light for a more thorough inspection. He squinted one eye, stuck out the tip of his tongue in a mockery of concentration. “Damn! Appears to be Latin ... of all things. Can’t make it out. Only what appears to be the word ... *commilitones*.”

She said, “Here ... give it to me. I’ll read the Latin for our Rhodes scholar.”

A somewhat embarrassed Owen Klein handed her the knife. “My dear ... I defer the agony of the Caesars to you.”

“Damned good guess. If you can believe it, it actually says: ‘for our beloved Caius Iulius. From your fellow soldiers of the Thirteenth Legion. May your victories be celebrated

forever with the Thirteenth forever at your side.” She then added, “Gentlemen ... this knife once belonged to that rake, rascal and reveler, Caius Iulius Caesar, consul, triumvir, protector of Rome.”

Owen shrilly piped, “Quite a find. I now understand why the Holmans were so tight-lipped. I suppose it’s theirs if they want it. I sort of doubt it though.”

“Ivan, do you want to tell them about your dream scan or shall I?” she asked respectfully.

“He’s said all he can. You do it, Julia,” said Ivan as he regarded the cold lump of flesh. “We’re really not up to it. I suspect you’ve got it figured. Like Doc says, we defer and confer our agonies to you.”

They each had noddingly noted Ivan’s occasional plurality or third person, but each one of them had let it pass. Each attributed it to stress or to some emphasis of dramatic license. Julia promptly spoke her turn: “Why, thank you. Gentlemen, I believe I can connect Caesar with the *sica* and the shaman ... and these elements with Dr. Kovrani and Lester. I’ll suggest the ‘whats’ ... if not the ‘hows’ or ‘whys.’ Maybe ... Dr. Kovrani when you feel better you can supply some of the nightmare’s true grist.”

She stroked the ancient blade and handle, the soldiers’ words etched in deep grooves. “Haven’t seen any of the data of course, but it’s my theory that we avoided Caesar’s assassination not in 44, but in 52 B.C ... prevented his murder by Lester and the shaman’s magic.”

Ivan nodded feebly that he agreed, though he appeared more and more eager to withdraw both mentally and physically. He was clearly seeing things again.

“Lester was the shaman’s dupe, manipulated by a negative cube, a tuner for the future. Henry can tell us how that’s done ... all the tensorial theory.”

“I won’t. I can’t,” he said. Then he cautioned, “Julia ... be clear about this ... this is your theory ... not mine.”

“This theory of mine and the *sica* got the shaman into our CIC. With Ivan and Lester’s help, our CIC receiver and with a lot of power on the other side, they pushed and pulled Caesar through a thin spot in space-possibility-time.”

“Though with all their anti-power,” noted Tony, “they must have needed our Machine too. So we need only pull the plug and leave it forever pulled. I’m all for that. Thought I pulled Dr. Kovrani’s plug—” He stopped suddenly in mid phrase to examine the deep flush of his tightly clasped hands.

Henry explained, “It was Julia that pulled the plug ... killed primary and secondary power ... well ... after she found Ivan in the Machine. I’m not so sure Nettie will ever restart.”

Owen said, “This is too much to grasp now ... at this time of night. Why send us Julius Caesar? What was the point of this bizarre plot?”

She frowned. "Maybe they wanted to prove to the Romans they could send their best guy to Celtic hell."

"But here ... and to a boy ... driven to commit murder? Why, Julia? It makes no sense."

"Owen ... you've got to admit," chimed Tony, "we operate the shaft to Hell at bargain basement rates."

"But what about the shaman?" asked Owen. "I wouldn't blame him if he was trying to exit in a hurry. But why all this hocus pocus with Lester and the dagger?"

A pale Kovrani sat shivering. He mumbled, "There is something else you guys should know." He repeated these words several times in varying tones." Distracted, he gazed around the room. "Oh, I'm rooted to this accursed place. I cannot escape." His eyes returned gradually to Owen and his question. "There was a kind of changeling spirit. He ... er ... us saw eyes like black flowers blooming inside the hollow stump. This stump ... I think was alive." He stopped and muttered softly, "Not so sure I can go on right now. That stump was more than just dead wood—"

"Don't try it now," advised Julia. "You must be dead on your feet. We should break this up. We've had a bad night."

"Ha! An understatement of the first rank," corrected Tony. "By the way, Julia, where's Larry? Wasn't he with you?"

Julia had no answer. She appeared genuinely puzzled.

Henry persisted, "Julia, I know that it's late, but I'd still like to understand maybe one thing before we leave. Who pushed the buttons? It had to have been the shaman, and not Lester, though both are ... or were clearly real, and not someone's changeling spirit. Sorry, Ivan, but I think your hollow stump was nothing more than a real bad dream."

Julia seemed eager to answer when Ivan would not. "If someone knows the answer that someone ain't me. But I will tell you what I think it was. It was probably the summer of 52 B.C. ... in France, what was then Celtic Gaul. Caesar met the Gauls in a parley. We saw it ... Larry and I thanks to Pandora. Caesar, the Gauls, the shaman ... they all worked their own schemes. The Gallic commander was probably the Arvernian, Vercingetorix. The final battle would occur near *Alise Ste.-Reine* better known today as Alesia. The Romans won the climatic battle that ended the long, Gallic wars. This was a milestone in history and set the course for modern Europe. I'm glad we didn't foul it up ... or perhaps we did ... and can never know how much."

Owen questioned, "All that aside, these tactics surprise me. Why screw around with sorcery? Why not just put the blade through Caesar's throat during one on his night maneuvers?"

Henry added, "And there's the fact that Caesar said nothing about this in his *Gallic Commentaries*. At least I don't think he did."

“I don’t think it’s the thing anyone would include. And his book went through many revisions. Mostly, it was party politics.”

“But Julia, why so complex and convoluted a scheme?”

“Maybe the Gauls had tried everything. It could be they figured Caesar was more than mortal. There was some justification. Many conspiracies had failed. And the druids were very big on sorcery and spells for the solutions to their problems.”

Tony added, “It seems they had saved their biggest and best solution for bottom of the ninth.”

“They wanted something that would scare the Romans out and keep them out for good. Force and intrigue had not worked. So, I suppose it does make a modicum of sense.”

“Perhaps Caesar was the least of it,” quavered Ivan, “and only the test ... the test round ... and not the ... the kill round.”

Tony shook his head in frustration. “Too much for tonight. But I’m still worried about Dr. Kato. Wasn’t Larry with you in the lumitorium? Julia, shouldn’t we look for him?”

“Yes ... he’s probably still there. But I agree ... we’d better check. Who can be sure the effect of this on him ... on any of us?”

As the others left, Julia held back. She paused, then rolled the severed head over with the toe of her boot. She noticed that there were two pinkish openings. One of these might suffice for both a nose and a mouth. It was a toothless cavity with a thin, eel-like tongue. The second opening was an eye socket that trickled a blackish blood.

She had also noticed, not unexpectantly, that the shaman’s body moved in conjunction with its head, turned in synch as if they were still connected by an invisible cord—the dimensional cross-section, the Cannon Effect that Henry had told her about—the fact of head and body still being rigidly connected across the higher dimensions. This was not something she could look at for long so she tried something else.

She carefully lifted the shaman’s stiff and soiled robes. His body was twisted and covered with hard nodules. One arm was nearly normal, the other was severely stunted and only a few inches long. Something sparkled near a tiny hand. She reached down and retrieved the green, quarvine crystal about the size of a grape. She replaced the cover on the body.

And although she concealed the Pandora stone in her fist, it glowed through her flesh, grew large and throbbed to the beat of her heart. A sympathetic light came on from a remote region inside her brain. In the dark light she saw Henry’s attic trove and she began to understand—his once perfect orb, now less than perfect, his gnome and marionette. But other questions remained unanswered. There was the tapestry, the three Klein bottles, and two of the three, green crystals.

Even though she could not easily forget these things, especially her jack-in-the-box, there was one question above all the others—the fate of that creature of rainbow plumage—Henry’s part-man, part-bird, part-angel locked inside its gilded cage. Seeing through her

first she saw the stone turn inside out. It revealed the man-bird in panic. Having escaped his attic prison this creature fled across a land in limbo, a land lost between time and space.

Chapter Fourteen: The Cosmic Brake

“Papa! Papa! Zu Hilfe! Zu Hilfe! Sonst bin ich verloren.”

The burst from darkest night to brightest light mangled his senses. He fled in panic and in pain, crossed a land perfectly flat, perfectly white, with no sound, no horizon, nothing to mark his passage through time and space. In so far as he could tell, he only dreamed of flight. This was neither Heaven nor Earth, but a universe on the brink. The brink of what he could not know.

Though he could not remember what had terrified him, he was disgusted by the flesh as if he had swallowed a large, slimy clod, perhaps a gravid slug, the lowest form of life with no hope of coughing it up.

In concept if nothing else, he applied additional force to his lank limbs. This had no perceptible effect. Though he tired there was the clear understanding that he must never stop.

As wounded eyes adjusted, he saw a speck where parallel lines were expected to meet. From somewhere deep he harnessed the power and aimed for the speck. The effort was exhausting, though the white flat was smoother than any he could imagine. Perhaps he ran uphill. There was no sure way to know, for nothing was familiar in this featureless land, if land was what it was. Perhaps it was sea or air, but it was like no sea or air he could ever imagine. It was far too perfect for any known element of Earth. He suspected: “Pure mind, continuous and unfettered—pure consciousness without the mess and bother of things and thoughts—the blank, but needful pages of a book.” He pursued thus powered by his own powerlessness.

The speck expanded inside the perfection of a vast continuity. A faint line like the edge of the world left the speck, rushed toward him, and then curved around him like a bow wave. It straightened again as it passed not impassively beneath his feet. This line, though immaterial, fired sparks and feelings he had never before known.

As he gathered speed, more lines rushed toward him, some thicker, some thinner, line after line at varying intensity and interval. The effect of each was electrifying. He increased his speed. Time was shed of space, was now free to conceive length, breadth and height all its own. The lines deepened. The rills and grooves roused in him winds and waves, gathered into a tempest that propelled his flight across the void. He wondered if there could be void without the notion of space and substance?

Soon the speck was a splotch, then a man like himself running in the distance many leagues ahead. With almost inhuman effort he closed the gap. The continuity began to warp, so great was his speed, to gather ripples, troughs and then waves as if in typhoon.

When within arms reach of the fugitive he extended his arms. So did the man in perfect unison. As they were about to touch, to merge, a chasm suddenly opened that swallowed them. They tumbled in a maelstrom, a chaos of dark inside the light. The swirls and eddies separated them. After a seemingly endless fall a gentle brake was applied. The man landed with surprise upon a soft and velvety cushion.

He was lifted from this cushion on to a firm pallet and strapped down. A glowing angel whispered to him in English. This was a severe shock since he had assumed the angels spoke impeccable German when not discoursing sagely in their heavenly harmonies.

Seemingly aware of his terror the angel spoke to comfort him. But this angel was a prodder, first with fingers, then with sharp needles. A mask was applied to his bloodless face. A blanket was provided for his cold, limp body. He could breathe, but in an artificial way as if assisted by a gentle though relentless force.

He was moving again as if carried *gespenstig* by an old and persistent mystery. But where would the mystery take him? Perhaps only his angel had the answer for that.

The Eight Baumer Dimensions:

1 Length

2 Width

3 Depth

4 Time

5x Length Uncertainty or Possibility

5y Width Uncertainty or Possibility

5z Depth Uncertainty or Possibility

6 Time Uncertainty or Possibility

Pines' Roost

Saturday, February 18th

It was Zuni land southeast of Mt. Sedgwick and the mud-logged river. There were no towns other than El Rasigo, La Sierra and Tarpley. The only decent road was the Old McDunty Pike. Both the Zuni and their enemies, the vaqueros, had claimed that it tallied with Captain Kip McDunty's original meanderings. The Indians told stories that Kipper's ghost scattered the cairns placed by wayward travelers.

If one followed Old McDunty to Copper Gorge, then trekked the gorge past the condemned soda mine to Sidewinder Trace, they would encounter a log cabin anchored high atop a red-stone butte. The nearly black cabin rested precariously, no firmer than the native conifers. At first there seemed no practical approach. It seemed unlikely that even

burros could climb its steep and dangerous face. However, what many failed to notice was the lift camouflaged by a windbreak of dense pines.

The men inside the cabin faced the prow of a bitter afternoon. On this day, few of McDunty's progenies would be out braving the hazardous trails and back roads. Lloyd Baumer braved the window, if not the storm, his back guarded by the arcane books, the zoological and geological specimens, the raptorial Harpy, the lion twins that flanked his lava hearth. The fire lapped these bronze lions standing tall and overbearingly smug.

For the moment his attention was neither on the blaze nor the impending Alberta clipper. Both had been preempted by the spinescence that now held his scrutiny, that speckled the pane—hoarfrost patterns painfully mindful of Minerva's multidimensional maps.

Doc Klein in his Levis and his turd-kickers (his rattlesnake boots) looked as if he had just driven a pack of mules across the powdery Tularosa, when only a few hours earlier he had repaired a deadly aneurysm. The scruffy doctor assumed a defiant expression. His hand rested upon Lloyd's winged Harpy. Withdrawing it angrily, he repeated, "In my dream we were there. Nettie too. The forces pressing our 'cube were too much for her to bear."

Lloyd forgot the patterns in the hoarfrost, their fractal complexity. He returned clumsily to the chair from which he commanded with austerity Pines' Roost.

Owen Klein admonished, "Lloyd ... stop curling tensors or whatever it is you do and explain these powerful forces. After all ... we must know."

Max Cole looked up at his friends with scholarly interest, but soon shrugged and returned to his current frustration. The piebald colonel sat slumped over the octagonal, glass table overburdened by the large E-sketches and blueprints. This clutter represented their newly acquired compound in excruciating detail. Upon these drawings rested his black briar pipe, an unsharpened pencil, plus a noggin of aromatic, but by now dispirited grog.

For distraction Lloyd browsed Hunczovsky's imposing histography, its more-appealing thickness as he ignored the thicker questions implied by Owen's recollection of the LENS paracube.

In a fit of irritation over the compound's tricky security system, Max declared, "I can't slice jack shit from any of this." He rolled the prints up carelessly and stuffed them into a long, metal cylinder. He grumbled as he stoked his pipe, "The compound won't be ready. Better if we burned it to the ground." With an errant elbow he knocked over the cold, sticky grog. Cursing a blue streak he heaved the pencil into the fire when his profanity had failed to soothe his fiery temper.

Lloyd waited for the tantrum to pass, then reminded him very simply, "You and Bill have got two weeks."

"Then you've got Ivan for two weeks. He's gonna be trouble now that he's kissed the angel of death."

“I’ve had to take extra precautions,” said Lloyd. “Our panigmas have not proceeded exactly according to plan.”

Max snorted rudely between puffs. “These damned unforeseeables. Unforgivable,” he quipped laconically.

Lloyd returned a dour glare. “Owen’s trying to tell us about his dream, and Max, you aren’t even listening.”

“You’re suddenly listening?” Owen snapped. He rubbed his weathered face, flipped Lloyd’s Harpy the “bird” then sidled closer to the fire to revive fingers that still ached from hours of delicate surgery.

The old physicist did not look up. This man that literally held the world in his grip appeared at this moment too frail to hold up his own head. He replied, “Been listening all along. You were telling us about your dream ... about Nettie’s paraspace fantastically incubed.”

“I’m afraid our space as well. Unfortunately, it goes with the territory. The three of us were there. Bill too,” recalled Klein. “We were circled around the paracube as if it were a real thing. When you tried to break the quin ... its seal, it cleaved into scads of quars, cubes, squares, lines and points ... you know ... the whole, incomprehensible works.”

“Like quirky quarks,” suggested Max. “... The inquanta of a breach.”

“I don’t know about these things. That’s why I ask. In my dream the quin was a clock dropped from a great height. Its fragile works and mechanisms caromed and collided. So much flowed from so little. I recognized your 4-dimensional cubes ... your so-called quars as they went about annihilating one another. Posiquars cancelled antiquars. Anticubes cancelled posicubes. Space cancelled time while time cancelled space. Uncertainty drew in tighter and thicker around us. Then with no time and no space, we could not breathe. Finally, everything was gone, everything that was ... was now no more. I’m not talking about a discontinuity. I’m talking about extinction ... about never having been ... a hitch in the mechanism ... a turd in the punch bowl ... a flaw in the physics.”

Max fidgeted, answered Owen’s question snidely, “The flaw is not in the physics.”

Lloyd closed the book, gazed into the fire that separated the smirking lions. Seemingly dreaming, he rubbed sight back into sight-weary eyes, rubbed the variable green luster back into the jewel of his gold ring. He coughed mechanically in his not-so-subtle way of commanding their attention.

“The flaw is the essential precision in a phase space of continuous uncertainty,” he replied sincerely.

“I think this explanation is well ... pure S, H, I, T,” spelled Max.

Surprised, Lloyd challenged, “What? You ... you disagree?”

“Nope. Agree all right. But that’s what it boils down to. You’re proposing that ‘shit happens in theory’ when I say it’s shitty enough to stink us to the planet Tralfamadore.”

“Max, not a bad place as I recall. Wonderfully stress reducing. But seriously, with Kovrani there is no question that we were very lucky. I will realign and retest the LENS. And I will reset all of Nettie’s tolerances. I hear you. And I wholeheartedly agree.”

The winter wind had picked up. Pellets of glaze ice thrummed the windows and a rattling roof. An unsavory chill passed through the room like “bad” air from the “plague” years.

“Perhaps, as you say, the flaw was always there,” said Owen. “Maybe if we understand what it is ... and how it works ... all the principles ... you know ...” He was loath to say it, but he nevertheless spoke the words. “How does one build himself ... well ... you know ... a time machine ... from only—?”

Max’s eyes ignited as he added, “... from only a dream and a prayer.” An old taboo had been broken. Space and time drew in a little tighter, a little thicker between them. The quantization of time, each iota of the present, each frame of consciousness was never more powerfully revealed than by speaking the unspeakable, thinking the unthinkable.

Lloyd raised a hand, held it high in the air, his fingers arranged as if to touch the subject from the depths of his soul. “You truly want to know? It’s a serious question. Its serious answer will require your utmost attention. Are you prepared to give it ... for a time ... from a needful niche inside your curiosity?”

“Yes.” They both answered his question, one “yes” following the other, after some slight hesitation, not sure where the old relativist would take them.

“Then be prepared to hang in, for I’m going to tell you about the infinite cube and the forces inside ... those phenomena that control the light itself.”

“We need to know,” pressed Owen uncertainly. He blew warmth back into his hands, held his palms out to the fire. His mind turned suddenly dark as he gazed into the light.

“I’ll tell you something,” confided Lloyd, “that you may not wish to know. You both know that time and space packs a wallop. But neither of you know just how much. You don’t know. You don’t know about the **Cosmic Brake**. It’s not something we’ve ... ah ... discussed. It is after all the basic mechanism, and like all mechanisms, no matter how beautiful, it contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.” Lloyd once again retrieved and browsed Hunczovsky’s *Tale of Jove*—in these troubled days his cross and his crutch.

“Another disquieting and belated piece of news,” reflected Max, “in a long and steady line of bad news and big surprises. We’ve had cosmic attractors, light speed unbounded, a quantum continuum where the past is just as uncertain as the future. And we’ve had Nettie growing larger, stronger. But by far the worst is playing peek-a-boo with the psychopath.”

Owen paced thoughtfully before the fire. The horror of the night spent with Lester Holman was still deeply etched upon his face. “Bad, true enough, but I doubt that even Leopold is the worst thing we face?”

Lloyd in his turn offered, “Gentlemen, we seek the truth. To find it we must sometimes endure the dark light of our worst fears.”

“What could be darker than certain death?” uttered Max.

Lloyd shrugged that he did not know, or that he would not answer if he did. He sat silent with his hands on his knees, with his long chin resting uncomfortably a few inches above his chest.

“I don’t know the answer,” sighed Owen. “I don’t know what is meant by your Cosmic Brake (break?). Do you mean we slow the paracube to sub-light gently, coax it into our space, or are you saying we slam it against the present, smash it brutally into its quanta and anti-quanta?”

Though quiet, Max knew something about mnemonic cubes. He knew about their 4-dimensional cube, often called a quar. In three dimensions, the quar would vibrate across time along each of its three axes. If the quar were projected into a parallel space-time the resulting dyad could be connected across the possibility gap to form a complete 5-dimensional cube or quin. If the quin were projected into a parallel space-possibility-time the resulting dyad could be connected across the next higher gap to form a 6-dimensional cube or quex. He also knew that all of these so-called “cubes” had something to do with Lloyd’s infinite cube, but he was not exactly sure what that something was.

Likewise, Owen Klein was far from ignorant on the subject. If less agitated he may have recalled that Nettie’s paracube was not the complete quin, but a dyad or two quars connecting two parallel space-time planes. He may have also recalled that the complete antiquin, Julia’s infamous anticube, was their link to the light pump. It’s also possible he may have recalled a higher dyad, Lloyd’s dyad, the panigmatic antiquin-posiquin pair. If less agitated he may have recalled all this and more and not have brought the subject up in the first place. He should have known the reaction this question would ignite.

“Perhaps I pose too technical a question?” wondered Owen in words muted and muffled, as he regarded his old patient, but more his dear old friend. Lloyd, at this moment, was more a legend than a man, more a marble Lincoln, an imposing memorial—not dead, but not really alive either.

Max reminded, “I think we’re straying too far from the point. For my part, I want some reassurance that all the lesser cubes fit. Do we understand how they fit? May we tinker, open and close the paracube without killing the doctor, the patient and some of us not-so-innocent bystanders?”

A thin line of darkish delight descended like glacial, black ice from Lloyd’s eyes to the wryly-wrinkled corners of his mouth. Nodding fatherly he answered, “You naturally want some reassurance. I think your point has been well made. Coincidentally, it all begins with

a point ... a cube of dimension d equal to zero. You may know or not (know) that a cube of any dimension d , whether it's a point, a square, or a perfect box, adds one more dimension by projecting its sides or its $d-1$ cubes upon its own reflection."

Owen observed, "You're using these words as if they mean something to us. You sound like an old schoolmarm about to preach ... no pound out a painful lesson in parasolidity."

"Max said he wanted to know if they fit ... how they fit. And you wanted to know about time and space. And it's time you did."

Lloyd pedantically aimed his lesson. "Allow me to explain this in my own way. If you would hold a 3-d cube up to a 3-d mirror, if you would project each of its six squares upon its solid reflection, keeping all these projections parallel, you would create a 4-dimensional cube or quar containing 8 boxes, 24 squares, 32 edges and 16 points." He paused to let the geometry, the picture, develop in their heads. But he could see that it would not, not without a little help. He would use his 3-dimensional analogy.

"Since you surely can't," challenged Owen, "see such abstract things, how can you know what it must be? Lloyd, the truth is that you're extrapolating the cube. Visualizing the transdimensions is impossible. It is after all just a trick of abstract mathematics."

The physicist instantly darkened. His aldrigh mask seemed to crack around the corners of his cold, blue eyes. "No! It is not a trick. It is possible to count up the sub-cubes (n) of any dimension (m) ... count up all the points, the edges, squares, normal cubes, quars, quins, quexes, queps, quocs, et cetera, to form the infinite cube with dimensions of d .

Lloyd made a rapid mental calculation of his infinite cube, derived one evening long ago as he enjoyed the Disney cartoon, *Fantasia and The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

$$n = 2^{d-m} \{d!/[m!(d-m)!]\} \text{ or } n = 2^{d-m} dCm$$

"For example," he said, "a quep or 7-dimensional cube would consist of 14 quexes, 84 quins, 280 quars, 560 boxes (normal cubes), 672 squares, 448 edges and 128 points all packed inside its multidimensional space." Lloyd once again raised his hand dramatically for effect. "More importantly the infinite cube describes our infinite and multidimensional universe. By analogy to the infinite cube, a 7-dimensional universe would contain 280 4-dimensional sub-universes each more or less typical of ours. It would also contain 560 3-dimensional sub-universes, and so on and so forth."

Max squinted elfishly as he summed and re-summed stubby fingers used to simple math.

Owen countered, "A shopping list of all the parts is not the thing itself. And how can one project the sides of one box upon another and keep the lines and the boxes straight in normal space?"

"You may if you shrink one of the cubes and place it inside the other. Between the two cubes are the six projected sides forming six cubes in perspective. Voila! What you would see is a parallax, 3-d view of a 4-d cube ... but real ... just as real as you or I."

“Lloyd, my brain is spinning. May we return to the quin and what seems to be our problem. How does Nettie compress the paracube to fit inside our four dimensions of space and time?”

The old physicist gathered himself together as if he was about to address a prestigious gathering of his colleagues. “I’ll limit myself to the positive, 5-d cube ... with no photon pumping and Holman Gates. Of course I must reduce the five dimensions to three so we may visualize what happens. We’re then left with one coordinate axis for space, one for normal or forward time, plus another for the uncertainty of space, all three at 90 degrees.”

Lloyd Baumer settled in for the telling of space, time and uncertainty. He placed one hand on the Hunczovsky book as if he was swearing to tell the truth. He started professorially: “We perceive the surface of reality ... a 4-d surface of length, width, depth and forward time that most of us accept as commonplace and complete. There’s more. Before I tell of it I must briefly digress. I beg that you will bear with me. I want to be very clear about this simplified model. When I allow one dimension for space and one more for time I’ve reduced our subjective reality to a two-dimensional plane ... like a flat sheet of paper. On parallel planes we discover the peculiarities of quantum physics and relativity. We take measurements like Planck’s constant. We observe photons traveling at the speed of light.”

Owen said, “And the region between the sheets or planes is pure philosophy, Plato’s allegorical cave, Kant’s reality.”

Lloyd laughed and added, “I don’t know about that. But it does contain all the space that could have been ... really is ... to be more precise ... though it is an elusive reality ... indeed an elusive truth that tempts and tantalizes our limited cerebral yearnings.”

“But it’s a dim light that shines on this truth,” said Max, “that shines through our possibilities and projects ‘reality’ upon the thin pages of our existence.”

“Max, yes, the projection of consciousness is indeed a fragile reality, but important for all those that choose to think about it ... and even those that don’t.”

Hovering close to the fire, Owen asked the physicist, “How do you explain the variable speed of light that’s so crucial to your theory of continuity?”

“Once again it’s a matter of perspective,” Lloyd explained. “It is simple parallax that sets the apparent velocity at 186,000 miles per second. The local space-possibility produces a slight tilt to our reality plane, our 4-d comb ... I mean, cube, of course. For Einstein it was space-time curvature and gravitation ... the general theory of relativity. Space-possibility or space contingency we’ve decided to call the fifth dimension, really three measurements along three spatial axes described as 5x, 5y and 5z, the X part of the basic S-T-X.

“Uncertainty, possibility and eventuality all express the classic idea of contingency. Regardless of what we call it, it is the local tilt that accounts for the direction of time, the distribution of mass and energy, the apparent speed of light, just to name a few.”

Owen objected, “I don’t see how light velocity can vary when so many are so vexed ... when so many are so convinced that it can’t?”

“It is true that anyone taking measurements in a plane parallel to ours will determine the accepted value no matter the beam’s apparent source or direction. But it is the next dimension that makes things interesting. An observer in a nonparallel plane might measure the speed of one of our laser beams from almost zero to almost infinity ... causing our perceptual space to appear thin or thick (dense) relative to this nonparallel observer.

“It’s like this: The parangle we take through the dimensions defines our reality and what we see of the other planes whether they’re parallel or not. A free perspective on paraspaces could shrink or stretch our view of space or time beyond that predicted by Einstein.”

Lloyd added, “For Einstein our four-dimensional planes were his classic, inertial frames of reference.” The man signaled for a break as he hobbled from the library. Owen and Max directed furtive looks of frustration. In a few minutes, Lloyd returned carrying a glass half-full of juice. He sat and massaged a knee held stiff, a distraction of the failing flesh. Taking a sip he muttered, “It’s past time for a new one ... but only when our work is done.”

Lloyd returned to the topic of cubes. “We now come to the rotation of a quar within the quin ... and the focusing of our Panigma LENS. I’ll use rectilinear geometry and analogy as a way to approach the difficult conceptualization of space-possibility-time.

“Many quars are possible. The LENS can rotate the space-time plane ninety degrees toward a past possibility, then tilt it relative to the axis of space to isolate the desired space-time event. Thus for the dreamer and the dream parascopers, all of the past becomes potentially the present and all ‘there’ becomes potentially ‘here.’ Quite simply, when the dream plane is rotated ninety degrees about the common spatial axis, real time will accelerate relative to the tilter. It will finally fill in all of his or her past, possibility space. Thus with enough power, the dreamer can view any past-possible event through the window of present. For the dreamer, real time is replaced by his tilted time.”

Lloyd summarized, “In this way time phenomena are converted to space phenomena. Real time takes on the appearance of space, not time, and can be observed like space. Of course there is the converse. If the dreamer were to rotate his dream plane ninety degrees about the time axis his view of real space would grow to infinity. Though for this kind of tilt the required mnemonic power is quite large (a smile). It is this latter case, this time-axis rotation that converts space phenomena to time phenomena. It is our Faust or thinspace, what amounts to a consolidation of space, a kind of classic sci-fi space warp or fold.”

“Your point,” said Max, “is that all this pitching and yawing of the dream plane could take us anywhere or any ‘when’ in the past or in the past-possible ... to any ‘when’ or ‘what’ whether real or not, since the window of the fifth, contingent dimension is involved.”

“All possibilities are real. That’s naturally the point.” Lloyd added, “With the paracube, we can map the universe from the Big Bang to the present ... and not just the accepted past, but all the possibilities, assuming the incredible mnemonics could be mastered in our cubic containment of time and space.”

Owen chided, “Flirting with Pandora is one thing, but to reveal the cruel possibilities—”

Max added flatulently, “If she’d stayed a wet dream and not the real thing I could’ve enjoyed her possibilities a lot more.”

“And we come at last to the ‘Brake’ itself,” said Lloyd.

“Finally ... with answers for Panigma Gate?” inquired Owen.

“Yes ... plus a climax from Einstein’s own playbook.”

Lloyd summoned his strength with an arm and leg stretch for the stretch drive. “Again we will simplify our quin ... make a normal cube of it. Its height or depth we call space-uncertainty or eventuality. Our familiar space-time appears like a grid, like a flat square of graph paper passing horizontally through the center of the cube. Now, let’s rotate the cube and look down upon the grid square. We will measure space on the vertical S-axis and time on the horizontal T-axis of the square. Let’s measure unidirectional time from left to right. Our current location on the space-time grid is the intersection of T-zero and S-zero, the absolute center of the square and also the comb ... what we call ‘now.’”

A pause. “You said ‘comb’ again, responded Owen. “Why’d you—”

“I said ‘comb?’” Lloyd looked confused. “I did not.”

“You said ‘comb,’” repeated Owen.

“I meant ‘cube’ ... the absolute center of the cube.”

Max could no longer sit. He rose, vented wind, then moved nearer to the window as if preferring the storm outside to the one within the Roost—and the one within himself.

Lloyd composed himself and the lecture continued. “Let me represent the past by a time traveler located in the lower left quadrant of our space-time square ... displaced by miles and years. To achieve the vector for contact the dreamer must rotate his space-time plane ninety degrees through the cube toward the traveler, a rotation about their mutual space axis. What happens is this: All of real time, in this case the past, is compressed to fit inside his expanded viewing window. To compensate for real space the dreamer pivots his spatial axis the required number of degrees in order to place the time traveler directly overhead and perpendicular to the dream plane at the dreamer’s current time and location.

“If there is enough mnemonic power an inertial plane is projected through the traveler. Since the plane is parallel to the dream plane, the velocity of light is 186,000 miles per second. The traveler moves nearly as fast ... the greater the time difference the greater his relative speed. At some point, Einstein’s relativity kicks in. The space-time window

contracts the traveler's space as it stretches or dilates his time. This is explained by Einstein's space-time interval with its tradeoff of space for time ... or time for space. Both men are synchronized in the quasi-present of Einstein's special relativity. Only the dimension of spatial uncertainty separates them. For the dreamer, the time traveler hurls past him at nearly the speed of light. But both of these impediments can be eliminated."

Owen questioned, "What keeps the traveler in view given that he's moving so fast through dream time?"

"The paracube oscillates between reality and parareality to suspend him inside the dreamer's time and space. The dreamer must focus on his target and enlarge his space-time window to reduce the traveler's relative velocity to zero. If he can concentrate the power for this the oscillation ends and the target plane collapses. The traveler projects his shadow, his three-dimensional self from his quar through the fleeting breach in ours."

"A kind of wave-function collapse," Max suggested. "But it helps to have a material link ... something that connects the timer with the tilter. Right?"

"This 'key' is important especially for deep time. My ring, and in Lester's case the dagger, focuses the required power over a span of many years. It's a gimmick I admit, but it's a useful technique that helps to polarize the mind. But remember that Nettie could care less about gimmicks."

The Chicopee Colonel joined the Doc, paced from bookshelf to bookshelf, pretending interest in the trinkets and books. Max tested his understanding of the Gate. "Lloyd, until his speed is reduced the time traveler is untouchable."

"Yes ... his relative motion contracts his space and dilates his time. And there is something else that is extremely important for the practical minded."

Max asked quaveringly, "So ... when we stick out our catcher's mitt why doesn't the time traveler just splat against the present like a juicy, ripe tomato?"

In the waning firelight, Lloyd Baumer, resting regally in his chair, was their darkling king of the gargoyles. His eyes blazed like the quarvine of his ring, his low-powered Panigma LENS. He answered, "Depending upon which quar you're in, our Jove is traveling either one third of a foot per hour or practically 186,000 miles per second."

"But Lloyd," said Max, "we know that dream and reality are connected by our Nettie. Now please ... what is ... what is so important?"

"It's like I said before. Special relativity kicks in. Everything is relativistic including the traveler's mass and momentum." Time took a needed time out. Max and the doctor stood motionless. Each seemed afraid to look in the other's eyes for what they might discover.

While regarding the floor, Max whispered, "The force required to stop our traveler is ..."
His trailing words were inaudible.

“Where ... where from?” asked Owen reluctantly. “And please none of your bizarre rotations and reflections.”

Lloyd was deliberate. “All right. But where could this force come from? The paracube maintains a toehold on reality like Max said. The dream plane intersects the reality plane in our current space-time. Henry worked it out. It requires the ultimate in precision.”

They both stared anxiously at the gargoyle.

“Gentlemen, it’s like this. We borrow a little angular momentum from the Earth’s orbital velocity. We use the Earth’s inertia as a cosmic braking system.”

Owen whispered, “God ... we pay.”

“Yes ... by god, we pay ... an infinitesimal cost.”

“But you do not even believe—”

“Well ... let me put it this way: I believe in physics and mathematics. If this is what you mean by believe, then I’m a true believer.”

Max replied, “Lloyd ... never mind that now. Please tell it straight. And no bullshit. That is only if things go right. What could happen if we botched the momentum braking? You know ... really screwed the pooch all the way to Tralfamadore.”

“The force of time and space is well-beyond our common experience. Mnemonic power is converted into mechanical energy. Without proper control this collision would nudge the Earth. The time traveler would be reduced to what might pass for grandma’s jam if you’d find any of him at all.”

“Nudge the Earth!”

“Yes ... into the sun or outer space. It hardly matters.”

“It hardly matters?” Owen repeated.

Max asked calmly, “Is anything worth this risk? Would you chance knocking the Earth from its orbit?”

Lloyd answered without the slightest hesitation. “I’m surprised at you, Max. Naturally, I intend to do just that.”

Later that Afternoon

The storm outside was worse than ever.

Lloyd explained, “The young man’s name is Tim Corrit. It concerns the death of his father in 1988. I’ve studied the case carefully ... mapped Tim’s past meticulously. I feel we can help Tim and ourselves.”

Max asked, “Does the man know what will happen?”

“No one can know but the three of us. I’ll run the test from a safe distance. Tony has it scheduled as a routine LENS scan. Sondra Clay will do the ‘conning.’”

“And what will Tim bring us?” asked Klein with the barest suggestion of a sneer.

“Practically nothing. Well ... almost ... I mean a tiny thing. And it’s only twenty years ... an Eulerian piece of angel food cake. The momentum ... the velocity will be manageable. It’s what you both want ... what I want ... proof at low power that the Gate is okay.”

Sarcastically: “What we want. You can’t be—”

“Gentlemen, it tests the ‘cube and the plan more effectively than anything we could have hoped for.”

“But not his father?” pressed Owen pointedly. “He ... well ... you wouldn’t do that ... would you?”

Lloyd understood what Doc meant. He looked beyond them toward the hearth, thrummed his fingers on his sacred *Book of Jove*. “No,” he said finally. “Nothing like that ... a little bauble that’s easily moved and is not likely to be noticed by anyone other than our Mr. Corrit.”

The book reminded Lloyd of something. His blue eyes brightened. He skillfully changed the subject in his abrupt way of changing subjects. “Owen ... you didn’t finish telling us of Austria. What did Nicolaus say when you told him of our incredible discovery?”

Owen hesitated, then mumbled sullenly, “Mixed reviews.”

“What! Why no excitement ... no—?”

“Well ... the manuscript ... the letter ... of course he was ecstatic ... but when I couldn’t tell him what the letter had to say—”

“Yes,” said Lloyd, “I see.” The old man struggled to his feet. He limped across the library to his antique, shutter desk. Lloyd unlocked and opened its fragile tambour, then opened the central drawer carefully removing several sheets of thin and crinkly vellum. He perused the pages lovingly before returning painfully to his seat.

He did not begin reading immediately, but held the letter tenderly as if absorbing its power through his pores. After a respectful pause he translated as if memorized:

To the Thoughtful One,

Though I know not your name, you are my hope and my salvation. But time plots vengefully against me. Without your intervention, death and despair will be my only reward. Please understand that writing this letter

is my last resort. My hands and heart share horrible pain. I nevertheless begin my bequest and appeal in the best of faith and goodwill.

I have decided to leave everything to you. Do not expect worldly riches. Nothing of that sort remains, though I would gladly give them. I can only hope there is more to me than material wealth.

I have included a few papers, nothing much. You may burn or bury all save the attached manuscript. It means very much to me. There are no legitimate copies, though many forgeries abound. It is my fate to be surrounded by the foulest miscreants. A brave woman stands with me, but sadly events have overwhelmed her just as surely as they must overwhelm me.

One more thing is important to mention. I speak of a small personal item that can reach far beyond the grave. At least this is the lore that has surrounded it for many centuries. The bastards are circling, so I have taken special measures to place it safely in your hands. It has been entrusted to brother Johann Nepomuk Hunczovsky. No one will suspect that I have given it to him. He will guard it. He, or one he devoutly trusts will present my gift when the time is right.

You may admire the beauty of the bauble I will place at your disposal. And although I expect its beauty to serve me and to serve you, there are facts in its regard that must be taken into account. Be mindful of unfulfilled dreams. And never dream upon the thing itself. Such dreams are masks powered by a restless and ruthless spirit. Use my gift, but endeavor to take the greatest care at all times, day or night.

Given the perishability of the page, it is my duty to select the proper messenger. There may be an answer in my dreams and they grow stronger each and every night. The end is so agonizingly close. Alas, these final, tragic days trouble me more than I can bear.

I ask questions, but receive no answers. The heavens confound me. Why am I suddenly denied their precious gifts. I speak not only of my life though it hangs by the merest thread. I also speak of being handed the watch key only to find that the watch itself is broken. This is the cruelest punishment, far worse than the mockery I have endured from the lowest men.

But I do not despair. It leaves behind a sour note. Trusting that you can distinguish the wheat from the chaff, a sincere offer is made to you—my beloved manuscript. Please accept it as my best effort and with my hope that it is worthy of your indulgence. Preparations are nearly complete. I will wait for your decision and your sign. Please spare me from a relentless Fate, for there is still very much to do.

Ever your grateful friend,

The letter was signed. A second taboo was broken. Lloyd broke his own rule and repeated the name several times, as if appealing with all his heart unto the heavens.

*Ivan Kovrani's Office at the Institute
That Same Wintry Afternoon*

Leonard Moss entered Ivan Kovrani's office acutely out of breath and freshly dusted with fine snow. He slogged across the floor in ponderous galoshes. His eyes revealed tension. As for the rest, his head and his shoulders, the desperate angle of his mouth, he drooped under the load like one of the Institute's decorative evergreens.

Leonard had not bothered to announce himself to the dithery man behind the expansive, walnut desk, more a fortress than furniture. Ivan had entered a memo into his lociputer when jolted by Leonard into a kind of synaptic limbo. Leonard casually brushed himself off leaving several dirty puddles on Ivan's Indian carpet—an expensive bribe or gift, if one prefers, from their local Mogul, Leopold Hardan.

Ivan stiffened as he spoke with disapproval. "Didn't think you were going to make it. Had to stay busy just to keep from going nuts. I am here alone with not one guard, with not one living soul on the grounds to pro ... er ... to assist me."

"Ghastly drive," snorted Leonard around a gargantuan sneeze. "The road is glaze ice. Took two bloodcurdling hours. What's so important you that couldn't tell me over the vicom?"

Ivan was as pale as a turnip. He fiddled with a stack of papers, finally pitching them in the trash basket. He looked up tragically, stared rapidly at Leonard and made no offer of a chair or anything solid. "It's been a while ... a long while since we talked. I've not been able. Now ... we must. But this thing begs discretion. Please ... Leonard, no phones, secure or not."

Leonard unbuttoned his coat, sat down, looked down and smoothed the less-than-sharp crease in his trousers. "I quite agree," he announced unconvincingly.

Ivan pressed a button that closed the office door. Leonard noticed that his hands trembled. Ivan hid them self-consciously under the desk. He said unsurely, "Leonard, you're the only one I can really trust."

"I understand," said Leonard. He thought that his old friend looked unusually nervous, dangerously drawn and pale. His eyes lacked their usual sparkle, replaced by what he feared was a LENS-induced psychosis.

"Ivan, are you okay? Are you feeling well?"

“I haven’t slept much. Could be the LENS is finally catching up. A leave would help, but under the circumstances that’s impossible. Thanks for asking, but I’ll be all right. Nothing that a normal night’s sleep wouldn’t cure.”

Ivan attempted a smile that flickered, then fizzled. Leonard could almost hear it fizzling, like the life of the man across the desk. Ivan killed the lights using the panel that also operated the security door. Darkness was fully ushered in. For Leonard it was the turning point, that fateful moment of clarity and juxtaposition. He considered the symbolism appropriate to their predicament. Images old and new passed through his mind. He asked, “Why douse the lights? After all, the room could be bugged.”

“Rhoury’s checked it, but Lloyd could be scanning. This should ... well ... take care of Lloyd.”

Leonard questioned, “I wonder about that, though one thing is certain. We’ve achieved a new level of paradimensional paranoia. This is a George Orwell nightmare, and nothing remotely close to Tom Emsley’s brave, new world.”

“It’s a good thing poor Tom can’t see this.”

Leonard affirmed without relish: “Yeah and I agree that our situation is serious ... most serious.”

“Serious? It’s disastrous,” squeaked the wraith of a man.

Leonard added soberly, “What am I to report to the Committee? If the American people find out we’ve spent billions on an Orwellian nightmare I’ll ... we’ll be pilloried. I leave the backlash to your imagination.”

Ivan appeared to stare off into never-never land.

He said, “Tom and I were foolish idealists. The LENS should have been a boon to mankind. But it’s time to set that aside and deal with the facts, even if it means inflicting some casualties of our own. The ambition and greed of these men leave me with no alternative.”

It had reached one of those rare occasions when the loquacious Leonard Moss had nothing to say.

Ivan changed the subject. “I’m sorry you had to deal with my ... with the shaman’s ... er ... situation. We couldn’t involve the local people with anything like that.”

“I didn’t have to touch him,” said Leonard gesturing appropriately. “Even with our connections it wasn’t easy. My friend, it was a bizarre situation by all accounts. It wasn’t just the poor fellow’s body ... it’s ghastly condition that shook them up, through this was bad enough. I could tell you things ... but never mind that now. Ken Rhoury and his people did their best ... I guess.”

The backdrop of drawn curtains cast a pale, penumbral light upon the desk, walls and floor. It was as if these men had been transported to another dimension, a multi-sided

chamber of ever-changing patterns, its colors dominated by bands of black and blue and sickly yellow. Ivan saw the light if Leonard could not. He shivered in the cold as Leonard rambled about Rhoury and the unlikely coupling of the druid's separated head and torso.

"Ken's team removed the head and corpse after plenty of questions. Some, but not all, were matters of bureaucracy that must be oiled and fed." He chuckled mechanically. "I realize this better than most. In any event, I believe that Ken now understands there must be nothing ... nothing whatever for the files."

Ivan muttered, "Ken's always been a reasonable fellow. Then, we've always been quite reasonable with Ken."

"Yes ... another contribution."

"To his favorite charity."

"By the way, Klein's quarantined the chamber until it can be confirmed as clean. He didn't trust Ken. He informed me rather tactlessly that his crew were careless, bumbling oafs."

"Forget Klein. 'I can't thank—'"

"Please hold the plaudits till it's really over."

"There's only one way. And I refer to the larger issue. That's why we must talk. We must disable Panigma Gate before we're snuffed out."

"It shouldn't have been allowed to go this far."

"They can still be stopped."

"There's a conspiracy," suggested Leonard. "The letter and the manuscript are at the core. I've talked to Konnick (a snicker). He's forgotten everything ... a case of highly selective amnesia."

Ivan asked, "The message of the—?"

"I've heard every kind of hogwash from the demotic *Book of the Dead* to the runic *Havamal*."

"Runes from an imbecile like Lou Konnick? Sounds like Polk or Kato's overactive—"

"Everyone's really puckered up."

Ivan asked, "Should we have Ken handle it?"

Leonard Moss looked like the condemned man strapped in the hot seat with the warden's hand on the switch. "Don't think so. Someone scares the shit out of them ... me too."

"It is of course that pervert of all perverts ... our sleazy benefactor, Leopold Hardan."

“The man would stop at nothing,” said Leonard. He’s duped Lloyd ... or paid him to forget his ...” He quit in mid sentence. It seemed that Leonard had suddenly fallen asleep in mid speech with nothing to account for this untimely lapse.

If possible the office turned even gloomier. The yellowish bands devolved into a fungal gray pall. Suspended in time, Leonard dozed in the grip of narcolepsy, his head tilted to one side, his eyes open, but transfixed. The room was changing as if it were a camera lens focusing on a distant point. What Ivan saw was chillingly familiar, but grossly out of scale. He did not question things like this anymore. Not since that night spent with Lester.

Ivan thought: “Was this to be Leonard’s turn?”

Leonard was elsewhere with his eyes glued straight ahead. He slumped, turned so deathly still that he might have been chiseled from quartz. He thinned and de-opacified as if some powerful light shone through his muscles and bones. Though extremely bright, the room remained dark and immune to the inexplicable intrusion of this alien aura.

For a while Leonard did not move, did not even blink. Gradually his neck bent back. His splayed fingers seized the armrests. His pupils filled the eyes as if blood filled his brain. He continued his grotesque tilt backward. At the point that it seemed his neck would break, a violent spasm hammered his body. The recoil tossed him forward out of the chair and down hard upon his knees. He woke, grabbed his pounding chest, looked up at Ivan with eyes glazed and glistening like marbles. Ivan could only watch, but he knew. He knew too well the eyes myriad and ancient. It was still not altogether clear whose eyes they were.

“Leonard!” cried Ivan Kovrani. Flailing arms sent desk paraphernalia crashing to the floor. “Speak to me, Leonard! Damn it ... speak to me man!”

Leonard returned slowly to his chair as if still dopey from strong drugs. His former color returned as slowly as he moved. His eyes burned. His voice cracked: “I saw the other side ... wrapped in crimson clouds, low and heavy on a charred horizon. Then came the deluge ... and the dead.” He shut his eyes and waited for his lungs to catch up with his heart.

“Leonard ... you must try to tell me what you saw.”

“I am. I want to while I can.” Leonard paused with his hand on his heart. “It was well-trod ... mud ... the worst mud. But it was much more. Blood! Blood everywhere ... carnage everywhere ... a torrent of red stench. The sky opened and rained red. The dead had come for their revenge. On a promontory, a barren escarpment of glistening rock, appeared that evil genius behind it all. It was Hell’s Gate ... time and space run amuck. So terribly real.” Leonard buried his face in his hands.

Ivan looked past Leonard. The office had grown or the men had shrunk. The walls spun as if the men rode a carousel. Ivan knew well this evil spin and like Leonard closed his eyes.

Leonard whispered through his hands: “The evil eyes looked down at me.” The man shut down. There followed a pause as Ivan gathered together his strength for a confession.

He admitted, “I too have seen terrible things. I’ve had to accept a painful lesson ... never to be alone for long ... for that’s when the thick light filters in. And this grayish pallor is the worst. It’s the pall from a cold larder for cold and rotting provisions. It’s the lair of the beast. I saw its eyes that night with Lester ... and every night since. We must never again speak of these things. Hell is loose upon us now and listens to our beating hearts. There is no place on this small Earth that we can hide.”

Leonard opened his eyes. “No place to hide,” he repeated. “Julia was right. There is another one of these evil things ... one more ... more powerful. It scans us even now.”

“My friend we must ... we must devise a plan. We must use the LENS on that fiend. We’ll discover enough stench to force that beast to capitulate. Do you doubt for one minute the mountain of crime and corruption that he’s amassed over the years?”

Leonard struggled to recover. “Problems,” he said with a noticeable hitch to his voice. “Too many problems. What about the power?”

“Yes, the power. Leonard, I know you think we’d be playing Hardan’s game, that he’s too powerful to intimidate.”

Leonard’s pupils still filled his eyes to the brim. He searched the room. “The shadows,” he replied. “That’s why there are so many. So powerful. It’s the darkness that shines through our eternity.” A pause. “The plan, Ivan, the plan. Do you remember?”

“Leonard, listen. I know it goes against the plan ... the reason for the LENS. Its light was supposed to be good. It was to save us from ourselves. But Leonard, there are fallacies, grave fallacies.”

Leonard’s black pupils suddenly expanded malignantly. It seemed each might burst like a blood-swollen tick.

Nevertheless, Ivan continued, “I see them all clearly now.”

“But Ivan, there were so many footprints in the mud that I could not make out the plan. If there are fallacies ... in the mud ... in the plan—”

“Please listen. There is one huge fallacy. We cannot have the LENS without the Gate. I know that now. They are one and inseparable. Leonard, you surely see this too.”

“See? Yes ... I see. I see more than you think. I see those footprints tracked over time and space. Mine were in there too. I looked up ... toward the glistening rock ... through the black and billowing plumes. Inside the smoke ... inside that dark cloud they were there ... looking darkly down upon me ... myriad eyes inside that dense and deadly cloud. This was not all. So many things were moving ... were struggling to be free. At last ... to live.”

“I know. This is why it’s over. Leonard, our project ... our hope for the LENS is gone. It’s over. We must eliminate the LENS ... the Machine ... everything. But to eliminate it we must use it one last time.”

“Shadows in time. That’s all. Just shadows. Powerful. Their LENS is powerful. But they are only shadows and not real. They cannot hurt. They can’t get at me here. Help me!”

“My dear friend, please listen to me. I know your pain. I know how you feel. This is why we must strike first.”

Leonard asked, “Strike first? Yes ... strike first. That’s a good idea. I see it clearly in the mud.”

“We must confound their paracube, unhinge their Gate, so to speak. If not permanently, at least long enough to buy us some valuable time to work things out.”

“Ivan ... but who? Who could do this thing? Not one of ... one of us ... surely not one of us.”

“An expert totally unconnected.”

“But who?”

“Use your connections. But please be discrete. Be quick. But do it. We’ve days or less.”

It hit Ivan hard what it was—why their space was so out of scale. They were mere bugs under a magnifier looking up at one colossal, telescopic eye. Like Leonard, he closed his eyes not wanting to ever open them again.

On the floor in a dark puddle unnoticed was something out of place and out of time. It would not be found until the next day, and then not without a lot of comment from the janitorial staff. “If that thing was a pubic hair, I don’t wanna meet the guy or gal,” they all joked coarsely. The object in question was a steel-like bristle about four inches long and nearly black it was so deeply blue. It seemed to glow of a dark and alien light.

That Same Day in a Remote, Tarpley Warehouse

Three men huddled around the table in the small, musty office of an abandoned warehouse. A foul, moldy odor permeated everything, especially the men.

On the table a coal miner’s lamp glowed orange, made jack-o’-lanterns of the men. Numerous footprints disturbed the white powder and excelsior that sullied the floor. A stack of wooden crates was one crate away from disaster as were the men that huddled and whispered.

Leopold Hardan had spread several photos across the scored and stained table, faces for Ralph and Eddie to memorize. “You are to watch them day and night. There must ... no ... there will be no screw-ups.” Hardan had acquired the services of Eddie “Roundhead” Reed and Ralph “the Rail” Seiper from the right-wing gang he secretly financed. They

came to him with impeccable credentials, had done many jobs for him, but Leopold was still unconvinced they could be trusted for a job like this.

“Boss, since there are just two of us, how can we cover all of them ‘round the clock?” asked Ralph, his breath misting in the cool, damp air.

He spoke precisely with an undecipherable accent. His appearance was almost normal if a bit too tall and frail. A brassy toothpick, his precious trademark, dangled from thin lips. This trademark was in actuality a Muntz metal (brass) nail that came with an unpleasant story—his first job done for Hardan in which nail and brass had featured prominently.

Ralph Seiper might pass for a businessman if it were not for his Muntz nail-pick and the magenta scar that ran from below his right eye to the cleft of his chin. The scar was an old scar and had nothing to do with the nail or how it had been hammered in.

Seiper was dressed in an expensive suit and tie that contrasted sharply with Hardan’s shabby attire, an unusual phenomenon that even the cretin, Eddie Reed, had not failed to notice.

Eddie Reed nodded stupidly his support of his dapper associate. Roundhead was another matter. Ralph preferred that Eddie not say much. He wore gold earrings and most of his head was shaved. The hair matted to his neck was long, oily and unkempt. Eddie’s conspicuous dome was tattooed with an assortment of hate symbols—a virtual textbook on the subject. In his tight turtleneck he looked like a cartoon character—the vile comic strip villain.

Hardan could not bear to look at Eddie, but the creature offered him some utility. Unlike the Rail, Roundhead Reed had no qualms, questions or concerns about anything.

Hardan answered, “I told you. Hire who or what you need. Just make damned sure they can keep their eyes open and their mouths shut.”

“Okay boss. Whatever you say. We’ll get a few more guys from the gang. They’ll follow orders ... I promise.”

Hardan collected the photos, shoved them at Ralph.

“These people will lead you to our man. It could happen at any time so stay alert. You must determine where they take him. You must grab him immediately using any or all means at your disposal. I remind you that you need not be squeamish about our Institute friends, but I doubt it’s necessary to tell you this.”

Ralph asked, “How will we recognize the geezer you want?”

Leopold Hardan handed him a folder labeled: **The Dire Wolf**

He said, “All the key facts are covered in this brief including his picture and bio. Study the entire folder very carefully. I want it returned in two days. Copy nothing. Say nothing. No notes. Understand ... yes?”

Ralph opened the manila folder to an 8x10 likeness of the Dire Wolf. The man's name had been neatly typed at the bottom margin, though this was unnecessary. Ralph was rocked hard by the picture, but by more than only the picture. Leopold watched his reaction with a perverse delight—the exploding pupils, the quivering lips and toothpick. Hardan was visibly satisfied with the first impression. Ralph loosened his tie, placed the pick in his pocket and closed the folder with a deep sigh.

Ralph was perplexed yet genuinely persuaded. He had learned to take Hardan seriously no matter the circumstances. Ralph handed the brief to his partner without comment.

Hardan added, “This is the best I could do, but I think you gentlemen will get my drift.”

Eddie snatched the folder, opened it, and recorded not unexpectedly his astonishment at the sight and the notion of the Wolf. Hardan gleefully noted each mindless reflex from recognition to recoil.

Roundhead sputtered, “B ... but, how'd you—?”

“Don't worry about that. Trust that I'm neither an idiot nor a lunatic. Please know that you both will be handsomely rewarded when this job is successfully completed ... and in the way that only I can. However, if you foul-up or gab I will skewer you in the way that only I can skewer. And I can assure you it won't be quick and easy. Now ... speak!”

The Rail responded, “We follow you. We get your drift. No need to embellish the point ... sir.”

“The point? Do you ... indeed? I doubt that very much. Yes ... yes, I doubt that very much indeed.”

“Boss, this will be handled efficiently. It's going to be our pleasure to do this job for you.”

“I shouldn't need to tell you to treat our man with care and respect. But be firm with him, for he must come with you. Provide whatever assistance he may need. Bring a litter with you. He may be weak and unable to walk. His English is rudimentary, but he should be able to understand if you speak slowly and distinctly. Ralph, if that fails use German, but only as a last resort.”

“*Wie Sie wollen,*” said Ralph.

Hardan grunted repulsively. The sound was resonant and always reminded Ralph of a hippo farting in the mud, but he kept this assessment to himself.

“When you have taken possession call me at this number. Then bring him here quickly. But by all means drive carefully. Don't have an accident, for god's sake. If you do it had better be fatal for both of you. There will be a helicopter waiting here to take him away. And bring all your Poxers with you. Leave no one behind. More helicopters will arrive to take you all out.”

Eddie bravely asked, "Where will we be goin'?" And boss, this might sound silly, but your phraseology was not real good. I mean ... the 'copters will take us all out where?"

"My dear fellow, I've always treated you right and will continue to take very good care of you so long as you take very good care of me. You'll be vacationing for some time on my beautiful island of Laikani. Trust me ... you will love the long rest. Yes ... yes, the long sweet rest."

*Allen "Sloe" Polk's El Rasigo Apartment.
That Same Inauspicious Afternoon*

The wintry day was not good for much, but it was perfect for creating synthetic holographs, a hobby that had absorbed most of his spare time. Allen's new lociputer was tied into the OnNet 210. As a result he could operate its utility programs and peruse Minerva's databanks.

Allen had completed another mirage and was testing the visual effects on his lasoptoscope, the forerunner of the panoptoscope. The device employed his patented 4-d-imaging technique. He had pieced together some special material from various LENS calibrations and had added a few embellishments to entertain his buddy, Joe Fuller.

Not unlike Joe, Sloe's problems had overgrown his personal courage. But this art made him feel alive again. And besides, this particular canvas was special and therapeutic. It was like throwing darts at the devil. Except that these make-believe missiles carried wallop if only of the psychological sort. Then again, he might be able to put this particular psychology to some real good use some day.

*Albuquerque, New Mexico
Earlier that Same Day*

The driving rain threatened a sudden turn to heavy sleet or snow. She had watched the storm from her restaurant seat for over an hour. She also watched the red, brick entrance of the Albuquerque Sun-Times. But she really watched for the man.

She picked at her salad, pretending to eat, when this was the last thing on her mind. Her handbag contained a thirty-page document plus an improbable story. Would anyone believe it? Worse, would she survive if they did believe it?

It was a story of government secrets, screw-ups and cover-ups. But there was something more. She had first approached the Times about a week ago with her story, but had lost her courage when she discovered that she was followed. The man in question was tall and distinguished. He wore his white hair short, his complexion ruddy. He carried a folded paper (she guessed) under his left arm keeping both of his hands hidden in the pockets of his raincoat.

Terrified, she had hurried past the building. For a long while she had wandered the streets in a kind of daze.

Later that day she had returned to the restaurant to ask about the man, but no one admitted to knowing anything about him. And though he had not reappeared, she decided to stay clear of the newspaper's office. She did not trust anyone to help her, having convinced herself of hired assassins. The experience in Albuquerque had left her badly shaken, had kept her away from her job and away from her home. She had made and scattered copies of the document itself and had updated her will. She had also notified someone who might carry her torch if she could not.

Now she was back and determined to tell her story to the Times and to the world. And the tall man was back too, having passed the restaurant twice with his stiff collar pulled up around his face. She told herself it did not matter. This was more important than her life. But there was still the practical necessity of evading capture or worse in order that she reach the building across the street.

The restaurant manager had taken special notice of her. Was he one of theirs or was she only being paranoid? The establishment was crowded and they probably needed her table. She told herself that this was all. She forgot the manager and concentrated on the flow of people from the restaurant. The woman thought of her father. She thought of him often, though it tore her to pieces. The thing was incomprehensible. It begged so many unanswerable questions. Why had he done it? What could be gained with so much at stake?

She left a few bills to cover the lunch and the tip. A crowd of noisy patrons were about to leave. This was the right moment. The woman fell in behind them, just another face in the crowd. Reaching the street she made a mad dash for the Times. Jean Phillips prayed for her life, but what was it all worth if cheapened by those arrogant cynics claiming special rights and privileges.

The Next Day at Max's Town Condo

Max had doggedly attacked the brunt of the storm. He had plowed across the hazardous mesa from Pines' Roost to his rented condo in El Rasigo, his home away from his ranch in Los Lunas. Thankfully he had not veered off into one of the deep, snow-obscured chasms. He did not remember much about the drive.

The town had taken ten inches of ice and slush by midnight, the time he had left Lloyd's Roost. It was now nine on a very cold Sunday morning. Max had shoveled a narrow path to the street, but he muttered aloud: "Why should I shovel?" There was nowhere essential that he had to be at this hour. He decided it was only an acute case of anxiety and fidgets precipitated by the events of the previous night.

He put away his dinged shovel and entered the rear of the unimpressive building. He removed his fur hat, boots and his thermal hunting jacket. Max passed through the utility room and storage area. He could not purge the images, the reflections and rotations from his mind. Perhaps he had dreamed up the whole thing, and Lloyd had never betrayed a hint or a word about the momentum of time, of quantization at nearly the speed of light and of the unfathomable, the Cosmic Brake. As if tinkering with time and space was not

enough, Lloyd now played billiards with the planets. This was too much for simple men and it was beginning to tell on all of them. There were too many bad dreams, too many revelations from top to bottom. Lloyd was having trouble seeing cubes instead of combs, planes instead of pods, vectors instead of dark vesicles. Now there was Owen with his cubes, his explosions, his flaws, his questions that should never have been asked, much less answered out loud.

All of these panigmatica were bad. It was only a matter of degree. He had to agree with Julia Moffett on one major point. There were nightmares still out there far worse than Lester Holman, far worse than Jean Phillips, far worse than even Leopold Hardan. And it all had to do with that evil ring and stone.

More work might clear his head, purge the premonitions and the nightmares to help him relax, at least enough to think logically. Max had a few reports to write, a few checks to issue, nothing important, though it might kill an hour or two. He would dial up the OnNet UT and do a little, harmless work.

Max dried off before entering his modest kitchen. A fresh pot of coffee was ready and smelling really wonderful like nuts and berries. He filled a mug, grabbed a jelly donut, and headed upstairs for the loft. His lociputer was already on and glowing. He sat down and tried to work. He had never felt lonelier, more isolated, in his life. He quickly discovered that he could not get interested in reports or checks or even jelly donuts. He stared at the blank screen. It stared back as if stupefied by his clumsy efforts. Then he had a brilliant idea. He might putter around with Minerva and peruse her dream scan reports. It seemed like a good way to kill some time before taking off on his winter stroll.

Max browsed the long list of names though something about it bothered him. Finally it dawned on him. Where was the dreamer that Lloyd was so interested in, that young fellow, Tim Corrit?

After several database queries he confirmed that the Corrit file had been protected. He next issued his special override code and waited for Mr. Corrit to introduce himself. This did not work. He repeated the procedure twice. Twice, Mr. Corrit refused to surface. Max had one more card to play. He repeated the query with Lloyd's own code.

After a few beeps William T. Corrit came to life on the sky blue screen. But William T. Corrit? What had happened to Tim? Max had neglected the little matter of the man's first name.

Okay, he would try again. He tried again for Tim Corrit, but there was no Tim. William was there, but who was William? Another alarm bell went off in his head. Was this an honest mistake or something else?

Max requested a short biography on William T. Corrit.

It seemed that William was fifty-one and married with no full-time job. Jet Propulsion Engineer had been listed as his profession. Max scanned what remained of his file. It seemed that Mr. Corrit had been with the LENS project almost from the start. Max paged

down and it jumped up. William had had a son, Timothy James, but the boy had died in 1986 at the age of only thirteen. What about 1986? The cause listed was accidental death with no further explanation.

If this information was correct what was Lloyd talking about? How could he confuse a dead son with a live father? After all, Lloyd had said that the father had died in 1988. But not according to Minerva. Lloyd and Minerva seldom erred on essential details. But this did not mean that things were truly square.

If Lloyd was correct, how could Tim Corrit pilot the Machine if he did not even exist?

Chapter Fifteen: The Lucky Stone

Reprinted with Permission from The Prosateur's Digest

I am a case for puzzlers, a living, breathing paradox, a man without a past. How does one misplace a large chunk of their life? I am not talking about memories. I have plenty of them, too many, as far back as I want, and the memories of others that should erase any doubt a million times a million. But the memories don't count for much. They cannot be trusted.

They cannot of themselves justify a single moment. When all the facts are gathered, really examined, I am left to draw an improbable and disturbing conclusion.

I owe my past, present and future to a remarkable event that occurred two years ago. Mostly, I owe my life, not once, but twice to the kindly intervention of a dreamer.

A riddle? Perhaps. But I think it's more. I think it's the legacy of the stone. And if the stone's more than a myth, then so am I. I will try to explain this reasoning if not so convincingly my memories.

It all began with that horrible winter of '06. Of course we all remember '06 not for its winter, but as the real beginning of the new millennium. So much has been written, so much has been said, that I wonder what I could add that could possibly matter. In spite of it or because of it, I've been asked to give my account of the **Great Experiment**.

You see, I was one of them. My name is Timothy James Corrit. I am going to tell you of one night in February and one day in June. You may think my part in this was small. In a sense you are right. How could my days and nights measure up to so much as the twinkle in his eye? But they must in a way extraordinary. And I know Lloyd Baumer would agree, for there is no such thing as a small part in a drama, really a dream so large.

Besides, one never appreciates the big picture from a position so near. From the trenches we see only the bullets and the blood, never the history. But who knows? You may be one of those souls that owes his time to mine. I can count at least two that would say I was no small player. You see, I was the first of them. The record on this seems very clear. I was the first one of them to survive his possibilities.

I will tell you something about myself just to prove that I can. I was born in 1973 in Copley, a river town in northern Missouri. It's not close to anything you'd know. I lived there, the only child of Ruth, through times mostly bad, till I met and married Janet Russo in 1995. Without anyone's blessing we ran off to start a life in California. By '01 things got turned around. I was earning a decent wage as a med tech in San Diego with our second child, our sweet and dark-haired Melanie soon to arrive.

Mom lived on in Copley till she passed away last year. I never really knew my father. He left our clapboard house when I was a toddler. He never returned. This is not quite true. But I'll explain this apparent contradiction later in a better light.

My youth is best forgotten. Would that I could. It wasn't exactly poverty. I had food to eat, a roof over my head. It was the nightmare and my odd notions. That's what Mom called them. You see, I was convinced I possessed a kind of mind power—that I could inflict the worst calamities by the forcefulness of my own mind.

I knew the bad things before they happened, things as bad as the Beckman fire more than twenty years ago. I had had a bad fight with the Beckman boys only a day before their dad's barn had burned to the ground.

Mom had not the money or the know-how to help me very much. That is not to say I didn't have my good times. But I also had my bad times too. A little later I'll tell you two of them.

In 2005 I moved myself, Janet, Bill and Melanie from San Diego to Albuquerque. At the time I wasn't sure why I'd left. I had a mortgage and a house, a car payment if not so reliable a car. It was a tolerable life if not the American dream. Then came January of 2006 and the news that seemed to explain everything.

Soon after taking the X-Tech job I learned of some new developments in sleep therapy. Without consulting anyone I volunteered to spend three weeks in the dull and dusty little town of El Rasigo, New Mexico. It was no paid vacation. At the risk of overdoing it (just check any paper in America) I'll say a few words about that now much-discussed place.

The **IPPR** is the Institute for Physico-Psychic Research. This mouth-full should have set off alarms, but it didn't. Few had heard of it back then. I tried to convince myself that sleep research interested me as a career. Of course it was a lot more than that. It was a chance to examine my nightmare and my odd notions more or less scientifically.

My sleep sessions were conducted in February. My big night was the 22nd, my third. I should remember since it was the night that would define my life. I hesitate to call it a rebirth, but if anyone has a right to use that word, I feel that someone is me.

I remember very little of the metallic dome they call the Panopticon. Everything happens in one of the four isolation chambers in the basement. It wasn't a chamber of horrors as others have claimed. It was just typically clinical. Each chamber had two rooms, the isocell where I slept and dreamt, and the isocon where the technician monitored my night rhythms, so to speak. Sondra Clay was my med technician, a real nice lady. I remember the big red "3" painted on the imposing gray door outside.

The isocell had its share of interesting gadgets. But mostly I remember the nightlight, dull red, the contoured couch, and the headset and mask. I also remember that it was hard to relax until Sondra gave me the mercolidine sulfate. You may have heard of it. You may remember the flap that occurred. They can't use that stuff anymore. Actually, as it turned out, that mind extender was the least of my problems.

I was to be paid \$3000 whether I slept or not, whether I produced one ounce of useful data or not. I didn't care about the money or the data. In fact, I never collected the money, though I did collect lots of data. The first two nights had been uneventful, except for those flashes from my nightmare of Copley Heights and of the thing that ran wild below the town.

I'd been well prepped. I'd been interviewed by two doctors, Mirigliano and Kovrani. And I'd watched about a dozen videos about sleep and sleep disorders. They were considerate and professional. I can't complain that I was mistreated—well, perhaps misled, but never mistreated. One requires that I actively join in the illusion. The other, I guess, does not.

Frankly, Janet thought I had lost my ballast. Perhaps, but I disagreed. I was convinced I'd learn something that would help. It turned out I was right.

I'll waste no more time. I tell you of my final night. It started out just like the first two. It was after 11 P.M. when Sondra got me tucked in. That lady treated me like a kid. I had to promise I'd not been guzzling root beer sodas. It took her twenty minutes to wire me to the computer and verify that I was connected okay. She helped me attach the mask, which wasn't easy, and I started noticing all the coffee I'd had.

As I lay there stretched out I remember thinking about Sondra. No, it wasn't anything like that. It just seemed to me that her job had to be boring. And at that late hour I wondered how she could remain awake much less alert and on her toes. I have to hand it to her. She did a great job, that is, for most of the night.

Sondra talked to me through the headset to help me relax. And she piped in some laid-back music. I asked what it was and she said it was a long-dead composer named Deal-e-us. Of course I'd never heard of the guy. I will say this much for it. The pastel colors and soft sounds that danced in my head were wonderful even if he wasn't very good.

It wasn't too long before these sounds and colors took a definite shape. They coalesced into little people and animals that danced to spritely music. They must have sampled every conceivable note, plus some not invented yet. I found it possible to direct them as if they were a ballet troupe. I concentrated on the lead dancer, an anti-maroon centaur. I had never seen that color before or since. Everyone I tell this to thinks I must be talking about some kind of strange green, but trust me, I'm not.

The centaur was ordinary compared to all the others. The sylphs, nymphs and pixies teased the burly lumpkins dressed in their pantaloons and tricorne hats. And the knobby noads in monkish cowls painted notes on everyone and everything. These notes became more creatures and these creatures became more notes. I found that I could perform many tricks. For example, I could will the tones from cold to hot or from hot to cold. I felt like Rasputin at a convention of all my odd notions.

The word "soporific" came to mind. It was a word Sondra had used to describe the chamber's dream peace. I liked the word. I discovered to my satisfaction that I could compose a little tune around the word and its lovely syllables. My gnomes and notes loved my new tune. They could dance upside down and inside out to the music. One of

them, a demure, calico coquette sang my little ditty while she cavorted and flirted outrageously. As I recall it went something like:

if so por ic
 so por if ic
 ip so fi cor
 in yor fisic
 if no so por ic
 so por if ic
 fo co pri si
 in yor fisic

If you have some clue then good for you. At the time it made some sense. Cannot say that much for it now. More importantly from this point on things went south.

The music that had started out so gay now turned so very sad. I could no longer inspire my dancers with pleasant thoughts. The dance party continued, but my little sprites melted like butter in warm broth. The golden fluid thickened, and far sooner than later, they all dissolved and were gone. And I began to melt as well. The red chamber disappeared. I was left with my memories good and bad.

They drifted in the soup, my wife and kids, my mom, even my dad. As I struggled to recall an old scrapbook photo of him, I experienced a violent surge. It was as if someone had flipped the switch of life. An impossible landscape filled my head. The unfamiliar joined the familiar in a picture book fantasy. And anything revealed remained always in clear view.

Surprisingly, this condition seemed normal and natural. By comparison, reality was like a severe case of myopia. Sondra, or someone far away, reminded me to accept and not to fight this breathtaking gift of sight. Somehow I managed to flow with it, to take comfort.

At about this time my dream-o-rama developed a worrisome blemish. It was barely noticeable at first—a small blotch on an otherwise perfect landscape.

It aroused feelings that kind of gathered together into no clear picture. You may know what I mean. It was like that last dream of the night. Everything is fine and rosy when you feel that odd, little hitch and you know that the nightmare's coming, maybe feel it in that crawly space inside you. You know, the one underneath your confidence. It's not exactly in your head or in your belly, but in some deeper organ that doesn't show up on any of those anatomical charts.

It took its time gathering its strength. It seemed to have plenty of confidence. I tried to find some of mine, but to no use. From this space deep inside me, it rose up, outshone the practical light of day, the reasonableness of my hope, the warm belief that things really weren't so bad. I heaved a kind of mental heave. I'd never been so spooked in all my life. I clenched real tight to a certain part of me as I gazed upon it from a corner of my mind.

Tucked within a pleasant setting of fields and forests stood a small frame house, a perfectly ordinary country home. It could be that I had seen it before in another time and place. But closer scrutiny revealed something very wrong.

The house had all the right parts in all the right places, but it was not content with rightfulness. Instead, it devoured itself like a snake swallowing itself. I tried with all my strength to snap back to wakefulness, to reasonableness, but the more I fought this thing the faster it gulped the space around me.

This maniacal dwelling was an insatiable monster, though it seemed its own parts were insufficient to satisfy its hunger. Grass and trees followed glass and lumber into this perversion of space. It was soon clear that I was to be the main course.

In no time at all I was drawn to the quivering rim like the mouth of some beast with no choice but to peer down its throat. Pardon my mouth, but I think my head must have fallen through the hole in my ass. I've never seen anything so immense crammed inside one place. Pardon my mouth again. I don't mean to be facetious at a serious time like this.

Multiply Niagara Falls a zillion times, place it in your backyard, and you'd get a fair idea. Foaming, boiling liquid cut through the rock like one of those new gamma lasers, boring and blasting a hole that must have reached the center of the universe. Was this the place everything went when it was finished, or when the universe was finished with it? I remember thinking something like this. I remember thinking a lot of bad things.

This maelstrom mangled my senses. It was the beast of my Copley nightmare magnified a million times. This wretched beast had a name, a name misleading, but one that crushed my life and my soul to pointless pulp.

Where was Sondra now? I prayed. I braced, but to no avail. I lost my foothold and was swallowed up. The sour foam filled my lungs. I should have died then and there. In fact I prayed that I would, but no, not yet, my nightmare was not finished.

I was swept along for what had to be an eternity, breathing molten rock, drowning, but not succumbing. I waited for something, for anything, for the slightest opportunity to save myself. Daring to open my eyes I searched the frothing, boiling brimstone, opening and closing one eye, then the other like a nervous shutter.

I saw my chance—zillions of eddies or budding funnels that formed now and then from the main funnel. Thinking that smaller had to be safer, I decided to try for one at the first opportunity. When one appeared beneath me like a yawning mouth, I dove in brain first.

Naturally I had no clue where I would go. At least I could open my eyes without roasting them. Otherwise this lesser turmoil treated me no better. I was hurled toward a point of light, feeling the mother of pain from my limbs to my loins. In the time between a thought and a breath it was over. With a final gasp I was delivered into the daylight and could breathe the sweet air as if for the first time in my life.

I can't say that I was too surprised to find myself inside the madhouse, though it seemed perfectly sane from inside. I had definitely entered the hard way, since it was equipped with the usual assortment of doors and windows. But it soon became obvious that I was both in and out at the same time.

I had been reduced to less than vapor. I could move effortlessly, but I could not touch or be touched by any part of it. I drifted into a small bedroom to test my navigational powers plus a troublesome theory.

My suspicion of invisibility was soon confirmed. A boy of twelve or thirteen stomped into the bedroom. Taking no notice he passed through me on his way to the bed. There he collapsed while expressing himself angrily to someone out of view. I could hear none of it, but reasoned that the boy was ragging someone in the next room.

I kind of “slipped” off to the left and noticed the object of the boy’s displeasure. A young woman labored over the pump-sink of an old kitchen. I had immediately recognized them both. With concentration I discovered I could read their thoughts and their circumstances as easily as I could read my own suspicions.

In fact I could do much more. I could enter the boy’s head, see him through his feelings and his fears.

Believe me, I was uncomfortable as the sly peeper, though in fact I was powerless to leave until my work here, whatever it was, was finished.

Dear reader, what follows is an odd composite, a melting of two minds—a man’s recollection of a summer day seen through the eyes of a boy. His ways and words will be both his and mine. I hope you understand.

Ma had slipped on her work shoes, her watch, her ID tag, and was about to leave for what she called her “just deserts.” She had tried coaxing me into doing my chores, cleaning up after the invasion of mud. Unfortunately for her this sunny day was the foe of all chores, for it had finally stopped raining after the worst spell of weather I could ever remember. Besides, there was havoc itself to deal with now loose upon Copley Bottoms.

I agreed to the chores, but quite unconvincingly. Ma knew her efforts were futile. But her table-hopping at Morrie’s L&L wouldn’t wait for my cooperation.

I knew this. I also knew that I was late for an important test of manhood—an appointment and trial with the Tranquility River. This was to be my rite of passage. And I would have accomplices—the Courtney brothers, those ill-famed imps, Skip and Brad.

Swimming the Tranquility was usually no great feat. I had crossed it lots of times, though Ma didn’t know, or she pretended good she didn’t. However, the Tranquility wasn’t quite so tranquil these days. The summer deluge had it bulging. It had reached the point of impressing even the Courtneys who were rarely impressed by events less than world war.

Each of us was to swim the river. The point was to earn the coveted Double Cross by being the first to reach what had once been Slip’s Landing. The landing only days before had been washed down to Moins.

Just so you get the picture, the Double Cross was two crucifixes that had been fused in the Beckman barn fire. Skip and I had rescued it, but had kept the fact a secret. The fate

of the Beckman twins is gruesome—a story that I’ll not take up. I’ll just say there was no finking out when challenged by the Courtneys, by the river, or by the Beckman’s Double Cross.

I was a damned good swimmer, a junior lifesaver, much better than the Courtneys. But even I wasn’t about to take on the river on this day without my secret. My secret would not have benefited my status with Brad and Skip, so I had never said a word.

After changing into cutoffs and sneakers it was time to collect it from my secret vault. I stored all of my treasures beneath a loose board under my bed, a place only I knew. There among the usual things one hides from his mother was the green talisman, my precious lucky stone. I sorted through all the candy, the Wolverine comics and the Tops sports cards. As usual I found my lucky piece at the bottom of things.

I know that one should expect more from a lucky stone. It was mostly like any other pebble. But it did have some qualities not wasted on undersized heroes the likes of me.

It was after all the right size, slightly smaller than a robin’s egg. And it was polished to a silky green luster, a result of the eons spent at the bottom of some Gondwanese stream. Even better, it possessed curious markings that were obviously inscriptions added by antediluvians from Atlantis. But more important, it came from a box of trinkets left to me by my father.

There was no time to ponder. I placed the lucky stone inside my most secure pocket. It couldn’t possibly escape as this pocket had an unc customary, but useful zipper.

I bolted from the house without a thought for anything but the Courtneys and the river. I tight-roped the steel rail toward the red and rusting Tranquility Bridge while avoiding the eager bees patrolling the red clover. I was truly free in the sway of a dazzling day.

An odd notion weaseled its way into my brain—a notion that I was not alone—that some angelic spirit watched and protected me. This was okay with me. I’d gladly take all the help I could get.

I stayed on the tracks. The tall rye was soaking wet. I’d save wet for later. No need to check for the stone. It was safe in my pocket. I quickened my pace, counted the dark and creosoted beams to pass the time.

Brad and Skip would be impatient. They would be in the river if I arrived one chime later than noon by the Billing House clock. Worse than me not being there was that I would be treated to their chicken clucking and barnyard scratching for days without hope of relief.

After ninety beams I arrived at the steel hulk of a bridge. A flock of crows had perched on the girders to cackle and dry out in the sun. I threw a fist full of cinders just to hear them screech. I’d never felt better in my life. I descended the steep and slippery bank to the old dock where Skip and Brad would be waiting. In another minute or two I’d be in the raging water ready to better those braggarts stroke for stroke. The Beckman’s Cross was mine.

I couldn't see them yet, but I wasn't too worried. Then suddenly without any warning, any hint at all that it was coming, the thing hit me hard. I was overcome by a girlish faint that launched me head over heels down the steep incline. Eating the weeds and dirt must have jogged me back to my senses. I ended my somersaults by grabbing the prickly thistles. Most came out of the ground, but a sufficient number of them held tight.

I lay flat on my back. My head felt okay, but my hands were bloody raw with burrs and thistles. I sat up and looked around with tomato-red embarrassment.

Maybe the two trolls had seen me tearing up the hillside? Fortunately, this was unlikely if Skip and Brad were at their appointed spot, which they had to be by now.

Reflexively, I checked my pocket for the lucky stone. I'll never forget the horror. The worst thing on Earth had come to pass, for as impossible as it seemed to me, the lucky stone was gone. The pocket was still zipped closed. I just couldn't understand how it had managed to escape from so secure a hiding place.

The next few minutes passed like hours. It was in teary-eyed agony that I searched. But it was no use. My lucky stone would never be found in the wet plaster of mud and weeds. As far as I was concerned my life was over. Nothing else mattered. Of course at the time I knew little of life, death or what mattered. All that was to come much later on.

I stumbled around in a daze, not really expecting to find the stone. I cursed the Courtneys, the river, hoped to see neither again. I wished the river dry and the two trolls dead. My rage had simply spilled out, a burst of anger, but a burst that would inflict a deep and lasting wound.

The Billings' clock tolled noon to punctuate my pain and distress. I turned round and headed for home.

The older Tim was not yet home, but suspended in that tumultuous summer of 1986. He, more precisely, I, drifted like a low and heavy cloud. I followed the tracks just as I had followed my youth from its heights to its depths. Old thoughts returned of the accursed river, of the Courtneys, and of the stone—memories that had been dead and buried for many years.

The stone was the connection binding me to the river and the Courtneys. Skip and Brad had challenged the Tranquility as promised. Sadly they had lost a lot more than a simple boyhood contest of skill and courage.

I would never go near that river again, would never speak of it. I would spend more summers in the depths of Copley, but all thoughts of my antagonists, Skip and Brad Courtney, would eventually fade away.

But the nightmare persisted—a horror as vivid as it was abrupt. It was high noon in Copley on that day of the Double Cross. I was paddling, surrounded by the turbulent, brown water, far ahead of the Courtneys when it happened—the spasm and cramp that

sent me to the bottom—lungs aspirating, heart bursting, mind reeling in death’s crushing grip, life’s final impossibility.

Remembering produced pain, but it also started a process of healing. The old scars were replaced with living tissue. I might not erase the past, atone for my deadly thoughts, but I might face the truth, pay the Courtneys and the river their fair price.

An odd notion ended my deliberations. I came to realize that what lay ahead looked strangely the same as what lay behind, like looking in a mirror, only I wasn’t there to look back. What did look back, what did lie ahead, was that hulking Tranquility Bridge. I didn’t move, didn’t have to, for the bridge rushed up to greet me. So did the maelstrom below. It quickly consumed the town and the bridge. Then it waited—this time for me. I felt the decompression as I stepped through. With a rude heave I was purged from this land of lessons learned, dues finally paid.

What followed was a breathtaking ride through a land trapped in time. Eventually my time chute opened with a jolt returning me to the dream lab and to my rightful time and place.

I was bleary-eyed, soaked and numb. But it wasn’t long before sight and feeling returned. I looked up and noticed that Sondra was slumped in her chair fast asleep. Somehow I knew she hadn’t finished the trip. I stretched feeble arms and legs, then noticed a severe cramp in my right hand.

I forced open my clenched fist and there it was! Lost for so many years I now had it back—warm in my hand, Dad’s cherished gift, my precious lucky stone.

This is not the end of my story. Just two months after this affair I had an extraordinary meeting with an extraordinary woman. We’ve all read volumes about Julia Moffett, her role in programming the impossibility machine, her role in eventually unprogramming it. But when she came to see me I had no inkling of this woman or her role.

Before I attempt the final telling I must explain my father’s return to Copley. You’ll recall I’d been intentionally vague concerning the facts of his return.

The truth is that in December of 1988 he came back to us. Father (after whom my son, Bill, was named) had found employment in California after many years of frustration and bad luck. He had called with the good news that he was driving back to Copley. He had promised to be home before the holidays. And most of all, he wanted us to return with him to California, to San Diego actually, to a fresh start in a warm place.

Mom had said, “Tim, he’s really coming home for you. You should know that he understands how rough it’s been for you. He wants you to have a father.”

For me the news was bittersweet. I was confused. After all, he had abandoned us without any cause that I could justify. This was not easy to overlook, though I must have wanted him back. And I would certainly have to tell him about the stone and about my dreams as well.

So we went to work. I helped Mom clean up and trim the house. We scraped together the money for a turkey and the fixings and waited impatiently for his arrival. I wondered what I would say to him. Would I reach out? Or would I reject? Would I forgive? Or would I forsake?

At 2 A.M. on December 23rd Mom received the call from the Missouri State Police. The memory of it still twists in my head like hot, barbed wire.

The troopers figured he'd fallen asleep at the wheel. Mom collapsed when she heard, hit the floor like a corpse. I saw it coming, but could not reach her in time to lessen the blow. Had I even unwittingly conjured this worst-case scenario? Thank God I did finally come to see the light, but not soon enough to help her.

We buried him in Copley the day after Christmas.

There's not much to add. These are the facts as I remember them, for what they're worth. I'll now connect this to my meeting with Julia Moffett in April of '06.

She apologized for the intrusion, but said she was on a mission for an old friend. After some hemming and hawing she confided that her friend was joined closely to me by a thrice-rare stone of magical powers.

About a year ago I saw the news photo of Julia's friend like everyone else, so you can appreciate that I was hit much harder by what I saw than the average, avid, tabloid reader.

To complete her mission this friend required the third node—as it turned out, my green stone. She was willing to trade to get it, to provide what she claimed I needed most.

I listened spellbound to Julia's story of a grim campaign waged across time. I had managed to convince myself that I was imagining the whole thing. Then I looked into her violet eyes. They held the ages. The origin and purpose of my stone was explained to me in incredible detail. "It is not for your eyes to see any more," she warned. She was dead right.

Julia explained that I must come to understand my father just as he had come to understand me. She said he had seen all the things that I had. For the first time in years I replayed that horrible night in 1988.

She added something I'll always remember. "He is not the dead man. He lives in his totality no more or no less a life than you or I. He is with you even now."

I'm finally starting to understand and it's not at all what I first thought. Julia said, "Tim, the stone no longer matters for you, but it matters a great deal for her. For you, and for your father, it has done its best work."

She paused to let me mull this over. Then she added, "It's entirely up to you. No more speeches. I know that whatever you do will be right."

I said nothing, but rose to retrieve an apothecary bottle from my secret vault, a place only I knew. I removed the green object from the green bottle. After one last look I took her hand, placed the stone in her palm, then closed it tightly, plus my book on the whole affair. I say this to press home the hope and prayer.

Julia had something more to say. “Your dream was a rare insight. You were really no better than the Courtney boys that day in the rapids. But do you understand the dilemma? For you there were only two chances in the infinite. The dreamer could dislocate this boy at the critical moment just before he entered the river. Or he could dislocate the stone. To dislocate the boy was less dangerous, but cheated you. To dislocate the stone might risk serious aftershocks, but would offer you a real chance at life.”

I asked, “But who dreamt my dream? If it wasn’t Dr. Baumer, if it wasn’t Sondra Clay, I would have had to conjure the stone to save my own life. Is this not impossible?”

“Tim, you still don’t know? Who would take the chance, make the ultimate sacrifice to save you? Dr. Baumer and Sondra Clay assisted only technically.

“It was your father, not Dr. Baumer that cared. He gave you life not once, but twice. It was an older and wiser William Corrit that piloted the Machine on that fateful February night. And in so doing he faded out as you faded in. He faded from our certainty just as certainly as you sit here now and wonder why and how.

“Tim, think about it,” she added. “How could you pilot the Machine if you didn’t even exist?”

Chapter Sixteen: That Dark and Deadly Light

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.”

- H.P. Lovecraft
“The Call of Cthulhu”

It destroyed without mercy—first paralysis then blindness, finally pain, though with time the mercy of coma and unyielding oblivion. Kye, the last Sorelean elder, sensed that he had entered Queen Nrczxa’s refuge for the final time. In less than one molt, he too would succumb to the unmerciful gods.

Nrczxa and her unborn had thus far escaped the *xenonadir*, the unseen pestilence that had infected the entire planet. For several cycles she had hidden in her high apartment. It was no longer safe to visit the others or the world of the spore-bearing fronds, the fruit of the gumpleen trees or their yellow blossoms. Besides, there was no reason now, for her preparations had been sown, sealed and tested. Space, time and uncertainty had been fully aligned with her plan.

Kye had teleplanted, “You and your seed must leave before the penumbra of the next long pulse.”

But this epic journey required others. It was no small problem, requiring a rudimentary technical skill from those who would never knowingly help her kind. She could not implant the necessary skill without implanting the necessary power—dangerous in the wrong hands. The implantation had required a delicate stratagem and a great sacrifice—at least three of hers. And all were precious now more than ever.

She had carefully buried her precious beacons deep in the siliceous beds that the headland waters could not erode. Now, she must dream—a war dream carefully woven to tempt, but not over-tempt, to tilt, but not over-tilt the fragile continuum.

She adjusted the light to the dire *rubio* of dusk, took one last reality trip through the manifold of her room—a maze of possibilities like the glial cells of her vast neothoracic brain. Everything seemed to be in order, the wet larders, the dry larders, the nurseries, the training rooms, and the war rooms. The timbre of terror had been set just right. The uncountable branches were adequately thickened, evanescent and neurophobic. All time and space doors had been closed and locked tight—that is all doors but her seductive door of dreams.

She allowed herself freefall through the infinite possibilities, the convolutions of her vast cortex. When she found precisely what she wanted she turned up the power, funneled her plan through a single glial cell. A point of light deep in her cortex began to expand and take shape, to take urgency, potency and certainty. A powerful *kyr* began to blow, a tempest in the aether like none she had ever conjured.

Nrczxa would be summoned soon by Silverhair. She would not refuse his kind invitation to dance.

Julia Moffett's Office

Late Friday Morning, March 3rd

The day would be dry and unseasonably warm. The cloudless blue would not quench the desert, nor would the southerly winds that carried the first register of spring—the pungent pollens and resins of pinyon making their annual awakening. In Julia's cloister it mattered not one degree of heat, not a cliffrose, not a single canyon wren. She sat painfully hunched over her desk. Only her eyes moved as she reread the document attempting to distill logic from anger.

The light was low, shining like glowworms trapped in two, amber jars, one at each end of her desk. She had failed to notice the ugly shade they cast. The angle and accessories had conspired to conceive an old crone with a crooked beak and a wry neck. She straightened and the crone disappeared, leaving in its wake a bronze and brooding angel.

Her books and notes had been neatly stacked on both sides of the manila envelope and thirty-page letter. Julia consumed the letter in fits, consumed them grudgingly, her jaw clasped close to dislocation. The Phillips disclosures were no less troubling than her green quarvine. Jean's revelations might flatten the dome. It was perhaps the only way to end the nightmare, but Julia was concerned about collateral damage, for Jean could not know that she had struck a match in an ammo dump.

Julia had to respond, though each time she tried she was confronted by an implacable kernel of logic that warned of serious consequences. It emanated from the green and convective oracle she had secreted in her handbag, but endeavored never to touch or turn over in her mind.

She set the letter aside and looked up to find Henry standing in the doorway. The slightest negative signal would send him packing, but Julia did not want his self-imposed isolation, most certainly not now. Though she knew precisely what he wanted, she had to deal with Dr. Kincaid and his self-ennobled quest.

He spoke first asking, "May I speak with you ... take a moment of your time?"

She answered, "Certainly, and I have some news for you. Please ... relax. You're standing there so creased and pressed I'm sure a sudden wrinkle would split you into Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

He frowned sternly, but self-consciously, his head barely tilted to one side in a ridiculous ruse of reprobation. He turned his thoughts delicately like the pages of a worn and broken book. These days she read his pages almost as easily as he read her eyes.

She had distanced herself over the past few weeks. She could sense the injury from his curt formality. He had blamed thinspace for their falling out, but there were other factors. She was troubled by the Phillips and Holman scans. And she was troubled by her dreams. No rational person would disagree that they had tempted disaster. Henry understood this better than most, although his enthusiasm for the project remained unabated.

He posed the pivotal question, “You’re avoiding me. Is it me, my work, or the ugly company I keep?” He manufactured a sinister face, his best Hardan imitation, but failed to capture Leopold’s reptilian scone with his too polished, boyish checks.

She smiled genuinely for the first time in days. “None of the above actually,” she said as she regarded him thoughtfully. “It’s the need to be right.”

He cocked his head in a futile attempt to disarm her, but she held her ground. He asked, “Julia ... must you always be right?”

“Henry ... are you that insensible? The game we play demands no error. It’s relentless. It takes its toll on the flesh ... even more on the mind and spirit.”

He understood in his highly theoretical way, but had no solution.

She paused before asking, “Am I doing the right thing staying here ... helping these ... these men?”

He tried to reassure her. “Julia, you must not even think such things. It’s out of the question. We need you now more than ever.”

Frowning from deep within allusive eyes, she paused then added, “I know I can’t quit. Much too much guilt. And please do not misunderstand me when I say you trust these men too much.”

“But Julia ... you don’t understand. I trust you.”

She tactfully avoided his plaintive look and her own sympathies. Julia recalled the things that had happened, that could happen. As surely as the Sphinx she came apart grain by grain. “I’ve given your Faust-3 to Nettie,” she stated offhandedly. “The program has been enabled. But you should know one thing. And it means ... everything.”

He seemed to levitate as he tolled exuberantly, “It does I think. It does mean everything. I can’t expect you to understand ... not really understand. We conceive the inconceivable. Thus far, time has been our fascination. And though none can question that we’ve made an historic breakthrough, it is only the book’s first chapter.”

His eyes had stoked a raging fire. “It is true we’ve shrunk time to fit. But to shrink space to fit ... to rotate reality about the temporal axis ... to unlock the old mysteries of mind versus substance ... this is an heroic quest. Julia, it’s time we trained our LENS on the

stars and begged them ... why? Why?" he repeated dramatically. He spiraled nearer, to her and to that final question of his quest in ever tightening circles.

"Henry ... you will never reveal the thing itself. Like Heisenberg, you disturb what you so desperately seek. Sir, you badly muck things up. Now ... sit down and calm down. Please! You're spinning me dizzy with your antics."

Reluctantly accepting a seat, he responded, "I know. But I want to know about Faust. I want to know if Faust-3 will solve your dastardly maze?"

"I ran the simulation on Little Max. Your F3 is a memory hog ... a real porker. Henry, it will consume the entire quin. No paracube from the media will hold it." She launched a look that offered him a single chance, a single way out, but she doubted he would take it.

"If quin-infinite would it matter? Julia, did F3 properly load all the stress tensors for the finite solution to our problem?"

His answer had not surprised her. "Our problem ... yes, my stargazer ... completed with but the slightest hitch. But nothing that will ..." Julia deftly altered her course. "You've done this ... this thing too well."

"And you. But we must test it in real space ... in a small piece ... at a modest aperture." He nearly sang, "Where in the cosmos shall we go? Someday we'll venture far ... to the beginning ... or to the end of time and space ... to the birthplace of possibility ... to the realm of the restless gods?" He stopped abruptly. Sadly, Henry could see that she cared nothing for his Faust space—less than nothing. This disturbed him since he thought they had reached an accommodation if not an understanding.

"Quite a speech." Lowering her voice and her gaze she asked, "What comes after this modest, albeit heroic test?"

"But you know as well as I ... a warp-fold ten. We'll unpeel the layers ... locate that elusive plane where light travels at $0.1c$. After that who knows? It's only a matter of softening the impact of the superwindow. Warp-fold sextillion may be possible."

"But if you compress the universe to fit the window of your mind, you may find there is no way to uncompress it. You may have it all crammed between your oversized ears. For a tantosecond you will be it and it will be you. And where will that leave you ... where in the universe shall you be. Will you be all or nothing ... alive or somewhere else?"

He argued reasonably: "The idea that space and time stretches or shrinks is perspective. It is the velocity of light that propagates this perplexing notion of scale. This depends merely on its path. It's what maximizes and minimizes space, time and uncertainty." He looked into her eyes for the expected confirmation. After all, this was nothing new. She stared back at him coldly with eyes blazing like the violet ice of some distant planetoid.

He tried again. "You know, Julia, that F3 will involute our space window just as Panigma LENS involutes our time window. But there are four other scenarios as well. We may span space through our time window or span time through our space window. We may

even involute space through time or involute time through space. I want to experience them all.”

“My ... my, so brazenly curious. I would have thought you’d had enough. Have you forgotten that other window? Have you forgotten that long night spent with Lester Holman? Have you forgotten that long walk taken in the dark and dead of night?”

“No, of course not. How could anyone forget a nightmare like that?” He continued after a pause, “How could anyone forget the involution of Kovrani?” He looked around as if he had heard his own name shrieked in desperation.

“I trust you meant the convolutions of Henry Kincaid.” Her tone suddenly dripped venom.

Not intending this so openly she smiled the poison away. She rose and circled behind him. Shades from the twin, amber lights percolated across the wall. There was no ugly crone, only the bronze and brooding angel. Julia pressed firmly against him. She cupped sensuous hands underneath his manly, though diminished and unprepared defenses.

“You are a puppy,” she proposed in her clinical voice, “playing in your yard. You’ve discovered something curious. It is a small, wiggling tail beneath a very large rock. You pull while the tail grows longer and fatter. In little time you cannot let go of the serpent. It’s a mind full. Henry, it’s an old, but valid metaphor. It’s more than warps and tensors, involutions and convolutions. Don’t you see the horrific state we’re in? Don’t you see the terrible risk of teasing a nightmare as powerful as this? What gives us the right?”

Henry felt the familiar surge of pleasure, and with it the familiar surge of pain. With Julia there was never one without the other—a perilous price he had always gladly paid. His mind was quickly freed of warps and tensors, involutions and convolutions. There was now only Julia and her potent persuasions.

Her tale over, she abruptly uncupped and retracted her skilled hands. “Maybe Larry’s right. Perhaps we are their dreams, their hopes, their fears ... and of no earthly substance.” Julia effected long, purposeful strides for the divan on the gold gams of a huntress. She strategically selected a specific point of view. She enfolded her arms snugly beneath her breasts, crossed her limber legs, let her head tilt slightly forward so that her hair tumbled forth luxuriantly in melodic strands of umber.

He altered his angle of attack a few degrees. “Julia, none of this is the point. Unlike the Gate, Faust is only there for the dreamer. And I’ll be the dreamer. Just me and me alone. It is not as if we seek the Gate or Lloyd’s dyad of the quins. Your protestations ...”

He attempted possession of her laminose eyes, but she let them fall heavily upon the floor spilling their lambent light. She and her concerns had wandered far. The color had left her cheeks. Henry tilted his head trying to find her somewhere in her thoughts. He swallowed the burning knot in his throat and beseeched, “Julia, where are you now? What is it that torments you? Why can’t you talk to me?”

She raised her head and appeared to search the inscrutable corners of the room. “That’s the pertinent question. Many have asked. Reason has asked. I must find an answer.”

She worried him more than ever. “What are you talking about? What has this to do with the investigation of Faust?”

“Yes ... our Faust. The dilemma of our Faust is that we really don’t know who will be needing him ... or why they should.”

“But of course we do. I’ll be testing F3 using a safe window.”

“It’s seems not, for Lloyd has taken him back.”

He stood, but tottered. “What! This scan was promised to me.”

She gravely announced, “Lloyd has repossessed the mathematics of your conception. We’re only his all too agreeable fools. Of course he’s protected demon Faust with his password. I’ve not found it yet, so I do know that it’s more than routine security.”

Henry paced. He repeated her old caveat. “It’s wired to the Gate. Your booby trap is now a deadly reality.”

“Yes ... you finally feel the point. Painfully sharp isn’t it? There’s also a new Gate password with new machine code buried in the Light Shell. Without issue of this new Gateword, the unsuspecting user summons Faust and not the Gate ... not the Gate at all ... not that anyone even close to sanity would want either one.”

He droned, “Julia, you must find both passwords and destroy the encrypted code.”

The subtle lilac of her purbrown orbs returned. “We hold tightly the tail of an ugly snake and cannot let go.”

He collapsed in his chair. “Enough ... enough of this,” he whispered dejectedly. “I can no longer fence with you. I am whittled to the quick. Why didn’t Lloyd tell me himself?”

“There is the devil’s truth in this. Lloyd only has to enlarge the Faust window to barbecue the dreamer’s brains in a brilliant flash of illumination. Such wisdom would be cosmic, but also quite useless.”

“Then the answer is to forget Faust. And it’s no problem for me to forget the Gate. We will stay clear of the Machine and ride out the impending storm.”

“Henry, you make it sound so simple. Perhaps, we should take a long vacation ... hope our world’s still here when we get back.”

“I’m a simple man ... a foolish man. You have the answer?”

“No ... but I think there’s an issue much more than F3. The issue is the Gate, and this is the one thing we should never forget. Why would Lloyd go to such lengths to protect it? Whom is he protecting it from?”

“That one’s easy ... the lizard Hardan. Lloyd doesn’t need any more Holman Gates ... or twenty kiloton superwindows inside the dome.”

“No argument. But why marinate someone’s brains just to teach them a lesson? Hardan would never touch the Machine. It would be Larry ... or perhaps you or me. It’s time you came down from the clouds to see we’re buried inside a mountain of shit. I don’t know about you, but my jack-of-the-night is out of his box. I don’t like the glint of his eyes.”

In Henry’s eyes the woman shrank like Faust’s thinspace. In his mind she seemed to be chanting from the end of a long, dark corridor, to be warning: “It is dark inside the night. The light cannot shine in. Only darkness can prevail ... can survive inside the night.”

The Tail of the Snake, West of El Rasigo
A Bright Tuesday Afternoon, March 7th

Lloyd had assembled his core team—Cole, Klein and Hagerty. Lloyd believed that fewer was better. It made for long days, but even longer nights. They had spent months preparing their fortress-compound. It was no surprise to three of them that the real work had landed squarely upon the same three.

The white and gold hacienda was nearly invisible from Snake Road. A narrow, gravel path connected the ninety-room residence with the old, serpentine highway. The hacienda had once belonged to a powerful drug lord. He had moved on to bigger and better things, adding a veneer of respectability in another part of the country. The property had become available at a very good price thanks to their all-seeing LENS.

The previous owner had installed the latest in high-tech security that featured mil-spec electronics worth millions. When it came to special requirements owners old and new had much in common. The wooded estate was surrounded by a 12x2 foot reinforced, concrete wall. The wall was topped with glass and metal shards. And if one happened to solve the wall they would be challenged by a tangle of razor wire and a noxious chemical spray.

The lean team (in number) conducted their dress rehearsal. They had just completed their cursory inspection of the grounds. One-by-one they assembled at the compound’s steel door—four feet wide, nine feet tall with boilerplate three inches thick. The building’s walls as well as its windows exhibited commensurate though well-concealed hardening. It was an impressive display of brute strength, but they had not come to marvel at the compound or its strength.

Lloyd inquired, “Bill, it’s a little late to ask, but can I assume you’ve salved the pox?”

“If you mean that scurvy crew, Rail and Roundhead ... yes, boss ... not to worry. That pair’s tracking decoys courtesy of our Colonel White.”

Lloyd replied, “We must be watchful of those two.”

Bill nodded as Lloyd sighed and said, “Okay gentlemen ... it’s time we went inside.”

Bill produced a small transmitter, used its keypad to activate the anti-blast door. It inched open to the sound of heavy gears and motors. The mechanical mouth yawned wide and beckoned them irresistibly inside. The four men stepped into the tall vestibule and beneath a wrought-iron chandelier. Their hard soles clacked rudely against the highly polished wood. Bill led them into a room that might have served as a reception hall for the mob.

Though sized appropriately for a Viking horde, there were no tables for feasting, for guzzling, for boasting, or for anything of the sort. There was no furniture of any kind, only a confounding assortment of plywood crates, plastered carelessly with peeling labels.

A row of barred windows had been set high atop the four walls, beneath the beams of the mansard roof. A red sandstone hearth spanned the far wall. Norman oriflammes and halberds were suspended over its mantel. More than a dozen doors were spaced along the white stucco walls. Each was slightly recessed and framed with a stout Moorish arch. Their walnut-stained planks were nearly invisible in the diffuse light of the afternoon. And though dust-laden beams emblazed the heights, this light had almost no low-level effect.

The hall had been reduced to a warehouse. The men rummaged in the dwindling light feigning interest in boxes and packages. There was enough food and water, soap and sundries, toothpaste and toilet paper for a six-month siege. Boxes were stacked high and leaned this way and that. The men sniffed the moribund air. The floor was slippery. Lloyd nearly fell. Tired and disappointed with what he saw but more with what he didn't, Lloyd inquired, "Those special cameras ... and microphones ... you know, Bill, the extra security that Max had sent over yesterday?" He stopped abruptly when Max answered his question with a single bob of his balding head. He sighed. "Okay ... let's see what you do have ... why you brought us here. It's safely stowed away ... warm and dry ... I trust?"

"Sealed up like Tut," answered Bill. "I thought you'd want to see the thing for yourselves ... something you're going to have to adjust to sooner or later." Max and Owen listened nervously at perimeter of the conversation. They had earlier argued unsuccessfully that this was not the time for curiosity, but Lloyd had been manic over what was an obsession with the readiness of their fortress and their plan.

Bill led them to a door deceptively recessed like the others. He used his keypad and the door clicked open. The four men stepped into a semi-dark receptacle that was almost too small to contain them, a "claustrophobic closet" in words spoken under Owen's breath.

Max asked as he examined the room's conspiring corners, "Bill, if this trip is going to test our phobias I'll leave right now."

Bill winked conspiratorially, and then indicated that they should line up snugly against one of the walls. He stooped and seized a handle concealed by the flooring and opened a trap door to the squall of dry hinges. A pillar of light emerged from the depths conjuring an infernal cast as if reflected from a shimmering pool of morgue pallor. Bill leaned over

the concealed breach for a better look before risking one step. “Care for a look?” he asked as his large pupils dropped like pellets of molten lead through the shimmering breach.

The three reluctantly complied with his request. Each man peered down a long shaft, a dangerous descent down many rungs of flimsy ladder. They retreated, but Bill urged them to the edge volunteering the first step. One-by-one they descended into and through the pale light. Ladder and men groaned and swayed. Max, the last man to descend, apparently taxed the ladder beyond its strength. Fortunately the bottom rungs yielded only as he cleared the final step. Max cursed his choice of friends as Bill removed wood fragments that needed removing for the sake of safety. It proved unconvincing. “Sorry,” Bill said. “It’s temporary till—”

“My leg is not ... now or ever! What if I’d busted my goddamned leg?” fumed the friar. “A real ladder, not a kiddie toy, would have been cheaper than the lawsuit is gonna be.” Max stopped abruptly. He reeled in his fiery temper. Facts of a far greater significance registered in his eyes, for example, Lloyd’s latest “Black Hole of Miscalculation.”

It turned out that the bottom of the shaft was no better than the top, only a tad brighter, its air fouled with a rank blend of mortar and mildew. The dusty floor revealed dozens of unreadable tracks. Footprints tracked down the corridor. Max lamented that none tracked back. The three of them looked to Bill Hagerty for a plausible answer.

“No one comes back,” answered Bill as he stowed the broken rungs in a corner crammed with barnacled buckets and trowels.

“He’s right,” gulped Owen. “It’s too late. We’re actually going through with it. It wasn’t until this moment that the fact really hit. I guess I thought that in the end we would come to our senses.” They all seemed to be thinking similar versions of the same basic scenario.

The weak light that had greeted them shown from a careless string of incandescent bulbs. Bill, too tall, sent one swinging as he tried to avoid stepping on his own feet or theirs. Max, coughing into a handkerchief, mumbled something about the awful smell and the insufferable dust. Owen complained incessantly about the cold, tomblike quality of the place. “Who’s buried here?” he wondered aloud.

“You really have to ask?” countered Max. Both of the resolute skeptics, Owen and Max, grumbled nonstop. The four of them stood waiting. No one wanted to take the first step down that long, gray corridor.

“Sorry about the air,” said Bill. “I’m working on sweetening it up a bloom or two.”

They stood shivering at the end of a dank, narrow, hastily completed tunnel about thirty feet long. The unevenness of the masonry when viewed at length suggested the rifling of a gun. “No point in further delay,” Bill added. “Let’s go ... she’s waiting.” Bill’s “she” was guarded by a red door smelling strongly of fresh enamel—a fierce eruption that throbbed on unprepared retinas. The striking contrast between the splash of red paint and

the rest of the tunnel held them back. They shared the same complaint of vertigo since the tunnel or barrel rotated around the door as if the door was a target unavoidable. It had certainty and finality that pulled them forward as if their “fate” rested at the bottom of a deep hole and they were sure to topple in—their course irrevocably set for now and for all time. Lloyd gave a name, a mouthful, to this phenomenon.

“Gentlemen,” said Lloyd, “you are experiencing near certainty, the rare perception of ponderoaxiomatic probability.”

No one had a thing to say. The men drifted reluctantly toward the door with Bill Hagerty in the lead. “Careful ... the floor is very slippery.” Bill shuffled down the corridor, shoes sometimes touching, sometimes well apart, as if he was traversing the pitching deck of a ship. As they approached the door, he released its lock using his hand-held transmitter. “The Red Room. What you’ve been avoiding is locked inside.”

They filed unsurely into a command and control center. “Lined with steel,” said Bill theatrically. Max closed the door to a resonant thud—an appropriate sound of import from the impact. The whirr of the air conveyor altered slightly its machine hum to accommodate a sudden change in air pressure. Their eyes betrayed instant and utter disappointment.

Max exhaled and moaned, “So this is it. What a delightful place to suffer one’s final constipation.”

Bill was quick to defend the place. “No frills. She’s fitted for utility.”

Owen traced his forefinger along the metal wall painted battleship gray. He inspected his blackened digit with disapproval. “She is fit only for filth. Damn it, Bill, this place has got to be cleaned up. And what is that awful smell? It’s even worse than the corridor.”

The question surprised Bill. His sniffed and shrugged no comment.

Three of the walls were an electronic quandary of card racks, CRTs, blinkers, conduits, valves and pipes. It reminded Max of the inside of a submarine and other things. “Where’s our periscope? It’s no more inspiring than a metal sarcophagus several sizes too small.”

A few chairs were haphazardly scattered. In the center Bill had installed a square table overfilled with compsets, lociputers and an assortment of inscrutable gadgets tortuously wired together by dedicated amateurs. The effect of these gadgets was as overpowering on the eyes and brain as had been the corridor and the red-enameled door. Teetering from overload, Max selected a chair and collapsed as if from heat. In time, all but a typically hyper Owen Klein joined the reluctant conspirators in a circle around the square.

“Not done ... but what’ya think?” asked Bill, straight-faced and deathly serious.

The silence that followed was palpable. Bill was visibly hurt. “Jesus, guys, I did my best. Who was here to help me? You should’ve seen the mess I started with.”

“Never mind that,” deflected Lloyd. “You’ve done fine. Now ... what about the air? Owen’s right. It smells bad ... like—”

Bill suggested, “Paint fumes maybe. I’ve grown kinda used to it.”

Klein cracked a broad, though a clearly sarcastic grin.

“None of you should worry. It’s perfectly safe ... perfectly secure ... no problem. The design’s ingenious.”

Owen asked the ex-mercenary, “And the hardware checked out? All of it?”

“Most of it,” answered Bill. “Soon ... the rest of it.”

Owen paused in front of a blue, wall panel. Skeptically, “And this?”

“The main tunnel joins the ‘Red’ and ‘White’ rooms with the grounds,” offered Bill on cue. “Our way in and out from here on. I will change the color to blend in with the rest.”

Owen thumped the panel and frowned. “Where?” he grunted.

“The area is laced with dry, limestone caves. At least one comes out on the other side of the lake. Kind of whimsical, I think.”

“About as whimsical as Hardan’s gonna be when he finds out ...” Max stopped. “Let’s not get too fancy. We’re not the CIA. Remember who and what it’s for.”

Bill interrupted saying that he had used the tunnel many times and that it would pose no problems for whom it was for. Max tried the single comphone and observed wryly that the line was as “dead as Moby’s dick.”

Bill said, “The computer turns on everything but that.”

Though gripped by deep in thought, Lloyd asked, “And what starts the computer?”

“Boss ... your voice and only your voice ... when the time comes.”

Owen informed Bill, “I want to move the IM ... my other delicate gear ... early tomorrow morning ... the earlier the better.”

“I’m ready for you guys. You better get packed. And it won’t be so bad. I think you’ll prefer these accommodations to the Tarpley Manor.”

Max moaned like a moose cow in heat. Owen nodded torpidly his agreement.

Lloyd asked, “Can we be ready by the twelfth? Gentlemen, we must be ready in just five days.”

Owen ventured, “There’s a chance if Minerva’s calculations are reasonable, if Nettie can control the incident power.”

“In five days we could run World War Three from here,” droned Bill matter-of-factly.

“Not so unlikely,” hissed Max cantankerously.

For their cynical friar the prospects were bleak. Max could almost hear the swish of the long rope and the snap of his neck. There was more if one listened with a sensitive ear—the footfalls of their jackboots—the angry voices overhead and in the corridor—their guns discharged. The goon squad would only have to seal the doors, the tunnel, and then leave the four of them to rot in their compartmentalized hell. They would never be found.

Lloyd offered, “Early Sunday morning we will open Nettie’s eyes for the final time.”

Max wondered who would open theirs. It would require a paradox of discontinuity to quash the Machine or a quark-splitting failure of the Cosmic Brake. Max sat silent as the others talked over the details of security, of supplies, of medical fastidiousness, of the readiness of their “Green, Blue and White” rooms. Max tried, but failed to dial down the sound as he fought futilely his own private war with the plan.

About thirty minutes passed during which he had avoided expressing any opinion. Without much to recommend it the discussion had gradually turned to the gold ring that Lloyd no longer wore. It seemed that its overripe quarvine now blazed too conspicuously. The stone was kept safe from prying eyes, from loss or theft, for Lloyd had locked it securely in his safe at Pines’ Roost. Instead of the Hunczovsky ring, Lloyd kept Joy’s shamrock on his person day and night. The brass ring with its nephrite jade shamrock was his lifeline to the beloved, though deceased Joy Marie, his wife and Bill’s sister. But it had always been clear at least to Lloyd if not to Bill that one ring held tightly the other, links in a long chain with many twists and turns in time.

Owen asked about Joy. Lloyd’s lines of old age betrayed bittersweet memories. “I’d taken her back to the curio shop in Steyr a year or so before ... before she died. She’d insisted on seeing it for herself ... the *Aus der Mansarde* where Dad had purchased the Serenata box she so adorned ... and the ring she so bitterly detested.”

Owen added, “Your father was a war correspondent following the Third Army into Austria.”

“Yes. I showed you the articles. You may recall the horrible conditions ... little or no food, medicine or clothing. Refugees poured in as the Russians drew near.”

“When you visited there with Joy things must have been very different.”

“I remember that she asked the proprietor ... ‘Are there any others ... any others? Tell me the truth.’ She was really worried ... really convinced that there had to be others.”

“She thought the stone was wrong ... had no rightful place with us,” recalled Bill. “She thought the stone was aligned not with this world, but with some other. I don’t know how she came to feel this way, unless it was that strange, black light inside the stone. But I always suspected that it was something more ... that something had happened to terrify her. She never said. I do know one thing. I know how painfully I miss her.”

The old man nodded mournfully his agreement. “The poor fellow in the shop showed her Seitzler’s *Rhyme of the Ring*. ‘No more of them ... I can promise you that,’ the shopkeeper had told her. Of course we now know differently. I bought the Seitzler book plus the *Speculum Lapidum* by Camillus Leonardus. I bought them for her, but she wouldn’t touch either one. It was Max that has devoured them ... along with Kartofan’s *Oneiros* ... tales to titillate his rational mind.”

Max pinched his nose and reset his spectacles. “It’s the dearth and the debris of civilization. It’s divination and alchemy ... and a vast host of arcane ‘ologies. I read this stuff only as a student of the human condition ... and for no titillation ... I assure you.”

“Piffle,” snorted Lloyd, “you have discovered the fascination of the *Nibelungenlied* ... the legend behind the legend ... and why the Ring so haunted the Third Reich.”

Max responded, “And haunts so many even to this day. It makes no difference about Seitzler and his tales ... if his *Volsunga* was even barely true. It is tribal myth that rules these murderous mobs. We speak of man made in God’s image. But I fear the opposite is true. Has there been a more evil creature set loose to tread upon the Earth?”

They were startled by these words, including Lloyd, even accounting for their source. Owen finally uttered, “Let’s hope not ... or better ... hope your view is terribly wrong.”

Max agreed, for who would not? Time passed without much said.

Lloyd was in need of frank talk and turned it finally to the crucial subject. “I think I told you that my father gave me the ring when I was a lad of fifteen,” he said sternly, adding for effect a riveting burst of laser blue from eyes that held something back.

Bill suggested, “Quite a responsibility for anyone ... but for a mere boy. How did he explain the gift?”

This question intrigued them. “I truly thought that it was,” said Lloyd, “... a gift ... I mean. I remember that beautiful autumn evening like it was only yesterday. Mom had turned off the lights and gone on to bed. I’d been listening spellbound to Dad’s tales of lost lore, of tokens handed down, of cities so unlike ours we’d never recognize them as cities, inhabited by sentient races so unlike us we’d think them ... well ... nonhuman. It was all wonderfully Lovecraftian in its detail. Dad loved the H.P. Lovecraft stories as did I. He talked as he rocked and smoked his knobby, black pipe. The stars were out ... amazing ... a bazillion in those days.

“We both had tilted toward the stars. I was sprawled barefoot on our porch swing. Wonders swirled through my brain ... more than girls and baseball. I recall a swift change that came over me ... as if a switch had been thrown. We both felt it ... Dad and I. It was as if all of time had passed through us in one surge like a tidal wave. Dad sat suddenly straight as did I. He removed the gold ring from his finger. He’d just finished one of his classic yarns and seemed about to begin another when he totally surprised me and said, ‘Son, it’s now yours to keep. I’ve completed my brief watch.’

“He placed the ring in my sweaty palm. ‘Take good care of it,’ he said. Never had I been allowed to touch it. Then Dad added, ‘The band is soft, though the stone is hard. Your tasks and responsibilities are vast.’

“I asked if the stone was an emerald. He answered that it was not a common bauble. That answer threw me for a convoluted loop. I tried other questions. He tried other answers. We went round and round to no end. Then I asked what he knew of the origin of the queer, green stone.

“‘Ah ... from the Alps of Carinthia,’ he replied, ‘from her mountain crypt of dreams. And you my boy must decipher these dreams ... find out what they mean. It is important work, but work you must accept.’ Then he told me of his timeshaper, something he’d never mentioned before. It seemed this creature was more than just a vivid dream. She was a being from a lost dimension, a keeper of keys and light and dark fires, a magical weaver of time and space captured and held in an infinite tapestry. The green stone was her LENS through which she took her worldly accounts.”

Max added, “Unworldly Nrczxa knits in eight, not four dimensions.”

“... And unknits as well,” finished Lloyd. “That name for her ... Nrczxa ... I remember trying to spell it ... trolled out as it was ... like singsong in my dreams. But I knew. I knew that if I had the temerity to dream of her ... to even look upon her ... or at her tapestry ... it would be ... well ... it would be my last look.” He paused for air. “My ... I do gab too much ... speculate too much. You must think I’m as daft as Leopold Hardan.”

They sat awhile grimly silent with their thoughts. A sudden sneeze from Hagerty broke their spell. Automatically the others cried, “*Gesundheit!*”

“Perhaps,” said Max, “Kartofan himself took that last look. Seitzler wrote that he died horribly at the age of twenty-five.”

“But remember those cruel times,” said Lloyd. “Kartofan wrote his propositions near the end of fourth century when Alaric’s Goths were busily wasting the Western Empire.”

“Lloyd ... to the point,” Owen inquired, “what have you actually seen of her ... or of her connection to this strange stone of yours ... or of her connection to us ... far more my concern for the present?”

The old man turned to face the doctor. “I’ve seen little beyond what the thin veil of sanity so mercifully provides.”

“But you have seen something ... a glimpse inside the labyrinth ... of its rooms and corridors ... the shapes and textures of an alien world if not the cities ... the beings themselves. You’ve seen more than you have told. What is it? Why can’t you tell us?”

“It’s not the thing to tell one’s friends. What would it serve you to know ... to know of these strange and alien dreams?”

Max contemplated the woody knurls of his pipe. In contrast, Bill's eyes darted rapidly between Lloyd, Max and the doctor. The lanky Doctor Klein sighed, stretched his legs, his arms, appeared preoccupied with counting the valves and fittings on the wall. Lloyd calculated. He added and subtracted. He balanced his explanations like he balanced his field equations. Max knew this if the others did not.

Without benefit of windows, without benefit of warmth, the four men appeared as cold and gray as the cold and gray walls of their command and control center. Regardless of the sinister atmosphere, of the well-calculated, well-placed scraps of information, Owen would not be easily dissuaded. Finally he asked, "Have you seen your timeshaper?"

"I saw her last night," answered Lloyd without hesitation. "I'll let you decide what it was I really saw. It seems that I'd made it through her maze unscathed, had finally reached her lair deep inside the great labyrinth. It only required that I concentrate on the light from my augural stone. As was said, rooms and passages were unworldly, like the alimentary canal of a living colossus. And I was no more than a parasite in its belly.

"She'd been waiting ... a very long time I think. Her inner sanctum was amazing in its own right, a network of quivering tubes and nodes, but nothing when compared to her, though nothing like what I had expected. Don't know what I really expected, but she wasn't it.

"Not exactly the perfect girl next door, she was nevertheless a beauty beyond words. She was ravishing, though a tad blue-skinned with angular features. Okay ... I'll come right to the point. If I'm to be doomed forever for my curiosity then so will you." Lloyd inhaled a long, but wheezy breath, so frail it was near to failing completely.

"She takes me in ... well ... more or less inside her. This is hard to explain ... harder for you to understand ... I know, but I will do the best I can. I am captured by the most exquisitely lucent eyes ... an absorbing and intimate encounter to say the least. Soon I am maneuvered beneath her ... pushed and pressed against an invisible floor. And I am the young man again ... vigorously pushing back, if you know what I mean. So erotic a thing I've never before known. Every sense and cell is electrically charged. No words I know could describe it." Lloyd looked down shyly. "It's best I skip this. It's out of character for me to speak so frankly about such things."

"I think we should hear it all," coaxed Owen, "... if it's—"

"You'll hear only what is safe to tell. At first it's wonderful. Then bit-by-bit I notice that something's very wrong. It hits me too slowly that what I see doesn't really square with what I feel. Her skin is really grossly coarse ... extremely abrasive ... nothing close to what my eyes attempt to tell me. The same could be said about her hair, less like silk, more like wire bristles ... and her lips ... not the mounds of delight I think I see, but a cutting beak pressed hard against my throat. Her fingers are more like talons than human flesh. And then ... there's the smell ... a smell like burning ..."

Lloyd paused. "And then?" asked Owen. "What? What happens?"

“I finally get it. It all crashes together in megaquins. It was so utterly simple that I can’t believe I’d missed it.”

“A thing you deem safe enough to tell?”

“My mind’s eye had been tightly closed the entire time. Her beauty was only a dream held inside a dream. I try to open my eyes to the truth, but my lids are as heavy as lead. You may be familiar with this queer sensation. I’ve read that it happens ... dreaming your dreaming. When I finally force them open I am bludgeoned ... rocked hard by the truth ... my hard head cracked against an even harder floor.”

“Lloyd ... what ... what happened?”

“The scene was so bright that I was blinded. But there was something there to be seen ... a thing like a black mountain in the foreground ... so black it vibrated and pulsed ... and behind it blazed the dawn of a thousand suns. There was just too much contrast for the mind or for the senses. That dark and deadly light was clearly there for me to see if I dared look. But it would not suffice me one iota for a single photon’s worth.”

“But you wake to ... to ... to the answer ... to the light inside the labyrinth.”

“Not before the mountain rose to eclipse the dawn. I tried to flee only to discover the darkness had its prickling hold. The darkness and I fell ... fell forever entwined in the uncertainty of time and space ... that mindless Grundlespin. Only then do I wake ... and it’s not to any labyrinthine light. I wake to the time and space of my own bed ... to the precious safety my own room at Pines’ Roost.”

“Remarkable story ... I confess, but in a way sadly unsatisfying.”

“To me ... yes, but to you, Owen, how so?”

“I thought you would ... would better explain the connection ... of her to him ... or of her to us ... or to the ring ... hers or his? I’m babbling I know ... and so confused. Lloyd, help us understand the truth.”

“It’s a string of the most perplexing perplexions,” suggested Max. “What could be said that would satisfy our thirst, for there’s far more here than mere logic can reveal?”

“Gentlemen, I’m quite tired ... from all this talk and thirst for truth. Besides ... there’s a cold draft.” He shivered. “Bill ... do you feel the chill? Can you do something about it?”

Bill glanced at the door that was closed, had been closed the whole time. Their digital thermometer read 23°C, the relative humidity 25%. But Bill knew something was wrong. It slowly dawned on him. There was no longer any whirr from the air handler. The control room was stone silent.

“Was the ring his?” asked Owen emphasizing the pronoun. “Never mind all the rhymes and the rings. Was your ring once his ring? We have only Hunczovsky’s word, and though I trust old Nicolaus like I trust you, I’m left unpersuaded. The inscription is inspiring, but hardly convincing.”

“You want facts when it is a lie that speaks the truth ... a single day, but no small matter I assure you. It speaks louder than all the books in all the libraries ... louder than all the experts ever could ... ever in a thousand years.”

“The LENS,” said Owen. “So that’s what did it. The LENS has laid his final stone to rest ... set in place his true marker for all eternity.”

Lloyd had focused on the table and its chaotic tangle of wires. So had the others as if hypnotized by a sudden apparition. Lloyd placed one hand upon unfinished wood as if he expected his Nrczxa to appear in its place. For a sobering instant, Max suspected that the table, chairs, even the four walls had blinked, had faded for one tantosecond into Faust’s deadly thinspace. He reasoned that it must only be the mood of the moment or the tenor of Lloyd’s perplexing tale. But these troubling suspicions were not his alone.

Owen cried, “What the f—?” He repeatedly tested the table plus the other hard parts for solidity, like a stork repeatedly testing the water for a slippery meal.

“A probe ... a breach!” cried Lloyd with unprecedented fear. He closed his eyes. It required many seconds for the man to regain some measure of control. He offered with a hollow, unconvincing voice, “It’s all right. We’re going to be all right. It was a ... like a hypnagogic startle ... only stronger ... and extrasensory. It was a dream incursion ... a side effect of too much of our Machine ... nothing more.”

Owen exclaimed, “But whose dream? I think we all felt it. I felt it ... a hole in reality ... or perhaps a ... a discontinuity ... a sudden rift in space-possibility-time.”

“A dream all right,” uttered Max, “of mindless, senseless nothingness.”

“No, no ... please. It’s okay. It had to have come from me. The dream that I so carelessly described must have induced a telepathic field ... an instant of hysteria. The perception and its panic had to have come from me.

“The tunnel,” suggested Bill, white-faced. “We should leave quickly through the main tunnel. I think we should ... and fast.”

Lloyd reminded, “If it was a break in time what good would the tunnel do? None! Let’s change the subject. It will help. Nothing bad happened. Bill ... listen to me. Pay attention. Tell me about the security you have arranged for early Sunday? Bill ... just tell me about Sunday and everything will be all right.”

The three were too unnerved to think of Sunday’s plan or of much else. It took some time for Bill to find his voice and to recall the few simple facts. “It will appear ... appear to everyone the same. In truth, security will be double-strength by Saturday night. Russell White and his men will have been deployed both here and at the Panopticon.”

“You have complete confidence in White?”

Bill deeply inhaled. "He's good ... and he knows only what he needs to know. And so far he's kept Rail and Roundhead out of our business. Boss ... I still feel it ... like I'm falling through the tunnel toward a sea of ... of red suffocation."

"Bill, pay attention. Let's not underestimate Rail and Roundhead." Lloyd nervously fondled the jade shamrock. "Tell me about the CFID. Is Friday's ruse going to work? Someone!"

Owen answered, "Leonard Moss will receive the bad news on Saturday after he's had his dinner. Lloyd, I think that maybe Bill has a point. I feel it too ... a powerful commotion in the pit, so to speak."

"Gentlemen, butterflies in the belly or perhaps bats in the belfry. Owen, can Moss swallow your whopper on a belly full of pot roast?"

"It will contain just enough of the unbelievable to be perfectly believable. I think the report will command Leonard's attention. He should have no choice but to order us to shut down. Suitably protected we'll go in to shut down and secure the computers."

Lloyd looked in turn at each man for the moment slightly green. "I will need several undisturbed hours for what I must do."

Max asked, "And what might we expect from Ivan?"

Owen replied, "The man's not eating, not sleeping much ... a case of severe LENS trauma. I don't think he's up to interfering, but one can never be sure."

Bill asked nervously, "What's to be our story for Monday morning when they discover we have operated the Machine?" His colorless eyes were transfixed on the tunnel's blue, but dwindling escape hatch.

Lloyd replied, "Don't worry. I'll take care of that and what they will think."

Bill persisted, "They'll suspect the Gate."

Lloyd agreed, "Of course they will. And to add the proper panache I will have staged the accident that lurks inside Ivan's worst nightmare."

Owen sighed. "It will be pure panic and paradedementia on Monday."

"Just another day at the office," commented Max.

Lloyd rose unsteadily. The others did too, all eager to leave. Bill pulled back the blue, wall panel that exposed the entrance to the cave.

Owen said, "That leaves us with Henry and Julia, and of course, with Leopold Hardan."

"Julia and Henry will be left to Max. After we've brought our man to the compound, Owen will inform Leo using the established code. That's all. Then we will hunker down and wait for what comes next."

Max sternly reminded, "It won't be a peck on the cheek."

"My butterflies have sprouted into pterodactyls," said Owen.

"Let's not kid ourselves," warned Max. He delivered his short speech. "It will not be like we've cured cancer or ended war or famine. They'll be no parades down Pennsylvania or any White House teas. We will be despised more than the builders of the Bomb. The only thing more sacred than the past is God himself and we'll have mucked with both."

No one had any more to say. They made their hasty departure through the emergency tunnel.

Wednesday, March 8th

Leonard Moss located Ivan's expensive, blue sedan. He maneuvered his SUV alongside the solitary vehicle parked in the tall brush of a remote roadside park about twenty-five miles east of El Rasigo, not so far from the foothills. Remaining seated, he mentally reconnoitered the area. There were no hikers or campers. He spotted the trail marker and the trail leading into the juniper and fir. Satisfied that the risk was relatively low, Leonard left his truck for a not-so-well-marked footpath.

About fifty yards up the trail he found his cold friend huddled on a wooden bench. Ivan had aged. The man looked up and tried to smile, but his smile devolved into a tragic mask. Leonard had never witnessed a more pathetic look. His already shaky confidence evaporated.

"Welcome to my new and rustic headquarters. This is the best I could do," droned Ivan nasally.

"You did okay, but you shouldn't be here on a day like this. Ivan, you need professional help. You've lost far too much weight. Your eyes look like they've tangled with a truck." Then Leonard tried to warn his friend: "This self-neglect is dangerous."

The man sputtered as he stroked his beard, "What does that matter ... now?"

Leonard took a seat next to him. He was afraid to bump him that the man might shatter like a flower frozen in liquid air. "That's nonsense. You've got to stop thinking this. You've managed to convince yourself of the worst bilge."

"But it's true. I see those eyes ... see them now ... but not out there ... in here ... inside with me," he said gesturing, his hand held tremblingly against his chest, but open like a spastic claw as if he held the iron and bronze dagger too near to the life inside his heart.

"I know. I saw things too. Remember? You were there when I did. But I have to forget them. You have to forget them. See Dr. Langer if you can't let go. It's the obsession and not the nightmare that feeds your fear."

“I dare not tell anyone anything about it ... even Langer with his clearance and discretion ... with his ... you know ... could you? Could you tell anyone the things you saw that day in my office?” A pause. “Well—?”

“No ... of course not. Just don’t forget that we’re both in this together. Ivan, I’m out in the cold too. I’ve done some pretty crazy things myself ... stirred up a mountain of shit already.”

A ground squirrel scampered past. Ivan looked furtively over his shoulder. “The LENS was a horrible mistake of pride. We were crazy to think we could control it. I should torch the whole works, escape to these mountains ... change my name ... change everything.”

The brave rodent stopped to ponder them. “It would be your horrible luck that Hardan would move next door. Umm ... sorry ... not funny.”

Ivan produced a plastic smile. Though in every way a dreadful smile, Leonard tried to encourage his friend with anything he could. “You still have your mind ... your reason. I haven’t the slightest doubt about you ... your sanity, but you must come to see this too ... and soon.”

“I don’t know what I see anymore. But what’s the latest from Dr. Karpinski? Briefly ... please. The cold’s numbed me to the core.”

“As I said, I stirred some shit, but I finally got to see him. He’s already looked into the matter ... has studied the problem in some detail.”

“Discreetly?”

“Yes. But the scant line-documentation concerns him. He claims it’s inadequate for the task, and he’s one of the best men in the field, with no ties to Hardan other than he hates him even more than we do.”

“We’ve discussed his myriad qualifications.”

“Ivan, I used up all my favors to get him. I’m telling you I’m used up. This scheme had better work. The word is out I’m in some kind of serious trouble. No shit.”

His words took root like a weed in a rose garden. Leonard looked into Ivan’s eyes for perhaps the first time in many weeks. Blue-black circles that began about the cheekbones had ground down into the pits themselves. Dark whirlpools had flooded them; hence the whites of the eyes had disappeared as well as the sockets. Leonard was shocked by the realization that the eyeless face he now explored was in some greater plane than same mangled face that he had seen on the cold floor of isocell one.

“Has he found a ... a way in?” asked Ivan haltingly. “Can he disable the Gate?”

“He’s had little to work with. Besides that, he suspects the thing’s protected, inaccessible, maybe even wired to another deadly device. He recommends that we stay clear of it.”

“So ... what are we to do?” The man wrung his hands, rocked back and forth as if to inflate his already deflated substantiality. Shrilly came the man’s reply, “Is there no way to end this nightmare?”

“I’m reluctant, but there is perhaps something we can do. We can access the LENS ... the Panigma Button, the Machine code, and the Light Shell assemblers through the basic firewall,” droned Leonard as he consulted an envelope nearly obliterated with notes.

Finally, “But how will this destroy the Gate?”

“It’s indirect and very tricky, but the LENS paracube also initiates the parangle and paraperture for the Gate. Karpinski’s idea is clever and could confound them for some considerable time ... that is ... if he’s right ... and not counting too much on his reputation.”

“Is he right?”

Leonard placed what he hoped was a calming hand on the man’s shoulder. “Maybe. I say maybe, but there is just a slight catch. Karpinski can’t be completely sure of the results.”

“Slight! My god what are you saying? We need solutions not more problems.”

“Karpinski feels our chances are good. But if he’s wrong ... and he was totally up-front with me on this ... if he’s ... no ... if we’re wrong on this we could be in for some serious trouble.”

“You’re going to have to spell it out. I’m tired ... I can’t ...”

“It amounts to a kind of rescaling or dampening of the matrices ... the tensors I think they’re called ... a readjustment of Nettie’s tuner-amplifier. Regardless of where they want to go the function of Karpinski’s algorithm will be to attenuate. They’ll go nowhere even though the LENS runs. And so will the Gate, but it will be useless too. The idea is that they’ll buzz around in circles. He will bury his encrypted code inside Julia’s Panigma Button. It should baffle them for a long time so long as Miss Moffett stays out. Ivan ... that’s his opinion.”

“Julia hates this thing as much anyone ... probably more than anyone. She won’t help them fix the Machine.”

“There it is ... spelled out. It’s now up to you.”

“What’s your catch ... the serious trouble you spoke of?”

“I needn’t mention the LENS theory’s difficult. The code’s extremely complex. Success will depend upon an element of pure luck.”

“What happens if he miscalculates?” asked Ivan.

“He can’t actually prove his algorithm in advance. That’s the bad part. And we have so little time.”

“Please ... what’s at stake?”

“If Karpinski’s wrong, LENS power might not be low at all. It could be enormous, consuming the full capacity of Nettie’s neurostratum. Even so, Karpinski thinks the odds are with us ... that the resulting space-time factor and window will be ineffectual.”

“But Leonard, what would happen if the worst does come to pass?”

“That’s just it. We don’t really know. It depends upon where the pilot’s trying to go. But if the window’s enormous he won’t just miss his target, the power of the paracube will destroy him.”

“I can’t agree to anything like that.”

A pause. “I’ll tell Karpinski to forget it.”

Ivan closed his eyes. A wintry chill passed through his body.

He quavered, “Leonard, you have talked to Karpinski. You’ve formed an opinion. Can he do it ... do it without endangering the pilot?”

“He’s ready, but it is your decision.”

“Tell him he must prevent a superwindow at all costs.”

“Ivan, we don’t have the time to interface completely with the Panigma Button. He’ll certainly do his best, but he can’t guarantee the button will bail us out. There are too many permutations.”

“He must. He must make it safe. Please tell him this.”

“Yes, Ivan, I’ll tell him.”

“If he can do it ... do it safely, tell him to proceed. Have him cripple the Gate for as long as he can ... and just as soon as he can.”

“Yes, I’ll get right on it. Let’s find someplace warm. I’ve one more matter to discuss with you. And for this one too, we need to get it right.”

*Rail and Roundhead at Ike’s, somewhere on Route 380
Late Thursday Night, March 9th*

The atmosphere was thick enough to dance. The chilies and garlies mingled chaotically upon the tender mucosal membranes. The fetor of the stale coffee and the burnt grease was fortunately lost to the senses, unlike the spiders of grime that lurked in the corners and beneath the neglected counters of the diner. But Rail did not care. He hardly noticed. It was not the ambiance of Ike’s or even his bill of fare, but mostly the isolation of the All-Niter that Rail needed now. But of course Eddie “Roundhead” Reed was another matter. For Roundhead, Ike’s was in his eloquence, “just about fine.”

Eddie tossed the photos of their surveillance targets on the table or dirty plates if the latter happened to be in his way. The photographs were amply layered with fingerprints. Aside from Ralph, Eddie and the bewhiskered Ike, there were two uneasy customers, a man and woman trying hard to ignore the two Poxers.

Eddie worked over a plate of oily, French fries and yammered with his mouth full. “Umm ... we can’t keep this up. He keeps addin’ work to the list. And with what that cheap ass is payin’ we can’t afford to keep all the help. Dun’t you think? Dun’t you think so, Ralphie?”

Ralph Seiper agreed. “We’re not. They’ll soon be history.” The man and woman three booths away were conspicuously silent. Ralph had not failed to notice. He had also noticed that Ike had quietly disappeared during Eddie’s latest bout with the fries.

Eddie wiped his hand across his mouse-gray shirt. “Jeez, the guy’s a grade-A nut case. Does he ‘spect us to believe his crap about the Wolf?”

Ralph planted his yellow alloy toothpick firmly between his bleached teeth. “Eddie, my dear boy, he expects it. I know him well enough to know that he expects it.”

“What’s he on ... kerosene?” chirped Eddie. The man in the booth flicked an owlish glance at the back of Eddie’s oversized, over decorated dome.

Ralph returned a wink and a smile. His long, cheek scar coiled into a glistening, purple snake. He answered Eddie’s question as simply as he could so that the cretin might understand. “Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying the boss is playing with a full deck, but I do think there must be something solid to all of this. Think about it, Eddie. Think about that day, the sixteenth. Remember?”

“But bringin’ dead guys back to life. You believes it, Ralphie?” Eddie smirked as if he had uttered the most profound thought in the world.

“Nobody would have spent all that dough if it was just total nonsense. Too many college stiffies are involved for all of them to be crazy.”

“Maybe, Ralphie. He’s been right with most everythin’ so far.” Bright headlights swept through the dark parking lot. Ralph made a slight adjustment to the drape of his nylon jacket. The driver rolled down the window, paused a second before speeding away.

“If he can do it I want to be on his side.”

“Ralphie baby, I’m wit’ you.”

“But I agree with you, Eddie. There’s no need to tail them all. And there’s certainly no point in tracking Whitey’s decoys. They’re not likely to screw up. We’ll concentrate like the man said from day one.”

“Backs to plan A ... huh?”

“We should reduce our risk, payroll ... and our exposure.”

“You wants me to handle the details?”

“Why not,” said Ralph, smiling brightly at the two sheep-faced patrons. “You seem to enjoy it so much.” He checked the time. It was just past midnight and a brand new day.

“Right on! I loves it. No waggin’ tongues wit’ me on the job. But decoys trailin’ decoys. I will miss the joke.” His laughter jarred the table and the two nervous patrons.

“The big brains have gone under. We do need to find them. But when one wants carrots one should tempt the silly rabbits.”

“They’re runnin’ around bumpin’ into each other. We should just t’row a net over the whole, nutty bunch.”

Ralph’s eyes sparkled. He leaned forward and nodded agreeably. “Eddie, we’ll rely on Mr. Abe Lincoln’s sound advice for occasions such as this.”

“I’ve always said you was a smart guy, Ralphie. Haven’t I always said that? You know somethin’ ‘bout what that guy Linc’n once said?”

The man and woman whispered and fidgeted to the delight of Ralph. He figured they were plotting their getaway—a joke for sure. He relaxed, playfully lolled his Muntz pick, let it teeter up and down for its best effect, and remembered how the metal probe had last been used. He then removed it from his mouth and placed it in his pocket with a pat.

“Yeah, I do, Eddie ... I really do,” said Ralphie chuckling.

“You can quote all the great ph ... phil ... smart guys. So what’d Linc’n say?”

“My friend he said: You can only follow some of the people some of the time.”

Eddie lowered eyes and voice. “Man ... that to me is good, sound advice. I didn’t think Linc’n was in our racket.”

“Eddie, everyone’s in our racket to one degree or another. Lincoln was no exception.”

“He was a pretty shrewd dude then ... huh?”

“They didn’t come any smarter than Honest Abe.”

“How,” wondered Eddie, “... how will we fool the boss without a gett’n’ ourselves snuffed real bad? You know ... skewered real bad like the man said.”

“Eddie, how will he know? He’s paying us to watch out for him. Right? And in this world you’re lucky if you get what you pay for, much less for what you don’t.”

Eddie struggled to push the words past the fries. “If you’re lucky, Ralphie baby.”

“Eddie, you are the world’s original slob. And I wish you’d wear a hat when we’re out in public. It’s almost embarrassing, not to mention very alarming to the local citizenry.”

"It dun't pay to flatter me none," he said as he licked and lizardly probed his lemon yellow teeth.

"That's right, Eddie. I forgot. Nothing flatters you."

"Besides," Eddie noted amicably, "Kincaid and that leggy bitch go toget'er."

Ralph's attention had wandered to Ike's customers. "Maybe," he added as he adjusted his view over Eddie's round shoulder.

"But yeah, Ralphie. If you're a tail'n' one, you're a tail'n' 'em both."

He produced a disgusting snort. Everything was pornographic to Eddie Reed.

"There's no good reason to follow any of the others. Between the two of us we can cover Kincaid and Moffett," offered Ralph. "They've been the keys all along."

"I wants the night shift," said Eddie, leering with squinting, torpid eyes.

"Eddie, we'll have to be very creative with our reports. We can't afford to fuck up, you know. He'd string us up by our brass clangers just like he ..."

The man and woman rose, aimed toward the diner's single exit, and tiptoed down the narrow aisle toward Rail and Roundhead.

"Dun't worry ... huh," said Eddie, his back to them. I can be downright colorful. Just you wait. I'd a probably made a great reporter fer some rag ... you know." He laughed through his mine-shaft nostrils.

Ralph frowned. "Eddie, are you ever going to finish eating?" He gathered up the photos and put them away.

"Shit, Ralphie baby, I certainly hope not."

The man and woman shuffled shyly past them. The woman looked down at the floor like a hound. In spite of himself, in spite of every desire to the contrary, the man's eyes had been seized by Roundhead Reed and his outrageously tattooed dome. He clearly struggled to avert his eyes, but just as clearly he could not.

Eddie gazed up at the man, rubbed his bald head perversely. The man looked away, his Adam's apple bobbing like the nervous bobber on a bluegill pond.

The anxious couple reached the door and opened it.

Ralph said to Eddie, "Come on. We can't just sit here all night. We've things to do." They both laughed at the joke.

Hardan's Condominium in El Rasigo Blanco
Thursday Night, March 9th

His blackouts were getting worse. Each one landed like a heavy, black curtain studded with lifeless eyes. These eyes followed him everywhere. They would harden into pellets of white-hot metal and transfix him in Hell. He hardly slept at all. If he could only hang on a little while longer. The end of the nightmare had to be close. He must remain in these squalid surroundings until the ordeal was over, until total victory or total defeat. Not that he would tolerate defeat. There was nothing he would not do, even if it risked everything he had, for he had nothing worth protecting.

From photos and documents, Leopold Hardan had constructed a facsimile of the Machine's consoles and monitors. It may never be needed, but he did not care. He had to be ready. He actually enjoyed learning the procedures and operating the replicas. He had always taken quickly to systems and computers, an aptitude that had made him billions.

His enemies had underestimated him. Everyone had underestimated him. But the great day of retribution would come, the day when all doubters would be purged. He only needed the Gateword (Lloyd's real password) plus Kato's Key-from-the-Past and nothing on this Earth could stop him.

Nor would anything quell the cry of the beast. His Dire Wolf unleashed would finally provide him peace, would let him sleep after a lifetime of torment. Together they would silence the pusillanimous horde and repel the evil from the corn. With the Dire Wolf by his side, he would have everything worth having. And the son of Naja could live for the first time in his life.

Chapter Seventeen: The Pilgrimage

Our favorite fears are secreted in a musty attic or a dank basement, buried in trunks,
stashed beneath the bed sheets, stowed behind the cedar boards—magic toys and trinkets
collected in the darkest recesses of our imagination.

- Posted over the Shop,
Aus der Mansarde

The Trinity Test Site, The Rim of Jornada del Muerto
Friday at Dawn, March 10th

The basin and surrounding mountains had absorbed the morning's aura. Its colors had anointed the carpet of dry powder, warmed it, set it awash and on fire, restored and revived an inland sea beneath an ancient, Paleozoic sun. The desert swelled to labile lilac or plunged to abyssal blue. In the distance they rose, the pink cones, the blushing, magma nipples. Dawn in the desert knew no restraint on its temper, on its brush or its palette.

And though their day had begun optimistically, had erased the night, it had not erased the shadows.

Many historic sites had claimed lives. Many were the most hallowed of ground. Many were not. Most had done their work more ravenously, but few more despicably than the crater. The regrettable thing was that hardly anyone knew.

On this day there were two who knew.

Jean of the LENS was a smallish woman with hawkish features. The years had chiseled the rifts and chasms, the map of time upon her face. Standing only sixty-two inches but more than equal to her sixty-two years, she pulled the taller, younger Julia down to earth.

For a long time neither woman spoke. Then as if to awaken the slumbering dunes, "It's my private Hell," said Jean. Her hair, her blue parka fluttered in the warm, southerly breeze. If a hell it was a beautiful hell that even Jean would not deny.

Julia turned toward her, but could not easily face her. The younger woman stood rigid as if struck suddenly ill and ancient. She lamented, "Even on this beautiful morning it's a withering sight. The crater must affect people differently. For me it's that day ... those awful nights all over again ... the nightmare of Father ... the obscenity of that scaffold."

Her nightmares gathered like thunderheads on the horizon—Fire Stoker and Artful Jack. She could no longer face these things alone. Henry was of little help. Perhaps Jean

having faced and survived her own private horror could provide what the others could not.

At Jean's insistence Julia had pulled strings to gain access to the Trinity site, open to the public just twice a year. Julia said provocatively, "Robert Oppenheimer announced after witnessing the fireball, 'I am become death, the shatterer of worlds.'"

Jean spat, "His highfalutin words from that Hindian poem. Well ... he was no more than a snake in wild fire." The woman's eyes darkened. "Julia, I speak my mind."

At such a watershed of history highfalutin might have been excusable. But Julia could not deny that Jean spoke her mind. Julia acknowledged, "You've read about the bomb ... about the Manhattan Project."

Jean would sooner chew locoweed than appear dumb to a college girl. "I'm not the biggest lunkhead. I can read. And in a day or two I learned all I needed of that confernal gadget. And by the way young woman, your damnable contraption is no better."

Julia admitted, "Yes ... no better ... at the very least ... no better." She could not lie, not here.

Jean added, "To your people I was garbage at the side of the road ... the filthiest trash to toss in the breeze till it's finally out of your sight and smell."

"I should have done something," Julia confessed. I could only wallow in my misery ... could not face you."

"Honey, I wasn't going nowhere ... truly I wasn't. Hadn't too much to say either. For weeks after that nightmare I lay next-to-dead in the county hospital droolin' and conjurin' ghosts ... mostly mine. I was one step from the loony bin when I remembered who I was. But you've read my letter. There's little more I could tell." She added crustily, "Let's walk while we talk."

Jean led, her thumbs thrust inside the pockets of her rope-held jeans. They churned up the white gypsum as they traced precipitously the crater's sloping rim.

Julia volunteered, "It's a miracle you survived."

"I've survived a stable's load of miracles in my time. What's another load? My rambling letter told you of how this load smelled particularly bad. I wanted to see you 'cause I do need you. I'd not bother you 'less I had to."

They gazed with sorrow upon the outraged desert. Though somewhat softened by time and the shadows, the crater was a mortal wound four hundred yards wide and about eight feet deep. The buzzards circled the open grave. Like Trinity, their mouths gaped wide to be fed.

Julia inhaled and uttered tragically, "I loved Dad more than life. That he could—"

“Conspire to murder,” said Jean, finally shedding her parka. The desert had turned its face toward the sun.

“It’s unthinkable. He was a good man ... really. Jean, if only you could know. He was a good man.”

“Never got to know mine. Couldn’t really say if Dad was good or bad. I had only Ma’s remembrances.” Jean forced a smile. “She said he loved a certain story. It was his putz and the potato story. Seemed Dad thought it explained all those mysteries of life. If he was looking fer answers he found a hot one in his skivvies when he realized what was up. Well ... the way I talk. I wonder what you must think. You see ... I have to ... to smart-mouth ... or else this thing would kill me deader than my old man.”

Till now Julia had thought she was tough—tough enough to never feel sorry for herself.

Jean recounted, “Ma recalled the horrible day of July 16th, 1945. It had rained the night before. Dad must have died around 5:30 A.M. He was missin’ fer days. A week or so after the blast the rumors started. Most had him run off with some hot floozy from Angel Fire. Hmm ... guess maybe they was right.

“It all got goin’ in ‘43 when they confiscated his land. To call it land’s a laugh. By noon it’s a roastin’ hell only fit fer snakes ... at the edge of Malpais ... a worthless lava bed that never forgives ner forgets. The Army lied. They festered up a real puss ball. Those cork-sacking bastards produced reams of legal, toilet wipage that claimed his patch of land weren’t rightfully his.” The wind scattered the pleasant scent of gypsum. The sweet breeze had so far belied Jean’s descriptions.

“For twenty years Dad had given himself up to that worthless patch ... fifty acres near Carrizozo. He’d dug a well and raised some stock. And he fixed things ... little things ... just enough to stay a nose hair ahead of the sheriff. Then he lost his brother to the Coral Sea. Ma and I ... his scratch and scrub ... were all he had left.”

“Jean, I ... I understand. He’d not be bullied.”

“Just pig-headed,” she snarled. “All of them ... to let their feelings run so fast and so far. Just plum pig-headed.”

The yellow sun swelled over the desert, bleached its bones, and dried its morning tears. Its pastels were burned away. Only the fervid colors would survive the sun’s blistering torch. The women cowered beneath it. Jean uttered tragically, “At least it was fast.”

Julia tried to imagine what it was like, the many trials, the many tragedies of those times. “They were all caught up in it.” This was all she could think to say even as her own feelings ran well past reach.

“Your people were no better,” accused Jean. “We were only chips. That’s all we’re worth. Ya count up the bodies then ya congratulate yourself. Acceptable losses ... acceptable costs.”

Jean continued her harangue against the winds, though the winds did not care. Words in the winds could only huff and puff. Like Jean, Julia sought help. But Jean's letter had not provided what Julia had needed. How did you find me?" Julia asked.

Jean replied enigmatically, "I still have it."

At this *non sequitur*, Julia lost patience, sent the worst signals. Her attitude was not wasted on Jean who had learned to spot the arrogance so often taught by formal learning. Finally, "What is it you still have?"

"The blasted nightmare!" Jean exclaimed. "What else? You think I'm talkin' about a schoolgirl's crush. Damn it, woman, I'm talkin' about the damned nightmare. Every night they make their trek. The tower smiles before it barbecues them like spring lambs in hellfire."

Julia stiffened as she recalled their faces, the expressions of mortal terror she would never forget, the reflections of death in their eyes, eyes that went instantly pit-black like cinders in fresh snow.

Jean spoke their names: "Pete and Cal. One Pete. One Cal. Who cares?" These words fell like stones upon the water. "Who cares one lick fer two sand rats?"

Julia asked dreamily, "Your father?"

"Peter Mapes Phillips. And according to Ma, his sometimes-friend was Calvin Cyrus O'Byrne. They were nothin' special other than they loved to raise hell ... and of course piss in the Devil's pot."

"No one told me their names." The buzzards that soared dipped lower. As if their thoughts were one, the women turned together, brushed together, as they headed back for Julia's truck. The clinging, white powder, the brilliant Trinitite, had reached the knees of their blue denim jeans.

Jean sighed and said, "No one gives a flying finger for these men. I'd asked about two markers. It was to be very simple with no lofty, bullshit speeches."

Trying to ignore the ugly, circling birds Julia responded, "Jesus ... they must have gone ballistic."

"Honey ... you could say that. This one guy about burst his bowels inside his plush office. Guess his ass must have had itself a hair-trigger." She laughed at her joke. "That's why I advised ya not to give 'em my name."

Julia reminded, "They did let us come here. They didn't have to you know. I've not that much—"

A blast rang in the distance like a muffled rifle shot, followed quickly by several others. The buzzards scattered, disappeared into the blue. Jean reached for Julia. "It's okay girl. Some guys are popping fer pleasure. Further off than ya think. We're alone. But before

we leave I wanna ask ya. I'm told you saw my nightmare through a kind of computer scope."

"Yes ... not a bad way to put it. Nearly wrecked it though. But tell me ... Jean. Is there no treatment that could end your nightmare ... medication or hypnosis to curb your terrible affliction?"

"Naw ... got it figured that I own it fer good."

They stopped, stood as still as cacti. Other than the yucca and cholla, a rat or a reptile, they were probably the only living things for miles. Jean closed her eyes as she recalled the gaunt, bomb tower.

"That night shrinks like time's all scrunched up. Dad and Cal, the tower, the MPs, the metal shack, then finally the flash, all exposed on a picture burned in my brain ... burnt in like this burnt out hole."

This rekindled Julia's memories of that day in the lumitorium. She tried clearing a throat that would not clear of the tacky and insufferable Trinitite. She licked parched lips. Julia felt sick in the heart and sick to the stomach. To steady herself she placed her hands on her hips, tried exhaling from the diaphragm.

Jean railed, "The MPs locked them in that metal hut. It was pretty far from the tower. If they'd just stayed put I'm sure they woulda made it."

The cruelty of it slammed into Julia. And Jean appeared to see it coming. Julia whispered, "No ... I don't think so. Jean, I saw it too. That hut was less than a mile down range. It was much too close. They'd have suffered a slow, agonizing death from burns and radiation. At least the tower was quick. I'm sorry but that hut was worse ... it was ... diabolical."

She asked herself how high up did it go. Perhaps, this was more than just a sorry feud between Pete and the MPs. Did it involve the Army brass and scientists in macabre kill-models for Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Jean gushed, "I knew there was more. There had to be more. They was white rats to be roasted."

The weight on Julia's chest would crush her, for what her father had done, for what she had not. She reached into her khaki jacket and seized the shaman's green quarvine, pulsating and warm. This had happened without her intending it. She realized the mistake, but too late to count for more than a silent curse.

A door opened up into another world. She lay in a dark place with the cold and damp fingers of the dream still upon her. She was painfully stiff, but found strength and lifted herself from the dream couch. She unpeeled the dream cap and mask, then rubbed her scalp bristling like steel wool. Her mouth tasted fishy and gritty—not right. Her dry tongue felt hard against her sharp teeth. She scanned the room for some clue.

A pencil of light probed the darkness. The light beam found her. It expanded, filled the room, revealed Henry armed with a J-Mart flashlight. The light was so bright she saw through him, saw for him, for he had no eyes for the light. She was not frightened. The light revealed his box of dreams—the angel and the serpent, her jack-in-the-box, and the other things that now made sense, something they had never done before. She knew it all and it placed her squarely in the center.

But none of it squared with what she told others or even herself. She regained control, unclenched the shaman's stone. The door closed tight. The light and its truth faded. Old Jack slithered back into his box. As the angel ascended and disappeared, Julia forgot.

All the while Jean ranted and raved, "That fire burns in m' heart! It's as if I was there with them."

Julia, eyes glistening, stooped to embrace her. Jean responded, crushed Julia gently, but utterly.

Jean tragically recounted, "Ma said everyone knew. Every no-count tramp knew the government worked on high explosives. They'd all heard the rumors how one bomb would end the war. It was obviously a test. Why did they go near a tower lit up like some Christmas tree in the middle of godforsaken nowhere? Didn't they know?"

Julia said, "At the end, in their hearts, their eyes proved they knew."

"Yes, that last cruel joke was played on them."

They held tightly to one another. Each accepted the other's pain as a requirement of their own. In time it was over. Tears had been shed and shared.

They separated retrospectively as the night from the day. Jean beseeched, "You must know what I feel ... what I see every night of my life. I need you to bring this conferral madness to an end."

Julia softly asked, "How can I help?"

Jean answered, "I've talked to a reporter named Karrell. He's interested, but mostly he's interested in your Institute. He's heard rumors, but wants to talk to someone inside. Says the dome's a hot item."

Julia was genuinely surprised. "He's talked to some of our dream subjects?" she asked.

"He's not talked to any sleepers other than me ... only to outsiders. He's talked to no one with any real sense of what's going on."

Julia, flushed from either the heat or her emotions unbuttoned her jacket. She found a handkerchief in her other pocket, the safe one, and patted her brow, her lips. "You told him of your father. What did he say?"

"Honey, he feels that's old news. He'll tell my story, but wants to know more about the Institute ... about what kind of fiendish things goes on there. That's where you fits in."

“Jean, believe me. I can’t talk to anyone. The project is classified top secret. By law I can’t say a word.”

“Karrell will print nothing without a reliable source. And he and me think it’s gotta be you.”

Julia looked for support, for something solid to lean on. There was only Jean. Julia exclaimed, “I’ll rot in prison. What good will that do?”

“My story ... and your story must be told. This Institute is bad. I know it. I’m not interested in money, publicity ... even revenge. Too late for that.”

“Jean, we were trying to help. It’s just too much for us now. You can’t guess the magnitude of this.”

“I guess not.” After a second’s pause, she asked, “The others? Where do they stand?”

“I’m trying with one, but he’s both the smartest and dumbest man I’ve ever known.”

Jean said, “Yep ... never known one that was as smart as he thought. But that’s another story ... fer one of them cluckin’ hen parties ... eh.”

“Henry Kincaid’s pretty smart about some things. It’s his opinion that the high-yield nuclear tests have done more than just screw up the weather. He feels they’ve seriously stressed the fabric of space and time. He’s convinced they’ve turned our timeline into a deadly fault line.”

Jean Phillips was unimpressed. “Lordy ... shouldn’t need lots of letters behind your name to know that. Should be obvious to any dumb jackass. But I want to know about the man I described ... the one in my letter ... do ya know him?”

Julia faded as the sun’s fist descended. “The burr hair,” she recalled limply. Her own long locks hung uncomfortably over her shoulders. She dug her heels into the gypsum, inhaled the searing air.

“Tall with short, white hair,” added Jean. The guy’s everywhere followin’ me. He reads my garbage. I think he’s even listenin’ on my phone. There must be others crawlin’ in the sewers. Next thing I’ll see a head gawkin’ up at me from out of my porcelain bowl.”

Julia rallied. The trace of a sly smile found her eyes and mouth. She suggested, “That could explain the repugnant bouquet ... the putridity of thought.”

“Means they’re just shitheads ... the whole bunch of them ... shitheads to their shoes.”

“Well ... that’s what I meant. Jean, I think I’ve seen your burrhead with a guy named Bill Hagerty.”

They continued their slow return along Trinity’s rim. Jean exclaimed, “Hagerty? Who is this guy?”

“Bill Hagerty does odd chores for Lloyd Baumer. This burrhead is probably just a ... you know ... a PI.”

Jean wrinkled her nose. She asked, “PI?”

“Private investigator ... a private dick as they say in those detective novels.”

“What’s so private. This dickhead follows me ... everywhere ... followed me twice to Albuquerque.”

“If he’s Hagerty’s snoop you’re probably okay. Hagerty does not fit my idea of a thug.”

“I don’t like waitin’. And I’m not immune to lead poisonin’. This guy’s lucky I’m nice. Ma woulda led the jerk into an alley and punched his ticket all the way to Abilene.”

“Jean ... you didn’t say. Your mother is—”

“Yeah ... gone. Too bad Honey. Believe me, we could’ve used that lady ... ‘specially in her prime.”

Julia held high her jacket to deflect the torrid sun. The Oscura and San Mateo mountains, the Chupadera mesa had come to life, were magnified by the lens of air that refluxed above the soda and sulfur evaporite.

Jean jumped from the dream chamber to the county hospital, from El Rasigo to Albuquerque, then back full circle. It was a boiling pot mixed up beyond meaning. Julia’s ears began to ring. Jean and her words faded.

Julia had been mesmerized by the desert, by the mountains, and now by the mirage. The steel tower had replaced the dark obelisk, the Trinity monument. It waited as she waited. Finally the knife switch closed the circuit. The tower seemed to smile, to embrace her lovingly. A second sun rose up to vaporize the desert in the heat and shower of fast neutrons and gamma rays.

For who knows how long—a thousand days, a day, a tantosecond, there was nothing but the Grundlespin.

At last her fall ended. Julia landed softly upon opaline powder. The sound in her head was like the roar from a throbbing propeller. Soon the roar was replaced by Jean as she lifted Julia as effortlessly as she would a Tularosa rose.

Julia whimpered gibberish.

“This awful desert is getting to ya. Drink this ‘fore ya wind up worse off than a cur-dog.”

Julia accepted her pocket flask. She took a sip, but even a sip was too much. The sip exploded in her throat, foamed in her nostrils.

“Swigs like gin ... don’t it,” said Jean. “It’s a kind of shock treatment. Can vouch for it.”

Julia tried again with better results. “Thanks. But I think I’m gonna die here.” Jean took back the flask.

“You wouldn’t be the first. But what happened? You had my heart ‘bout stopped when ya flipped in that fit.”

“A kind of hypnosis. Terrible. Let’s go.”

“I agree. I more ’n had enough myself.”

As they walked Julia nearly mashed the two little beetles meandering among the gypsum grains. What these tiny creatures could not tell from their lowly position was that they were subtly persuaded along their course by an almost imperceptible groove. The groove had been cleverly made for the curiosity of little beetles.

They trekked from tiny grain to tiny grain. Finally and inevitably came that zing from the hard-faced one that waited patiently, timelessly, at groove’s end.

The less lowly humans trudged back to Julia’s faded pickup truck. Then like a crop duster they sped north for NM route 380.

In less than an hour they had reached the little burg of Bingham where they stopped briefly for the necessities of both the women and the truck. Julia was uneasy among the customers and so single-mindedly eager to return to the road that she left behind her change and memories of the stop—all but two.

Soon they were chugging across the sweltering Tularosa with Carrizozo, Jean’s home, about thirty minutes away. Jean had rolled down the windows in a vain attempt to avoid roasting inside Julia’s rolling, clanging, metallic monster.

Julia ended the uneasy silence. “Sorry the AC’s busted. No time these days for normal cares.”

Their eyes collided once or twice like stray bullets. Jean said, “Darlin’ ... you stay so glued to that mirror you’d think the Devil his self was after us.”

Julia clenched tight her jaw, but did not reply. The truck rumbled across the shimmering straights—a white, waterless basin like Herbert’s Dune. They felt the jolt of every rut, every break in the pavement.

“You feel like jawin’ some?” Jean finally asked.

Julia shrugged no, but replied, “It’s all right.”

“I’d kinda like to finish the thought we was on. Seemed like a century ago, but I’m kinda interested in that private dick ... the guy you called Burrhead.”

“I don’t really think that guy’s our problem.”

Jean inquired ruefully, “But we have—”

“At least two ... a gaunt one with a long, purple scar reaching nearly to his juggler and a hulk with swastikas burned in his head... a piece of work. It would offend the species to label him a Neanderthal.”

Julia’s anxiety returned—slithering and coiling, forewarning disaster, but never quite unsheathing its deadly fangs. Her anxiety had its venomous effect on every muscle, every nerve. She took the silent measure of all vehicles moving or parked. She knew a sleeping serpent when disturbed could inflict a lethal bite.

Jean probed, “Ya saw ‘em in Bingham?” She held on to the question with her eyes. Julia fiddled, made an exaggerated point of checking the dashboard lights and the gauges, of rechecking her watch and resetting the rear view mirror. She applied more foot to the pedal.

When Jean made as if to repeat the question, Julia inquired offhandedly, “You own ... or have a gun?”

“Naw ... never took much to them noisy things. Rely mostly on my wits and steely boots.”

Julia showed disappointment. “I think it’d be a good idea if we didn’t see too much of one another ... at least for a while ... at least till we’re sure—”

“Till you’re sure about me or for me?”

Neither woman smiled. Both knew that it tempted catastrophe to smile when crossing a Chihuahuan desert, especially when clunking along in an poorly maintained, mechanical contrivance under the blacksmith’s stroke.

“We’ll be okay,” muttered Julia. “This place has its odd ways ... too much space. Crazy, but it causes a kind of reverse claustrophobia. It gets in my lungs and pushes against my heart ... as if to strangle each and every beat.”

“Can’t think of a place that it ain’t,” Jean said. “The monotony gets in you. But tell me something. What really happened that night at the Institute? I’d really like to know the truth ... bad as it might be.”

They shared a semi-warm swig from Julia’s dented, soda can. Jean offered astutely, “I was told they was computers measuring my smarts. I must’ve rung up plum empty.”

There was no reaction. Julia stared straight ahead. “It’s a mind extender, a reality amplifier, using enhanced memory chips and high-speed processors.”

For an uncomfortable minute Jean seemed lost. She finally replied, “Lordy ... that’s the malarkey I got from that ass-wipe, Leonard Moss. Then I got more from some wise guy ... Korani ... I believe. That feller must’ve had a splintery board up his arse. Made my skin crawl like one of ‘em boot worms we have ‘round here.”

Julia corrected, “Ivan Kovrani ... a psychologist.”

“They fed me some crap about it being safe and painless. They snookered me like the gal that just got off the bus from Pissburg.” A pause. “Seemed wherever I wanted to go I just did without any bother. So simple it has me wondering why I can’t do it all the time.”

Julia replied, “You glimpsed reality through the wide-angled LENS. It’s the tilt to our container that reveals its depth.”

Jean was somewhere else. “There was a big screen all round me, but somehow more than just around ... like the screen was an onion skin that could be unpeeled. I saw stuff I knew plus a lot more stuff I didn’t.”

“It’s possible to move your eyepiece to obtain a certain view, though it takes practice and just plain luck. But this is something you’d know better than I.”

“Honey, never tried cruising any of your own nightmares?”

Julia rechecked the rear mirror, the idiot lights and gauges. She mumbled that the engine was suddenly shakier, noisier. She avoided Jean’s question.

Jean answered for her. “Uh ... too smart to, I guess. Not surprised. You’re a smart gal. You know it’s a fatal pill. You’ve made yourselves the contraption from Hell and ya all knows it.” Jean fanned her flushed face as she asked, “But gazing at the past through one’s dreams ... it don’t make no sense to me. The past is gone ... plum gone fer good.” She regarded Julia and her answer carefully as they squeaked and bounced heading east.

“The vibrations of the past and past-possible are always with us ... like radio waves,” explained Julia, “but they’re jammed by the power of the present ... the practical, survival-type needs, I guess.”

Jean noted, “Too much guessin’s been done.”

“I’m not disagreeing with that. But we’re not guessing about the permanence of the past. Though in our dreams we receive only snippets.”

“Christ ... my snippet’s a sledgehammer a hammerin’.”

“You’re filling in the missing pieces. These pieces wouldn’t add up to much, so the mind fills in the blanks with what it feels or knows ... using a kind of mental cement. In your specific case you know and feel too much.” Julia stole a glance at her passenger. No longer laid back, Jean had leaned awkwardly forward with both hands spread over the dash as if examining it for bumps or breaks. Julia veered across the center, but quickly returned with an embarrassed “oops.”

Temperatures and tempers crept relentlessly toward the red. The women bumped along the broken pavement, feeling the heat with neither one precisely sure where they were going or why they were going there.

“One of the dangers,” warned Julia, “is a brain syndrome ... amnesia, coma ... or worse.”

“Korani did admit to some mild tribulations like in surgery when you’re knocked out cold, but he told me it was less than one happenin’ in thousands.”

“That’s nuts. We’ve used the LENS for only a few months. What could he possibly know about the risk?”

“Do you use people’s heads to peep?”

“It started as a way to help. Nothing could be hidden from the LENS. Real history would be our teacher ... our judge and juries all rolled into one. There was a flood of fantastic ideas. The LENS was supposed to help us understand. And we were desperate for justice. But you can see it’s too easily abused for profit or power.”

Jean loaded then fired an angry, unexpected shot. “Who said you could take this on?” Ever so gradually her manner had changed, her eyes and mouth had hardened.

“It was Senator Tom Emsley’s utopian dream,” said Julia. “We could no longer escape our actions. It was to be the God Machine ... the all-seeing, gifted eyes of God himself.”

“Hmm ... that so?” A pause. “So ... it was it this Emsley that said you could?”

“Yes ... and others.” With alarm, “You know about him?”

“I even met the bloke. It was last year. He was the only muck-a-muck that listened. It was Emsley that sent me to you people.”

“The Senator died about four months ago ... said to be natural causes. His heart. I don’t know ...”

“From all the lies in it.” Then Jean insisted, “You must tell the story to Karrell ... the whole, confounded business?”

“First ... you better hear the rest.”

Jean found the gin flask under the seat and took a long gulp. “Rather have a crotch exam from old Doc Hangnails his self. Christ on his splintered cross ... let’s have the rest of it.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

Jean consumed and savored her last dribble of gin. “Try.”

“Our computer LENS not only tilts our view it can enlarge it ... I mean magnify it.”

Jean sorrowfully exhaled her frustration. “I don’t—”

“The simplest way to put it is that we’re not so simple. We exist on many planes. Our time, space and possibilities can be made thinner or thicker. We’re like the electron ... like a wave. We are complex.”

Julia realized too late her ostentations. “Jean ... I’m sorry. I depend too much on jargon.”

“I’m beginning to see. But if you could see it as well as you think, you could explain it to an ignoramus like myself.”

Julia squinted. “You’re right about me. I’m just spouting words. It’s too easy. But you’re quite wrong about yourself. The fact is that it all comes down to the source of all power ... the elemental power of an idea. Our computer has the power ... and can almost touch infinity ... the totality of the universe itself.”

A pause. “How could we survive a hug like that?”

“The problem is not the fact of infinity. Thinspace and thintime are always with us. It amounts to a huge, round peg in a small, square hole. To receive the peg our computer must expand and reshape the mind to proportions beyond its physical capacity. There are extraordinary possibilities ... to literally live forever ... your mind and personality copied into a computer to be played back ... to bring you back ... anytime it’s wanted. But it’s even more ... literally to be one with all ... in a state of infinite being ... God ... or Satan in a bottle. Mankind is not ready for either. We are not God ... or Satan ... not yet.”

Miles and minutes came and went, though in their passing, tempers improved not one notch. Jean sighed dejectedly. “You can explain it to my father and hope he understands.”

“Jean, it would be possible for you to see your father again.”

“Yes ... through your wide-angled LENS?”

“More than that. Seen in the flesh ... next to you, talking like the two of us. We could whisk him away from the bomb tower just before detonation.”

“Julia, you are playing God. Where will it end?”

“I hope with the two of us.”

Jean gushed, “But my father back with me ...”

Reading her thoughts, Julia answered, “Bittersweet. That’s the problem ... the possibilities are so sweet, but the consequences so bitter ... these folds in space ... these rifts in time. With meticulous care some think the paradox can be avoided while some don’t think at all.”

Jean looked around the cab, but there were no more mind-numbing swigs, nothing left to flush the ugly clot of contempt growing like a cancer from her convictions.

“There’s more,” exclaimed Julia.

Jean frowned. “Naw ... I don’t think so.”

“Jean, I don’t mean the—”

Bitterly, “I know what you mean.”

“I’ve not spoken of it with anyone,” said Julia, “so they believe I don’t know. To most of them I’m just a programmer. What could I possibly know of high-physics?”

“Young woman, you give yourself too little credit.”

“It’s ingenious. And it’s the real sledgehammer, though one could fall in love with it ... with the awesome power of the momentum brake ... with our planet possibly blown to smithereens with only the slightest of miscalculations.”

“Perhaps you already have,” Jean suggested in a tone razor sharp. “Fallen in love ... I mean.”

Julia recoiled, looked as if she had been punched in the throat. “In love ... with ...”

“I may not be a refined and educated person like yourself that’s seen rifts and paradoxes or the whole world blown to smithereens, but I have a sense for what holds things together. It might surprise you.”

Julia mumbled as she shook her head, “In love with it ... but that is crazy. I’ve done all I could.”

“Well ... what do I know? I do know that Karrell needs to know. I gotta give him and me an answer.”

“But please ... be careful.”

“May I meet with you again?”

“Never near the Institute or my home. I need time to think ... to work out a plan.”

“Ya dun’t have ta worry about me going anywhere near your Institute young woman.”

“I still don’t understand one thing. How on earth did you find me?”

“Well ... it was a man that called.”

“Jesus ... who? Who called?”

“He said you could ... you would help me.”

“But did he identify himself? Was it Kincaid ... or Larry Kato ... or Allen Polk? Do you remember him from that night?”

“No, ‘fraid not. Will you track him down?”

Julia answered, “We must know who we’re dealing with.”

They approached that blackened swath known as the Valley of the Fires. Jean agreed dourly, “Yes ... yes ... we must know.”

“Jean ... we must be close,” muttered Julia as she scanned the highway for their turnoff tucked tightly away in the desert’s monochrome.

“Honey, you are close. You’re about to arrive. And you’ve driven so skillfully. I think you’re an amazin’ woman. So much high-trust is placed in you by those high-minded men of such sincere conviction.”

“Jean ... Please, cut the crap. I’m an accessory ... a computer programmer and nothing more.”

“That’s not what you said. But this computer programmer ... I’m not exactly sure what that is.”

“I only write the Machine’s instructions.”

“This seems to put you in the catbird seat. Tell me something, Julia. If you wrote these instructions why can’t you just unwrite them ... make ‘em go away?”

Julia protested, “It doesn’t work that way. It’s not my responsibility to remove them ... or to alter them. I can only warn others of the terrible risk.”

Jean persisted. “Which you’ve done?”

“Definitely ... yes ... like an old, barn nag.”

“I wonder. You might spur a stubborn animal to the right when ya really means fer it to go to the left.”

“Jean, you don’t seem to understand my problem.”

“I hear ya. You use words real good. But I see what’s in your heart. I told ya I see things others overlook. You love this computer and what it can do.”

“Damn ... I loathe it! From the start, I—”

“Oh, you may believe you stand against this horrible crime. I accept this notion. But deep in your heart you know exactly what you want, and you want the very devil. Julia ... darlin’ ... you must give it up. In the end it will destroy you. It matters not to me. I’m destroyed already. I only wait fer the worms.”

For the first time in Julia’s memory someone other than herself had managed the final word. It felt as if the Enola Gay had just soared high over her head.

Chapter Eighteen: Jack be Nimble, Jack be Quick

The Institute

Friday Afternoon, March 10th

Wilbur Conovar had never heard of the LENS or a thing of its panigmas. It would not have mattered much if he had, for Wilbur only worried about the here and now, the things he could see, hear, taste, smell and feel. For now, he followed the basement corridor mumbling as he popped his antacid chewables. The security guard escorted the experts to quarantined chamber one, their rubber-soled shoes squawking like performing seals. Trailing silently behind the men was their metal, suitcase-sized contraption on wheels.

Wilbur knew that CFID men had something to do with bugs or germs. They had been involved in that outbreak of plague sometime back, in some other state he could not remember. That's all he really knew. Chief Hagerty had claimed their inspection was routine, but the sour burn in Wilbur's belly seldom lied. Hagerty's lies and the effect they were having on his belly were not the only things upsetting to his sensibilities.

There was one more development troubling to Wilbur's sense of order. There were two men, not three. What had happened to the third agent, the cipher with that hollowed out look? It had been the man's skin and eyes. They were chillingly familiar as if he had seen them somewhere before. But he could not remember where or when. He could not be certain that his memory did not play tricks. This man had not spoken with the others, had not even looked at them. This odd business troubled Wilbur, this along with the fact that the fellow carried no gear. The other two carried notebook computers and bio-laser sensor guns, the kind of stuff Wilbur would have expected from CFID men.

The cipher could be their boss. Experience taught him that bosses needed little. On further pondering, Wilbur concluded there could be no serious harm. All the sensitive areas were monitored and locked. Cipher probably used the head. The man would turn up sooner or later. He would receive a sound dressing down for his breach of the primary rule.

Convinced of his sound logic, Wilbur unlocked the door to chamber one including Doc Klein's ridiculous addition—the cheap, supermarket clasp. He waited patiently for the government men to catch up. Like all these types that he had ever encountered, they took their time and some trouble with officious nosiness. After the predictable, pointless pretense of knowledgeable scrutiny, the two CFID agents gathered around him in front of the gray, cell door boldly numbered with red enamel.

The men said nothing as they stood and stared at the numeral twelve inches tall, seemingly throbbing in the light.

“You going in?” asked Wilbur as politely as he could.

“Not on your life,” said tall and thin agent number one, his face masked like a surgeon. “They don’t pay us enough for that. Just open her up and we’ll take our look from out here.”

The two experts unscrewed the nose cones from their bio-sensor guns and released several stops and locks on the menacing metal box. Taking this as his cue, Wilbur used his small transmitter to activate the heavy outer door and slide it out of their way.

“The anteroom,” Wilbur acknowledged coyly with his head angled over his shoulder.

“So?” snapped squat agent number two. The man resembled an ugly gorilla.

Wilbur guessed his meaning and used the remote control device to unlatch the isocon and isocell doors almost simultaneously. The doors retracted as they were supposed to. He then used his remote controller to illuminate both rooms as he stepped back.

“Hmm,” said number one as if it conveyed some valuable bit of technical acumen. “It’s exactly what I thought.”

Agent number two fired a few sensor bursts into both rooms, noting sagely with nods the illuminated readings from his UltraNet gun. “Active as ‘ell in there,” offered the agent.

“We’ll let Robby take a look,” stated number one.

“Robby?” responded Wilbur, hoping Robby was the missing cipher.

“Robby does all our dirty work,” answered the thin man smugly.

Agent two deployed the metal box at the entrance to the anteroom. Within seconds it opened itself up, rolled its sides conveniently out-of-the-way, transformed them magically into new and useful parts. Robby wheeled himself adroitly into the isochamber, beeping as robots were supposed to do. The men quickly traded their laser sensors for their notebook computers.

Robby, a kind of roving biovore, bristled with telescoping tubes and appendages, with every sort of mechanical gewgaw and gadget. He began launching other smaller, special-purpose robots for incomprehensible, multifarious tasks. Agent one directed the robotic sampling, testing and analysis as the other man monitored the surge of data telemetry.

Wilbur was forgotten. This was fine with him.

Much Later that Same Night

Once ushered in, he was left utterly alone. He had risked not so much as a note, I.D. or key. There would be nothing to connect him with the deed. The man sat poised behind

the expansive walnut desk. He opened the concealed drawer and activated controls that operated doors, lights and lociputer. He could finally relax. Well, not exactly relax. He had been assured that there would be adequate time, that there would be no security cameras or sensors. But he never believed anything assured by men, and only rarely by his machines. This is why he was who he was. This was his technical edge, his difference. He took nothing whatever for granted, least of all, himself.

He entered with precision Ivan Kovrani's I.D. and password. He waited. The operating system soon acknowledged a successful logon, displayed Ivan's personal greeting and a brief list of activities, his calendar for the week. He paused briefly to absorb the minutia of this man as he asked himself the same tough questions he had asked himself for many weeks.

In the face of no new answers, he proceeded with a task not displayed on Kovrani's list, a task as difficult as any he had ever undertaken. The man drew in a deep breath and from the array of clickable icons he selected "Light-Shell Drivers." The deception was begun.

Guard Conovar would never know. He would also never know or comprehend that Jack Karpinski's new and nimble LENS algorithm was conceived not for its efficacy, but for its lethargy.

Though time as always, and in its own way, would have the final say.

El Rasigo

Late Friday Night, March 10th

It was nearly midnight when Julia returned from *El Rancho Rojo*, Jean's sobriquet for her humble abode in Carrizozo. The roar in Julia's head was now blinding and unbearable. The unseasonable heat and surprising humidity had compounded her discomfort. She could barely remember where she had been, what she had done. Mostly, she did not want to remember. Memories invariably led to dreams best forgotten.

She parked on the street of cottonwoods in front of her Spanish bungalow. Inexplicably the timer that should have turned on the house lights had not completed the circuit. The street was dark and foreboding. Two colorless dogs yelped mindlessly at the colorless moon. There were few cars on the street, which was unusual. Those she saw, she did not recognize. There was no breeze, only the most oppressive heat.

She killed the wheezing engine, but decided not to leave the truck. One yelp and the dogs stopped barking, seemingly swallowed by the night. She held her breath for as long as she could, listening for who knows how long. Nothing. There was not one sound. The street had never been this quiet, this dark, and this empty. Even at this time of night, house lights were nearly always on. TVs, radios or stereos should have been cranked up somewhere in one or two of the little houses on the lane. On this street someone was always coming or going. The young couples were always mixing, playing their rock or country music too loud, teenagers with everything to do, or with nothing to do, spilling into the street in the exuberance of date night.

The neighborhood had always been so alive. Why not now on this night of all nights?

From the glove box she retrieved a trinket box of orange, padauk wood that had once belonged to her dear father. It was one of those little puzzle boxes that she quickly opened to expose an empty chamber of just the proper size. She placed the box inside the pocket of her khaki jacket in such a way to capture the green, shaman's stone without touching it.

No more touching. No more apocalyptic visions.

The box was closed, withdrawn and stuffed into a cramped place beneath the passenger seat. In all likelihood she would never see the stone again. On this one point of all points she would have no regrets.

Her heart pounding, she leaned back against the seat. She tried to massage away the agony that had possessed her throbbing temple. She took several deep breaths, but to no avail. She closed her eyes and waited. This was as good a place as any. The pain ebbed and in time a calm of clarity, of peaceful resolve replaced it.

All was quiet, dark, empty.

Julia woke screaming, gasping for air, the light of the pale moon pouring into the truck's sultry cab. In some nameless, fatherless panic she thrashed forward as if bludgeoned. She slammed her hand against the dash, her head hard against windshield, taking out the rear view mirror and its incumbent moon, both shattered into a million shards. Julia saw them all at once, saw the pilgrimage to Carrizozo, her return, the throbbing stone in its padauk box. In spite of her terrible pain, she had dozed and dreamed.

It was the same horror each and every night. The vision had been savagely burned into her brain. She saw herself twisted—a helpless heap in a gutter pool of cold rainwater. An old-fashioned gas lamp reflected upon the black water, but tragically it was not plain water, for commingling with the cold rain was her own warm blood.

She recalled a quaint, old nursery rhyme. He was her man on this and every other night, in her every nook and niche, nimble in her past and nimble in her future. History must repeat. He would pursue her always and forever.

Chapter Nineteen: The Macula

“Why must the fabric of space and time confine inexorably the fortunes of man? If you can imagine an advanced race of time menders, of space benders, you might also imagine their awesome power over the spatio-temporally disadvantaged.”

- Lloyd Manley Baumer
London, 2003 A.D.

“What evil hatcheth from the cold backwaters of our imagination?”

- Eliso Kartofan (Cartovanius)
Lauriacum on the Danube, 390 A.D.

The Emsley Meeting Room

Early Sunday Morning, March 12th

It was one tick past midnight, the pivotal moment for Lloyd and his three confederates. They had arrived in their masks and white smocks, with their perfidy and temerity to the Emsley room, their hatching place. They gathered around the heavy, oak table curved like a kidney to appease the slight curvature of the Panopticon.

Each arranged his notes, each organized his thoughts with an unassuaged anxiety. The last minute fencing with Leonard Moss had not instilled confidence in their plan. Moss had untracked them, pleading that they stay clear of the dome, rambling not of the reported danger, not of flea infestations and bubonic plagues, but of a druid’s curse, of deadfalls in space and time. Three of the four conspirators agreed that Leonard Moss had argued for common sense—that Leonard Moss was dead right. Of course, as always, all warnings were weak, would have had little effect had they been otherwise. The old man would never relent and they knew it, would never give up on the dream, no matter the cost. And though “never” was too strong a word given there was always that chance—somehow, their slim chance was now thinner than the algorithmic Faust.

It had nothing to do with heroics, for Lloyd suspected he would be reviled as this millennium’s antihero. These things made little difference to him now. Knowing was his curse. He knew that all possibilities could happen and did, somewhere and “some when” in the vast continuum. Lloyd knew that people could be many things—heroes, antiheroes and anything in-between. If he could have picked, he would have picked the latter and anonymity. But probability suggested the two extremes. Humanity suggested the two extremes. In-betweens would be very hard to find, even if the paracube made them so.

Whether villain or hero, Lloyd was soon to defile the edifice of history wearing but a robe, pajamas and slippers. But veneer never made or unmade anyone that mattered. For better or for worse he would be made or unmade by his hopes and by his fears—by gold rings and green stones, by lost letters and sacred manuscripts, by attic birds and gutter

serpents, by blue witches and black mountains. The man was his dreams—and his nightmares too.

He circumnavigated the table erratically with his head down, with his arms pinned against his chest. He was too nervous to sit, too nervous to stand—a frail man wrought with pain. So far, the elixir mercolidine had not reined the herd that thundered in his mind and in his breast. He touched the green stone bound by the gold band to his little finger. For weeks he had dared not wear the ring. That is till now.

He had dared not risk its loss, its dislocation. In the approaching days, as if it knew, as if it had warmed to the task ahead, the stone had surged, had collected within its convolutions a dark but ubiquitous light. That is till now.

Only now, the green quarvine twinkled feebly, its vibrations all but imperceptible. Lloyd's bleary eyes testified to his concern, as if something had broken loose, as if he had failed to grasp the quar at a juncture when Jove needed his strength the most.

Hope was now transferred to his beloved shamrock, to his timeless jade, his remembrance of Joy Marie. Affixed to this keepsake was a brass ring. Something small, but dark had been added. It was the master device—a single, ovoid transmitter that operated the many isochamber doors, symbolical of other keys, the ring and quar of Lloyd's Gate. He reached into his pocket for the device. Avoiding the transmitter he located the jade, found the stone as firm as ever. Reassured, he could focus time and attention to his historic quest.

He began, "I'm not one for locker-room rhetoric. Besides, you're well aware of what we're about to do. What's left to say? It's clear the next few hours will be the climax of years of hard and mostly frustrating work. It will also be the fulfillment of a dream."

Bill Hagerty whispered, "Ah ... here it comes."

Lloyd hoped to rally them from their foggy depths. "Travelers are we ready to scale those impossible heights?"

"Afraid my nerves are shot," said Max as he paced in front of the dark window, his thoughts darker than his squat and wavy reflection in the warped pane of glass.

"I expected more of the Gipper," said Owen, "but I suppose that's your best ... *your nunc aut nunquam*." A pause. He smiled. "You can tell I've been studying."

Lloyd ran thin fingers through silver hair—a tousled and electrified rage that cast him as the mad professor. Max passed their modern Frankenstein without a word as he pondered the monster this fragile wizard had created.

Max, his convictions ripped asunder, collapsed into the first available chair. He looked up at the portraits on the wall—the President and those honored scientists—several men, one woman. What would they think of this? And there was the statement of mission bound to the wall. But were they bound to it. He whispered its noble phrase: "... for the general welfare and prosperity of mankind."

Max sighed and suggested, “Lloyd, try to relax even if we cannot. Let us handle things from here. You’ve done all you can. The rest rests upon us.”

“He’s right. We’re ready. The compound’s ready too. Nothing can go wrong,” blathered Bill. “Every contingency has been considered down to the most insignificant detail ... even to his favorite color.”

Lloyd wondered grimly, “Every contingency?”

The four were wired. Their nerves flashed like neon signs. Tension filled the room as the inevitability of their descent reached the windows of their eyes. The anxiety gauge in their attic lofts now registered several atmospheres of overpressure.

Lloyd said to Owen: “When he comes to us you must be ready. I’m not talking about mechanics. I know you’re prepared for that. But you must talk to him. You must reassure him that he is safe ... that he is alive and well, for he will have heard the angels sing.”

“And what of you?” reminded the doctor. “Your tank’s practically empty. And there’s the merc itself. I know you took too much. You forget that I am responsible for your health. You do not give a butterfly’s shit for either one of us.”

Pacing anxiously, Lloyd averted eyes already stressed to bloody blobs by his many sleepless nights. He stopped suddenly and said, “It’s time. I think the drug’s finally kicking in. Is camera four ready?”

“Yes,” answered Max. “We’ve started the Light Shell. The LENS and panoptoscope are ready too.”

“And the Gateword ... our safe password?”

“Lloyd, trust us ... trust me ... please. It was entered correctly ... the trig’ sine of today’s date to four decimal places ... the four, innocent digits ... 2079.”

“Good. Then no Fauth?” lisped the physicist.

“We hope, just you,” said the friar. “My friend, there is still time to postpone. We all think that you should delay this rash business ... or better yet ... leave it for a younger ... stronger man. Your mind knows this is right.”

For a time it seemed that Lloyd might consider Max’s advice, but his heart would not listen. Reason found few watchposts. Lloyd signaled with his thumb aimed for the door that Owen should accompany him. The doctor removed the IM from his pocket and with a few keystrokes read Lloyd’s vital signs. He nodded okay and led his old friend for that dome wedge they knew as isochamber four. It’s three three-sided combs—the anteroom, the isocon and the camera waited silently in the dark.

Max and Bill left for the lumitorium one flight up. They slowed as they entered the laserium theater to allow sufficient time for four old eyes to adjust. They avoided a direct look at the panoptoscope and took their seats on the minitrain of twenty-five cars. Max selected the locum car, its master stick and throttle.

As they had ascended, Owen and Lloyd had descended for the isolation chamber. Owen was Lloyd's selection as navigator for this intricate translocation. For all but Lloyd the process was too slow to get on track. There was insufficient work to fill their time—the interval Lloyd required to reach the critical juncture, for him exhausting, for the others merely excruciating.

Beads of perspiration clung to Max's forehead as he sat waiting in the blue light of their huge fish bowl. The man did not stir, only stared at the panel on his lap, at some imaginary point between the backs of his hands. In contrast, Bill fidgeted like a kid full of root beers. "What on earth can they be doing? It's been an hour."

Max consulted his Lumex watch. It had been exactly fifty-one minutes since Lloyd had left for the isocell. "The boss is slow even with the merc ... unpredictable stuff ... this drug," he said, his hands measuring the paracontrols tentatively as if for the first time.

It had surprised Bill that the theater could be so dark with the panoptoscope so bright. Its dark light conjured dark thoughts. He squirmed and blurted out, "Something's wrong. We should call Owen ... or see for ourselves."

Max rechecked the locum, traced his finger over its raised, blue monitor. "He'd have called. Lloyd's concentration is less than keen. Of course ... mine's no better. I don't have to ask you how you feel."

"Damn!" Bill cursed. "This wait sucks a trailer hitch. At least you've something useful to do."

Max grunted, "Useful?" He locked the steering console into its position about an inch above his lap. He activated its three, wafer-thin navitors with three, toggle clicks.

The blue Pandora scope grew inevitably larger, inevitably brighter. The minitrain lurched forward at Max's command, crept forward a few parameter-seconds along its paracircular track. Max stopped the machine, reversed it, stopped it again, and then coaxed it forward another paramsec. This parangle barely registered on the scale of his microparad indicator. He frowned with a technical concern.

Bill ignored it and interrupted Max's concentration with the question: "Have we taken every precaution?"

Max squinted, pinched his nose. He professorially removed and cleaned his smeared bifocals. "In your own words, Bill, 'nothing can go wrong.'" A pause. "Actually, I'm not too thrilled about confronting Lloyd's worst nightmare."

Bill's large hands had gouged deep impressions in the vinyl armrests. "Why won't he talk about it? Must be hard on the eyes if he won't even talk."

"Don't think that he can. You heard him. I think we've heard all the facts that he can tell. But I'm not as much concerned about its effect upon the eyes as on other more vulnerable parts." Max restarted the tedious locibration of the train.

Bill asked, "Is it some kind of cosmic entelechy?"

Bill could feel Max's retreat from the question, though he had stirred from his work just slightly.

Max looked up and repeated, "Entelechy? What do you mean?"

"Actually ... this ... this cosmic attractor."

The giant scope staged through a swath of fathomless blues. Max answered, "Of matters cosmic I'm hardly qualified."

"Jesus ... Max ... quit stalling. What do you know?"

Max chose his words carefully. "We have quite a lot of data on parangles and input power ... all that."

Equally blue of face and disposition, Bill stated bluntly, "The man talks to you ... at least more than the rest of us. What about these dreams? How do they all connect? Larry Kato said they did."

The little train lurched forward. "We've analyzed them to pieces, particularly the Holman scan on the theory that the druid was the source of our LENS attractor."

"But Max that druid's deader 'n shit."

"Well ... the point I should make is that our analyses have only muddled things. The druid seems more a false echo ... one of perhaps many meant to confuse ... meant to misdirect."

"But why? With all the expensive scientists and computers we still don't know a gosh-darned thing."

"That's right," said Max, "not without more work and a lot more data."

"What could Lloyd tell ... but won't? What might shed some light ... however feeble?"

"Bill, it's one helluva time for this. We're just two jerks sitting in front of the 'scope from Hell."

Bill responded bitterly, "Can't think of a better time. We're about to throw the goddamned switch. What do you geniuses know? I've got a notion to quit."

"Quit? How? Can't see that it'll help you ... or me. Not now, not with Pandora's box ready to give birth."

Bill glared sullenly and askance. In the resplendent, blue background of Pandora, his mottled and textured face mimicked a continent, the Earth from space, his profile a dark coast, his eye a glimmering, inland sea. He muttered, "What would shed some light?" Turning toward Max, his own blue light went out, disappeared inside dark shadows.

Max tapped the steering console. He blinked when it would not. He spoke, his voice resonating a basso profundo, his eyes downcast and filled with doubt: “Bill ... I rarely discuss it with him. I keep it tightly corked. Words have ways ... unsettling ways. That’s why Lloyd never speaks his name.”

Bill held tightly to his question, focused his eyes accusingly.

Max removed his pipe, but remembered the rules and returned it quickly to his pocket, annoyed he could not smoke when he needed it most.

The lumitorium was submerged in blacks and blues like the depths of the sea. Max would not look Bill in the eye. The eyes said too much at times like these.

Max began, “It’s reputedly divination and magic. It’s the Devil’s own cook book ... the black apocryphy. We’ve come to know it as Kartofan’s *Oneiros*. Only fragments of these troubling revelations have survived the ravages of time and man. Good thing too I think.”

“I’ve heard you speak of him. Who was this man? Never had heard of Kartofan before. If he’s so im—”

“There’s a lot you would never have heard about. Eliso Kartofan was an alchemist and seer from the Roman outpost of Lauriacum ... a province of Noricum around 400 A.D. It’s said he was really a Goth or a Vandal. Kartofan died in Pollentia during one of his infamous misadventures. His book and others of the ilk have been suppressed wherever and whenever they turn up.”

“Damn it Max!” Bill exclaimed as he nodded toward the deep Pandora. “We’re about to be swallowed up by that blue bitch and you’re spouting about ancient history.”

This observation had its effect. Friar Max looked as if he would shed an inch or more of precious hide.

Bill implored, “Don’t I have a right to know?”

Max rubbed his moist forehead before he spoke. “It’s called the *Macula Obscura* ... a convergence. We each have them ... supposedly buried in our subconscious.”

Bill seemed to shrink in the almost palpable light. “I have such an inscrutable thing?”

Max removed his pipe, set it on the console. “You and me ... everyone. But you’ve never actually seen yours.”

“How can you know?” he asked apprehensively.

“Because you can ask,” Max snapped back.

“I see. I mean ... thankfully I don’t see. But what is this mac ... this convergence?”

“A macula is a dream ... a very obscure one. The *Macula Obscura* means literally hidden spot or blemish. According to Kartofan, a macula would usher and mark our passing into

the netherworld. It's a wakeup call. Well ... it's a call ... perhaps awakening for some ... more an unawakening for the likes of men like us."

Bill twisted. "Jeez ... Max! I don't understand any of this. It is gibberish ... a call from the underworld? A dream ... or something worse ... an obscure thing ... a macula?"

"There are maculas and there are ... black labyrinths ... well, I think given what I know of Lloyd's night prophecy I would place his among the latter."

Bill asked gloomily, "Max ... then why in the name of common sense do we tempt catastrophe?"

"Clearly we're all as mad as Kartofan."

"What can we do? Lloyd won't stop."

"That's right." Max smiled grotesquely. He smiled not for Bill, not for himself, not for even half a chance. There were none. He added, "So we must forget the *Haruspinales* of *Pollentia* ... forget that every chamber of our demise is primed and loaded." Max concluded, "Kartofan would warn us that a Grundlespin is waiting. Our clocks are ticking ... tick-tock ... tick-tock."

"I can't accept that." Bill collected his courage and boomed in his baritone voice: "Max, don't get me wrong. I've been around. You know that. And I've seen more than my fair share of some real badass shit. I've seen what men can do ... can do to each other."

"I know. I know about Zaire ... and Chad ... your work before this ... the things that you have done."

"Well then ... please ... Max ... tell me the truth. What will we see in Lloyd's dreamscape ... not a macula I hope? But what will it be? Will it be fact or fantasy?"

"That's a damned-good question. I wish—"

Bill beseeched, "Good enough to be answered?"

"So .. you really want an answer?"

"Max ... how will we know dream from reality?"

"What makes you think there is a difference?"

Bill remembered that native village along the upper Ubangi River—that thatch hut fired by rebel incendiary rockets. He remembered the sickening smell of his own burning flesh. He also remembered asking himself that same question as he battled the inferno of napalm—the torrent of fire consuming his legs.

He repeated the question: "Is this shit real ... or my worst fucking nightmare?"

It took Lloyd nearly ninety minutes to reach the critical juncture. The isocon's data loggers recorded the event. Their long-awaited journey had begun.

In the lumitorium Max looked up from the locum, nudged his companion as the panoptoscope surged to life. "This is it Bill. Both feet on the floor!"

Bill reflected on other times and other places. He counted and recounted fingers held tightly in two, white knots. A breath from the tight knot in his chest was held and savored as though it was the final blip on life's recorder. He dared not look up at the 'scope, though from the pit of his being he knew he must.

The roller coaster gathered momentum, began its climb toward a soundless crescendo. Finally, Bill succumbed, stared into the panoptoscope unfolding like a paper lantern, turning him inside out and outside in, sucking him in, then spitting him out.

There was a flash and a concussion to wake the town, exploding like a grenade against their skulls, though no one would hear the thunder in their heads.

Panigma LENS (their time and space) had converged.

It took each man many minutes to recover. Max was the first to emerge, the first to notice the panoscene, the first to recognize the time and the place. "Not this," he declared dismally, "this father of dreams ... his own father ... the whole thing begun again."

With Lloyd as their guide, Bill and Max experienced an idyllic slice of proverbial American pie. Max nudged the locum lever a bit more toward 2 o'clock. The train moved a few microparads toward the past. The panoscene gradually came into sharp focus.

A lean, leathery man and a skinny boy enjoyed the rustic serenity of an autumn evening. The boy lounged on an old-fashioned porch swing. His father relaxed in an oversized rocker, smoked a pipe skillfully hewn from black briarroot.

Bill had the revolting thought: "It feels as if everything I own ... my bowels ... my brains are crammed inside my mouth all at once. I can't (gagging) ignore the nausea away."

"That's right ... your first panigo. I forgot. They don't get any better. Try not to swallow. You've bitten off too much of the blue bitch."

Bill swallowed. He commented, "This is ... is the one?"

"Fraid so. That is young Lloyd with his father over fifty years ago."

"Telling tales they shouldn't," Bill blubbered.

"Yes. I'd hoped Lloyd would steer clear of this. Foolish of me. Well ... Bill you can do me a favor."

"Me?" chortled Bill. "Maybe ... so long as it's nothing to do with the Machine."

“Well, I can’t promise that, but when this thing’s over, if you’re fit and able, and if I’m as lucky, tell me whether it was real or only a real badass dream.”

In the ways of dreams Lloyd was thrust into inner space with scant time for reason or recall. His mind raced to mend the discontinuity. Though mend it he did, for this was a time in his life that he could never forget.

He had been returned in mind and in spirit to his boyhood Indiana home, to his glowing, wide-eyed youth. Shoeless, soiled feet dangled casually over a squeaking swing. The boy listened intently, for on this night young Lloyd’s thoughts had been turned from girls and baseball to his father’s tall tales of ghosts and vampires. The boy’s favorite stories were hatched from haunting enclaves like Carpathia and Transylvania.

The father relit his pipe as he finished one tale and prepared for the next. “Would you like to hear about the **Timeshaper of Carinthia**?” he asked somberly.

Lloyd loved this one the most, though it scared his youthful confidence into smithereens.

“Son, this one is true,” Dad said convincingly. And although Lloyd’s father started all his stories with such provocative claims, Lloyd could see that on this occasion his old man had really meant what he had said.

The storyteller explained that he had purchased a special talisman at great expense and risk to life and limb. The charm had come from the old country, a place known as Carinthia—a mountain fastness of the Alps. The father removed the ring from his little finger and handed it ceremoniously to the enraptured young man.

“Son, it’s now yours. Yours to do with as you must. But a word or two of caution is in order—”

Young Lloyd interrupted, “But Dad, what is this beautiful green stone? Is it an emerald?”

“No, son. It’s not a common bauble. And the band is gold so please be careful.”

The crystal was a perfect sphere one half-inch in diameter. The setting was ornate and delicate with odd symbols engraved in the band. The band’s theme was knots, loops and polygons that made no earthly sense. Young Lloyd discovered that when the band was removed it twisted to a Mobius band of one side. He treasured mysterious, dimensional teasers like Mobius bands and Klein bottles.

His father redirected the boy’s attention to the green stone and told him it could focus light in ways that made the invisible—visible, and the uncommon—common. “After all,” the man said, “the universe has no bounds ... no shackles. Only man has these. Time and space are merely functional illusions.”

Lloyd, the boy, had never understood this. Lloyd, the man, would come quite close. But regardless of any lessons of time and space, the ring and its story had always fascinated the cynical old man and eager young boy in wondrous ways that time had never altered.

The boy shoved the ring on his second finger. It was a snug, but not uncomfortable fit. The green stone was powerfully magnetic. The dreamer and the dream watchers waited expectantly though not for very long.

The lanky man warned, “Careful son, the magic intoxicates. Do not go too faaaa ...” But it seemed Lloyd had, for the old man’s voice faded into memory to be replaced by the crystal. It flooded the boy’s head with a magical, green elixir. Either the stone had grown many times its rightful size or the boy had dwindled to the size of a common grape. But size mattered not one angstrom when inside the infinite quar.

His father’s image rotated slowly inside the LENS. The man rocked back and forth smoking his black pipe. His eyes conveyed a warning though his lips moved in ghostly soundlessness.

The autumn night remained, but in a strange state of vibration, at once both the dark porch and the dome isocell as if two “presents” were possible, both at the same time. The porch swing was no less than his couch of magic dreams. The twinkling stars were no more than his blinking computers. A single star, seemingly no more than any of the others, exploded from inside the stone with an incredible surge of power.

There followed a sharp crack and electric sizzle. The vitreous vision transformed itself into the Timeshaper, the source of Lloyd’s light and his infernal night—the fabled ubiquity that had acquired many names over many ages.

A woman was struck from the crystal, a creature in blue-black robes, neither old nor young, ageless in her substance, ancient in her suffering, but beautiful in spite of both. She extinguished the Lamia stone that surrounded her with a puff of green vapor. She sat and rocked back and forth. She did not look up. She did not speak. She was nevertheless mindful of the small, brown-haired boy.

She was dark-complexioned and translucent like a blue sapphire, a woman of the dark and of the light. Her hair, if she had hair, was concealed beneath a black skullcap. Ears were hidden. Eyes were enigmatic or possibly protected by dark glasses. Cheekbones were prominent in the way of Orientals—a queenly face befit for the sepulchers of ancient Sumeria.

Her small, delicate nose was unusual, but it was her mouth that concerned Lloyd the most. It was not like any mouth he had ever seen before, though there was only the barest hint of odd—the way in which the upper lip was held over the lower to suggest a curious, perhaps rapacious bite. This improbable combination of features was somehow familiar, but it was not for boys or even their fathers to understand just how or why.

This night vision was a mixture of contradictions and contrasts that confounded the emotions. She appeared regal—a symbol of something great, but beyond reason, an idea incomprehensible to common man. Her manner was not necessarily unkind, but strict and purposeful, maybe even sensual, if this was possible for a woman with the bite of a raptor.

There were other manifestations that captured him. With hands sheathed sheer and red, she knit the world, more than man could know. Her vast needlework consumed itself indefinitely like the Klein bottle. Life and death emerged from a tapestry immeasurable in its expanse. And one could not miss the tools of her trade, the scintillating knitting needles sharp and precise as if forged and honed by the gods themselves.

Before Lloyd's incredulous eyes there came into clear view the woman's full pride and power. A long necklace was her crown, the symbol of her high rank, for prominently about her thin neck she wore a string of a hundred green jewels each one more or less identical to the green quarvine that warmed his second finger.

Lloyd tried to turn away, but his senses were no longer his to turn. The surprising necklace concerned him more than her threatening overbite. He preferred not to move, not to call attention to himself, but he stirred in spite of every intention.

So did she—at first so subtly.

Her attention was diverted from her knitting to the boy on the porch. She looked first at Lloyd, and then at the ring as a man would look at an insignificant bug. Initially there was no overt reaction. But the dark woman gradually developed a rigidity of mien that induced chills. If malice had form it was personified in this woman, for she was apparently enraged by his possession of the green stone.

She slowly, menacingly, extracted the needles from the fabric on her lap, seemingly so as not to alarm the boy, though if these were her tactics they failed. It had happened that her deliberate and predatory movements had stroked the limp nerve of pure jelly that ran down his back.

Cool and calculating, she considered the needles as an artisan would fine instruments, rolling them in her hands, enjoying their feel of precision. Seeing them through lightly sheathed fingers, she never once took her eyes off the boy. Neither could Lloyd lift his gaze from her glistening, steely rapiers.

Time slowed and lodged in his throat. She ceased her tender fondling. As her crystalline eyes bore through him, he sensed the subtle change in her mood. Her mouth opened ever so slightly. Was she smiling or tasting his blood? She returned to her vast tapestry seemingly to hatch an idea. She desperately searched the infinite fabric for something of importance.

In little time she located a pattern that fired spasms through her. In her ecstasy she howled. And beneath this horrible siren Lloyd heard the plaintive bleats of his own mortality, his own haunting cry in the wilderness.

Within the tapestry Lloyd Baumer was knitted and purled. Her fabric held him, his life stitched in its infinite possibility, cross-linked to the living mantle of the Earth. His lifeline threaded from boyhood to manhood over a twisted course with all things in view.

Certain memories leapt from his *vraisemblance*.

Lloyd saw Joy, his wife, a warm and loving stitch. And he witnessed her death, his Pain, the long, taut strand stretched to break his heart. Time spun its magic and eventually closed the wound. In later years Lloyd found his glowing Achievement, the arcane loop of continuity, and ultimately just a hint of his finality.

He lay between reality and dream, between life and death, between the world of boys and men—a commingling of the possibilities. He perceived space and time through a kind of third eye, and though of sufficient reach its peripheral range was surprisingly insufficient given what Lloyd knew of its power. His sleep mask was not the cause of this atypical tunnel vision. This even Owen Klein would know—if Owen Klein had chanced to look.

If he had looked Owen would have seen the power of Lloyd's eyes burning and blazing through the mask. The dream mask was no obstacle. The problem was Lloyd's sudden lethargy, a strange paralysis of LENS parangle. With all his strength he could not adjust the angle when it should be so easy, with his cicabytes within mind's reach.

His view of common space was limited to a hint of ceiling, a bit of wall, a few of its blinking clusters and consoles. His eyes locked on to a scrub bucket left carelessly behind. He tried to see around it, but could not, no matter how hard he focused his hypothalamus.

Soon his reach went the way of his sweep.

The boy in the man began to fade. The woman's increasing opacity isolated the older from the younger. The older had little time to understand, to ponder its meaning, to brace, for the Timeshaper now used her steely needles with a bright and blinding stroke of surprising savagery.

Inserting the metal points into the tapestry she began frantic knitting. It seemed that she would encircle him with charred and blackened threads, a tangled web to frame, then close his coffin. He was vast, but she worked as if possessed of a thousand, bloodstained hands. The fiery pebbles around her neck reflected the power of her life-rending needles.

Owen sat in the next room quietly manning the 'con, watching the parameters of a life—respiration, heartbeat and brain waves with nothing more substantial than data.

Max and Bill would sense Lloyd's peril, though they would be powerless to intervene. In spite of Lloyd's nightmare, blood still coursed through his veins, air still surged through his lungs. He tried reason. There had to be an answer near at hand.

He concentrated on his time and space, though small and dark, pushing the time reever as far back as he could. This had its effect, but not the one he had intended. There was something in her place—something more than time and space—something outside this experience, something from nothing. It was just a tickle, a flickering shadow near the edge of perception, though from the simple artifacts that he could correlate, his physical space remained practically unaltered.

Lloyd remembered the trick of playing the dream backwards. With effort and with no small amount of luck he might recycle the Machine, reprogram the AIs and refocus the

LENS nearer to his original target, nearer to Jove. It had worked with the letter. It might work again for the Master. He channeled all his strength, all his mind through the green quarvine.

But this effort overloaded the CIC, caused ears to buzz, heart to race, the room to spin like a carousel. No trick of mind could distract the Timeshaper from her black webwork so near completion. The circle of black thread was almost joined to where he started, to where he would probably end. His mind's eye unhitched from the great tapestry. He returned his gaze and attention once more to his common space relentlessly shrinking. In some way it was different, incongruously becoming more from less. It was true that the couch had frozen into a hard slab. As it grew firmer he grew colder. And though he could not purge the phantom reever from his nightmare, his view of reality remained limited, but otherwise unaffected.

The view ahead was perhaps safe, but what of the view behind, the view beneath? What might approach him unseen? This fear flowered into panic. The space behind and beneath was powerfully insinuating—a million pinpricks on the neck, shoulders and back. He was powerless to move.

An insane laugh, his own, rose like vomit from the deepest pit of despair and helplessness. The cruel irony was not wasted—his life destroyed by his own life's work, his panglorious theory of continuity.

Was this to be death—that final and very personal discontinuity?

It didn't hurt particularly. True, he felt the numbing cold, heard the maddening buzz, and inhaled the rarified air. But he'd seen no bright, heavenly light, heard no angels singing, and beheld no golden or gossamer wings.

Possibly rational mind had snapped.

Inane thoughts filled his head—an unpaid bill, an unanswered letter. Yes, that unanswered letter. All were unanswered now. He would have expected void, but there was not even void. In fact, what was left grew brighter. It was just that there was not so much left.

He risked a look at the Timeshaper busy in his dreamspace, laying stitch upon blackened stitch. The LENS shuddered and convulsed. She paled in an intense burst of mnemonic power. Lloyd felt the wind rise from below an instant before his nightmare erupted from its black cocoon. From an expanding temporal rift she stepped—a dark, but somehow lustrous queen—perfection and perversity, a gross impossibility for the eyes. She had knit from him, from his hopes and his fears, her own improbable rebirth. Waking in his material world she stretched. She approached him from behind, her trembling limbs extended, her hard mouth wet and aquiver.

The night queen kissed him lightly on the nape with cold, hard lips. She held them against his clammy skin—long enough to taste time's brief measure of his life. The lonely dreamer saw beyond the apparition of this dark mistress into the darker macula as all the angels sang.

Chapter Twenty: The Land of Nod

“Now, my suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose ... I suspect that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of, in any philosophy. That is the reason why I have no philosophy myself, and must be my excuse for dreaming.”

- J.B.S. Haldane
“Possible Worlds”

There was dissonant chorus, a wailing wind in the aether captured by something less than Heaven. A broken bottle was cast adrift among this clamor. What was this clamor? Or better yet, what was this bottle? Was it full? Or was it empty? Was it mind or body or just raw meat?

A few mental atoms clicked into place. Images formed of one's self and of a faraway world. He remembered his name or part of it. He remembered the dusky, little town in New Mexico. Here and there his mind penetrated the din and the pain. But for a few poorly formed fragments, splinters of names and places, his memories lagged pitifully. It was abysmally dark. Then, as if by a merciful accident, the horrible cacophony faded and disappeared.

Other names came to mind—perplexing names like Cole, Kincaid and Leopold Hardan. He struggled to match these names with faces. These people were connected with his work. What was their secret? It forewarned disaster. Direct confrontation with these memories was painful, yielding an explosion of lines and planes, little more than geometric nonsense.

There was a gray wall that he could not push back. He redirected his feeble effort. This had to be more than a dream. Could it be some altered psychic state? What were the possibilities? He recalled his age and the poor state of his health. There was his frail heart. Perhaps he recovered from surgery at East County General. Or perhaps he had not. Perhaps perdition was his final reward.

If only he could see through this mutton broth—a thick, brown soup, bubbling and curling. But if there was broth, if there was some color, brown or not, there must certainly be light and substance—fabric even if fine spun, with perhaps some thin thread of hope.

Try as he might, he was unable to locate a source of light. Could he move? Could he maneuver? Lloyd exercised his mind and summoned kinetic energy from a small point of power locked deep inside his *Vermis Kinesis*.

He was jolted by this fantastic concept. Why did he imagine that he could propel by mind? Perhaps he could not, for it seemed there were needles poised and ready to pierce his skull at the slightest thought of psychic propulsion.

Lloyd had no choice but to persevere. He endured cruel pain as the mist accelerated. It was as if he possessed no solidity, no inertia. No matter, for it seemed he could maneuver in this brown-stained aether. The pain lessened as his apparent speed increased. The cold, stabbing needles retracted and were mysteriously gone.

But where were light and terra firma? To be safe he throttled back, fortunately not an eyelash too soon, for the earth materialized before his astonished eyes. Mind reeled if mind it was. He applied psychic brakes, stopped within a chin's whisker of impact. Without any point of reference Lloyd had plunged recklessly and rapidly for the hard deck.

Hovering over earth he attempted reason. It could be true that reason did not even count. For reaching out with his mind, Lloyd confirmed an improbable theory. His mental being penetrated the solid ground as if one or the other or both were mere mirage. But the assumption that either one was solid in the first place was apparently too hasty a call.

He gazed down at the languid remnants of a channel. There was some water, but mostly there was the blackest, foulest mud he had ever seen in his life. It was not even mud. It was a noxious slime, thick and glistening. Green vapors belched from numerous fissures in the mire, beating out a constant blip, blurp, blip, blurp that his brain could hear even if his ears could not.

There were yellowish things breeding and wiggling. This fecund ooze was too repulsive to ponder. In spite of fecund, in spite of repulsive, or perhaps because of it, his mind lapsed to the poet, Dante Aligheri. It seemed that he sampled the poet's final circle, his fetid latrine. This shit hole was enough to gag even Dante himself. Nauseated, Lloyd looked up toward what should have been blue sky, but what was instead an indefinite series of layers of earth and air indistinguishable. With a little mental focusing he was able to sort and separate the brown bands into earth and air. Objects came into view beneath the horizon.

Stones of all sizes were scattered upon a broad, alluvial plain. To his left, the plain joined a sprawling basin reaching farther than the eye. Lloyd suspected that an inland sea lay beyond it. He did not know why he suspected. In fact, he began to suspect many things. Lloyd began to remember—not memories of a deliberate choice, but the uncontrollable surge from an incomprehensible dream. If a dream it wasn't the usual garden variety, a game of peek-a-boo from behind a safe curtain. He felt dangerously exposed with no place to hide. Sensing a maculation he snapped back to the basin still in the open, still dreaming the same dream.

On his right, rose purplish, craggy peaks. Between these extremes of chisel and hue sprouted patches of gray vegetation struggling against drought or disease. Once great stands of timber wilted and withered in the final stages of expiration.

He followed the narrowing channel toward the gray forest, away from the festering ooze. Here the flats were hard-baked and suffering. Some of the trees were giants of girth and height. Many were palm-like with massive, protruding scales. And hidden among them were the only living things he recognized, though most were stunted and discolored by a red fungus that advanced on the undersides of yellowing leaves.

It was a surprise, but nevertheless a comforting fact that in this cruel land grew little ginkgo trees—even if they were small, even if they were freckled with a rampant rust. Lloyd recalled their distinctive fruit. He recalled that autumn smell upon his shoes, returning thoughts of Dante's aromatic poem. But more importantly it returned thoughts of home—good and bad. How far? Did it even exist? He could not hope to guess.

He drifted over myriad secrets in the hope of finding answers. The scenery improved a little. Or maybe the flora only grew on him. He hoped not. This place exhibited a strange collection, and if not verdant it was alive and crawling. Horsetail sprouted from pools of viscous muck and foul, black water. A few large ferns and fern-like trees grew among them, collecting and concentrating a seemingly living fog.

The fact of vegetation as familiar as horsetails made him curious, so he floated nearer. Small craft swooped in and out of these wispy patches. He entered a copse of horsetail and prickly, leafless shrubs. A tiny, dive-bomber looped past his ear. Another attacker soared through him, soon to be joined by hundreds of little flying fortresses. Though not exactly B-17s, these insects were impressively gunned and turreted.

Thankfully, there were no collisions. Lloyd was less than vapor, for even vapor can be felt upon the face. Regardless of his surprising lack of substance he decided not to loiter in their maniacal path. He suspected that he should not take this gift of invulnerability for granted. Lloyd could never be sure if and for how long his unexplained ghostliness would prevail, would seal and protect him. What if reality returned at the wrong time, in the wrong place? Thoughts of the kind would not help, so he moved forward with all the optimism a dreamer could muster.

The insufferable fog gradually burned away. Or did his eyes only adjust? Did they only acclimate to the light of the pale yellow orb? The sun, appearing both too large and too bright, was perched high in a sky rudely discolored as if suspending large quantities of soot and sulfur. The distant peaks spewed ash that painted devilish, undulating bands—red, brown and black from horizon to horizon. This portrait was strange, but not new to his experience. It was a land he had visited before, and in a similar way. It seemed a consequence of perspective that at times was almost total, as if his mind was a single eye suspended in space with a view at every angle and an angle for every view. Each view was discreet and kaleidoscopic like the hinged faces of their geodesic dome. It was an eye more than either of his that required careful selection of the angle and scene to keep from spinning like bait on a string.

He followed the main channel past or through fallen trees, stumps and stilt roots. Another oasis loomed ahead—one larger and greener than the others. He penetrated a barrier of broad leaves and vines, opening the pages of a storybook. For a moment he experienced the sensation of pressure or touch, the most vague hint of a lump in his throat and a

living, beating heart inside his phantom chest. He entered a fairyland of pools, clubmoss, red mushrooms, dense overgrowth and prickly vines. Bleeding blisters erupted from stalks and the trunks of trees. The creepers collected crawlers of every possible design and appendage. Giant aphids, termites and slugs struggled and smothered in the sticky, amber resins. It was the **Land of Nod**, a land of snails and snailwort, of toads and toadstools, of bugs and bugbane. It was a land fast asleep. Then to his surprise, Nod nodded back to life.

The land awoke with a spasm, a sudden, explosive shudder.

A pack of animals, marvels in motion, rushed him head on and pell-mell, splashing mud, flinging pebbles, panting like racing greyhounds. Lloyd managed a fleeting glimpse as several of these racers paused atop small stones to reconnoiter. Their length ranged from 10 to 20 inches. Their torsos were covered with lizard scales. Their actions, however, were anything but lizard-like. Limbs were too long and erect for lizards. And they moved with the speed and grace of ferrets. Their heads were dog-like with just the hint of coarse, gray fur and long, straight whiskers.

These agile creatures were quickly gone—perhaps fifty or more spurred by the worst sort of panic. As there seemed little hope of pursuing them, Lloyd continued his course, more often through than over this improbable land. Towering tree ferns had fashioned a lush canopy over the darkly sodden trench. Fine dust and droplets sparkled in the brilliant cathedral sunlight. He paused to absorb the black mire's strange, soundless peace, trying to reassure himself before drifting (or dreaming) on.

All signs of peace and reassurance ended a hundred yards up the trail. A killing frenzy had occurred at a sharp bottleneck with steep and slippery sides. Twenty or more of the reptiles lay dead or dying. Some appeared desiccated while others bled from dozens of puncture wounds. Their gapping mouths contained bluish black bristles of a disconcertingly familiar hue and texture. Body parts littered the trail. Many did not match the reptiles or anything he had ever seen.

It seemed odd that the only footprints belonged to the fur-collared lizards. Why were there no other prints? Had the attackers swooped down from the trees, then returned on spring heels? Whatever they may have been, the dog-reptiles had to be their better in stealth and in speed. Lloyd searched for a plausible answer. He searched the trees and the mires, but found only scavengers—giant scorpions and millipedes.

He approached a hollow dominated by titanic trees crowned with cones, and tree ferns crowned with massive flowers. Most were giants of two hundred feet or more. A closer look confirmed that although cones were likely to be cones, flowers were not likely to be flowers.

Gargantuan fabrications were nestled high among the longer shoots and green fronds. Their yellowish material appeared alive, fungal, though perhaps of intelligent design. The engineering was a genuine wonder of capilliform complexity. Spheres were joined by great bellows tubes and translucent, lesser tubes that crisscrossed the dense, interior foliage.

There was no obvious sign of habitation.

The appearance of these organic spheres and tubes was unsettling and reminiscent of something better left alone. Exhausted by a kind of sensory overload, Lloyd pivoted, seeking relief, open space and a way out. It would not do to be trapped here. The earlier hint of real feeling, of a heart and a painful lump returned momentarily, but soon vanished. He left the loamy hollow and reentered the plain, deciding to investigate the pits or slurries ringed with horsetails. Some of these plants were over forty feet tall. As he crossed the baked and cracked earth something clicked. It was a word that he had sought and the word was “calamite.” These plants were calamites. But calamites were ancient and long ago extinct.

The calamites dominated the pits—vast ponds of steaming, bubbling blackwater. This however was not their only feature. Dark, elongated boulders were randomly arranged. In the largest of these pools the nearly uniform boulders measured twenty feet or more. Lloyd wondered if they might be the semi-buoyant tears of volcanic glass, since several actually seemed to bob and float in the black miasma.

One stone raised its head and all his questions were answered. His eyes contracted with a painful throb. Suddenly all the stones were moving toward him. Lloyd forgot his ghostliness. For an instant his lack of substance was ignored. This was all that panic required. The pang of disequilibrium seemed the one property of his mind not dependent upon its duration for its potency. Nevertheless, the timely quality of logic eventually prevailed to reassure him. If he could not be heard, not be seen, not be felt, he was perfectly safe. He could not be hurt. By all logic he was safe and not really here (or there, wherever there might be).

Lloyd reverted to the scientist once again. No matter how difficult he must remain the scientist. He headed for the blackwater once again confident in his objectivity, and more importantly, once again reassured of his protective insubstantiality.

The rush toward him, the sudden, mind-blinking surge had nothing to do with him at all. It was driven instead by the bellies of the beasts. Mindless hunger had propelled several of the living boulders out of the water and on to the semidry land. They had abandoned the water to browse on the smaller and more tender rootstocks, calamite stems and shoots. Those that remained behind frolicked like hippos in a mud wallow. Some were larger than hippos. He moved through the rushes to the brink of one pit, then beyond and over the blackwater, but found it nearly impossible to tell where mud stopped and beast began.

They were living tanks heavily armored from nose shield to tail spur. Steel-platted wolverines came to mind—squat and muscular. The head of these semi-aquatic vegetarians was wide and triangular, ending in a razor beak. Heavy brow ridges ran to the snout. Their wide backs were lined with two rows of short spikes. The muscular tail was also spiked, but with four sets, two above and two below. A double-lobed, heart-shaped mace tipped their powerful, high-held tail.

He recalled the trail massacre. Could these plodding dreadnaughts have slaughtered his lithe and limber reptiles? They were powerful enough, no doubt, but obviously not fast enough, smart enough, or even delicate enough for the task. After all, there had been no prints, practically no disturbance at all along the rotting riverbed. More to the point, these creatures were only clumsy, lumbering herbivores.

Impressive duals flared among the land rovers for the most delectable sprouts. They tried, but were almost incapable of injuring one another. He decided he had seen enough. Lloyd left them to revisit the hollow and the arboreal splendor he had found abhorrent while at the same time oddly compelling.

While re-crossing the hard-baked flats a stream of large, rainbow dragons—a line of a hundred dragonflies daubed and dappled like Costa Rican butterflies passed impassively through him as if he was nothing at all. He was stunned by their beauty, by color he did not know existed. The dragons fluttered toward the parasitic flowers that had infested the titanic trees. He had to return to investigate these floral fungiforms. Why did they tempt him? Was it science? Was it invertebrate science that tempted the Dantian myriapods to the filthy ooze and the viny gorse?

Given time he relocated the distinctive lush foliage, the loam richer and darker in the hollow than anywhere else. While outwardly vibrant and alive it took root that somehow the opposite was true, though the dense ferns of vein-blades, red and green, both on the ground and in the air, belied these notions. He wandered through the maze of ground ferns while focusing most of his attention upon the trees—huge tree ferns that he had only read about in natural history books. Their words and pictures did little justice to what he experienced now.

It was not only the trees themselves, though they were impressive enough. It was the maze in the trees, the intricacy of causeways that characterized the higher elevations. These networks were massive, their immeasurable bulk barely supported by staunch trunks. His imagination filled in the blanks, conjured monsters in the great hulks of timber. Each tree was an unwilling host, strangled by a speckled beast, a creature beyond its habitat, a tree-bound gigantopus—a clinging conspiracy of multicolored arms.

There remained no clues to its origin, though from the beginning Lloyd had sensed a living tangle of tentacles coiled among the branches. Its knobs and spines, spirals and frills were breathing, feeding, growing larger, and seemingly growing stronger. If there was a way out this treescape had to be the way. Lloyd summoned strength from his final reserves, but found strength lacking. His oppressive fatigue had returned far worse than before.

Fear fed fear. Logic fled in its wake. His mind had entered the lower corridor where things went bump. Suddenly all things around him were cold, suspect and threatening. His attention was captured by the ferns to his right, then by the ferns to his left. He imagined deadly tiger centipedes lurking behind rustling fronds. This impression of encirclement was too much to bear. The leafy, tentacled elevations seemed his only escape.

With all his strength Lloyd rose to join the fungal clusters. It seemed no accident of fate that he found himself poised before the largest and most complex of the giant blossoms, a tendrillous centrosphere wedged inside a torus richly tinted like a coral reef.

Like a moth drawn to flame, Lloyd was compelled to enter. Logic had warned him, but logic had taken its seat in the back of his brain. He searched the torus, but a seam evident from the ground had diabolically vanished. He circled, but access seemed always out of reach. Lloyd would have welcomed some feeling for substance, for touch, for some confidence in the common and conventional approach.

Giving up on the conventional he inserted his ghostly head through the tight, organic weave and peered inside the torus. And though this action was painless he immediately noticed a queer tickle that tiptoed down his spine. Spinning, Lloyd withdrew his head, somehow hollowed out by the darkness, a void that sucked him out and sapped his strength. In spite of the vapidness, the debilitating darkness, he knew that he must test the torus one more time.

He circled once more, had circled probably several times, when he noticed the queerest thing. When it had happened, how it had happened, he could not be sure, but “out” had become “in” or “in” had become “out.” It had happened without the slightest transition. Like it or not his wish had been granted. Like it or not he was all the way in.

The light inside the torus was weak as if shunted by sly, powerful forces. He prayed that his eyes would adjust, would find not only light, but also some comfort in what the light revealed. He reminded himself to remain calm. He was soon rewarded with a trickle of perception by means unclear.

The walls seemed to thin, to pass the sunlight at his whim. He summoned enough to appraise the situation. The space inside the torus seemed vast, much greater than he would have estimated from circling it. The space of the inner torus had been thickened perhaps a hundred fold, its time thinned reciprocally. Would this arcane knowledge help him here?

He thought more about what might help, but this effort defeated him. He found it easier to concentrate on the torus itself, a kind of doughnut shaped receptacle. Though he did not feel as much as a breeze he was aware of the passage of air inside this manifold of tubes, the flow regulated by beating flaps like aortic valves. A grown man could easily insert himself in the largest of these thick-walled arteries with plenty of room to spare.

He entered the first available branch, large, but pitch black. In spite of his blindness it seemed that he could feel the walls, for when approached they would cause that familiar tickle in the *Vermis*.

As Lloyd traveled deeper into the tube, bumping its walls with mind not matter, the tickle gradually gave way to a strange source of light, a few orange bulbs cruising in space. As he steered closer these objects grew clearer, though no better explained. There were dozens, perhaps a hundred or more glowing orbs as he descended deeper into the dark

barrel. Each moved because each orb was a living thing. As this dream would have it, each light was a translucent and luminous snail producing luminous, molluscan tracks.

The snails made navigation easier, the sensation of blind steering not painful, but not pleasant either. Lloyd followed the lights that appeared and disappeared with each twist and turn of the tube. Occasionally another man-sized branch would appear, but Lloyd refused these, not that one was any better or worse. All tubes were equally claustrophobic. All tubes were equally alive. Both were matters more than the rhythmic contraction of the tubes or their convenient size. The maze was a zoological trove of creatures feeding off each other and on whatever clung to the walls. Lloyd likened it to a tide pool beneath a moonbeam. The glowing snails were probably somewhere near the top of the tubes' feeding chain. Near the middle were the flowering barnacles and cysts, the star slugs and porcupine worms. At the bottom were layers of mucosal bacteria of varying thickness.

He had been bumping into and through them before the snail light had told him. His radial *Vermis* had felt them. They had passed through him each time his mind had miscalculated the walls. But these problematica were mere mites in the molasses. There was something else that gnawed and nipped his last frail bud of confidence. He sensed it was quite close.

At tubular junctures he encountered beating flaps like those he had seen in the torus. Some performed like valves, while others larger and thicker fanned the air with a pump-like action. At times this action was pounding, the tubes in thumping turmoil, the glowsnails nowhere in sight. Mostly, the result was sub-turbulent, at least for the residents, the apparently acclimated inhabitants of the maze.

His reaction was less than acclimation. One phobia fed another. The beating flaps did not dispel his fear of suffocation or the thought of his being crushed by a sudden contraction of the tube. He felt too small and too large at the same time. He felt like a bacterium trying to find its way inside a porous lump of coal. But unlike the bacterium he could see. But was this really sight? A new fear wiggled its way into his brain.

It grew more difficult to accommodate sight without substance. He saw all things clearly but himself. It was a too radical amputation and it was taking its toll on his sanity. He was a single eye connected to some remote brain. It was preposterous, but the fantastic truth was only dawning. He could have threaded a needle with his mind's eye. He was in truth less than nothing, less than a ghost, for even a ghost had once been something, a truth his mind should sense even in a dream like this. From the start the maze and its branches, the Land of Nod itself, the entire locum navigation, had exhibited no size or scale relative to himself. He had exhibited no size or scale relative to the maze.

But could he be sure of even this? What could be proved in a dream? He was not yet convinced. All of the evidence did not fit this argument. Why should shadows follow him? Why should empty space intercept the molluscan beams of light and cast disturbing shapes upon the walls if he was no more than a mind inside the maze?

Fear produced a growing pressure between his would-be ears and inside the hollow of his would-be belly. He thought of home, of Pines' Roost. Would this assist his relocation? The tubes took him nowhere. Each new branch was a useless cul-de-sac. He descended deeper into the despair of the labyrinth. The mental maze of tubes took no apparent notice. He was little more than a harmless fleck, another unimportant morsel of food.

The throbbing walls redoubled the rhythmic, bellows-like contractions of their practical necessities, then went instantly dark as if the hangman's hood had been pulled suddenly over his earthly head. The fatigue of his *Vermis Kinesis* registered a kind of dull red glow. There was an instant of disorientation as if a piece of time and space had broken loose, replaced by impossibility.

There arose a heave, followed by a great sigh, then a convulsion in the tube that dilated like a birth canal. The glowsnails and the other busy beasts miraculously vanished inside the folds of the labyrinth's living walls. He was once again blind, but in little time not alone. He could not see them, but he knew they were there. They must have ascended the long shaft like a beating cloud. And though he could not see them, hear them, feel them, his mind could. He did not know how he could do it, but he was convinced that he could describe them. Roaches? No, not exactly roaches. They were much too long for roaches. They flew like birds, not bugs. They thrashed like snakes, not birds. No matter. There was no time to ponder.

Another blast from below dilated the main tube. A whirling, bristling leviathan blew through him. It purged clean his mind plus any matter that mattered. There was no reason or reasoning for what the thing could have been. His mind's eye registered a tunneling, elephantine invertebrate, armed with grinders that doubled for revolving, revolting, studded eyes. He had felt the beast like needles in his chest.

He had reached the end. There were no more tubes to try. With little left Lloyd plunged through an opaque membrane. This left his mind behind for an instant, but his fear if not his reason soon caught up. At first he thought that he had returned to the torus itself. He had instead returned to a vast chamber, like, but greater, more complex than the torus. A pale, blue light seeped through the floor. He had traversed the labyrinth, suffered its branches, only to reach the centrosphere of the maze.

Surfaces were covered with a dark, coarse fur. Furnishings of an unknown utility were suspended on drab yellow ropes. And although color and detail were slow to impress the eyes, they did eventually impress.

What he saw was quite unprecedented. Nothing ever looked the same the second time. Could more than one chamber occupy the same space at the same time? Objects came and went. What he saw never looked good, not the first, not the second, not even the last. He perceived what he supposed could be a vast chemistry lab of translucent tubes and vats filled with all manner of fluids, bubbling and brewing. He also beheld a kind of machine shop of living parts busily repairing and re-growing. He saw animals suspended on fungal ropes, tightly trussed like candied snacks. He recognized his mammal-like reptiles among the many victims, large and small, dead and alive, hanging as would provisions in some fiend's pantry.

Lloyd felt his heart now beating like a drum. The knot was forming again in his throat larger than before. He could feel his tongue against the dry roof of his mouth, the tips of his fingers touching one another, his anal sphincter painfully puckering. Feeling was returning. Matter was returning at the wrong time, in the wrong place. He had dreamed up a reality, a maze filled with life and death. Lloyd decided it was well past the time to leave.

He attempted a simple lateral maneuver that failed, for he bumped into something spongy, but impenetrable, also invisible from what he could deduce in the meager light. Lloyd tried again, but once again he collided with something unseen and unyielding. He tried and failed many times, though other than the dizzying tug on his *Vermis*, he should feel nothing of substance. And it did not help that the apparent confines of his space and time shrank with each futile attempt. It also did not help that he was almost certainly watched. Lloyd was convinced now more than ever that something savored him a tasty meal.

He concentrated and gave it all the strength he had, for the first time aiming down and out the bottom of the sphere. This seemed to work, for the dangling ropes disappeared overhead. But upon further scrutiny he decided that he had not moved in the least. Someone or something had worked the ropes to mislead him. Unfortunately, it came to mind that when something goes up, something else comes down, usually something much larger. He had made the unpardonable mistake of not investigating his entire space.

This belated and horrific realization caused the hair on his neck to burn and bristle. What hit him next was a frigid blast of foul air. Not wanting to look up he raised his arm slowly above his head until it collided with something solid. His hand now rested upon bristling flesh and hard nodules. Paralyzed by fear, Lloyd could not raise or turn his head. He did move his hand a little, hoping for something the mind could accept. He touched a pebble, round and hard, then another, then many—the necklace—her necklace of a hundred round stones.

This brazen act was his final mistake. Like a predatory bird his unseen horror descended, ensnared him in powerful limbs covered with coarse, bluish black fur. They were both quickly entwined in the dark, locked in a mortal struggle. They fell from a great height, fell forever through the void, that mindless Grundle spin.

Chapter Twenty-One: P. Baumeri

Lloyd returned from a nightmare. All was dark. All was still, except for the steady throb and thrum from his carotid. He tasted his own blood (he guessed) and the vestige of some horror that clung like frigid tendrils to his throat. He performed a few simple tests.

He could not feel his arms or his legs, his back or his buttocks. He could not see.

There was only that relentless pressure against his face. It soon reached the threshold of pain, and with it—panic. His fear availed him nothing, for he found no strength for a struggle. Giving reason its chance, he remembered the skullcap and sleep mask of the dream chamber. Lloyd awkwardly pried them away with fingers seemingly not his own. The rapid hammer of his pulse subsided. Fresh air seeped into his lungs.

Once unmasked he had hoped for better things. But tired, old eyes responded poorly in the dim light—the dull-red blur of the isocell. It was possible that the powerful lucidity drug had poisoned the eyes and muscles. In lieu of illumination and coordination, Lloyd explored his memories, but found only stagnant waters.

It was disconcerting that the CIC absorbed the mind, but it was the only way to use the paracube, to communicate with the past. Considering his symptoms, his cluster headache and the lack of sensation, he was lucky there was no serious amnesia—no paradementia.

He remembered that his rescue had failed. An icy wave of disappointment washed over him. Was all of his effort reduced to this dull and dark moment? He feared what Nicolaus would say. Perhaps the fault lay in his own poor health, or in the excessive dose of mercolidine sulfate.

There were other possibilities. He carefully probed a languid mind for the last thing he had seen before waking, but this only added to the darkness that grew worse, that descended like rolls of black crepe.

Lloyd detected some tingling, some feeling in the lower limbs. He moved his legs a few inches, no more. He balled his hands into fists and raised his arms with only the greatest effort, then let them drop like rocks.

What obstacles lay ahead? His memory of the dream slowly returned. He recalled the darkling woman, her haunting blue-black robes, her necklace of round stones—like twinkling, red-black beacons—like fiery coals in the dark of night. And peace came with knowing that the worst was over.

And though relieved, Lloyd remained perplexed by the sluggish recovery of his senses. He opened and closed his eyes with little or no improvement. The dream residue

prevailed—her blackened robes and her fiery red beacons. They reminded him of the stars inside the Coalsack nebula. His mind wandered as if gripped by a high fever.

Lloyd twisted his neck, turned his head from side to side. With a throbbing headache any attempt to sit would have to wait. But for what? He must get up.

He shivered, cold to the quick. What had happened to the wool blanket? More important, why did Owen or Max not come to his assistance? His dark stars held fast—a memory rolling gently in space like the surf, enough to return him to sleep. But he would not be lulled to sleep, for his couch grew hard and cold. It hit him like a fist in the stomach—the sudden and disquieting realization. Lloyd lay not on the couch, but on the cold, hard floor. He reached and touched the tile, then verified the dream couch lying on its side.

His dark nebula acquired rich texture and more stars. It occurred to him: “Why were these stars red and not green like his quarvine?” Then it clicked. If more than a memory, if inside the red room and not merely inside his head, they would not be green at all. They would be anti-green. They would indeed be red or red-black.

He concentrated on the stars. Their rhythmic rise and fall reminded him of something commonplace. It also reminded him of something uncommonly misplaced. The simple answer came to him—the flow of air to and from lungs—a gentle breathing, but not his own. Something passed before his eyes, then brushed his cold, damp face, a soft caress from above.

He screamed with all his might, “Owen, by god, help me!”

With all his might he willed his feeble eyes into focus. More cold orbs emerged from the dark recesses. But unlike the black rubies they were discoids relatively large and oddly arranged—about eight in number. They appeared as lifeless as any eyes he had ever seen, hard and black as if wrought in a caldera. Near him, surrounding him, rose swaying legs or timbers acting as staunch supporting pillars for his darkly spangled universe. With a heave the darkness expanded and contracted, seemed to grow and seemed to shrink. His ears popped as if the pressure rose or fell. He opened his mouth. The air had a spoiled taste.

“Owen ... Max ... goddamn it! Where are you?”

What was the sense of this—these orbs, these pillars to be joined by two, frenetic wigglers, and then smelly, oily drippage, falling like a mist of deadly mustard gas?

A light exploded like a phosphorus incendiary. His eyes adjusted slowly to the offense. Eventually, they received a wealth of information, though the mind was slow to believe what the eyes took in. Lloyd lived the ultimate Rorschach test that ultimately unfolded into long fangs and rows of cutting teeth.

With these implements, she spoke: “Mankind awake from your slumber.” She had come.

But not in the dark, never in the dark. She had come in the brilliant light. His nyct-mistress had a name, more than one, so many and for so long a time.

Lloyd looked deeply into the sapphire blue face of his weaver, his fabled Nrczxa in cold, hard flesh, no longer a dream, and no longer a creature deceptively human.

He thought of shutting down—to let what must happen, happen. This was too much to bear. He closed, but soon reopened his eyes. The weaver would not retreat. She danced, pausing now and then to taste his face with nasty wigglers perched alongside sword-like fangs. The sight of her drove hot nails through every cell and fiber. So many points under the skin were aflame that the brain centers for pain and fear were now one.

But he had not come this far just to die on the floor. He concentrated. He had to dash fear and deal with what he had. It wasn't much. Then he remembered his ring. She only wanted its green stone.

Lloyd tugged, but nothing happened. His fingers were by now too severely swollen. He gave the band an incredible twist and yank, but it would not release its cutting grip in spite of its natural lubrication.

Nrczxa lowered her bristling head, extended her fangs enough to brush, but not cut his face. Small, serrated teeth came within inches. He took the measure of both. Her fangs were nine-inch daggers, protruding from toothy jaws dripping rank venom.

He could smell and taste his own fear. And so apparently could she. Nrczxa made a little chortle and pumped more rank oil covering his face. Nausea finally won the struggle over him. He added his own sour eruption to hers.

No matter, for he worked frantically on the ring as she danced her devilish dance. Unfortunately, the harder he worked the harder the ring maintained its grip. His finger continued to swell, locking the gold securely against his raw and bleeding flesh.

Without the ring there seemed one last chance, though a slim one. He must work fast and lucky. He placed his right hand in his pocket, searched it, and then brought the beloved object close to his heart. He gripped the gold to feign its removal, then flung the brass imposter as far as he could. Flashing green and metallic, the ring traveled a short distance, landing after a bounce near the wool blanket yards away. It was a pathetic ruse. But it was all he had. Would she take the bait?

It did not appear she would, for Nrczxa held her ground like stone. But neither did she attack. His carotid recommenced its knell. He waited, right hand clasped over left, as she held firm her menacing stance.

It all happened like a dream, like slow motion. She silently retracted her fangs, stretched and strode for the blanket as if balancing on stilts.

With no time to waste he made the critical test. But where were his legs? Somehow he had to find them, get them quickly underneath, but they responded like limp noodles. He seemed paralyzed by fear, by the drug, or perhaps he had been numbed to paralysis by her poison. Driven by adrenalin and his implacable will to live, Lloyd tottered to his feet, stiff as cloven hooves.

The door to the 'con was but a few yards away. For the first time he noticed them beyond the glass—the three men screaming without producing the slightest sound in their eerie pantomime of surreal horror. He could not look.

He aimed for the door and gave it all he had. It seemed he could ambulate well enough. But by all that was warm and tender, sweet and holy, he knew from the pall over his friends that he must never look back. It was all crazy. He was losing his mind. Lloyd could not help himself. He quoted the immortal line, just a bit altered, to keep from looking. He gasped, “Don’t look back ... reality may be ... altering.” This thought was insane, but it seemed to help, as he was now able to concentrate on his legs.

Yard by yard, he approached the isocon door with its slim promise of safety. He felt he would make it. He looked up at Max, a face as frozen as the glass, a face like none he had ever seen, a face that he would never forget. He dropped his eyes. Lloyd concentrated on his only hope—on what life was left in old, arthritic legs.

His bad knee gave out. He fell brushing the door handle with his forefinger, bashing his chin as he hit the tile. He rose on his better knee, but went down again. He could only crawl for the door. Something told him he would not have time—something that expelled a foul, chill wind against his bristling neck. He clutched the gold ring, closed his eyes and waited for her oily kiss.

As if by some miracle Nrczxa’s flux had seeped under the tight-fitting loop, loosening the band when his own perspiration had failed. It now slipped easily from his swollen and bruised finger. The isocon door opened. Lloyd tossed the ring over his shoulder as the large, rough hand pulled him roughly through.

There was not a hand alive that would have been too rough. “Inside ... ‘n’ hurry!” boomed the familiar voice.

The hand, the voice was Hagerty’s. Shed of his frock coat and brandishing his blue-steel pistol, Bill had started to enter the isocell, but with a staggering lunge, Lloyd deflected him back into the control room.

Its three inmates had created a pandemonium—too much for ears used to the silence of the dream chamber. Lloyd grimaced for quiet, but the others figured it for more pain and turned their decibels up another notch.

Max fired off lip scorchers like tracer bullets, clutching his neck as if he was trying to lift himself by his vocal cords—a good effort doomed by objective physics to fail.

Lloyd aimed his strength and attention at Bill as he held weakly to the man’s flailing arm. “Wait!” he cried, “We don’t want to kill it ... not if we don’t—”

“No ... kill it!” Owen roared. “Kill it now!”

Lloyd warbled, “Nnn ... no ... no!”

Bill, red-faced and panting like a sprinter, screamed within inches of Lloyd's ear: "Man, you're freaking nuts!"

"Then shut it ... shut it ... you crazy fool," roared Max. Men were moving in the small isocon with no real place to go.

"Please," Lloyd barked, "stay out of there. No reason in Hell for going in." Bill hesitated along enough for him to grasp the inescapable logic on their side of the wall.

"Hurry!" rose a shrill voice from behind him. It pleaded over and over: "Shut that damned door!"

Bill holstered the automatic, closed and locked the isocell door. He fumblingly tested the latch and stepped back as if its cold metal was blistering hot. Who could say it wasn't?

Max, of ghoulish pallor, had by now collapsed upon the isocon's cot, his bifocals cocked comically across his face. He held on desperately to his chest that pounded out his fear with no discernable rhythm.

"Max ... you okay?" cried Owen with less than his normal volume. He seemed uncertain whether to move first for Max or first for Lloyd. As a result the Doc danced helplessly between the two, his fingers flexing, splaying, his eyes bulging as if he were deranged.

"I'm pickled pink!" Max exclaimed. "Practice your nostrums on someone else. Leave me die of a heart attack before I'm made a peel and eat by that ..." It had become increasingly difficult for Max to breathe. Either the air was too heavy or his lungs were too light. He half expected his heart to leap from his chest and bounce like a rubber ball across the floor.

"Steady," chirped Owen as he seized Lloyd's sagging shoulders, more by fabric than by flesh.

"My head!" Lloyd complained as he tottered on one leg too frail to support his weight. Bill's eyes were glued to the absurdity that watched them through the glass. His attentions drifted or were taken hostage.

All the while Owen was babbling: "We thought ... Christ ... we thought you were done. We were afraid to try ... to try with it so close ... afraid to ..."

Lloyd, overcome by his pain, could not to hear.

A new flurry of 'cell activity had Bill mesmerized. He rationalized, "I couldn't risk a shot. Didn't know what to shoot at. Could I stop that battle pod? Might only piss 'im bad." Bill's wide eyes followed Nrczxa as she teetered grotesquely across the isochamber. The black light from which she had stepped clung to her like an episode of retinal fatigue. She let herself down gently over the discarded, quarvine ring with a motherly chirp.

"Bill," spat Max, "save that shit for later."

At this moment Lloyd's eyes rolled, his legs buckled. Slipping from Owen's grasp he slid like a potato sack to the floor. Max struggled to his feet, but lost his traction to the oil Lloyd had tracked across the floor.

Max recovered and helped carry Lloyd to the cot. Doc broke a capsule, waved it under Lloyd's nose, but its smelling salts failed to revive him.

"Jesus ... we forgot the gurney. It's in there," blathered Bill. His point (whatever it was) was ignored.

Max rifled the Doc's brown bag then tossed Owen the bottle. The Doc inserted one nitro tablet under Lloyd's tongue. "His heart's not going to take this."

Nothing happened. They waited—two men bent like cranes over the cot, the other man distracted by other matters—perhaps the uncertain barrier between 'con and 'cell, perhaps the sudden need to care when he had never cared before.

Many minutes passed. More from the hope than from any facts, Owen proclaimed, "He'll be okay. Give him air." He spoke softly, "Lloyd ... can you hear me?"

Lloyd opened his eyes, then turned cyanotic. He gasped, "Can't breathe ..."

Max repeated, "Owen ... he can't—"

"Yes ... I can see that he can't." Owen cleared fluid from his trachea, though his condition deteriorated. Pulse and respiration plummeted. Max circled the man and the flimsy cot, all three near to collapse.

"Max, try to remain calm." Then Owen ordered, "Sit!" But there was no place to sit but the floor or consoles.

Max whispered, "You ... you think ... hives?"

"Yes ... Max ... blocking the windpipe."

The Doc selected the proper ampoule and injected a high-powered cocktail of antihistamine and epinephrine.

"Don't wanna do this. No choice."

Nrczxa was active again and circling the quarvine. Bill mumbled something about "four entangled drunks." His "drunks" staggered, each using the other to avoid landing on their heads or whatever they carried. The "drunks" seemed to be performing some kind of ritual. Bill exclaimed, "I think it's popped that stone right out of your friggin' ring. Why would it do a thing like that?"

For the moment the others did not care. Owen made a space for surgery and prepared to cut into Lloyd's throat. But he did not need the knife. Color and respiration returned quickly enough. Doc Klein released the bright scalpel, unclenched his fists, and shrugged the tension out of his shoulders. He spoke softly. "He's back. Thank the merciful ..."

Perspiring, Doc Klein took Lloyd's pulse and blood pressure. He mumbled, "Too low." The patient sat up with help and requested, "Some water." For Owen Klein it was a bad case of *déjà vu*—an Ivan Kovrani replay.

"Boss, drink slow." Max handed Lloyd a glass half full of water. He handed him a towel. "Here ... and you'll need this too. You look and smell pretty bad."

Lloyd took a drink, wet the towel and attempted to clean up. His hair looked like the brush that had been dipped in nearly dry, black paint. In contact with the air Nrczxa's spittle had turned as thick as epoxy glue.

Bill remarked, "The man looks and smells like he's birthed a whale."

Each man took his brief turn with the towel.

Max asked crankily, "Is this the best we can do?"

Bill preferred his sleeve to the towel. He seemed to have an itch with no place to scratch. "Who'd have figured on this. We're gonna need a strong solvent ... some paint thinner to dissolve this gunk off."

He looked queerly at his hands. "Nothing is gonna work. Wiping only thickens it." Looking at Max, he opened his mouth to speak, but was struck suddenly dumb—the man finally connected with the facts of his predicament.

Max shivered, licked parched lips. His fixed and anxious eyes provoked an anxious question from Doc. "Max ... you sick? You look as if you're gonna puke your tonsils."

Max swallowed his urge to heave. He lowered himself to the technician's desk, leaned over with his hands on his knees. He did not tell them he could not feel his hands, his feet, or that he felt squeezed like a rubber ball. He did not tell them of the lump in his stomach like a clenched fist—a fist not his. The Doc, though concerned by Max's color, did not press the point.

After all, Owen was a trifle hurt. In Max's impulsive words he continued to practice his nostrums on Lloyd. He asked the man, "Any broken skin other than those mangled fingers and dinged up chin?"

"Hard to tell with all the snot or whatever the hell it is. Head and knee are the worst," complained the physicist. "Think the knee's finished ... no strength ... nothing left."

"We'll order you a new one." Owen checked Lloyd's arms, neck and face for puncture wounds. "Don't always bleed. I really need to know if you were bitten."

Lloyd croaked, "You saw those sabers. Think I wouldn't know if I was shiskebated ... think you'd have to ask?"

Max remained mute, though his pain had not eased. The odd distortion of his space he attributed to the shock of what they had done, of what they had seen. It was like gazing at the isocon through the wrong end of a kaleidoscope. Its walls and corners were too many

and too distant. There must have been hundreds of facets to the room as if the 'cell was a sparkling gem or a compound eye. He was seeing dimensions unseeable to man. He was somehow inside the queth of Lloyd's quex—the dyad formed from two quins or 5-d cubes. The panel lights rotated like comets around the sun. If the others noticed any distortion of their space or any comets in the consoles they kept this to themselves.

Owen wrapped Lloyd's knee. Bill remarked over his shoulder, "Doc ... you can't actually see what you're doing." Doc Klein looked up, and not intending it, he chirped in a manner suggestive of the pod in the other room. The others noticed, but kept this to themselves.

The twinkling navcon and biocon consoles provided Owen's only work light. Compared to the brilliance of the isocell the control room was as dark as a movie house.

Reminded of the explosion of the floodlights, Bill apologized, "Sorry about the floods. We thought they'd blind the thing long enough to ... to get you out."

Lloyd interrupted, "Good idea," he nodded sadly. "Worked on me. Still can't see. Good thing, I think."

Bill remarked, "You dodged the big one. I guess we're waiting to hear inspirational words ... something that scraps our eyebrows off the ceiling."

"Not now," cautioned Owen. He helped the man to his feet. "Lloyd ... how does that feel? The tape too tight? You capable of walking? I really think you should."

Lloyd hobbled with a Parkinsonian sway. His face could not conceal the pain. "Feeling bad," he finally admitted. He answered Owen, "I'm going to need a minute or two to collect myself. I must sit down. I'm—"

Bill consoled, "Not to worry, boss. None of us are feeling so good either. No apology needed."

Lloyd collapsed in a heap on the cot and curled into a ball. "We'll let him rest," said Owen, "but not too long. It doesn't feel right in here." He had to laugh at what he had said in spite of what was left of logic.

Bill stood with his back to the large pane of thick glass that separated the rooms. He said, "Agree with that," as he bumped into the glass, then turned to gaze into the chamber. Bill instinctively retreated as his eyes registered the sight. He collected himself and approached the window seemingly transfixed.

Max watched Bill, a man totally absorbed—displacing to another world, like the man becoming the dream. For Max, Bill was a disturbing, chilling sight, enough to ice the liver of the most devoted rationalist. This essence of alien rapture was perhaps the creature's most disturbing manifestation.

Bill kept muttering, "Maybe you should see—"

"I can't look," Max replied. "I'm fine right here."

Bill added, "Lloyd, I don't think this is what you wanted ... is exactly it. But exactly what is it?"

Lloyd replied self-pityingly, "Failure."

"You'll try again," predicted Max. "We may not, but you will. I know you'll try again ... and again ... and again ... until ... until the end is reached."

Owen blurted, "We really okay in here?"

Bill clasped his hand around his forty-five. "The wall, glass and the doors were designed to stand a five hurricane. I'd never understood the sense of it till now. You guys, I think, should come here for a look."

Owen reluctantly joined Bill standing near the glass partition. Standing bent back, but balanced, they looked like sprinters poised at the starting blocks for a run for the rear.

Owen said with disbelief, "It's preening like a cat."

Bill noted seriously, "That thing would de-wart my Aunt Martha."

"What ya suppose it weighs?"

"More 'n a big man ... more 'n me ... I'd guess."

Max cleared his throat. He contemplated the improbable sight beyond the barrier of intervening glass. In the dark he found it possible to convince himself that he sat safely in a theater gazing at a larger-than-life motion picture screen, pretending that it was only make-believe, the best in cinemagraphic effects and anything but real. Because his view was limited, was constrained and not the panoptoscope, this was not so hard. Safely behind the barrier, images could be received but repressed.

Owen wondered out loud, "Could we ... stop it?"

Bill grunted. He hardly knew. No one could know such things. Such things had not been tested.

The isocell was illuminated by four 1000-watt floods. The racks of electronic equipment were undisturbed. The dream couch and gurney had been overturned near the center of the room. Draped over the couch was a tangle of wires, Lloyd's connectors and facemask. In a corner near the anteroom door lay the brass key ring, the jade shamrock, and the remote control device. Not far away lay the gold ring with its quarvine crystal and a once green, once clean, woolen blanket.

Their attention was captured by what rested quietly near the blanket, near the quarvine, casually attending to unfathomable necessities, an inscrutable tangle of pods and armaments suitable for Max's make-believe.

Max's reaction to the creature was visceral. If describable in any terms it might be said to strike a brittle rapture. It felt like the cold, marble slab or the rigor in the neck, the rope

tightly bound. It was like tripping over a ripe corpse in the dark, a new one every night, and then finding out that you had reached the end of the line with no place to go but in the earth.

Max counted what might be its legs—four, six, then finally, he reached the number eight. Eight? What did it mean—the corners of a cube—the number of normal cubes in a quar—or the legs of the familiar group Arachnida?

Each leg ended in claws, multi-pronged and bright red. Much of its body was layered with fur, bluish or black, but almost any color was possible. The areas of fur were dotted with numerous, bald tubercles.

Given some scrutiny its body parts were familiar. Nrczxa possessed a large cephalothorax attached to a segmented and flexible abdomen. Her cephalothorax was protected with a heavy, horned carapace that seemed to render her invulnerable.

Supposing correct identification, her face held myriad parts—a mouth and beak, an extra set of small legs and impressive mandibles fitted with many saw teeth. Last and certainly not the least of which were her two, nine-inch, serrated sabers.

Bill made what was a reasonable assessment: “A gigantic, armored blackwidow? The mother of ‘em all.”

Owen offered, “Something between a spider and a scorpion. I’ve seen pictures ... in books, but—”

“It hardly matters,” said Max. “It’s deciding on a late night snack. Which one of us looks tasty?”

Owen made a medical observation. “It’s female and clearly pregnant.”

Their octapod carried a turgid and transparent egg sack beneath the abdomen, replete with a hundred or more green eggs. She sat back on her hind legs proudly displaying her green necklace.

Perhaps it was the widow’s jewels that had hypnotized them. Max’s rational self did not comprehend why they remained, why they did not bolt for relative safety outside the dome. But they did not bolt. He did not bolt. And though it was clear to him why they did not, it did not matter. It would not have mattered if it had mattered, for these men had no will they could call their own. Max’s brain knew this even if his legs did not. He was inexplicably immobilized, just like the others, hypnotized just like the others.

Bill mumbled, “I feel like I should sit down, but can’t. I feel like I should leave but can’t. It’s kind of like I’m here and not here at the same time. Strange.”

“She almost seems intelligent,” pondered Owen.

“I wonder what she thinks of us,” said Bill. He absentmindedly leaned against the windowpane and was startled almost to falling as though the glass had momentarily

disappeared. He anxiously pressed his palm against the pane. It pressed back like he knew it should. So what gave? Had anything but his nerve?

Owen noticed and asked, “You okay, Bill?”

“No worse than you,” he lied.

“It’s Lloyd’s *Panarachne Baumeri*,” offered Owen. You guys probably took no note, but I did. It’s like those *Megarachne Servinei* they found some time back ... those big fossils, but not nearly so big as this.”

Lloyd’s had closed his eyes. He managed, “She has names enough. No more. Make no more names for her.”

“What should we do?” asked Bill blankly. “Does anyone know?”

“That’s the good question. We’d better feed her before she feeds herself,” advised Owen.

“Feed her!” exclaimed Bill. “What? With what?”

“Bill, that’s your department. Please don’t screw up. Don’t want that on my conscience.”

“Doc ... you can’t be serious. What if her little darlings decide to hatch out?”

Owen prepared to leave. He thought he could do it, though there was an odd inertia of the mind as much as of the body. But could the others? They appeared inordinately weighted down. Owen attributed it to shock, a kind of psychic trauma. He thought it might work to get Lloyd going, the others moving, with a question, anything to distract them from the spell cast by P. Baumeri. “Lloyd, you feel like talking? Any idea where you were and why?”

“In Hell. Don’t know why. Maybe a case of ... oh ... forget it. Too tired. Won’t know more till after some rest. Maybe tomorrow I’ll have an answer.”

“Lloyd, I admit I’m pretty dumb when it comes to natural history,” droned Bill. “You know ... dodos and dinosaurs ... all that stuff. Never believed in any of it. But from what Max and I saw in the ‘scope you had to be scanning ancient history ... a million years ago ... at least. How could that happen? Max said the course vector was right on ... was okay.”

Surprised, Owen asked, “Can our Machine take us so far that we’d see dinosaurs? If I’m not mistaken dinosaurs died out around 65 million years ago.”

The old physicist answered plainly, “Our computer hasn’t the mnemonic capacity. You can forget that.”

“But four CICs were engaged for your scan at full power. That right, guys?”

Max nodded vigorously that Bill Hagerty was right.

Lloyd sat up, opened his eyes. “Four? Hmm? But that’s not possible. You make some mistake. Four CICs and I’d wouldn’t be seeing ancient history, I’d be a hard fossil in a heartbeat.”

The lump in Max’s belly grew progressively larger. It was moving up the alimentary canal. It was a hand soon to lift him up by his scruff. He kept this to himself.

Lloyd postulated, “Well ... even if the span of years is true, if it was millions of years, even four CICs couldn’t have contained that kind of paracube.”

“Then what did?” queried Owen. “Bill said they saw it. I know something about the LENS. I know we can increase our penetration of time for any parangle in one of two ways. We can add more CIC memory, which enlarges our receiving window. Or we can provide more OnNet memory ... more Nettie. It’s the amplification by the latter that increases the aperture of space. I think I’m right. Perhaps both together might have done it ... provided sufficient focusing power.”

“Doc ... that’s as true as the spot we’re in. But even with both, we would not have had enough mnemonic power. We’d need a thousand Machines. We don’t have a thousand.”

“Then who does? Where’d we get that sort of power? What’s the answer? There’s got to be an answer.”

“Pines’ Roost and some sleep. Worry plenty tomorrow.”

Bill remembered, and said with as much humor as he had left: “Boss, you should be worrying about your house key. It’s inside the ‘cell ... with her. You goin’ in for it?”

“My house key wasn’t on Joy’s (nearly inaudible) ring.”

“Then please say it wasn’t mine you tossed in with her.”

“It was Joy’s jade and my master remote ... the one that let’s me in my office ... plus opens the compulab ... and all the isochambers.”

Max looked at Lloyd incredulously. “So that’s it,” he exclaimed. “I knew there was something else.”

Bill turned toward Nrczxa resting peacefully. He sputtered, “Those damned buttons can open every door in the place ... and from either side. So why are we here jawing and standing around like four, old ladies?”

“For ‘cell four,” explained Owen, “she’d have to depress the button four times. There’s no chance that bug, smart or not, could manage a trick like that.”

Lloyd struggled to his feet. “I wouldn’t want to bet what’s left. And we can’t change the codes without Larry or Julia. It might be a good idea to padlock the outer door and get out of here ... fast.”

Bill reported, “I’ll need a real lock. That piece of shit on chamber one is only for show. It wouldn’t hold back a gentle breeze much less a ... and I don’t have another handy ... and at this hour it could take some time.” He added despondently, “You think we have it?”

Max asked sourly, “So what’s the verdict now, Mr. Hagerty? Pinch yourself. Is this a bad dream or just a badass case of reality?”

“I know one thing. Once that door is locked I’m not coming back to feed, to coddle, or to change her friggin’ blanket.”

“Bill ... I’ll tell you what I think,” shouted Max. “I think that creature in there could give a shit about what you think ... could give less than an old widow’s fart about all of our gadgets. Why do you think ...” He stopped. Suddenly red of face, he grabbed his chest.

Bill blurted, “What’s happened to the air in here? I can’t get m’ breath. The HVAC must be shutting things down.”

It was as if all the air had been sucked out.

The computers winked. The navcon and biocon dimmed. The already weak isocon lights followed the computers to their fate. Oddly, the isocell floodlights remained fully lit.

As the four men gawked, the intervening wall and window of the isocell shimmered like a mirage, faded, then recovered a few more times before it disappeared altogether. Every molecule of their glass and stone barrier, a wall strong enough to withstand a force-five hurricane, had suddenly and completely vanished before their eyes.

Bad knees, CICs, locks and keys were just as instantly forgotten. The four men stood and stared at the weaver across that empty space. It was like gazing through the right end of a very powerful telescope.

The Timeshaper, Nrczxa, grew larger, thickening her possibility space. She multiplied her size many-fold revealing a Juggernaut—an air breathing, earth-treading monster dripping from the mouth. She soon towered over them, swaying from side to side as if measuring them for a pine box.

Their machines were as puny as their minds. The biped’s cumbersome receiver should have been more help. It had taken all her strength to punch through. For a moment she had considered making a quick meal of old Silverhair, but the frail beast would have tasted like parched pozzle horn or possibly much worse.

Luckily, she had ingested several, young tussels before undertaking her long and arduous journey. The tussels, dried and dipped, she had taken from her waning stores. The few remaining Sorel that dined on fresh flesh would regret it. It was too late for them.

But it was not too late for her or for her seeds. She had rested long enough. It was now time for work.

Nrczxa rose. She stretched. She thickened. She tested her kinetic, kyr power for the long ordeal ahead.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Just Two Things

The Ides of March, the Early Morning Hours

His mind was in shambles. His memories could not be trusted. Nothing these days could be trusted. It seemed that an eternity had been crammed into just three days. Things were broken. Things had spilled out. No one, perhaps save one, could fix them or put them back. Max hoped he was wrong, prayed he was wrong. Lloyd thought that he was. But of course, Max was terribly afraid that he was not.

Though perhaps addled, and certainly exhausted, he cajoled and begged. And had the lady been herself, the woman he knew, a creature of the light, and not the dark, the tough and clear-minded Julia, it might have been easier. But she was not, any more than he was himself, or any of them were really themselves—now or ever again.

He had been on the visicom with her for but a few minutes. It felt like a week. Max was alone in the Red Room. At least he believed he was alone, but who could really know. The room wasn't even red. It was gray like his face, his future, and claustrophobic like the belly of a submarine. At least the call to Julia was a kind of surfacing, coming up for air and light. Who knew how long he must languish inside his dark cell. He inquired hurtfully, "So ... what have I not told?"

She fired back: "My god, man. His name ... his name. You have not revealed in your own lofty words, the paraclete of Lloyd's panigma."

"I'm sorry, but this is the one question I have promised not to answer ... for now at least ... not even for you."

Max readjusted his visiview, zoomed in close.

She knelt on her bed beneath the stars, nude, but for a sheer, yellow top that she held together with a clenched fist. He had roused her from a troubled sleep. She tried to cover up as best she could as she inquired, "Then tell me what to ask that you would answer."

His eyes reflected a time faraway, their first meeting at Los Alamos. He responded, "I know you are upset with me. I am upset with myself. Many things have happened. Most I've told you, for we are friends. We do what friends can do. The things I don't tell you, I don't tell you out of friendship. My dear Julia ... there have been terrible mistakes."

There came a deep rattle from her throat, then the words: "Mistakes? Outrageous! This is more than I can bear. It's me you're telling this. Damn it, Max, we're on a runaway train with no earthly brake. Perhaps if you'd been honest and not so manipulative ..."

“Julia ... I’ve tried ... please listen.”

“How about you? I’d cry, but I’m too dry. I’ve no tears left. They trickle in the gutter, commingle with the cobblestones. I’ve been there ... down low with all the sinkers and crawlers that welter in the muck. There is one lower, more foul, an unfaithful lover that aspires to wretchedness. I’ve been smooched, but even this was not the worst.”

“Yes, in your nightmares. But you were not really within its lethal grasp ... I mean ... in close ... in tight like the four of us.”

“No ... in close like me ... at arm’s length. But have you been as close as you think ... as close as you should to what is really at stake?”

“I’ve been close enough to taste its fetid breath ... close enough that my eyes and nose ran fast like spigots.”

“That’s not so close. The nostrils are braver than the neck. It’s not under your skin ... inside your craw.”

“Under a skin ... and inside a craw not mine. Any closer and I’d need a eulogist to plead the case. But I’ll not recount my fears ... the bitter facts ... of bug whickers found in my bed. I’ll only say my walls are not enough. Even these gray walls are not so safe. I cannot exhort the darkness out ... outside where dark belongs.”

“This is not a contest and is getting us nowhere.”

“True, but I don’t think you understand. We have her now. She’s ours.”

“She’s yours! More than you can know.”

“That’s why I need you. You know how to put things back where they belong.”

“And where’s that?” A pause. “Besides ... I’ve done too much putting back already.”

“I don’t mean to sound as if I know what you’ve been through. But I know what I’ve been through. Julia, these horrors ... they’re all nails from the same nightmare.”

“My God! I’m finished. Why aren’t you? Why aren’t you satisfied? Why isn’t Lloyd finally satisfied?”

“I told you this last one was too much. He may yet lose more than he has gained. As for myself, this is for me and me alone to live with. I accept it.”

With long, delicate fingers she absentmindedly stroked and smoothed the knot that bound her neck. She shook loose the tangles from her hair. From a pose of tragic disappointment, Julia bemoaned, “I thought I knew you ... could count on you when it counted.”

“You know I’m weak. I’ve not your courage.”

Her eyes, even over the visicom, dissected him. She hissed, “Courage ... my sour tears. You are corrupt in the final accounting.”

“Who of us is really so pure? You knew what was up or as you say ‘down.’ You speak of close, but you maneuvered to maintain insulation ... enough to maintain immaculation.”

The woman rose, unpinning her sculpted thighs. She stretched to reach the skylight. “You bastard! I never would have expected that shit from you. That was low ... cruel.”

“I know,” he said.

“But you don’t ... you don’t really know. You’ve not felt your heart bleed ... had your lungs burst. Look into your heart, not in your head if you want to see the black recluse.”

He wilted magnificently. “That’s the final nail.” He paused to taste his dry lips. “I deserved that. But you? You’ve helped us every step ... low or not ... cruel or not.”

She snapped back, “Does Lloyd know all I’ve done?”

“I know all you’ve done. I’m now putting it back on you. The question is ... will you help us again ... be counted when it counts ... before it’s too late? The danger you know. You say you do.”

Julia remembered. She switched off her video controller’s nearside link or she thought she had. In the dark and in her fog she had only inactivated the visicom’s nearside viewing window. She asked sullenly, “Where are you now?”

“Can’t tell you that either.”

“What is this crap? You can’t tell me anything.”

“Believe me, you are safer not knowing, safer where you are. We need you where you are. Julia ... you can do it. He knows you can. There are just two things that you must do ... just two ... one’s the evil dyad of the quins... the other’s the essence of the apocalypse.”

Unabashedly, she stretched thinking that Max could no longer visually connect. But she was wrong. Her visual equipment was still sending provocative images across a gap of perhaps ten miles. This she could not know. “Where is he? Is he okay?”

“At East County General ... intensive care ... no visitors.” Max had looked away as if he had said too much. Julia zoomed in for a better appraisal of his puckered face. She knew it lied.

“I should depend on this man for my safety? Why?”

“But he’s mapped the time and space. The connection is there. They are one. We are now sure of it. I know it sounds crazy, but does happen ... more than you know. You could prove it yourself ... if you’d only use the LENS.”

She rose to her knees, gripped them, swayed from side to side. This reminded Max of something best forgotten—the tantalizing, tarantella dance he had seen only days ago from the dome basement and isocon four.

“No chance of that,” she spat. “You know it. It’s not worth it ... a chance in a billion. Your schemes will fail.” Her face contorted. She clasped her thigh in a painful paroxysm. She slid across the bed, over the lavender sheets like a wounded angel shot from the stars. She put one foot over the side, firmly to the floor, to relieve the sudden and agonizing muscle cramp.

The gracile woman rose effortlessly on one leg. Max was shocked she was so brazen. He swallowed a lump that was melon-ripe to burst. He watched enraptured. She arched her back before stooping low in a dreamlike performance of power.

In the lustrous light she was the icon of an Amazon queen. Her waist, then a knee, she bent—her heel touching her behind. She clasped her hands firmly upon the latter. Her chestnut hair fell supplely from her shoulder to the table by her bed. She tilted lower and lower, tilted back her head, and asserted with comely exasperation, “You cannot win against this ... the thinnest of possibilities.”

It dawned on her. His silence might have done it. She checked the machine, but did not flip the video to off. She said, “Sorry ... did not think I was sending.” Julia stepped out of the range of the visicom, returned covered in her lavender, terry robe. She sat in a chair by the round bed, crossing self-consciously her legs.

Recovering from his rapture, Max urged in a less than reassuring voice, “Julia, you can do it, but you must go there. I don’t like asking you this, but there’s really no other way. I can’t go. Lloyd can’t go. Only you can do these things.”

“A lot of transformations and interfaces I’ve never attempted before.”

He suggested, “Henry can help you.”

“Henry? Max, you can’t be serious. He won’t. He wouldn’t, even if he believed any part of it.”

“Tell him what you can ... tell him what you must to convince him. He must help you with the dyad.”

“I’ll ask him to assist me. Crazy, but this is the one time he won’t.” She looked away.

“Yes ... the couch. Well ... the dream you must manage for yourself. But it must be done. We must know the facts, though no one alive is going to help you with it ... not even Henry. I’m afraid you’re on your own. You know it. I know it. But please be mindful of the powerful contingency field. It was Hagerty’s bright idea to kill the heat and lights ... that this would somehow weaken the field source ... a faint hope. Julia ... I wish I could offer you more help.”

“Enough! You’re suddenly so cooperative. Okay, I’ve heard what you’ve had to say ... so what about this unlikely dyad connecting the darkness with the light?”

“I only know from Lloyd that the Light Pump is possible and can be reversed. I also know that only you can do it. Then we will have it when we need it. And we’ll need it. I’m sure that we will need it. You know what is at stake.”

“We’ll never find the power ... for a probability so low, for a paraspace so large. You know that we must capture and hold more than a dyad of two quars, more than a dyad of two quins. We must contain the entire quex ... manipulate twelve quins ... twelve, 5-d cubes ... not two. To hold the quex long enough for any reasonable Eulerian maneuver would require enormous mnemonic power. Nettie’s mind doesn’t have it ... nor mine.”

“Normally, you would be right. However, Lloyd’s convinced this one is special, a most unique pair. It is a dyad with one quin inside the other, and so tightly connected that both are almost one. One quin must track the other. Tilt one and you will tilt the other. And you have the LENS catapult. Use the momentum of the past to launch the future. I saw the quex myself. If small enough to be seen, Nettie should find the power. And if Henry won’t help you, there is another one ... how should I say ... that would. But you must try. You must find the conviction and the courage. If you don’t this curse will never end.”

She offered, “The posicube part we might manage, though there is no guarantee as you’ve found out. But the articulated anticube is not the same at all. This light pumping is beyond our capability. There is no proof that this sixth dimension, that any part of this quex can be revealed much less contained.”

“But there’s Lloyd’s data from the Timothy Corrit scan?”

“That data is inconclusive ... mostly hash. Oh ... his theory’s fine ... on paper. Always is.”

“But there’s the Holman scan too. You—”

“That data too is incomplete. I’ve learned a few things. I’ve learned everything’s fine on paper ... sums up fine on paper. Posicube plus anticube equals the dyad. Conservation of paraspace always works just fine on paper. I’d just like to see this paper. Where the hell is it? Where was this paper three days ago when you —?”

“Julia, this time, for this dislocation you will see the paper. You will see both quins. We just need a bit more activation power for the required LENS containment.”

“Quite a bit. I’d soon not be around for that.”

“Naturally,” suggested Max, “you should arrange for yourself an adequate margin of time and space.”

Max saw the flash of temper in her purbrown eyes. She replied sarcastically, “Might also doctor-in a little of Faust’s thinspace while I’m at it ... enough to kill the pain. Might just tempt Henry back to his attic nightmare.”

“Well ... I’d hoped he’d see the light, and that it’s not warp fold. I shouldn’t have to tell you not to run F3 or the Gate. Hardly need to tell you of that nasty window preamp. Of course you won’t go that far.”

Julia rose—their sultry queen of the LENS. In a fit she kicked away the flimsy yellow gown she had dropped too near her feet. “Going back inside is not going that far! And this dream of all things. Max, think of what you ask. You know. You were there inside the cell with the stench of a death possibly your own.”

He looked into her eyes so far away. “I do not have the right. I do not have the right to even ask.” His eyes pleaded. “It’s too much ... I know, but ask I must. I have no earthly choice.”

“And on top of everything ... you ask me to consummate this dyad ... a translocation ... it would be nuts or even worse to even try.”

“Lloyd’s betting everything on it ... on the irony of it ... on the justice of it ... but most especially on the nuts of it. Help us. Help us send things back ... set things right.”

“Max ... you say there is very little time.”

“None or even less. The intellect we face is busy. Julia, you must send the beast to Hell.”

“Max, I think it may be you that does not understand. No matter what we may do, or do not do, we could never change a thing. There’s a beast for every hell and a hell for every beast. And it’s the Light that makes this so.” She terminated the visicom, near and far, this time successfully, this time convinced of her error, this time convinced of her course.

*Henry Kincaid’s La Sierra Apartment
That Same Wednesday Morning*

He was wrung to semiconsciousness by a rancorous clangor that flayed tender nerves. While the bed spun merrily he rose slowly. He clicked on the bed lamp. He retrieved and spoke into his old phone placed on a table near his pillow.

“Wha ... ya want?” he barked.

A low, sensual voice answered, “You, fine sir.”

“This a gag?”

“Hardly. And right now I require *Homo sapiens*, not *Homo erectus*,” the voice replied sweetly.

“Julia!” he groaned as he fell back on the bed. “It’s you.”

“Yes, your fellow inmate from the asylum. Sorry to wake you, but it’s something that couldn’t wait. I just received a disturbing call from the frantic friar.”

Another voice from far away warned that he should brace. He attempted to rub the sleep from his eyes. He activated the speaker, returned the receiver to its cradle and asked politely, “What time is it?”

She liltingly replied, “That’s much better.”

Henry apologized, “Sorry that I yelled at you. You feeling any better? You see Doc Langer ... your nerves check out okay?”

“Not really, Henry. But that’s another story for another time. You said you wanted to know the time.”

He sneezed, then cried, “Oh ... my aching head.”

“Celebrating? If it will help it’s nearly five A.M. The stars are out. I can see them from my satin sheets ... a beautiful, spring night in El Rasigo ... but elsewhere—”

“Couldn’t it have waited? Besides ... the Lab is closed. And I’m on rest and rehab. By the way, so are you.” He reminded, “You need it even more than me.”

“It’s not so easy. To escape the hangman we must step through his one-way trap.”

He casually stroked his two-day beard. “I thought this had to do with Max. You’re making even less sense than usual. Your visit to Langer was obviously no help to you at all.”

“Henry, try clearing out your head. I’ve had mine flushed with a fire hose. I’ve something to tell you. This is no fun for me either.”

“I know. I know. Let’s have it.”

“According to Max there’s been an accident at the Lab. Apparently Lloyd was scanning at a few billion terabytes when things went south.” A pause. “You hear me?”

His alarm bell sounded, albeit dull and distant. “A parascan ... what’s happened? How badly hurt?”

“Bad ... hospitalized ... horse needles and hot catheters ... an electrode up the kazoo.”

“Julia, this makes no sense. The isochambers were off limits pending a complete CFID report. Their report wasn’t due till next week.”

“But a preliminary version came in Saturday night ... a real bad report. Weren’t you told anything?”

He exhaled. “Why should they? I only work there. What kind of bad report? The shit in the papers these days is bad enough ... and now a ... a Lab accident.”

“We may wind up in the news ourselves. You know that Klein had suffered a brainstorm. He had called Moss. Saturday they had ordered a shutdown of the facility pending a final recommendation from the Feds. The way the story goes the dome was padlocked early on

Sunday by our Four Horsemen ... all with Dr. Kovrani's consent by the way. It seems our Gallic shaman was infested with certain critters ... fleas gut-full of a bacillus of pandemic infamy. Supposedly this is all spelled out someplace in writing ... if you can believe it."

"A report in less than a day?" Then loudly, "Wait! Hold on just a goddamned minute," he croaked. "Are you talking about the Black Death? You are ... damn it!"

"That's right my boy. You need to see a doc? You feeling a little bad? Have a smidgen of a fever? I can get you a comfy cot next to Lloyd."

He flopped down on his king-sized bed. "Jesus H. Christ ... we were in there with it. Did you touch anything?"

"Only the dagger ... and Ivan," she lied.

He struggled to think. "I guess we're okay. That was weeks ago. If exposed we'd be worm food by now. But why would Lloyd be scanning? I thought you said the Panopticon was locked up."

"That was their story about an hour ago. Besides ... if Lloyd did the locking up, he can do the unlocking, fire up the Machine whenever he wants. Max was evasive about the details. He claimed he told me all he should ... all friends could."

"This gives me a pain. Where did they take him?"

"To East County General. He's not responding. And I'm not responding. I'm sick of this. Every day is worse than the one before. Like to know what I think?"

"I'm sure you think it's pure bullshit."

"Actually that's not entirely true. I do believe there's been an accident ... but something perhaps a bit more pandemic than a plague or LENS trauma."

"Okay. We'll drive down to East County and find out for ourselves."

"I called the hospital after I spoke with Max."

Another pause. "Okay. So ... no Lloyd Baumer?"

"Very good! That's right. East County has no record of any of this. And Owen Klein's not checked in for days."

"No mistake ... Julia? Another name ... another hospital?"

"I checked both Drew and Malbridge. As to phony names, I can't discount it, but using the criteria of reasonableness I think we've reached our threshold limit."

"And you've dialed their homes ... O'Flattery's."

“And continue to do so as we speak. Well ... not that beer joint of course, but any place logical. Only the roar of silence out there, Henry.”

“They’ve really put the pickle in it. We’ll meet at the Lab, bugs or no bugs. It’s important to review the logs before they get lost in the usual protocols.”

“Henry ... I don’t expect there will be any cookie crumbs ... or bloody footprints in the corridors.”

“You never know. Even the best of them makes mistakes. I’ll need some time ... about an hour.”

“Did I hear you say thirty minutes? I may need your help just getting into the building. The place may be cordoned off ... barricaded. And I’ll want you to scrutinize the tensor data. I may require your ... your inspiration ... your remarkable lucidity after all.”

“I thought you said ... wait ... do you actually know where to find them?”

“I might.” She reached down and terminated the call.

Outside the Institute at 5:47 A.M. that same Morning

Wilbur Conovar looked surprised and apprehensive as she drove up to his security shack. She could feel it immediately—the noose tightening around their frail necks. So apparently could Wilbur, his face bloodless.

He asked gravely, incredulously, “Miss Moffett ... you going in? I don’t think you should ... you know.”

“I have to ... Wilbur. We had some serious trouble here last night.”

“I know. A county ambulance roared out o’ here ‘bout three this morning. Miss Moffett ... I’m here by myself. I can get a hold of no one ... no one, I say.”

“Who were they? Do you know?”

“It was Hagerty with Doc Baumer ... some others. They left in a goddamned hurry. And some guys parked out on the circle left when they did. Then ... for the past two hours there’s been queer happenings. Calls to my kiosk. But they rudely hangs up. And lots o’ system problems inside ... on my main board. Real queer. Stuff flips off and on like there’s a short somewhere.

“Then ‘bout an hour ago this big, gray van shows up. He just sits there outside the gate. When I comes out he drives off a little, stops a second ‘fore he drives away. Then just before you pulls up I see ‘im again ... roarin’ by like some serious nut. Hell’s tarnation ... Miss Moffett ... what’s goin’ on in there. You gotta try ‘n’ understand one thing. I’m out here by myself. Don’t know nothing neither ... nothing ‘bout none of this.”

“I know what you mean. What do you know about the quarantine? I hear it’s been lifted.”

“No one said a thin’ ‘bout its bein’ lifted. I’ve been told to stay out. But if you really want ta go in I’m not gonna stop ya. But if it was me—”

“I don’t want to, Wilbur. It’s my job to check things out ... you know ... the computers. Will my I.D. card work?”

“Sure. But be careful in there. According to my panel the systems are down ... both lights and heat. I’m not real sure what’s workin’ ... what ain’t ... er why. I was told to stay out here ... and I guess that’s what I’m doin’. I wish Mr. Hagerty’d call me back.”

“I’m going to park my car. Then I’m going down to the compulab for a while. The backup lights okay?”

“Batteries? Yeah ... maybe ... I think so far. But Miss Moffett.”

“Yeah ... Wilbur.”

“I’m leavin’ soon. Then you’re on your own.”

“Nothing new. But Dr. Kincaid should be here in a few minutes to help me with the computers. I’ll yell if I need anything. Will you hear?”

“Yep ... yell. I should hear ya okay. I’ll switch on the compulab. But Miss Moffett ...”

“What’s that, Wilbur?”

“You’ve got balls. Oh ... I’m sorry,” he gushed, as the red blood returned to his round and beefy face.

Inside the Institute at 5:55 A.M. that same Morning

What Wilbur had said about dome systems was true. The primary and emergency lights, security cameras, plus the other basics were out of service or limping along seriously substandard. Julia negotiated the stairs and corridors, quickly bypassed the chambers to arrive at the compulab, the main control center for the Panopticon.

The critical processors, Minerva and Nettie, were operating. She sensed the enormity, the seed that had grown steadily, nurtured by Jean Phillips and Lester Holman, but sewn by another. They would find out more soon enough. Harvest day would arrive soon enough.

She thought about the dream couch and shivered. The air was brisk for the light dress she wore, but it was all she had available at such short notice. The perusal of the OnNet would help her forget these and other mundane matters, some under her sight, some not. Setting aside her oversights, Julia pondered the cold hardware and the coldly logical Minerva.

Minerva was a blinking cabinet like Nettie’s twin OHMs. But Nettie’s vast forebrain was remarkably different. Julia looked down, through the clear Lucinite—at the labyrinth of biochemically-grown neurodendrites, tucked cryptically inside the once empty plenum—

the neurostratum between the basement and subbasement. The biomass extended across the entire diameter of the building—an organic brain weighing at least a thousand tons, its microtessera inconvenienced only now and then by stairwells and utility conduits.

Julia stood uncertainly over its eerie emanations. If she stood very still she might feel, might even hear the nourishing flow of the bioelectrients. Nettie purred like a big cat. It was as compelling as the bioluminescence that rose from the billions of tiny bits beneath her feet. Unfortunately, Julia lacked the time for further pondering, further introspecting.

She took a seat in front of the Light Shell console, concentrating as well as she could. For the present she would have to forget Max and his requests. She would have to collect and compare data from the last three parascans. Would Minerva talk to her as she talked to Minerva, as Minerva talked to Nettie, as Nettie talked to Pandora? She went to work.

Julia meticulously fitted together the fragments. There were no panoptographs of Lloyd's three scans. This was no surprise and fine with her. She had had more than enough of the panoptoscope. There were no logs to check—no real surprise either given what she knew of Lloyd's tidiness.

The Panigma Button had activated to erase the AI interpreter. Nice and neat, but this only made her detection a little more difficult, not impossible, for she had planted and activated the perfect cyber spy, unflagging, unwavering, impersonal and hack-invisible.

Her work was suddenly interrupted by shouting from above. To break her concentration it had to be a real donnybrook. She engaged the first floor cameras. Most did not work. She did connect with Wilbur's kiosk, but there was no sign of Wilbur.

The lobby camera helped locate the disturbance—Ivan, Leonard, Henry and Wilbur bitterly embroiled. Julia told herself to ignore them. Henry would have to deal with it. But she observed Ivan emaciated like a Holocaust victim and could no longer ignore. This was the price of Henry's inopportunity and her uncertainty. She could see his anguish. Dealing with Ivan Kovrani and Leonard Moss under the best of circumstances was no treat.

The altercation eventually ended. Leonard and Ivan left hurriedly. Wilbur returned to the womblike security of his kiosk while Julia returned to her work. Time passed.

Henry entered the lab. He tossed his overcoat indifferently on Minerva. Julia removed it, carefully rearranged it over an inactive bio-tester. She returned to her blinking console slightly miffed. The amount of actual equipment in the compulab—what one would recognize as equipment was paltry—the core analyzers and mobile workstations scattered few and far between. The lab was mostly empty space and that quar-green glow that toiled tirelessly beneath their feet.

"Ah ... you made it. If you had been on time you would've avoided old Moss and Mire," she said testily.

"Doubt it," he exclaimed. "They'd have been down here bombarding us both with all the whats, whys and why nots." He shivered and groaned, "Ohhh ..."

She morbidly answered, “Down here ... not likely.”

Henry paced back and forth, peering now and again at the microtessera glowing like luminous plankton in a warm and swarming sea at night. “Hmm ... maybe you’re right. Other than the dark, the cold ... you notice anything peculiar? Maybe, when you first came into—”

“It’s bright enough in here. Is it Nettie’s glow that’s bothering you? She’s busily burning bytes. She works like the devil while we sleep.”

“And dream ... but I think I know that. No ... I was talking about the air.” He re-sniffed. “It’s bad ... like—”

“A morgue ... with its pungent formaldehyde odor ... that kind of comes and goes.”

“That’s it exactly. It must come from the vents. It’s everywhere. Could be electrical ... or maybe a problem with the coolant system or—?”

“Want to check out the gear below ... the motor switches (chuckling) and the controls in the subbasement?”

“Nope ... not on your life. Too dark to go down there. Besides ... there’s nothing pending on the big board. No ... I’m thinking it’s our space. Does that make any sense at all?”

“What about it? You think it’s thinning or thickening? Henry, you losing your grip? Is reality kind of slipping away? Ya wanna see Doc Langer for his infamous back-flush?”

He stared at her, into her brown-lilac eyes, at her scant, tight-fitting, purple dress. Julia held tightly to his gray eyes as he bemoaned, “Until you said that it hadn’t dawned on me. But damn it, I think that’s what I feel. It feels like I’m in the attic again. Like I might be crushed by all the space inside it ... or me. Why should I feel this now ... in here?”

“Easy. Look around you. It’s a chronic case of six A.M. nerves.”

“Someone’s trying to tell us something.”

“Think so? I suppose it’s not that our clearances are up for government renewal.”

“We’ll be cleared all right. Maybe we’ll be cancelled like a bad play.”

“Look around you. I would not be surprised.”

“Julia, I must tell you, tell someone ... that everywhere I look I’m imagining things that should not be ... like those little sticky notes on everything ... words and pictures glowing in the dark. I cannot make any sense of these tingling ... and flickering suspicions.”

“I guess not. But let’s get to work. Get your mind off feeling sorry for yourself. Kovrani and Moss have anything important to say?”

This sounded another alarm. He asked, “Did you see him?”

She confirmed, “Looks as if he needs a priest, one that moonlights in demonology.”

“I hardly recognized him. He rambled about Lloyd. Some kinda guilt trip. You’d think he was responsible for every farce and fiasco since the Creation itself. He’d like a detailed accident report.” Henry harrumphed.

She nervously tapped her foot. “So would I.”

“Thought you’d have it figured eight ways from Sunday by now. Any quanta left inside those brilliant CPUs and burning tesserae?” With his hands resting on her shoulders he peered at the complex data arrays displayed on the big tube. He harrumphed again as she pointed at the bluish screen. “That one is indeed quite queer,” he admitted.

“You can see I found a tensor ... or the stress tensor, the big boy himself, plus a little of this and that.”

“I’ll tell Ivan that is our report ... a little of this and that. He’ll be sorely disappointed. He wants to know the aperture ... and window preamp ... if both were within tolerable limits. After a short pause, he added, “Hmm ... I’d like to see that first one again. If we’re to re-aim and re-fire that big boy, we better have damn big piece of artillery.”

She let his anxious hands linger upon her shoulders. It calmed him, helped him to forget his jangling nerves. He was especially vulnerable, especially needful of a little human touching. She knew there could be complications. Perhaps it was the only way to get his mind out of the dim attic and into the light no matter how weak.

Julia relocated the first spin tensor and stated, “Lloyd’s condition, from what I know, would indicate that the CIC limits were just a smidgen intolerable.”

“That’s what I told Moss. I hope he keeps an eye on Ivan. We could wake up tomorrow and see our names splashed across the front page.”

“Could happen. But forget about those two. You learn anything more about Lloyd’s condition?”

He nodded that he had not. She displayed another tensor, plus more arcane data on the screen. She uncrossed her legs invitingly, less than absentmindedly.

As he bent over the console her honeysuckle hair lightly brushed his torrid cheek. She was electric, an inexhaustible capacitor sucking the power from the room, all the poisons from inside him. Though it felt wonderful he had to stop and think. He returned to his nervous pacing, prattling rapidly like a child. Finally, he concluded with, “Julia, sorry I was late.”

She jotted down a few numbers in her notebook. “Yeah,” she said as she turned to face him, her large eyes layered in brown and purple panigma.

He could not avoid these perplexing layers. “I made some calls,” he acknowledged. “But no one’s out there. And East County says they haven’t seen Dr. Klein for at least two weeks. They wanted to know if I knew anything about our doctor. That one’s a laugh. I don’t know shit from shoe polish about any of this.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “Their story has me standing on my toes. I’ve tuned in Nettie’s tesserae, but still can’t see over the pile of poop.” But in fact Julia had tuned in more than software. She had tuned in a tensor as far from Nettie’s tesserae as she could get. Julia had imprudently conjured a burgeoning beast, a hooded ram by deliberate intent.

Henry feigned serious concentration, clasping his hands behind his back, shaking questioningly his head as if lost in arcane mathematics and not her honeysuckle.

“What’s Nettie’s condition?” he inquired. “That last tensor could not be right ... not in a million years.”

She shrugged. “Most of the system is okay. The C and D files are voluminous, but not very helpful. The interpreter is gone ... cleaned like a Christmas goose by the ONSI, if you believe the message log. But I will say—”

“My enchantress, who could stop you?” He self-consciously turned away, peered down perhaps at Nettie’s ethereal glow.

“That’s right. You never could. But I’m talking about Lloyd. He’s no slouch ... an artist even. He should consider the career opportunities now available in the lucrative field of encryption algorithms.”

He stood in front of the door gazing into the bleary, but flickering corridor. He lingered awhile seemingly lost in deep thought, then returned with a frown. “Taking shots,” he jibbed. “Why should Lloyd’s neatness surprise you?”

“It doesn’t. I realize the man knows the system backwards and forwards. Well, maybe not forwards,” she said with sly reference to the anticube’s elusive negative algebra.”

He inverted his frown dispassionately as if he was inverting one of his numerical arrays. “The only surprise is that he would attempt to conceal anything from the great one.”

“I guess that’s it,” she said, swiveling nervously in her swivel chair. “It kind of rankles my pride when I’m not barfing my prunes.”

She looked up at him expectantly with eyes like antennae. She seemed to be reading him, knowing what he was going to say as if she had lived this moment once before.

His face assumed a new expression, neither a grin nor a frown, but that “I know something that you don’t” look of annoying and irritating smugness.

She folded her bare arms, fetchingly crossed her tawny legs. “What’s with your goofy face?” she asked feigning amusement at his misplaced mettle. She had made up her mind, though he missed the subtle change, the ignition of a decision in her violet-brown eyes.

He asked, “Did you check out the chambers on your way in?”

“I leave them alone. The log documented some SBI problems in cell four. Didn’t think it required my attention. Wasn’t planning a nap, though I surely need a dreamless one.”

“Well ... I snuck a quick peek. Thought I might find some clues ... Lloyd’s doodles on a scrap of paper ... a revealing note or printout. Who knows?”

“Bloody footprints leading down the corridor?”

“My dear Julia, you never know till you look.”

“Well, Sherlock, don’t keep me in suspense. You have such a silly look on your face that I can hardly control myself.” She swiveled provocatively—near to prancing in her seat. Henry was reminded of a youthful gazelle that could not control its nervous energy.

“Do you remember which chamber was quarantined by our microphobic doctor?” he asked.

“Klein? Yeah ... it was *numero uno*. Your turn Mr. Rathbone, sir.”

“If you had troubled yourself you’d have seen that cells one and four are barricaded and padlocked. How about that ... not just one ... but now number four.”

“That’s interesting, but not why we’re here.”

He angled toward her indecisively. “No?” he inquired pensively. “Don’t you think we should have a gander inside isocam four?”

“You would break into a room that’s padlocked ... probably ‘cause there’s a damned-good reason.”

“Yeah ... I mean no. I thought we’d use the security camera. I’ll admit I’m curious about it.”

She answered quickly, “Tried it. Chamber four’s will run okay. But the rooms are pitch black. Can’t activate the lights. Can’t see a bloomin’ thing. Any other bright ideas, Sherlock?”

He stood above her. He took hold of her swivel chair, playfully rotating it several rapid turns until she was elevated conveniently higher. “If no bright ideas then I guess we will have to break in. You too dizzy for a little excitement? Hmm, am I boring you?”

She winked bewitchingly—the queen of an unseen, unknown realm. “Sir ... you are unnecessarily modest. You are a charming, exciting character indeed.”

“I’m serious,” he scolded as he braced her chair under the rim of the desk. Then, he braced himself. “We’ll get the guard, what’s-his-name, to help us.”

“Will we,” she responded, “get what’s-his-name to help?”

He bent and took a gentle hold of her narrow waist. She held her knees against his chest. Her purple dress rode higher upon her hips. Obstacles were slowly parted under pressure. “You would stroll in there with your hands in your pockets?” she asked bemused.

She checked the contents of his pockets as he reminded her of the location of his hands. He asked, “Do we have a choice? What’s-his-name has a gun. I’ll tell him to meet us there with his bolt cutters ... and his gun.”

“And yours?” she whispered submissively. “Will you meet mine with yours? Sir, this is crazy. This is no time for diversions in the dark. Would you admit that?”

A pen rolled from her lap. Metal clinked shrilly against the Lucinite floor. She suggested, “You should remember that stress tensor, and when you take aim, carefully confirm both the parangle and the aperture. I humbly remind you there are threshold limits.”

From the doorway came the call: “What are you guys doing?”

Tony Mirigliano sauntered in, uncombed, unshaved, and obviously unexpected. They were hoisted into the air by his words that stung like a swarm of bees. Of course he knew what they were doing, though that was all he knew. Tony was but twenty minutes out of bed.

“Oops!” he exclaimed. “Didn’t mean to startle you any. Wilbur tried to call, but the phone was dead. I came as fast as I could. And you, Henry?” He turned deathly serious. “I heard that Lloyd was badly hurt.”

“You scared the bejesus out of us,” Julia complained.

They tried to rearrange themselves and their dignity. No one seemed to notice the sudden change in Nettie or in the mirror that was Julia—a step change in their lumens.

“Sorry,” muttered Tony. “And to show you both how much, I’ll cut you some slack and forget what I saw. Just turn you in for stealing classified stuff and not the hanky-panky. I hear that Leavenworth is lovely in the spring. Put quite a bloom on your cheeks, Henry.”

Henry grumbled humorlessly, “My cheeks are fine.”

Tony winked at Julia, almost asked his question, but the humor he so often found in her eyes was absent.

Instead he replied sincerely, “Well ... I am sorry. But considering the gravity of situation ... well ... never mind that now. Tell me about Dr. Baumer.”

“We’re the ones who should apologize,” she said. “Tony ... they’ve taken Lloyd to East County. That’s the story. We know little more than that.”

“A bad dream scan?” inquired Tony.

“Yes, but the plot thickens,” she explained. “The whole Baumer bunch has disappeared without a trace.”

Tony frowned. "Hagerty phoned me ... told me to get the particulars from you. But I couldn't reach either one of you. Then, I couldn't reach him. I'm worried. Is this all we know?"

"You should also know that Kovrani and Moss were here briefly ... a few minutes before you so unexpectedly dropped in."

Tony said, "Haven't seen Dr. Kovrani in days."

Henry added, "Not much left of him to see."

"What do you make of all this? Is the answer in there?" Tony asked, nodding toward the OHM computers.

"It's coming slowly bit by bit, byte by byte. We're trying to bite Beelzebub before he bites us."

Henry asked, "Anything more revealing from that secret cache of yours?"

She was again evasive. "Things have turned up."

"What do you have? No time now for games."

"No surprises, Henry. Lloyd Baumer has opened the Gate."

Henry said peevishly, "I think we know that. But what in the name of Heaven have they let in?"

"With no panoptograph I can only speculate."

Tony repeated, "Something came through?"

"Things have been coming through," she said.

"You said things ... plural." Henry probed, "You might explain that. These things I didn't know."

"The Gate was opened Sunday the 12th from camera four, then again early this morning from camera two."

"Can you locate either source from the parangle ... and the power aperture?" asked Henry.

"I might. But I can't with you asking questions. Have something to eat ... some fresh air ... the sun, if there's any left. Come back when I'm finished."

"And when will that be?" Henry asked annoyed.

"When I'm finished," she repeated tersely.

"Julia," said Henry, "we'll be upstairs. I'll brew some coffee ... if anything still works."

They were leaving when she asked the question she had saved. “What’s the chance a flection-antiflection pair will actually touch in space-probability-time?”

Henry turned slowly, eyebrows raised, perplexed by her question. He regarded her intently. He nearly smiled, his cheeks dimpling just slightly. “Well,” he noted, “that depends upon your criteria of touch.”

“Say it was a microquin ... and not much more.”

“The probability is extremely low ... about a billionth with the usual space-time window. Of course you can increase the aperture or the mind-space. Might notice a microquin. Why on Earth do you need to know that?”

“Cause we had another Gate on February 22nd. And this one’s on the books with a name ... Timothy James Corrit. Seems the posicube and anticube came within a microquin. I’m curious. Know anything about it.”

“Of course not. Lord ... now three. What’s its connection with the others?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. Do something for me over your coffee.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Calculate the probability for a picoquin pair.”

“Just did. That one you can forget. Never see it with our LENS. We would need a thousand Netties for an uptight pair like that. We’d have to compress too long the entire quex ... and you know as well as I what that means.”

Inside the Institute at 8:15 A.M. in the Morning

After a dizzy hour Julia joined her inmates in the cubicle. The break room of vivid colors was unusually bleak and somber. Shadow had filled in every available space but the lime green table where the men sat quietly brooding. Henry doodled light-cones and sections while Tony sketched uncomplimentary caricatures of the staff on stiff, paper towels. They had scrupulously avoided the convoluted subject of Julia and her quex. There was no coffee or tea either hot or cold. She opened a can of warm juice and poured the contents into a paper cup. The cup had one of those nearly clever sayings printed on the side: “The coffee tastes better when the LENS is aimed downstream.” She wasn’t even sure what it meant. She was sure it had been Max’s idea, so she guessed this explained the “joke.”

Henry inquired, “Julia, what did you find? We’re dying for an answer.” She clunked the cup angrily against the counter. The room resonated with a sound surprisingly full. The men watched her complete two long strides. She took a perfunctory swipe at the vinyl chair before sitting down between them.

She sipped as she explained, “The code’s a mess. They’ve tinkered with the primary shell. They’ve also embedded an encrypted algorithm inside ONSI. I suppose their intent

was to contain the paracube, to neutralize it, though their light driver was itself neutralized later ... but not by the same guy. It's really—"

"You can deduce all this?" challenged Henry.

"Good code reads like someone's fingerprints. The light driver has some flair. Funny, but it reminds me of an old teacher of mine, almost as if I'm looking at my old, classroom notes. Hmm ... wonder if he's—"

Henry was impatient for an answer. "But who could have reversed the light driver?"

"A gifted amateur. They've been playing Ping-Pong with the LENS. The Gate trigger appears untouched, but if the paracube is unstable who could predict what the Gate might do. I certainly can't." She looked each in the eye for first time. She was as riveting as ever in the debile light of the gloomy cubicle. Henry recalled the brooding angel from one dark day not so long ago. Their days were growing alarmingly shorter, the nights longer and darker even as the winter season yielded to spring.

"Who'd be foolish enough to tamper with the LENS?" he asked, shuffling his wilted stock of towels.

"Lemmings," she answered as she buttoned her khaki jacket. Her scant, purpled dress was nearly eclipsed by drab khaki. She repeated, "Lemmings."

Henry nodded submissively as he tried to correlate what he knew.

Julia added, "And there's the AIs themselves. Since Sunday the OPM has accumulated mega-pages of high quality nonsense."

Henry asked soberly, "Is your Faust-3 intact?"

"Now mine ... eh? It is still nicely wired into Gate start. Without his new Gateword, Gate start will branch as slick as a whistle to F3. That's it. Pretty simple really."

Henry replied fretfully, "Never mind that for now. I'm concerned about the Gate itself ... with all this tampering. It probably made for Lloyd's trouble."

She replied stingingly, "The man made his own trouble."

"Maybe so. But tell me ... what about the physics ... you know ... the Einstein tensor ... the puzzle that wrung limp our neurons for month after month. Do you—?"

She announced: "The momentum of time ... the cosmic brake ... the LENS catapult ... this must be the one you mean. But you did finally solve the puzzle. Happy now you did?"

"Wasn't sure you understood all the implications. I never should have underestimated you. I was wrong."

Julia looked through him as though he was a dream, a cicabyte from the LENS. She would not unmask her inner thoughts. “Perhaps ... Henry, we’ll know soon enough.”

Henry, about to answer, was interrupted by Tony. “What’s this concern about the cosmic brake? First ... I guess ... what is it? Is it as bad as it sounds?”

“It’s the force that closes the Gate. Same as the force that opens it ... the wallop packed by time,” dispensed Henry. “Tony, this is enough for you to know. It’s a lot of esoteric math and not worth going into now.”

Tony lowered his eyes. It was clear that he felt the man’s left hand. Henry wrestled with the consequences of his thoughtlessness. “Sorry. I’ll give you more info later.”

Julia closed her eyes. She reminded, “The point is that we must deal with our visitors now delicately synchronized with our axiomatic percept of time.”

Tony timidly proposed, “Might the LENS help us?”

They all shivered as the thermometer plunged. It was as catching as a first yawn. Though exhausted, no one yawned.

“The LENS ... it might,” said Henry, “if it runs. Julia, what can you tell us about the LENS inquanta?”

“Inquanta?” whispered Tony. “Oh, you mean—”

“I can estimate the mass dislocation,” she said. “Net mass for the Corrit Gate ... the Gate on the 22nd of February ... was nearly zero. Of course we’re measuring the net effect of the couple, the microquin pair that neither Minerva nor Nettie can separate so far.

“This morning’s mass was fifty to sixty kilos ... no more. Now, for Sunday the 12th of March ...” A pause. “This one’s a dislocation like none of the others, for on Sunday we received Panigma Grande, and a range from about one hundred kilos to many metric tons of matter. The uncertainty I can’t account for.”

“Yes ... this extreme range makes no sense. And the LENS parangles,” Henry inquired, “any better?”

“This too is interesting. Like February’s, last night’s parangle was modest even by Nettie’s standards. Depending on certain factors the event-source probably intersected the grid fifty to five hundred years ago.”

Tony wondered, “Again, not much help. Why all the uncertainty in the time figures?”

“Your question is actually your answer. I don’t know the precise sub-light, so I don’t know the precise time. I can’t do better. It’s at least more useful than Sunday’s parangle.”

Henry asked, “Again Sunday. Why’s that, Julia?”

“Because Sunday’s parangle was ridiculous ... the dislocation was impossible. The power requirement was impossible. The tensor was impossible. So in keeping with everything that’s happened so far, by a kind of bass-ackwards logic, it must be right within the usual uncertainty.”

“What are you saying? When? How long ago?”

She answered unemotionally, “Two hundred and fifty million years, give or take ten million. This estimate assumes perfect conjunction with the grid itself. Seems logical though. These are my findings. I cannot guarantee I’m right. Don’t look at me like I’m nuts. I know that already.”

They stared at her. Their eyes held nothing back. They remained silent, except for some guttural rudeness. Julia waited for Henry to ask the next question, the logical question, but surprisingly, he did not. He was after all too logical, trapped by the perfection of his own equations. Instead, he expressed the opinion: “I was afraid it would be like this. It’s a gag, a bad joke meant to confound us. I honestly don’t know where we go from here?”

Tony muttered, “Dead or alive.” This blurted-thought was barely heard, but of course, it was heard, in spite of their concentration, like a fart from the first pew.

Henry asked him to repeat. “What was that, Tony?”

Churlishly he complied, “Do we know if they, whatever they were, came to us dead or came to us alive?”

Julia mulled the question. “Tony, I know of no sure way to tell. The Machine can’t distinguish a life from a lump of coal. The difference is irrelevant to Nettie.”

“But not to me,” rejoined Tony, “Can a man, a living thing, survive the trauma of the Gate?”

“Theoretically the answer is yes,” conceded Henry. “As for the emotional trauma ... I’m not so sure. The Gaul did not. The microparads—”

Tony exclaimed, “His trauma was a tad less abstract, don’t you agree? Come on Henry, get with the program. The question is no longer academic ... no longer theoretical. Blast ... are we to be the last to know? Well?”

Henry had no answer. And Julia offered none.

Following a contemplative pause, Henry agreed, “You’re right. I don’t think we can just sit around and wait. A lot’s at stake. What do you think?”

No one answered. Their space already much too small seemed to shrink even more.

“The obvious point can no longer be ignored. That toad Hardan must be involved,” he said. “You guys agree?”

No one answered. The room already too cold turned colder. The space around them already too dark turned darker. There was no sound but their words slicing through the silence. The Gate once opened would not be closed and they all knew it. The change of pressure, if not felt in the ears and chest, could be felt in their brains and pounding hearts. It was happening even now in the silence of the cold, dark room.

“We’re not really helpless,” Henry reminded. “We have the computer and the knowledge if we’ve the nerve to use them. We must know at least two things, who they are and why they’re here.”

Julia responded introspectively, “Just two, eh? My count’s a little higher than that.”

Henry had decided on his course. “Yes, and we’ll use the LENS. But it must be tonight. We may need the Gate as well.”

“You’d use the Gate?” gasped Tony. “That fries the fish! Why in the name of Heaven would you want to use the Gate ... after ... why ... well ... haven’t we had enough?”

“We must put things right,” said Henry. “I can’t explain it, Tony, but I saw it in my dream ... a key ... the key to the attic door and a way out.”

“Or a way in,” she warned, “with no way out, but oblivion.”

“I can almost see the thing in my hand ... the key ... then the key inside the lock molding itself to fit ... the door opening to the answer as the light shines in, the attic no longer dark and cold, but bright and warm ... and good ... far better than we deserve.”

Julia spoke acrimoniously. “They’re things about the lock and key you’ve forgotten in your single-mindedness ... in your haste to find the answer and the light.”

He maneuvered through the minefield that was her eyes. “Julia, can you locate Lloyd’s Gateword, bypass Faust and its superwindow?”

She quipped, “As easy as diving off the Chupadera mesa.”

He nervously consulted his timepiece. “We should return here around 8 P.M. You’ll need some time with the software and I’ll need time to prepare for this difficult scan.”

She requested, “Make it eleven ... a far better time for our heroic leap.” Once more Henry appeared not to hear or care. She repeated with unconcealed rancor, “Make it eleven.”

Tony had assumed the look and the lot of the lemming, that curious, ridiculous rodent with a penchant for self-destruction.

As they trickled out of the room, Henry acknowledged, “Yes, there was something else. You’re right. I know it now. I feel like we’re forgetting something extremely important.”

Julia had not forgotten, but she said, “Jesus, no, Henry, I don’t think so. You’ve thought of it all, I’m afraid.”

They negotiated their way past the unlit exit of the break room and toward the warmth of spring, not so confidently measuring each step in the darkness of the dome. In little time, they were lost. Tony opined that they had accidentally strayed into the cleanroom while absentmindedly arguing Henry's tactics.

Julia disagreed, "But that is in the basement. You're thinking we came from the lab."

"I know where we came from. I remember using the stairs. We came down. It is the cleanroom. I'm sure of it."

Henry exclaimed, "You're both wrong. We did come down. No doubt about that. But this isn't the cleanroom and this isn't the basement. We're lower than that. I don't know how we got down here. Why was no one paying any attention? This is nuts."

Julia agreed.

"It's one of the subbasement storerooms," said Henry. "We need to get back. There's nothing for us down here. I don't want to be down here ... underneath."

He led them through a passage like an obstacle course, then up the stairwell toward a glow that grew brighter as they climbed. "It's Nettie," said Tony. "She's burning brighter than ever through the little patch of Lucinite."

"Tony, that patch was covered up some time ago. Joe Fuller's orders. He couldn't—"

"Then the cover's gone or the stratum's ruptured. Her brains must have spilled out? Look at it. The twinkling light's everywhere."

"Tony, you're mistaken. It isn't Nettie."

A few pale bulbs floated in space, seemed to cruise the walls. This is precisely what they did, for each blinking globe was a translucent and luminous snail—a large, metabolizing mollusk tingling and flickering in space.

"Where in Heaven are we now?" gasped Tony.

"Where we deserve ... and it ain't good and it ain't Heaven," said Julia.

"There," cried Henry, "the door." Their escape was clearly marked by glowing snails winking on/off in almost every color.

Chapter Twenty-Three: A Mask for the Medusa

“What offers us the best prospect for a first encounter? Should we construct a starship and travel a few million light-years to a galactic neighbor? Or should we construct a time-ship, turn the pages back a few million centuries on our own backyard.”

- Lloyd Manley Baumer
London, June 2003

“Our uncertain future is Medusa’s mask ... or I’m a lotus blossom.”

- Maxwell Farnes Cole

El Rasigo
Thursday, March 16th

It was a minute past midnight.

Henry Kincaid cruised the Old McDunty Pike, twisting in the leather of his oversized sedan, trying to enlist some comfort in what he was about to do. A light mist settled on the pavement like mini-crystals of fire, the rain and moonlight rendering a flickering tableau of unspeakable expectations.

The transition had happened quite without his realizing it.

Perhaps it was just another bout of anxiety, an overactive imagination, or a growing LENS psychosis. The light that coalesced in the mirror reflected the past and the past-possible as it reflected the present. There was no collision between these dimensional planes. Henry was unfolding panoptograms in his head at parangles of 64π microparads.

The glowing wood with its overhanging limbs of elder and aspen, with its trellis works of dormant winterkill, were no longer brainless hulks of resinous fiber vegetating along the pike, but shrewd, calculating beasts. Glistening eyes and grasping limbs were insidiously arranged. A word ripened from the images—Dinomantids, giant insectosaurs of a past-possible, prehistoric age. They had massed along the sunken road, a lava bed through the mesa. Several flaxen beasts had stretched for ambush, for an assault upon Henry’s Lynx sedan or perhaps the moon shrouded in its primordial gas.

He must have plied the prospector’s path a hundred times, though he had never seen anything like this. It seemed that he saw everything for the first time. What had happened? Was it too much time spent with Nettie inside the dream chamber? What had happened to his lucidity of thought, to the logic of his field equations now that his dreams were real?

He saw clearly the hunters and the hunted. On this enchanted night the pike had surrendered to both the pack and the herd. The herd had not quite surrendered to the pack, but this seemed inevitable, for a long and pale procession lumbered solemnly to the vanishing of time and space. It was a toothy line of march along a ravine speckled with swollen and prickly pods, with cunning seed-ferns, with whispering ginkgoes, with plotting and primeval conifers. It was the Valley of Despair where all things went to die. Henry was heedlessly one of them in the heart and in the mind if not solidly in the flesh.

He tapped into reserves he would need to escape his mantoid rapture, both predators and prey alike. It was at this time that he spied the glowing slits among the tendrils of fern—a *bete noire* behind a rumpled mask, black and bone hard, cutting and grasping, blind but all knowing.

He mashed the pedal, but veered too near the center of the road. Were these visions real—on this night when dream madness was not so farfetched? Panigma LENS never quite let go once it sunk its bytes into your brain. There were debts to pay now that the excreta of the breach, its cragworms and glowsnails slithered inside Panigma Dome.

He turned back the clock on the past twenty-four hours. This distraction failed because the beast that gnawed voraciously his courage dwelled inside his own fears. But the worst of it must soon end. For what he had to do the wait was the worst. For all he had to do was dream.

But would dreams this substantial ever cease? Henry closed his eyes. He reopened them in horror when the right wheel of his car plowed through the wet berm. He would dream for an eternity if he fell asleep now. The weight on the lids of his eyes, the tug of sleep on his brain, the pull of eternity from his heart had never been stronger.

He gnashed his teeth summoning the strength he would require to keep a focused eye and a clear head. It would not be long and he could sleep safely if not blissfully, for this night was the most important of his life. Henry recalled the day now past, spent scribbling as if his thoughts would be his last and his legacy. He had written letters to Lloyd, his mentor, and to Julia, his tormentor. Finally, he had destroyed them. They were mere sentimentality.

He had given little thought to what he would do when finally inside the LENS camera. There was not too much he need do, for he had a special gift, that rare and inborn talent for the lucid dream. Besides, the computers would be programmed to help him, to guide him to chamber two of yesterday, and to chamber four of the previous Sunday. He and Julia had agreed there would be no time to investigate the curious anomalies of the Corrit, Holman or Konnick Gates. They would concentrate on the 12th and 15th, the identity of the travelers and the villainy behind the conspiracy, and worse, the betrayal perpetrated by the man he once trusted.

He had argued priorities with Julia. Which parascan would be first? He could not actually recall which would be first. It hardly mattered now. The key was Julia. He trusted her. It was Julia who would get him there. It would be Julia who would get him back.

He had phoned her once at home, three times at the Lab. All day she had labored to restore the LENS and unlock Panigma Gate. His anxious questioning had benefited only frayed nerves on both sides of the visicom. It had not helped Julia repair the esoteric processes of the Panigma Machine.

To remind himself to stay alert much less awake, he chattered at his own ghastly reflection in the mirror. "Must watch out for Freemont," he muttered fretfully. It was an owl-eyed man, slightly mad, that mocked him.

He was startled when a large animal appeared in the road. The dog or coyote scampered off unhurt. His reactions were slow. And though he had a powerful lens in his head and a hunter's tautly stretched nerves, nothing had reinforced his timid reflexes. He returned to his mirror gazing and nervous chattering. "It's gotta be here somewhere." He squinted as he complained, "Damn that glare!"

He slowed the car as he crossed the tracks of the old Santa Fe Line. His mouth smacked hard against the steering wheel. He slowed even more, but too late to matter. Once back on semi-smooth road Henry rubbed his stinging face as he consulted the time.

It was now five minutes past midnight.

Headlights verified Freemont. He turned on to a sandy road lined with saltbush and dry, desert grass. It turned out a turn for the worst, for he felt something cinch, something tighten around his throat like a noose of heavy hemp. It bit into his neck and prickled like pincers. He redoubled his attentions. The pain rose, rushed up his neck and face, and landed squarely between the eyes. The burning pincers twisted and bit deep into his brain.

"Shit ... the lights." Henry had seen things that were not, but had missed the things that were. The trailing vehicle closed to a distance of about twenty-five yards. It was now clear that he had been followed since he had left his apartment. He bleated, "Must be Julia ... or Tony ... but why would they be out here ... now?"

He maneuvered the stretch of rough road, manhandling his large sedan that seemed ready to unhinge at any moment. His tires seemed to find every rain-filled rut. He saw glowing, red eyes in the moonlit grass. "Jackrabbits?"

There was no other traffic, not on this road, not at this time of night but Henry and the lights that pursued him. Their piloting was unmistakable, their purpose unknowable, but guessable. Henry compared the reading on his Lumex dial with the reading from the dashboard of his Lynx.

It was now seven minutes past midnight.

"Must hurry ... must get off this damned road." There was the occasional residence, rundown and dark. He spotted the peeling red cantina, the rusting wrecks on cinder blocks. There seemed little or no sanctuary here. He sped out of the dying barrio and entered the development, a business center want-to-be, but little more. The Panigma

Dome basking in an orange, sodium light, sprang up from the center of this patchwork quilt of roads going round and round, back and forth aimlessly.

The dome at night had nothing to challenge it. He revisited his old fantasy of a metallic asteroid or a Martian moonlet half-buried in the mesa. Perhaps it was the Wellsian spaceship, the infamous pilot ship.

Slightly giddy, he blurted, "They're readying their tripod machines." He suddenly remembered the words left in the condensate on the glass inside his steamy shower. He had noticed the panel covered with letters—a probability fantastically low. Or were the odds all that low? Had he been receiving omni-probable quarlight even then?

Henry readjusted his mirror, drove past the dome as fast as he dared, circled back to Freemont and the conspiratorial pike. His nemesis pursued. Every nutty idea bombarded him. There was, of course, the possibility that he was already asleep inside the chamber and only dreamed the headlights and the gaunt insectosaurs. This was not so farfetched. So what must he do? He had no choice, but to assume the worst.

He sped southward on Old McDunty, so singly possessed that he had failed to heed the knockabout tracks of the old Santa Fe or anything but the thumping in his chest. His overactive glands poured sweat from his brows to his socks. With his senses totally transfixed, he drove sixty on narrow road reserved for less. He avoided his mirror.

Thus it was fact that he should have seen it coming. The rattling scream rose from the ever-deepening pit of his being, a Doppler-like, "Eee ... ahhh!"

It hit like a dagger thrust between his eyes—the piercing high beams—the shrill horn of the tractor with no trailer, appearing under the limbs, advancing then receding with a whoosh. His Lynx hydroplaned and skated to a dazzling spray on the wet pavement. After what seemed an eternity, Henry found himself sitting high over the curb aimed in the opposite direction. He thought he detected the glow of the dome in the distance and wondered if fate had turned him around for a reason.

He had not been hurt, though in his carelessness he must have crossed the line. He stared robotically ahead feeling strange and displaced of mind and body. It dawned on him too slowly. There were no other cars, no villains and no monsters, only Henry Kincaid alone and afraid on a dark and deserted highway.

He had an appointment to keep with Julia and Tony, with a dream, with a nightmare or not. He uncurbed, drove north at a more leisurely pace. He switched on his car radio. The fact of meaningless static did not matter. He tried the tuning bar, but soon gave up. He could concentrate on nothing but the brightly lit signpost of the dome. He rechecked his watch.

It was late and fifteen minutes past midnight.

He entered the development and approached the Institute from Acoma Drive. Henry first looked right, then left, then down the full length of Laguna. "Crap!" he cried. Hope sank,

for it was there on Laguna—that same car—that same slinking feline that had pursued and outwitted him, poised with its motor purring and its eyes furtively lit.

He had impulsive inspiration. “We’ll test bright boy.”

Coming to Jemez, Henry turned. He used Anasazi Circle to approach Laguna and the car from the opposite direction. These tactics required anxious minutes. But heart and hope sank, joined the simmering bile in his belly.

“What the hell’s he doing just sitting?”

Bright boy had not budged. Inching past, Henry tried to read the license number, but the plate and the car were so spackled with clay that not a single letter or number could be read. The implication of his being followed so blatantly as he inserted himself in harm’s way rendered him dizzy to his tingling toes.

Nothing happened as he passed by the spattered car. This dark feline sat absurdly still. Henry drove on, turned left on to Acoma Drive. Just outside the Institute lot he paused before crawling forward, past the open gate, past the guard kiosk unattended—disturbingly dark and Wilbur-less. He parked his car near the entrance of glass and steel—an eye that squinted pitilessly with insectoidal madness.

A few yards to his left he saw them—Tony’s MG sports car and Julia’s truck parked oddly head to head, bumpers almost kissing. “Damn ... they made it ... or ... had they?” Both possibilities frightened him.

Henry sat debating his short list growing shorter. It was now twenty minutes past midnight. The dark skulker was parked a hundred yards away. Henry slumped. He envisioned a marksman with a night scope drawing a bead. But he could not sit out here all night if for no other reason than his pounding bladder. “God ... I’ve got to piss!”

The mud-mobile moved, then Henry swiftly.

He dashed for the entrance, his key card ready, his heart fluttering like birdsong, his dam about to burst.

He had not shown up for work since that night of the Holman Gate. Larry Kato was as low as he had ever been in his life. Like Ivan, he slept very little, ate very little. He avoided mirrors. He avoided friends. Mostly, he waited and watched for signs.

Larry knew that Henry would not budge until he did. For tonight the charade was over. He gunned the engine and drove off in his filthy rented car. His crude amateurism had not fooled Henry. It was not really his intention to fool him. Quite the contrary, Larry felt that his warning, his message, was received loud and clear.

Henry and company would remain in the Lab for most of the night. It was a safe bet what they were doing, though in the dark they had better tread lightly. This was a lot more than Henry’s cubes and angles. This was the deadly game of ruthless men with no rules.

Another skulked their little town—one unnoticed by all—one with a very different agenda. Plain on the outside, but not so plain on the inside, his large vehicle was a marvel of techno-gadgetry.

The gray van appeared perfectly ordinary if one overlooked the dark bubble that concealed antennas and cameras, the well-concealed intruder.

The man behind the wheel consumed a mammoth cheeseburger dripping catsup on himself and upon the upholstery of the van. Its front seat resembled a grocery dumpster. Comical perhaps, but this fellow was not to be toyed with when it came to matters of importance and not merely appearance.

He had watched Kato and Kincaid in his night scope. He had recorded the time Kato had driven off. He had also recorded with amusement Dr. Kincaid's mad dash. Of all the characters in this farce, Kincaid was perhaps his favorite, aside of course from Julia Moffett. But Miss Moffett was a very different matter.

Ralph's note had warned: H wonders why he is so late. I told him what you told me—that B had been inside the Institute on the 12th and the 15th, but that these were only tests or diversions. I should not need to remind you what is at stake. Be vigilant. Make no mistakes. It will be your last breath as well as mine. And remember our strict procedure. Stay close to Kincaid. He is our safety net.

Eddie Reed smiled to himself. Ralph was a blast. He would stay close, for he was convinced Miss Moffett was his meal ticket. Now that this comely enchilada plus Millie (Tony) and Maude (Henry) had been tucked in safely for the night it was time for some serious chow and thoughts of the fine time he would have with these morons before this farce was over. He was like the expectant child with Christmas just around the corner. And a wonderfully dark Christmas it would be.

"Gosh, no better inside," muttered Henry with the faint hope that he was wrong.

Scattered about the foyer were glowing lanterns like turbans rolled from pastel papers. One might expect their lacelike shadows would be pleasing. But the dome magnified what it did not distort and distorted what it did not magnify. Land snails (pulmonates), cruising the walls, ceilings and floors, continuously highlighted new contours and tracks.

"The tracks to Hell," he said as if the words had been programmed. But not by him. So, by whom were these words conceived then spoken? Inside this shadowy core he was in some strange way not alone with himself. He felt guided and manipulated by subtle forces.

The lights and shadows were not, he thought, just mindless art, but orchestrated for effect. It could not have been orchestrated by any one snail or by any collection of snails from this world or any other. This *modus operandi* rendered Allen Polk's panoptography rank amateurism. If its real purpose was to humble, to instruct, it had succeeded.

Henry had no capacity to ponder further these strange phenomena. With arms outstretched, with hands pressed anxiously upon the wall, he groped the dim corridor. Somewhere a men's room should be found. He prayed that it would be soon, and that he would not trip over his paddle feet along the way. The finely tiled panorama of the interior wall served his fingers like Braille that he hoped would steer him quickly to the relief of his pressing bodily functions.

The mural's primitive, but expertly crafted mosaic offered hope from human tragedy. "A Fool's Paraspaces," he quoted—the title Lloyd had selected perhaps innocently.

In daylight the mural provided the usual institutional milieu. But its truth, its depth, its shades from vermilion to black was revealed only in the glow from the gastropods that tracked their luminous slime across the ceramic tessera. "What evil brings you here?" he cried aloud—too loud it seemed, for an unexpectedly powerful echo rocked him back to the brink of landing him solidly on his ass.

Teetering off-balance he had a withering thought, the same odd displacement of reality that he had experienced earlier. He felt much more than himself. Like the marionette in his attic dream, did someone or something illuminate his mind, stretch his space and time, pull his mental strings, and even pluck his vocal cords?

Henry's attention was recaptured by the mural, by the hero with large and penetrating eyes. Looking upon the tall and confident figure he noticed that these eyes no longer belonged only to the man, but to a shimmering apparition painted beneath. It was clear the hero in the foreground had no eyes at all for the light. Henry knew that if he gazed long enough he would unmask the true seer inside. But he rebelled against the powerful tug on his brain. He yielded instead to a practical necessity, to a powerful resonance within his own body. He shuffled, at times almost stumbling in the variable snail light, his mind and feet intent on finding what they needed above all else. His nostrils found it first—the men's room door held open by a rag smelling of turpentine. "Thanks," he offered sincerely to some unknown and equally unfortunate predecessor.

He stepped inside a room pitch black. There were no emergency lights or handy glowsnails. Afraid to maneuver and unable to wait, Henry unzipped, aimed, and whizzed. Where or on what he had not the slightest clue. He hardly cared so long as the thing upon which he whizzed could not whiz back. He zipped up carefully. He found a washbasin. There was no water, only a loud air hammer in the pipes—disturbing in the dark. For now he'd skip Hygiene 101.

Returning to the corridor, he unclenched. "That's a damned sight better. At least now I can think." Once again his words circled back and slapped the pink, goose flesh rising on his neck. Rocked back upon his heels, he reset his jaw, sucked up his last dribble of courage and aimed for the stairs.

Making his way as carefully as possible he observed more than just the gliding mollusks. Undoubtedly the vilest of the lot was glued like mucous to the portrait of Leopold Hardan. He could not avoid at least one furtive look. This large creature was like a crayfish, except that it had no segments and was flat like a silverfish. A single claw, far

larger than its body was held like a broken wing against its side. The claw was armed with two clusters of four, barbed prongs, and was fastened to the body by a stubby, ribbed arm. Its tail-turned-rasp was held menacingly high like a scorpion's lance.

By any comparison to this clinging, stinging horror the basement had to be much better. Its stairwell beckoned, framed in a pale light that pulled hard on involuntary strings. He watched himself move as if in a dream, mind step after mind step as he inched relentlessly forward. Then he remembered with a start.

This newest tug was an old obsession, an old memory from an old nightmare. The stairwell he remembered, the pale light and shadows he remembered, the unreality he remembered—a lonely boy lost in Nightmare Station. Hope had long since departed, had headed south with all its passengers—all save one, the boy searching for the night train north to nowhere. He was remembering this old terror for perhaps the first time in thirty years. But it was just as strongly felt as if the station was here and now. And there was something else added, something unwelcome in dreams of stairwells in the dark.

“Whew, this is bad!” The horrible stench was everywhere, far worse than yesterday. He was finally able to put a name to it—to the old chemistry lab memory of acrolein and burning formic acid. Besides the acidity and the poor illumination, the latter and perhaps the former provided by glowsnails, there was one other problem. The dome's heating system had been either turned off or was not performing. The temperature had severely plunged. He could see his own foggy wisps of breath. Somewhere water dripped, plunking loudly, tapping out a kind of SOS in the cold, conductivity of the air.

Henry moved through the corridor's constantly changing light. There was no illumination from the battery backup system, only the dim light from the glowing shells. The size of these glutinous slugs varied from the width of a fist to the width of a melon. Dozens glowed from red to yellow, from blue to violet. Their colors were warm, but their shadows were cold. He tested the snails—a red one, an orange one, and a pink one. These moody mollusks were extremely sensitive to his touch, though the starting tone never mattered. If tapped they would blink on/off using colors like the notes of a rainbow scale.

It was a journey not unlike the long night spent with Lester. The fact that this night could certainly be no worse gave him faint cause for hope. He wondered what was in store for him. He wondered if the computers would run and run safely. But mostly he wondered about the safety and whereabouts of his two companions—Julia and Tony.

He entered the basement stairwell then descended the thirteen, metal steps for the compulab and dream chambers, clinking down the staircase, careful among the scattered snails and cragworms, the latter bristling, budding, curling around rails and stairs, seemingly ingesting them. When Henry reached bottom he slid open the door to the basement and gingerly stepped inside the snail-lit corridor smelling like sulfur.

“Ouch ... what asshole ...?” The tall man had found the basement and the infamous water pipe. Cursing the growing knot on his head he threaded the corridor. As he passed Ivan's plague chamber with its metal door impressively bolted and barricaded he was reminded of something. It gave him a queasy feeling reminiscent of a critical oversight.

But whatever he had forgotten was quickly forgotten again. As he approached chamber two he heard familiar voices through its open anteroom door. These wonderful sounds lifted his low spirits out of the darkness. This feeling did not last, for when Henry entered the isocon he was struck instantly by the sight of Julia. She had brutally shaved her head nearly to the scalp. Those once bountiful locks now filled her wastebasket.

Tony and Julia bantered over printouts decorated with red corrections. Henry was reminded of necromancers proscribing victims. Julia operated the OnNet, OPM and CIC navcon consoles while Tony seemingly avoided the CIC biocon that was used to display electroencephalograms, polysomnograms, electromyograms, heart rate and respiration, temperature at various body locations, metabolic factors and blood chemistry. These and other measurements were vital, though not easily transcribed information. Except for the glowsnails, the isocon's consoles and monitors provided the room's only illumination.

Tony turned to acknowledge Henry with a good-natured salute. And although Julia looked up, she quickly went back to her work, apparently annoyed that he was so tardy. Henry cleared his dry throat. In spite of her displeasure Henry took a deep breath and tried to break the tension. He quavered the apology: "Sorry about the time. I was ... you might say ... unavoidably detained."

Tony ventured, "Oh Prometheus ... you do look bad ... as if the vulture's been chomping on your *pâté de foie gras*. Your checks have that dun pallor or is it just the bad light."

"Not funny." Henry scowled. "What's happened to Julia? She looks like a Brillo worm. Damn ... those ugly rasps freeze my pipes."

Tony answered when Julia would not. "She claimed it's an initiation for that anarchist gang ... that local scum ... the Predators. Look out, Henry, she's in that carnivorous mood of hers. I think she has that real hankering for some testicles and tartar sauce."

"Her blue plate special," Henry replied. "Though the color is right, I'm not volunteering anything. By the way, what happened to the heat and lights? Did anyone think to check the main breakers?"

Tony declared, "But that would mean another descent into the catacombs. Anyway ... we've some light from our friends. They are rather cute ... don't you think? They kind of glow on you ... eh? Nice of the boss to provide. He's always looking out for us."

"What are they really doing here?" asked Henry. "I'm thinking that maybe Julia's impossible tensor was somehow right. These *slimenifera* are not in anyone's taxonomy."

Julia nodded affirmatively whether or not she agreed. She zipped up her coat before searching its deepest pocket. Her puzzle box was safe and slightly warm. She spoke pleasantly without looking up. "Henry, why not make yourself useful and check the circuits. You wanna depend on these shit eaters? What if they're eaten themselves and we're left alone with a couple of cheap flashlights and no spare batteries."

"Skip it," he said. "You seem to be braving the hardship. We'll be okay. I had better get myself ready. I want to verify the Martoffs myself."

“It’s done. Anyway ... since you rate a high nine on the LaBerge,” she said insufferably, “you should have no problem. No merc for you tonight. You’re so remarkably lucid you can scan clueless ... oops ... sorry, I meant cubeless. What in the world was I thinking?”

“You’re even more hemorrhoidal than usual.” He changed the subject. “How’s Nettie and the backups?” Henry wanted to effect some normalcy for the benefit of the others. He was convinced this was important for “their” morale.

Tony stated matter-of-factly, “There was one interesting development, Henry. Nettie had a personal, logon greeting just for you ... from our Leopold ... a fond howdy-do from our favorite psychopath to you.”

Henry betrayed a quiver of the lower lip. He asked, “What do you mean?”

“Just what he said,” Julia returned. Still a trifle miffed, she would not actually look at him, but instead continued loading coordinates.

“Not funny. I’ll tell you why. I’m getting too many howdy-dos. A strange thing happened this evening in the shower. I had just rinsed. Opening my eyes, I found letters on the wet, shower glass. They were not written by random condensation or even Benito Mussolini.”

“No, I suppose not,” replied Julia, “or you wouldn’t be making such a point of it. You don’t mean to say that these letters actually spelled something useful ... perhaps a good aiming point for the LENS paracube?”

“Not actually. Just mostly consonants. Maybe vowels too. No coordinates. I’m shaken up ... this on top of everything else that’s happened.” He set aside his pretense of normalcy. “Please, no more talk about greetings from Leopold Hardan.”

“We were only joking, Henry,” Tony admitted as he sipped coffee from a paper cup. He spilled some on their checklist and tried to sop it up with the rag of a handkerchief. “Damn ... now you’ve got me doing it. By the way, that gash on your head happen in the shower while you were decoding Benito’s droplets?”

Henry caressed the growing lump. “After a miserable day I nearly lacerated myself in the stairwell. It was so dark in there I wouldn’t have seen a turd if it dangled from the end of my nose.”

Julia had loaded the intercepts for his voyage into thintime. At least they each hoped it would be time and not the thin space of the Faust tensor. These coordinates were quickly confirmed on her navcon. She casually stated, “Yes, it’s true. You might have detected a sweet-smelling diaper apple. But searching for the end of your nose would take you more time than we can spare right now. Hmm ... you are semi-lucid ... I trust no mind-altering substances other than your own testosterone?”

“Yes! No! Actually, I was searching for an essential article of plumbing ... for my watering spigot and a safe place to piss. This all happened before I dinged my brains out. The search for the john took a while considering how badly I needed it. Maybe it was the anxiety driving over. On top of everything else I was followed ... and rather clumsily.”

She turned and rubbed the bump on his forehead. “Followed? Really? You aren’t kidding are you? You have had a bad night. You think it’s serious?”

Their eyes connected. “Are you kidding? Yeah, I was followed, just like in the movies, from my apartment to the parking lot.” Henry stared at her burr cut. He lowered his eyes. Her short, wire bristles unsettled him.

She seemed to be sizing him up or the odd twist of his story. “Did you get a good look?” she asked curtly. “Recognize anyone?”

“No. The car was plastered with mud. Couldn’t even tell the make or the color. With no security, no help, I’ll admit I’m concerned.”

She asked pointedly as she went back to caressing his head, “Was it a gray van with a dark bump on its top?”

“No ... I said ... a car,” he confirmed with annoyance. He crossed a leg, changed his mind and then crossed the other, all the while tapping his feet to a subliminal rhythm.

Tony had been watching with fascination the pinkish, lantern snail that cruised overhead. He forgot the snail and asked, “Julia, what van? What do you know about a van? You holding out on us?”

Henry grunted knowingly, a foolish ruse, for he didn’t know a thing more than the bump on his head or the many snails seemingly in his shorts.

Julia did not hide the hurt. “It’s been hanging around. Wilbur noticed it last night. That’s all I know. Listen ... I tell you guys everything I know. If you can’t trust me you’re both in a world of shit.”

Henry responded sternly, “Shit’s to the rafters ... I know that already. But I sometimes wonder, Julia. You with us or against us?”

She hissed and returned to the navcon. Tony nodded to Henry consolingly before returning to his checklist. Banks of mini-bulbs spangled the isocon with red dots like an outbreak of computer measles. Julia sparkled with red rubies. She turned to him a second time with a look of concern showing through the mini-points of light. “Henry, if you still intend to rap with Nettie we’d better rap first.”

“Thought I’d asked you about her. I don’t want any problems with Nettie once I’m indexed and cybered in.”

“Primary and secondary power are unaffected by the general condition. I ran a reliability check through Minerva. She gave Nettie 99.8 percent. The figures for the OPM and CIC were not quite so high, but adequate at 98 to 99. However, the rest was not encouraging.”

Henry booted a snail that had aimed for his toe. “Why all these slugs? I’ve a feeling the March 12th tensor should tell us. Well ... they seem harmless enough ... unless they’re carrying the mnemonic plague. Okay ... Julia ... go ahead ... what’s more discouraging than a 3-cicabyte scan at several megaparads?”

“Thought you’d like to know that the panoptoscope won’t run. I will need to improvise something visual. I will need some idea where you are ... what you see ... the signposts you reveal if I’m to keep you out of your *Macula Obscura*.”

Henry blurted, “Jesus ... you had to mention that. Yes, you’ll need something and so will I.”

He wilted as she continued, “The analyzer’s next to useless for this.”

Henry regarded her suspiciously. It reflected back on him, came back far worse than he had sent. “Julia, what have you concocted?”

“The cinematography will be nothing to rave about, but a lot better than being blind.”

“You’ve tested it?” inquired Henry. “It works somehow?”

“So far ... only in my head. Don’t worry about the video. I’m reasonably sure that it will work. But there is something else that won’t.”

“Please ... Julia, it’s late. I’m rapidly tiring of this Click and Clack routine. There is no time.”

“It’s the Gateword, Henry. Still can’t find it, nor can Minerva. We tried every trick we knew plus some we didn’t.”

“I may need the Gate, and I’m not sticking my head inside Nettie without a way to disable F3.” Henry, highly agitated, was pacing in ever-tightening circles.

“Then ... you’ve a very tough decision.”

Tony asked, “Do we even need Panigma Gate? Why risk it?” Julia, even if you find one tripwire there may be others.” The woman nodded appearing to agree. After all, so far as either of them knew she had always been opposed to Panigma Gate.

Henry decided he needed time to clear his head. He opened the steel door connecting the isocon and isocell, selected a glowsnail carefully by its shell and entered the dark room. There were apparently no snails, for there was no light except for the light draining from his shell. He could be heard shuffling around as if looking for something of importance. From the isocell his resonant voice jarred the silence. “The Gate gives me options. Why should I risk the LENS aperture without tangible options, without the key that lets me in ... and the one that let’s me out?”

He returned with the flickering slug. “No snails ... no insectivores in the dark room,” he said apparently relieved.

“Even if we avoid Doc Faust,” argued Tony, “it’s a dangerous tactic. We’ve not mapped the consequences ... the discontinuities. I had hoped you would reconsider once you had thought it over. The Gate is sheer folly.”

Julia added, “Correctammundo! Tony’s making good sense.”

Henry dropkicked the gray-bodied, green-shelled mollusk across the 'con. Its light was extinguished with a pop when the snail slammed against the wall. "Snot light ... take that you sorry piece of shit!" He was visibly angry with the two of them or with himself or with the situation in which he now found himself. He continued, "I'll need a way to intervene, to take measures against the conspiracy. The warptear was my own, not Lloyd's. That does not mean I want it more. It means I must risk more to defeat it."

"You'll be firing salvos in the dark. You'll more than likely shoot yourself. I agree with Tony. But I'll go further. I don't think we should even run the LENS in spite of what Minerva thinks of the odds."

Pommeled by doubt, Henry exclaimed, "What should I do? I can no longer ignore this abominable nightmare."

"Only you can decide," she said. "Tell us what you want and we will do our best."

Henry answered quickly, "Then ... make me the key that unlocks Panigma Gate."

Julia said nothing more as she reconsidered his request. Henry turned his attention to a lavender snail leaving its track of glowing slime along the edge of the isocell door. "You think these creatures are here for a reason?" he asked. "Maybe a link ... a bio-antenna for communication with the other side? But what could justify those disgusting worms? And why suddenly no heat and light from an over-designed system costing millions?"

Tony shrugged that he didn't know. "I'm concerned there's a much simpler explanation than antennas and track lighting." He watched Julia deeply lost inside the cobwebs of a maze. "Perhaps Julia had the right explanation for your unworldly slugs. Henry, if you'll recall—"

Julia interrupted, "Well then ... if the Gate is what you want then Gate is what you'll get!"

They were startled out of their momentary distractions. What did she mean? It often happened that what she said was not what she meant. "Sounds like Russian roulette?" Henry quavered, turning pale blue in the light of the door snail that had reversed its color to replicate his grave-digger mood.

"No, not Russian at all. It's Irish with a dash of German. We won't even try to befuddle Lloyd's Gateword. No damned use ... cannot work. We'll go through the front door. It is then that we must arrange to confound F3. And we will. We'll have all it tied neatly in a bow ... a hearty meal for old Doc Faust. Such a trick impresses even me. Lloyd would love it too. Shame we can't call and brag."

"You can do this thing." He saw the devil's plan reflected in her purbrown eyes. "Just how? What dark ace of cubes is up your sleeve?"

"In your attic dream you separated the dyad into its parts ... the posicube and the anticube. Remember the confounded cubing and uncubing?"

“Yes ... of course. I was trying to find the key that would open the door before the thickness of the attic crushed me to a faint memory.”

“But you kept the posicube and threw the anticube away ... back into your dream box. You then made from the hypercube a tesseract, opened the door and escaped into your beloved, but bedeviled thinspace.”

“So ... what are you saying ... that I was as thin-headed as Faust?”

“Yeah ... you had it backwards. My smart boy, you threw away the wrong cube. The key you needed was not the posicube, but the anticube all along ... its negative variant of the hypercube. Inside your attic was thinspace. The topology of those Klein bottles infinitely thin ... that was your clue. Damn ... we’ve finally got it. What do you say, Henry?”

Tony said disbelievingly, “We’re gonna feed Doctor Faust the anticube ... Jesus! Ain’t this going too far?”

“What can I say? Your logic is sound,” said Henry of Julia’s plan, “but it does us no earthly good, for the anticube is inaccessible.”

Julia was ignited to a quarlike glow. She had become the dark Queen of the Machine.

“You let me worry about that. You mind all the loose boards and nails and I’ll open your attic door. I’ll make the key for your Gate, or if you prefer, the Gate for your key. Henry, I might just save your sweet ass after all.”

“It’s working?” he asked.

“It’s working,” she answered faintly as if still unconvinced.

“Any of your CIC transmissions getting past the parallax?”

“Seems so. He appears to respond to my cues.”

Tony sighed. “Then he’s going to be okay.”

“Not if this video doesn’t clear up.”

Julia retuned the video driver, tried to tune out the electronic snow on her navcon monitor, but nothing she did, including a change of LENS perspective, improved the resolution of Henry’s parascan. He had been in REM for about fifteen minutes and they were still navigating mostly blind.

“Can you make anything from that ... that blur?” asked Tony staring at the fuzzy blobs and splotches on the screen.

“No. And it doesn’t seem to be doing very much. Odd? It reminds me of months ago ... the dimensional chaos without the depth-time perception. I can’t tell where or when he is. He’s drifting. Not quite the panoptoscope is it?”

He reminded, "But there is no panigo. How long will it take Henry to converge? He only has to locate this place about this time yesterday. Should it take this long? I wonder if the preamp was set too low."

"You could, if you'd like, take Henry by the hand. I'll warm up chamber four for you if you'd like to try a Kovrani mind-melt. I could set you up real fast inside the LENS camera. No bother at all ... I promise."

Tony replied sheepishly, "No need for that, Julia. I'll try a little patience." He took a sip of cold coffee, made a face as he rolled his chair nearer the biocon for a recheck of Henry's PPI and vital signs.

She repeated, "I'll warm up another couch ... just in case." Tony, hoping it was only a bad joke at a bad moment, ignored her.

"Could that image really indicate isochamber two?" he asked after risking another peek at the parangle parameters displayed on her navcon. "In a way that blur or splotch in the center reminds me of the wedge slab of a 'cell or 'con. It is indeed odd how some of the forms are retrograde and some are not as if the scene is a mix of past and future. Just when I think I'm making sense of what I'm seeing it turns into a kind of LENS flotsam."

She shrugged as she squinted at the monitor. She traced fuzzy images with her finger, coaxing meaning from near-to-nothing. "That could be camera two, though it could be anything. But what's all that quanta passing through the planes? Reminds me of a dream I've shared with him. Hmm ... it is the mansard's clutter coalescing from the chaos ... the curule chair ... the astrolabe ... the teapoy and birdcage. It's like seeing animals in the clouds. Funny about that swiggle ... see it ... well, he's gone now. Always seems to disappear ... like he's hiding ... like he knows I'm watching. See how he tries to hide behind your splotch no matter where I move the LENS fulcrum."

She shuddered as if she had tripped over her own dark slab or the attic jack-in-the-box, perhaps the same nightmares all along. She searched for the reassurance of her little box of padauk wood. It was still safe inside her pocket, warm and safe. For some inconsequential advantage unclear even to her, Julia opened the middle utility drawer, removed the isocon flashlight and stuffed it inside her pocket. She looked over her shoulder at Tony grimly preoccupied, not engaged as he should have been by the Henry's biocon parameters.

Tony frowned anxiously at her navcon monitor. "Julia, this intercept can't be right. It's crazy. It's out of this world. This can't be Henry's vector. It must be something else?"

Julia nodded yes. "Something else. But it's been Henry's vector from day one and nearer than we knew," she whispered as if grim insight or bits of revelation had just clicked into their final resting place. "It's an ugly vector that points to Henry's worst fear."

"What?" he croaked. "Then you might want to get him back on course real quick."

"I knew that we'd arrive some day," added Julia enigmatically. "Henry was right. 'You'll pilot at Hell's Gate,' he had said." She remembered Max Cole and his dyads and dreams.

She guessed that Max would be pleased in his cynical way of being pleased. Like Henry's box of dreams the anticube had been made, crudely, but it had been made nonetheless. It had done and would do more handy work. But what about that other thing that Max had asked? She still had that locus to open. Too many puzzles were locked inside her box of dreams. Her own little locus grew warmer, heavier in her pocket, begged like Tony's questions to be opened and answered.

"There!" cried Tony. "It is the dream chamber. The door has opened ... maybe just a little. Jeez ... this is lousy. We're going to need a lot of gray matter to make much sense from this."

"Maybe more than we can spare," she mumbled as if millions of miles away. Tony did not wish to hear this tidbit of news.

Henry's piloting was less than lucid, unusually sluggish for a LaBerge-9 dreamer. Was this chamber two or his attic nightmare? It seemed more the latter than the former. He had hoped to avoid the attic altogether, but the box and its machine always lured him back.

He intercepted Julia's transmission: "Parangle lagging severely ... more than 50 minutes of omega and epsilon. Power high and irregular. Henry, you're drifting off course. Relax. Just follow my homing beam. Where's our lucid dreamer? I can't merc you now."

Her beam or his lucidity was nowhere to be found. There was just the niche, his dream *noir*. Henry was again inside his vision of angelic birds, satanic snakes, griffins, gnomes, puppets and plenicons.

Henry stood on his mental toes and peered inside the attic box, larger inside than outside, with compartments inside of compartments, on and on perhaps forever, a LENS panoptogram with uncountable sides and immeasurable depth. He probed the uncertainty of the locus. His mental hand touched nodules and spurs, tubes and toroids, a gizmoidal bundle—an assortment of gadgets all somehow connected. He firmly anchored his feet and with an enormous effort of his cicabytes he extracted the bundle from the box.

Its locules and labyrinths emitted a dark, quarlight. Henry carefully disassembled the panigmatical machine. Inside the box were two supercubes—the posicube and the anticube. The posicube he tossed back into the box. From the other Henry fashioned a negative tesseract bearing whorls that defied comprehension. These whorls twisted into a tight script bearing initials and numbers, actually three initials and two dates. What did they mean? Clues from Lloyd? Instructions from Julia? Or more puzzling symbols from Nettie?

Henry held the tesseract to receive its thick and parachromatic light. He inserted the tesseract into the padlock that had sealed him inside the attic. Over the door a number had been painted that he struggled desperately to read. He paused to focus. As he unlocked the door the number grew clearer. Henry was in fact surprised that there were

really two numbers, actually two doors—one thick, the other more than a million times thicker.

Julia had transmitted a code three warning, but she could not be sure that all or any of it had actually been received. Henry veered more and more off course—a trajectory dangerously close to locking him out of any chance of acquiring the proper return vector.

Another check of the consoles revealed something even worse. It was hard to believe, so Minerva's message had to be wrong. The critical CIC consumed memory faster than shit flowed through the proverbial goose. If by some chance Minerva was correct, Henry's goose would soon be roasted, his very vulnerable brain fried from the awesome mnemonic power of Nettie's space-time window. Another CIC would be needed soon, maybe more than one. Julia started two more CICs on fast warm-up. Her hand went reflexively to her pocket and its contents for reassurance. The surrounding orange wood was hot from the secret that it held and was getting hotter by the second.

She groaned, uttering words she loathed to speak: "Tony, do you see it?"

Tony was ghostly pale. "I'm watching it surge, now passing 65 percent of capacity and still climbing. Fortunately for Henry his PPI is climbing with it, but of course he's gotta plateau real soon."

"I've never had a CIC over 45 percent. Nettie's matching him terabyte for terabyte. We better find out what's going on. Otherwise we'll have to abort the scan and Henry doesn't need that. I'm going to fire up our last CIC ... just in case."

"What's drawing all the power?" he warbled. It can't possibly be Henry. If it is he won't ... make it. Has the anticube collapsed on him?"

"No ... no. It's not Faust's thinspace. His parangle is not consistent with that. He does have the Gate running, though only idling, drawing a few percent. But I don't know what accounts for this incredible window?"

"Jesus ... how can you remain so calm? I'm not feeling well ... my head and stomach are about to crash. Damn ... look at that! The OPM ... how's it handling the overload? Will it keep up?"

"It's not. It's out of synch ... well behind. It could shut down at any moment. And I'm worried about the Panigma Button ... if it should suddenly override I can't predict what might happen. But if we turn it off ... well ... that's no good either."

Another CIC switched on as Henry's scanning power and PPI approached 100 percent. Though his ground crew was totally overwhelmed, they nevertheless remained glued to their controls. In the cold 'con air cold sweat coalesced on warm skin, trickled along tense muscles, dripped on printouts, on instruments, on whatever was underneath.

Space and time transformed, grew thicker. The expanding contingency field was having its effect on everything from the biocomputer to the ground crew. The glowsnails

suffocated and died. With their demise the light in the isocon had surged. In their preoccupation the alternate source of illumination striking Tony and Julia's backs had gone unnoticed.

Tony held the biocon housing as if riding out a panigo. "Julia, his pulse and respiration are in the red zone. His intercranial reading is over 103°F. It must be his hypothalamus. Glucose is climbing. He's K-spindling. He's as lit as my biocon. We must disconnect him soon or he's a dead man!"

She waved off his suggestion to disconnect. Tony wordlessly communicated his objection, his frustration with flailing arms as if he was a drowning man contesting his third and final submersion. His eyes communicated a vacant visage of terror, though fortunately no one saw them, best of all him. With all the strength he could muster he finally found his voice and screamed, "What's happening with the navcon? It ain't telling us doodly-squat."

Totally absorbed, she did not or could not answer. She rechecked the console. The second CIC had reached 35 percent of its capacity. "The more memory I feed him the more he needs," she wailed. "Damn it, Henry. What are you doing? How can you keep this going?"

Tony shouted as if the woman was miles away and not alongside, "Retried the CIC link?"

"Sure ... several times. No good."

Tony mopped his brow with what was once a handkerchief. "We've gotta be forgetting something basic." He screamed, "What does the manual say?"

She screamed back: "Screw the manual! The manual says to clean out your pants. Good grief, you think we have manuals for shit like this?"

"Sorry ... just trying to use my head for something."

"Forget your head. Keep your eyes on the biocon. The other two CICs are heating up. 'Fraid I'm going to need them both. Tell me something, Tony. What happens when I've used all four? Where should I put the rest of Henry?"

"Shouldn't we shutdown? Look at that goddamned spike."

"Two problems. First ... I can't account for Henry's CIC index ... can't map a bloomin' thing. Second ... untrack yourself a minute, turn around and look inside the 'cell. Might explain the awesome spike."

"What's happened?" Tony turned to look. As he did, a bright light like a summer dawn with orange and purple fire passed across his face, though it did not elevate his spirits. "Jesus! I should have known. He's gone and done it. The fool has gone and done it."

The isocell was about to give birth. An ellipsoidal mini-sun rotated and expanded, ejected pulses and parachromatic waves. There were other equally strange emanations. Shadows

from another plane collided with firm objects in the isocell to induce numerous secondary spatial disturbances, incomprehensible forms and shapes.

She asked, "Can you see inside the event perimeter?"

"No ... it blunts the eyes. What on Earth comes through? What'ya see on your navcon?"

"Seems you were right. Looks like the door to one of our chambers. But which one? It's Henry's attic door. I can barely make out ... well, I hope I'm wrong. I think his answer's behind it ... and soon to be ours."

The third CIC kicked in. Mind power climbed ever faster hastening Henry's mnemonic crisis. Time and space began to bend around the event perimeter, to twist and turn dragging with it the tenuous substance of the isocell.

Tony rose uncertainly, drifted toward the isocell window on unsure legs. He stood by the window mesmerized by the show of lights. "You should see this! It's like a fiery *piñata* about to burst. Everything around it, Henry too, is melting and running toward the walls like wax."

The fourth CIC kicked in, then sputtered and died.

Julia cried, "This is not going to work. So ... we're in Baumer's shit after all ... and Henry's buried to his ears in a dark sea of Nettie's diarrhea."

"Julia, I think the Gate's about to deliver its cargo. The thing's gonna nuke us into Arizona! The wall ... I can put my hand through the goddamned, frigging wall!"

She removed her jacket now wringing wet. There was one last thing to try. "I hope this isn't Henry's idea of a joke 'cause I'm pulling out the stops."

Tony gasped, "Henry ... I can't see Henry!"

"That's it. There's no more time. This thing's going down with all hands ... unless this works."

As she was about to switch Nettie to manual the isocell flashed from cherry red to bluish white. Tony and Julia screamed and hit the deck. Their ears popped like firecrackers as the air pressure spiked. A thing heavy and metallic crashed to the floor. The lights, computers and glowsnails, expired and plunged them into darkness.

The air reeked of ozone. Tony whimpered, "God, no ... it's here." Julia slowly sat up, removed the flashlight from her pocket and clicked the switch. She passed it over Tony's perspiring face. "Are you okay?" she asked almost inaudibly as she crawled closer, the beam nervously darting back and forth.

"You trying to be funny. I think I've had an accident. What in the hell should I do?"

"What's the big deal. Seems simple. You want the honors or shall I?"

He eyed her furtively. “What’ya mean ... honors? You crazy? What fucking honors?”

“I only wanted to know if you wanted to go in, or if you prefer that I do it. One of us has to go in to see if Henry is okay.”

The man looked as if he had been poleaxed. “Go in there? I can’t, Julia. Please, you’ll have to.”

“Doesn’t really matter who. Same thing ... no matter.”

His hand came down on something hard. He jerked it away as Julia trained her beam on an empty snail shell sucked dry and left on the battlefield like a fallen helmet. There were a few more scattered around.

“Don’t think they can hurt you now. Nothing left of them, but the limey shell. Well ... here goes. First, let’s have some light on the subject.” Julia directed a narrow beam of light into the ‘cell.

Tony screamed, “God ... it’s blown out the whole friggin’ wall.” The entire wall and window between the two rooms had vanished completely. The flashlight’s thin beam intercepted the dream couch. “Henry ... he’s gone too. And what’s that cloud over the couch just hanging up there, thick ... gray and thick ... like a fog bank of ... snot?”

Tony jumped to his feet. “He’s gone ... the man is ... is gone!”

“Take it easy, Tony. Just keep your head screwed on. Let’s see what’s happened.” She re-aimed the flashlight toward the isocon panels. “You see it?” she said. “You can see what’s happened.”

“No ... but ... Heh! ... wait a minute. We’re—”

“Yeah ... that’s right. It isn’t Henry that’s gone. It’s us. Can’t you tell. We’ve been moved. Not much, but enough. This isn’t chamber two any longer. It’s chamber four. It’s Hell’s Gate like Henry said. Tony, I think our time has come. Listen. You can almost hear bristling ... like the ruminations of ... the knurly beast.” She sighed like life’s last breath.

As Henry contemplated two doors, one thick, the other a million times thicker, it became evident that he could not step through either one without stepping through both. The possibility space between them, a picoquin or less, was too narrow for his mind to pass through. The leverage of Nettie would not be enough. Because of the pressure of the light at his back, he could not go back, he could only go forward. Given no other possibility within his mnemonic power, he stepped through to the other side.

He beheld a tapestry like nothing he had ever known. He had the whole Earth, past and past-possible, rushing through his brain. With effort he concentrated and coalesced the flow of light, constructed specific images from the chaos.

He took the full measure of the mantoid raptors and their prey—truck-sized, triceratopian beetles and lumbering labyrinthodonts. There were Gorgonosaurs, Lystrosaurs and Diictodons. Henry suspected he was actually among them, treading the same path between quagmires of decaying vegetation and festering ooze.

Above the squalor he noticed monstrous, variegated leaves dotted with blackish nodules falling like parachutes to the ground. As they drew closer it became clearer what they really were—not leaves at all, but multi-legged paratroopers, furling and unfurling their parasail legs in a calculated and pinpoint descent. Henry felt death's hand upon his shoulder. He tried to flee, but it was too late. A faceless paratrooper landed on top of him, ensnaring him in powerful legs, folding him inside a dark and prickly canopy.

There was an explosion of light and form that hurled him back to familiar turf. For one false microsecond he thought that he was awake and safe, but his lack of habitation, his unlimited peripheral vision and the expansion of his consciousness meant this space was greater than real—a parascene of five dimensions, a rotation of the LENS paracube. He remained asleep and encompassed by the vast forebrain of the biocomputer. Tapping its vast mnemonics, he drifted inside a bright corridor, a beehive of activity and anticipation.

Henry focused on the anteroom as a hospital gurney whooshed through him. This was the thing that unnerved him the most—the ghostly lack of substance and true self, the all-seeing eye with no body, no sense of hearing, smell or touch. He collected himself, a few cicabytes of hopes and fears as he followed Max and the gurney into chamber two as it was on that epochal Wednesday, that past-possible, that highly improbable Ides of March.

The activity brought to mind a bustling hospital. Henry and Max entered the isocell where Lloyd slept on pressed, white sheets. Although his busy attendants were masked it was a simple matter to identify them—Owen with the stethoscope, Max with the rotund, pear shape, and tall Bill Hagerty with his holstered 45-caliber Army Colt.

Their stark white garb in the harsh red light overworked the eyes, cast them as angels in Hell, certainly not Raphael, Gabriel and Michael in Heaven. Lloyd, a semi-decent Moses, clutched commandments recopied on parchment, likely Konnick's lost manuscript, the rumored runic scrolls finally resurfacing.

Max readjusted the gurney. Bill nervously checked and rechecked the closed-circuit monitors. The diverse assortment of cushions and carpets that been had tossed around he had seen paradoxically twenty-four hours later.

What happened next happened fast.

The air in the isocell effloresced the signature parachromatics. The time vault opened and gave birth—to a delivery with a sharp clap of collapsing air. Whatever fell upon the soft cushions fell gently to be quickly surrounded by three masked men. For Henry the event was a blur. Ironically he had missed the delivery and the primary point of his parascan.

Members of the team performed flawlessly. The traveler was lifted, injected, covered and fitted with a respirator. Owen spoke a few words before the gurney was suddenly whisked into the corridor. For all of his trouble there was nothing for Henry Kincaid to see, no evil to unmask.

Owen concentrated on the sleeper stirring from his slumber. He placed the precious manuscript in a satchel before lifting and propping Lloyd for an exam that was barely tolerated. After collecting what was needed, the men joined the carefully planned escape.

Lloyd Baumer plus his conspirators, Henry Kincaid, the anti-conspirator, and the now prostrate traveler were soon proceeding toward the elevator, soon ascending to the dock, soon taking positions in the waiting ambulance, making speed without undo haste.

Bill Hagerty slid into the driver's side. He started the engine, mashed down the pedal, accelerated toward the main gate past Wilbur Conovar alone and confused inside his kiosk. Henry gauged the scale of Panopticon as it receded into perspective, its metal gleaming orange where there were no triangular panes of black glass to absorb the energy of the floodlights. Though only a dream it felt good to watch the dome disappear into the earth. With an eye for everything inside and out, he studied Max Cole sitting rigid and unresponsive considering the frantic activity so near and so compelling.

Henry parapoorted at an exhilarating clip. It was easy to believe in his own omnipotence, though he knew overconfidence could lead to serious consequences. He concentrated on a route challenging on this moonless night. Events inside the speeding vehicle overshadowed all else. Lloyd was ill, sweating profusely, breathing with difficulty, testing Owen's skill. Finally, Max defeated his funk to offer his encouragement if not an extra pair of hands.

They sped through desolate Tarpley, then into the remote foothills on winding, narrow roads. In thirty minutes they arrived at a massive, stone wall and steel gate, their fortress in remote El Rasigo Blanco. Floodlights greeted their arrival. Several vehicles crammed full of faceless, silent men flanked the massive, steel gate. Bill opened the gate using his hand-held transmitter. In less time than it took the device to reset itself, they were speeding up the snakelet, leaving sand and gravel in their wake.

As one gate closed, another opened, for the sun had anointed a new day. Henry could see Bill's objective through the sun-bathed pines. The sprawling hacienda impressed Henry with its tasteless decadence. In about twenty seconds they arrived at a huge door hardened like the time vault of Fort Knox. Wasting no time they unloaded their two, ill passengers. Bill opened the massive, steel door, and then re-pocketed the transmitter.

Henry made his decision. As he had foreseen, one key now availed another. He focused on Bill and on what Bill held like a jewel. Henry sized it up, folded it up and inserted it deftly inside the deep interior of his dream pocket. The required mass and temporal potential were easily displaced, perhaps too easily. His work was at least half done. Given the perils of the voyage it was far better than nothing. It was time to cut his losses and return home.

In no time he awoke expecting a warm welcome, but received nothing of the kind.

Henry received no welcome at all. He peeled away his head gear and mask. Still groggy, he sat up, his feet tingling, his eyelids twitching. Rubbing them did not help. His head throbbed from more than just low pipes. Sudden elevation produced vertigo. He inhaled, refilled his lungs, and fought off the dizziness. He looked through the glass into the 'con in anticipation of aid and assistance, of a host of questions, of the solicitude of friends.

But for the glowsnails the isocon was lifeless. An annoying hum like that from a surging motor beat in unison with the blood in his ears. He eased over the couch, placed his feet not so firmly upon the floor. He paused hoping to hear pleasant voices if even from the dark. He did not care if they hid beneath the couch. He needed the comfort of company.

As he started for the 'con door the memory of his parascan trickled back—chamber two on March 15th, the hacienda, and finally the gadget tucked unobtrusively inside his coat.

“Ouch!” He stubbed his toe on metal dropped between the couch and door. He quickly seized the warm padlock from camera four, its clasp shut. The memories trickled back, of Julia, of chamber four and the lock. He recalled the ill-timed interlude in the compulab. He recalled his embarrassment when Tony arrived. Instead of joining together, the pieces of the puzzle were flying apart. Now suddenly the worst fitting piece of all was the one he counted on the most. What was Julia not telling? Why was the lock dropped diabolically like the wrench in a game of Clue? Any attempt to reason caused his head to throb.

He stowed the bulky device in a pocket in order to balance his coat, then opened the door. The isocon blinked like an air-traffic control room. The fact of so many lights without people was predisposing of disaster. The pungent odor like burnt out motors and electrical sub-panels was stronger than before. He called out: “Julia ... Tony ... you guys okay?”

His voice sounded tinny, not the strong tenor he that was used to hearing in his head. He tested it again with even less confidence. “This ain’t funny. Please, guys no games.”

But for his two accomplices the isocon was how he remembered it. Reconnoitering, he found the checklist and the stain where Tony had spilled coffee. There was his friend’s empty cup, a few scattered notes and crumpled printouts, a pen on the floor, Julia’s pen, a shoe on the floor, Tony’s shoe. He picked up the pen, passed up the shoe. What dark deed accounted for the abandoned shoe? Had Tony been knocked out of his loafers?

Where was the smoking gun? At least there were no bloody footprints leading into the corridor as Julia had (it seemed) so long ago suggested. Henry muttered, “I must try ’n think. Must be rational and stay calm. It’s bad all right, but not so bad as it now seems.”

What if a time rift had separated Tony and Julia from his reality, from his here and now? Had they never ever been? This was too horrible a scenario to consider. Nothing of that sort could be true.

"I'm not thinking clearly," he concluded. Their scribbles were living proof. The pen was her pen. He remembered it well—the episode in the compulab with Julia glowing like Nettie. And the shoe had to be Tony's shoe. He remembered Tony. He remembered both their faces, their voices. They were solid facts and solidly somewhere. But where?

"They're okay ... have to be." The bluish beam of a mollusk passed like shadow hands across his face. Only the shadows were not the result of hands, but were cast by an active pair of eyestalks, the essential property of a brown-speckled snail. "I'll kill them."

The doors to the anteroom and corridor were ajar, which was strictly against procedure. He had been roughly awake for about five minutes. Perhaps it was only a matter of human biology and they would soon return. Unfortunately, he did not think so. The glowsnails seemed fewer, seemed fainter than before. Henry had failed to appreciate them. He opened the middle drawer of Sondra's panel desk and searched for a flashlight that he felt should be there, but was not. Their J-Mart special with its red and yellow bands had vanished into uncertainty. Henry had purchased four flashlights himself on that fateful, first day. He reminded himself, "It's not so bad. Stay calm and everything will work out."

"Just think!" he cried aloud. He consulted Minerva, enlisted her comp-links and cameras for the offices, break room, compulab, lobby and the parking lot. Their OHM computer admitted nothing helpful.

"I'll kill them," he repeated in words more pulled than pushed through his trembling lips.

As much as anything he needed some warmth and light. It was cold growing colder, dark growing darker, with all the right circuits in the subbasement. "No bogeyman," he said unconvincingly. "I can do it." There was too much territory to cover in the dim and dying glow of the snails. Henry had no choice. Then he remembered chamber four and the thought of skulking in the dark produced a quiver in his loins. It would be best to forget the whole dirty business and go for help. "No!" he concluded. There was no time.

He left the isocon, closing the doors as he entered the corridor. Several weak snails blinked "hello." He stopped and listened for friendly sounds, for the familiar voices of Julia and Tony. He detected an irregular plunk-plunk, probably the palpitations of a leaky pipe. There was no doubt. He admitted the possibility. He was genuinely afraid.

Proceeding toward the stairwell he recalled his dream of Nightmare Station with its subterranean passages and chambers, with its time vault, with those things hidden in boxes or beneath discoloring tarps and canvas covers.

He descended the metal stairs, past and through the stratum that kept Nettie warm and well nourished. He carried with him one of the snails as a lantern, though it seemed very near the end of its light and its life. He was surprised the pink creature was so cold. He had to warn himself: "Slow and easy." When Henry reached the bottom he paused a moment for inspiration before opening the door. He could count the times he had visited Fuller's catacombs on the fingers of one hand. He pulled, but nothing happened. He

pulled again with all his strength, finally forcing a narrow opening around the sliding slab.

“Gad!” came a response beyond his control. Fuller’s Folly was littered with crates and machinery, the optoelectronics used to calibrate the lenses of the panoptoscope. Plastic packing had been tossed around carelessly adding to the obstacle course of plywood boxes. The circuit breakers were somewhere unseen beyond the camouflage of cases and crates. He paused to scrutinize one particular crate that blocked his way.

He would have to deal with it. He eased around the obscure machinery and lesser boxes. His lantern flickered, went out. After a few seconds it flickered on to a sigh of relief. He had nothing if not his glowsnail. The crate was a cube about two yards to a side. It had been opened, its lid resting on its top. Before attempting to move it he would thoroughly inspect it. Making a “shade” with his left hand he aimed the snail light along the sides and edges looking for signs of damage, for cracks or for splits in the wood that might make moving it unsafe for him or for the equipment inside. Stenciled were the words: Fragile Optical Equipment—Store Upright. There was the Institute’s address and the note to the attention of Joe Fuller, plus labels, warnings and bills of lading. It appeared that the crate had seen a lot of rough handling for fragile equipment. There were deep chips and gouges in the crate, plus some dark stains near the top. He could not be sure of the color of these stains in the pinkish light. The crate emitted the strong odor of overcooked chemicals.

Henry removed the lid and positioned the snail for a look inside. He stood on tiptoes and waited for his eyes to adjust. A machine with many appurtenances gradually came into dull focus. His mind filled in the rest—likely the drive motor, Plano vanes and defractor of an optoelectroscope. With great effort he reached and groped for what he suspected was the scope’s power pack. There were myriad buttons along with bulbs and levers, nodes and spurs, tubes and toroids, a gizmoidal bundle of unexpectedly high complexity.

“Ouch!” Henry withdrew a finger dripping blood, cut by unseen, sharp metal. He brought the finger reflexively to his lips for comfort. It did not taste good, his finger or the blood. He should have known better than to stick fingers where they did not belong. “Not too costly a lesson ... this time,” he announced. He vowed that he would proceed more slowly in the dark.

But the crate had to be moved—blood, pain or strain. He crouched down and pushed. Nothing gave, but a few muscles in his back. He then anchored his feet using another crate almost as large. He lowered his point of attack and pushed again. It gave, slightly, but gave enough to create a tight, but sufficient passage. “Whew ... that’ll have to do.”

Straightening painfully, he heard the ululation behind him. It sounded again, longer and louder—a blood-rattling peal like an animal aspirating in the throes of agony. His mind accelerated as he struggled to choose what to do.

He yelled hoarsely, “Who’s ... who’s there?” He turned reluctantly, but there was no one, or no one he could see without more snails.

His already feeble snail light began to ebb. He took the dying gastropod in his hand, careful to handle nothing but the shell. After a few well-placed taps the light of the glowsnail was partially revived.

He maneuvered through the corridor on jellified legs. The words he heard distinctly: “Hen ... Henry?” in a pathetic, pleading voice. It seemed to have come from Storeroom B. He aimed toward the dark notch that was the door and nudged it open. A disheveled lump of flesh peered up at him with glistening, vapid eyes. “Thank God,” mumbled Tony, huddling on the dingy concrete. The man looked bad, but smelled worse. His hair looked as if it been combed by a saw. His shirt was stained and torn. One shoe was missing. Struggling to aim his weak flashlight, he uttered, “I heard.”

Henry reached out and coaxed the flashlight from his hand. The former asked, “Your face? Tony ... what has happened to your face?”

Tony traced the inflamed ridges that ran unevenly over his cheek. He winced in shock and surprise from the unexpected damage and pain. He studied his hand in horror. Squeezing into a ball he looked past Henry and gurgled, “Where’s Julia?”

Aiming flashlight and glowsnail, Henry replied, “Tony, this was my question for you. I can’t find her.” A worried pause followed. For several seconds nothing, then: “Do you know where you are?”

Tony stammered incoherently. Henry released a deep sigh, shrugged with resignation knowing full well the things that must be done and done by him.

Using the snail and flashlight Henry explored the cages, shelves and bays stocked with expensive tools and machinery. He diligently examined any space or container that might supply some clue, no matter how minute. He returned, but with eyes so stark and empty that it appeared as if the vitreous humor had exuded from their sockets.

“This is nuts!” he bleated, pacing like a caged panther, his chest rising and falling. “Why aren’t you in the ‘con? You know the rules.”

“Rules? Yes, rules.” It seemed for an instant that Tony might laugh. “The rules of the ‘con.”

Henry forcefully repeated the question, “Why aren’t you manning your post?”

Tony muttered, “I’m not. I won’t. I won’t ever again.”

Henry set the fading glowsnail on the floor. It began moving in a circle. He stated as calmly as he could: “Tell me what you remember.”

Tony was loath to look at him. “I remember we got real busy. Then it happened ... a flash and crash. It knocked us down and out.” Tony paused, his hand shielding his face. “It gets fuzzy. Julia said something strange, but I can’t remember what. There was a dark mass ... Henry, that’s all I remember. I’m trying, but my shoe? I want back my shoe.”

“Forget your shoe. Tony, this is important. For God’s sake this is important. You must think. You must remember what happened ... for Julia’s sake ... and ours. You must remember. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened and what she said and did.”

“It might help if we could find my other shoe.”

“It might help if you got off your ass. We’ve got to find her. My God man, snap out of it. We need clear heads. Look around you. What do you see? We’re in serious shit. Christ ... I’ve been using a jumbo escargot for a flashlight! Try to understand the mess we’re in.”

Henry lifted Tony ingloriously to his feet.

“Kinda sick,” was his response. “Maybe a walk would ...?”

“That’s it. And you’ll walk better if you remove that stupid shoe.”

Tony removed the shoe and tucked it under his arm. Henry led him roughly out the door and around the crates toward the electrical cabinets. Scattered among the loose packing were plenty of snails alive and dead, most under attack by parasitic Brillo worms. Tony stumbled as Henry grumbled. The cabinets were open, and also under attack by worms. All the switches for lights and HVAC were unexpectedly closed. Henry complained, “I don’t like this. Something’s pulling on our chain just to see what we do.”

“Jog ‘em,” Tony suggested sincerely. “A little kick in the amps is all they need.”

“High-tech suggestion.” In desperation Henry tried it. He cycled several of the main switches, but with no positive results.

“No use,” Henry proclaimed. “The circuits must be open somewhere else. Rats chewing the insulation ... inside the plenum maybe. This ain’t good and I don’t like depending on this Jiffy-Mart flashlight especially down here.”

“We’re wasting time, Henry. If we’re going to find her we’ll find her upstairs. My feet are soaked. I’d kill for clean and dry.”

“All right. We’ll go. Damn, I feel more the main coarse, less the *hors d’oeuvre*.” Henry led them through a repugnant carnage of semi-empty shells, some dry and some dripping jelly. “A brimstone roast,” he added forebodingly, “but underdone for my taste.”

His light wand probed the narrows. The two, battered men followed the light, avoided the clutter and climbed the metal stairs. Finally reaching the hoped-for higher level Tony found the men’s room. He did what he could with what he had to achieve clean and normal by snail light. Henry used the time to survey the corridor, calling out Julia’s name, aiming the flashlight into the lab and chambers—lockless chamber four excepted.

“Feeling better?” asked Henry as Tony emerged barefoot carrying a shoe in one hand, a glowsnail in the other. He added, “You look and smell almost tolerable. I’ve a present for you.” He handed Tony his other loafer a bit worse for the wear. “I don’t think you’ll

really want it now. It doesn't feel right. And that roasted smell. I wouldn't trust it any more than one of these blinking sliders."

"Thanks, but we are trusting them." Tony lobbed both shoes against the wall. "But I guess I don't need these things. I am remembering a little more, but it only baffles me more. I'm not sure of anything ... how I got downstairs ... even where I've been. I can see Julia's face, but I can't remember her final words."

"I'm remembering," quavered Henry. He removed the padlock from his pocket. He looked it over and rolled it in his hands as if he was guessing its weight. "Remembering black 'chutes ... opening and closing, eclipsing the light ... and me. Doesn't help me much."

They suddenly looked at one another as if deliberating which one of them would pay the check. The knowledge that both were thinking the same thing at the same time had found its way unwittingly into their eyes.

"We should leave. Camera four is best left alone and locked. I'm remembering something else. I can't understand it. I was inside that ... place. I know that now. Henry, I was inside chamber four. Henry, we should not stay here. We must go for help."

"No, we've got to go in there and you know it." He was about to toss the padlock in the general direction of Tony's loafers, but reconsidered and re-pocketed the device. "Don't want to wake anything more than the two of us." He glanced nervously from side to side without moving his head. He sucked in a deep breath as a kind of reality test, just to be sure he was not even now sleeping and dreaming inside chamber two.

"Henry, there's something else. I remember being lifted up by hooks. Suddenly everything was moving. A hole in space opened and swallowed me. This hole was blacker than black, darker than death. Somehow I'm deposited downstairs. Can't guess. Don't want to. Don't think Julia made it. Wish there was some hope I could offer. I'm afraid not."

"Yeah," said Henry with resignation. He aimed them for the chamber. "Well ... it's time. The door's open. If you know any prayers it might not be a bad time for one."

Tony betrayed no emotion as he stared at the door gapping wider than the few square feet of space registered by common sense. Henry played the light over the floor. They crossed over the threshold, entered the small anteroom of dream chamber four with their J-Mart flashlight projecting just a few yards ahead. They stepped gingerly from the anteroom into the isocon, though not quite the same as Tony remembered it.

To his amazement the control panels were fully powered. "That's funny," he said. "I'm pretty sure that the isocon was dead ... with no juice at all to any of the consoles." Tony breathed a sigh of relief as if electricity in the panels was some kind of good omen. They paused to listen. They both heard and silently acknowledged a regular, rhythmic clicking that echoed from the direction of the navcon or biocon.

Henry sniffed sourly the stagnant air. If nothing else the smell of burnt chemicals was worse. He redirected his beam toward the ‘cell itself. What followed was a hiss like live steam—a strangled human cough, then from Henry a string of uncommon profanity.

“Sorry,” exclaimed Tony, “I’d forgot the thing about the wall ... to tell you about it ... I mean. Not a particle of it left. Blown away by whatever it was that erupted from the crack in our LENS. Too big I guess for the time and space inside the room.”

“Look there!” Henry raised his flashlight and aimed it at a dark object that reclined inside the chamber. The motionless silhouette was asleep and lightly snoring in rhythmic clicks.

“Good grief!” bleated Tony. “What in God’s name is going on?”

“Check the biocon,” Henry ordered. “This is the last thing I thought she’d ever do.” Tony was slow to react. Henry barked, “Check out the ‘con and hurry!” He played the flashlight over Julia asleep on the couch. Satisfied there was no immediate danger, he redirected the beam to the concealed spaces of the pie-shaped room. Surprised, he announced, “The wall must have been vaporized so they could empty their trash.”

Between Henry and Julia on the couch lay a dirty, green blanket, stained and shredded in the center of a crisscross of tracks. A fibrous, gray balloon, a vast air bag, floated a few feet above Julia with no obvious means of support. It had apparently collected dregs from every vacuum cleaner that had ever gone to the dump. And though seemingly a cobweb, it had structure—air chambers, tubes and cysts. Most of the latter enclosed black coils that throbbed to a uniform beat.

Julia slept undisturbed. Henry warily approached her, pressed two fingers against the deep hollow of her neck. Her skin was hot and dry. Her chest slowly rose and fell. Her eyes were masked. Her head was snugly covered by the electrode cap. Henry glanced quickly over his shoulder at Tony in motion. “Come on ... what have you got?”

Tony frantically fingered the consoles. “Damn ... she’s scanning,” he yelled. “Why’s she doing that?”

“For Christ’s sake I know she’s scanning. How am I supposed to know why? The woman’s crazy. I need her bio-facts. Get with the program, Tony!”

“All vitals are strong,” answered Tony. “Good heart. Good respiration. Classic Martoffs. Getting her alpha waves. She’s waking ... going to be okay. Power is dropping fast. Panigma LENS is restoring real time. Minnie’s crunching the data now. Won’t be long and she’ll be out of it ... with us and wide awake ... alive—”

“And the power?” demanded Henry, his hand clasped gently around her limp wrist. “Man ... give me her mnemonics!”

“I hear you. Hold on ... it’s coming up now. “Jesus! Never seen so much before. She received 3.86 cicabytes ... three CICs plus most of the fourth. Nettie was just a tad shy at 3.83 and regular. Parangle measures almost 128π microparads. Wow! The spin tensor

confirms this attack and penetration. Henry, you should see this for yourself. All this and no red flags ... no problems. She's really going to be okay."

"You can say that and know!" spat Henry.

She raised her head. Henry shouted, "Tony, give me a hand." Tony entered the isocell mindful of the cloud, the rubble and the maze of tracks. Julia rose with assistance, sat up, removed the SBI cap and eye mask with a sharp and angry, "Ouch." She massaged the coarse bristle that was once ravishing hair. She located and searched the pockets of her denim jacket and seemed reassured that everything was in order.

She smiled angelically, but grimaced near to snarling when Henry aimed and held his J-Mart beam too long in her eyes. It was long enough for them to notice that each glistening iris reflected an intensely burning lavender. Any suggestion of the old purbrow had been washed away. The sight of these dazzling eyes triggered a brief round of questioning looks from the men, but triggered no questions they dared ask out loud.

She asked, "I don't suppose you're hiding anything to drink? Plain, old water would do nicely right now."

Henry mumbled, "We've nothing whatever for you. Nothing."

She licked her lips. "Too bad. I'm as parched as an old bachelor's prunes."

"Yeah ... well ... you'll have to forget it. How's your head? Can you see and hear okay? Sometimes—"

"Head's okay. Eyes real sensitive though. Don't do that again," she said irksomely. She peered up at the living cloud. "Let's move. Help me off the couch." She tested her legs, but found them lacking. "Whew ... not good ... wobbly. How 'bout a lift kind sir?"

Henry tossed the flashlight to Tony, and then carried Julia into the isocon, gently placing her in the command chair. An empty worktable was handy. The men gathered robotically around it. If Henry had not yet reached the self-defensive funk of Tony—a kind of foggy, automatic pilot, he appeared not far from it. His movements and expressions were machine-deliberate, not inappropriate perhaps for the circumstances, but for the emotional and sensitive Henry, not altogether appropriate either.

Deadpanned, Henry asked, "Feel like talking? What on Earth were you doing?"

"I needed Nettie's help to talk with her ... to communicate across the vast chasm separating us. She is Queen Nrczxa of the Dark Light, the first daughter of King Kust. She has been called many things in many times and places. She has come far in the flesh to be with us now."

Henry confessed, "That name ... Nrcx ... is somehow familiar. Like I've seen it written somewhere ... perhaps inside the 'cell.'" He concentrated with his upper lip pushed up and out. His eyes dilated in the dark as he tried to illuminate hidden corridors.

"Was it during your dream scan?" asked Tony.

He thought harder. “I scanned isocell two, but could not determine anything of much help. It all happened so incredibly fast that I missed the climax.”

Julia said, “It was fast. And I had to act fast for Tony’s sake.” There was a turn to her mouth, the hint of a malefic glow in her eyes that had alarmed Tony. In sharp contrast, Henry was once again manic, practically pacing while sitting, his legs in commotion.

Tony begged, “Julia, tell us what happened. I remember a flash, a crash in the ‘cell of two, then our relocation to chamber four. There was no wall, no Henry, only that awful web.”

“Peripheral, Tony. Irrelevant. What else do you remember?”

“I remember the sudden blotting of vision like I’d gone blind ... like a mask was pulled over my face ... a coarse and smelly side of beast. There seemed some kind of a shackle on my neck. I was lifted up by flesh. I thought that I would strangle. Then I must have blacked out. I woke in the subbasement storeroom with Henry rummaging in boxes and crates. I felt at the time, and still feel, a clinging residue of terror, knowing without any doubt that if the whole nightmare could be pieced together I’d go stark raving nuts.”

Julia said, “This ‘not-seeing’ is a godsend, a key defense employed by the higher levels of the cerebrum. But you know this too well. I was not so lucky. I saw. I remember. I saw you both in my scan ... your so-called blackout, Tony ... and Henry’s rummaging. There was this and much more. Nrczxa and I had nice a female-to-female chat, achieved an understanding thanks to Nettie’s powerful interface. I was well educated, well initiated, then inducted into her secret order with rank and privilege. I think Nrczxa will win.”

“Win! Win what? What is this thing’s purpose here?”

“Not thing!” A pause. She continued softly, “I will tell you one. She is here to save them.”

“Save them? Save whom from what?”

“Her children from the scourge, the pandemic ... microbial and deadly. It would have destroyed Nrczxa and her children. Eventually, it did destroy the Sorel. But Nrczxa orchestrated the cosmic confluence and escaped. We proved facile of mind and curiosity, received and acted upon her instructions. But with this knowledge we are also a great threat to her ... and of course consequently to ourselves.”

“It sounds like Larry’s theory was right after all. Can you explain this cosmic entelechy ... connect it up with our dreams ... I mean the parascans of the 22nd of February and the two main events in March?”

Julia mulled the question. “Corrit’s Gate was in many ways the most interesting, the most difficult. It showed us the anticube and how to make the anti-physics work using a finite and containable Eulerian maneuver.”

“This was Lloyd’s scan of February 22nd?”

“Correct. The man’s name was Timothy Corrit. Drowned in 1986 at 13 years of age, suddenly alive today at age 33 ... but vice versa his father in 1988. Past suddenly altered and turned. Corrit is a key factor in this difficult-to-believe equation.”

“Why is this man ... this scan so damned important?”

Julia removed three objects from her denim jacket. She arranged them on the table. The first of these was a jade shamrock with a key-button device attached to a brass, key ring. The second article was her puzzle box crafted from orange, padauk wood. Finally, in front of Henry, she deposited Lloyd’s gold ring, now clearly quarless.

Tremblingly, Henry selected the ring for examination.

“You might return both the rings to him. If you don’t mind I’ll keep the puzzle box ... a gift from my father. The puzzle itself, once the druid’s prophetic eye, I’ve returned to her myself.”

Henry cast a look of concern. He rubbed his fingers over the ring where the large, green cabochon was once affixed. “I’m puzzled myself. What happened to the quarvine? Why has it been removed?”

“Two of the three green stones I’ve returned to her. Only the Corrit stone is left. They are Nrczxa’s space, time and continuity, sent ahead as beacons ... but also much more than beacons. You must have heard of the legend of Lamia, the daughter of King Belus ... her children, all save one destroyed by Hera, her face, made by Hera, a nightmare’s mask.”

“Actually ... no ... I can’t recall. What has this to do with—?”

“Everything. The witch, Lamia, could remove her eyes ... leave them where she could not be herself to see. Nrczxa is Lamia. Or Lamia is Nrczxa. She sent her eyes ahead to see ... to counsel and to teach. They were three sacrificial seeds sown in the soil of old Earth. She aimed for her three seeds. She did not miss by much. But she can compensate for small errors ... hers or ours. It is these stony eyes that guide and render her complete, for you see like the druid, she is—”

“Wait a minute ... eyes or seeds? I don’t understand.”

“Actually eggs ... fossils for 248 million years. It marked the infamous Permian catastrophe that occurred sometime before the age of the dinosaurs.”

“Then Minerva was right. The incredible time displacement was true.”

Julia shrugged. “Her surviving children ... you’ve seen for yourself ... in there,” she said with her eyes marking for Henry and Tony the suspended nest of pulsating cysts, Nrczxa’s floating nursery. “By the way it’s filled with nascent helium. It’s perfectly safe if you don’t disturb her nestlings.”

“I see now,” said Henry. “I must’ve had things turned around. I thought you were talking about the fifteenth of March, but you were actually talking about the twelfth. And when I

said I hadn't seen her, I was talking about the fifteenth and my parascan of chamber two. But you were talking about chamber four and something ... hmm ... inhuman."

"There was no desire to mislead you. What do you think I've been talking about all this time ... poetry ... the mythology of the ancient Greeks?"

Henry reached into his coat pocket and removed the padlock. "I don't know. But I do know about chamber four. I unlocked that gate myself."

"Well ... Henry ... that was a kind of test ... maybe a lesson is better. That lock meant nothing to her? It's only the seeds she needs. You must know why. The lock was meant for you ... an invitation. Perhaps now you know what I've been talking about."

Henry grimly repeated, "The awesome power and purpose of 248 million years."

"They were a magnificent race. The hunter-males would glide through the air on membrane sails, glide like giant, flying squirrels, then spring back with their unfortunate prey into their tall tree-cities on eight, powerful legs."

"Enough! I saw the black 'chutes opening in my scan ... saw all I needed to see."

Tony slumped in his chair as if suddenly whacked across his neck. Once again seeing things, he rested his battered head, his one good cheek on the table as he murmured, "Out ... out of here." His words had an unsettling effect on Henry, already unsettled beyond his threshold of control. He looked to Julia for the answer.

"Yes ... and she came here ... to this place. We saw her ... Tony and I. It's just that Tony has forgotten. I can't blame him too much. Nrczxa was tired of sucking out the snails. And Tony was handy. One thing led to another. Believe me, I had to act fast."

Henry turned to look behind him into the isocell room—at the web. He switched on the flashlight, but its Jiffy-Mart batteries were dead. Except for a few panel lights the room was dark.

"I've that feeling again," croaked Henry. "Just like in the scan. It must be the feeling the condemned man must get when death taps his shoulder. Well now, Julia, you must tell me the truth. Where is this Nrr ... this Nrrg creature now? I desperately need to know."

Julia cast a look of surprise as if the answer to Henry's question should be obvious.

"Henry, I'm amazed that you would ask, that you would need to. You have never understood, have never seen or even guessed the truth.

"My dear man I know what you are thinking and what your question implies. You are thinking that I am she ... that we are somehow one ... at least now if not from day one."

Henry stared roughly in Julia direction, but without seeing her.

"Henry ... my dear, dear friend, it is only Tony and I that are here with you now. Well ... maybe not Tony. I'd never be so cruel as not to tell you ... let you both sit here in danger. I would tell you. You see it happened like this:

“It is true that Nrczxa came to see Tony and me in this room. She was the blackout and the shackle Tony referred to. She transported him downstairs. She would have done it if I hadn’t talked her out of it ... promised her something better. You both know how she is ... what she is. She is predatory and carnivorous by nature.”

“You’re telling me that she looks at us and sees only food. But honestly, Julia, I don’t know a thing about what she is.”

“Yeah ... you do. You saw her too, but only the mask that I had provided. Remember the crate and the dark, sharp machine that cut your finger. She was resting quietly in the crate, thinned enough to fit inside. It was a good thing I didn’t promise her you ... or give you a real good look.”

At this moment Julia was the Queen of the Night. Her epistle eyes had become the ages, lost islands in purple, Permian seas. She demurely concluded, “I’ll admit, Henry ... I was very tempted.” She smiled demurely like an angel.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Black Pool

March 16th, a Sunny Day

High-pressure air compressed lines, filled cylinders. Solenoid valves chattered open and closed. The pneumatic shutter-door responded to the energy stored in tanks, opened as if it had been closed forever. Though it had been seven hours, it felt like ages. It might have been weeks before anyone had come to their rescue. Mercifully, their portal opened to the sun, to air freshened by the offerings of a desert spring. They opened too, unfolded taut pedals and savored the light and the warmth like crocuses in the snow.

The exception was Tony. His pedals had been bruised, their once manly bouquet ignobled. From the cells of the dome he had clambered in pain and humiliation to make his escape. He was the last of them to cross over into the bright sun.

He had given himself up many times. This was bad enough, but during the past seven hours he had discovered much worse. It was all in the way of reaching that final instant, that inescapable truth as he replayed his old nightmare.

He lay fetal on the tile. He was horribly conscious through each agony. The processes of consumption were instinctive and grotesquely impersonal. He nevertheless suffered the assault personally—the impalation by hypodermic sabers, the jellification by necrotizing venom, the aspiration and ingestion by the quivering bristlesack. These possibilities clouded his recollections.

The most persistent recollection he accepted as fact—the dizzy seconds following the explosive rift inside the isocell. Julia had dropped her voice just before she had dropped the flashlight. He remembered the faint line of the beam striking the wall where the three wedges of the isocell, isocon and anteroom intersected. Then it happened. The bag-on-stilts sauntered back and forth, broke the beam not once, but twice. There was silence except for the hammer in his chest. The flashlight was within his reach. Instead of using it to search for Julia he depressed the switch to extinguish the light. There was no warning when the queen of his pain hoisted him into the air.

Then light and sound returned. He heard Henry's voice and remembered the reality. The dome's pneumatic door thudded behind him with the finality of a casket. Henry turned to Tony and confirmed: "You need medical attention."

"Need more 'n that," whimpered Tony. "I gotta get home. More than anything I gotta get home. I'm sick ... and getting sicker." The barefoot man trembled. The right side of his face was severely swollen, a series of black and blue grooves between the fiery red ridges. Tony cradled his jaw with one hand, his rib cage with the other. His nose began to

bleed, a lazy trickle at first, then an effusion. Henry found a tattered swath of fabric among his collection of souvenirs that was offered, unquestioningly accepted and applied. He could do little more than mumble a few inane words, not really hearing what he mumbled with his mind a million years away.

The corridors of the night had filled Henry's pockets with rings, coils and keys. He had shunned the lock, had refastened that hunk of metal to the door of isochamber four. It was a small thing to do, but if it helped him to forget it was worth a blissful paradementia. He turned expectantly to Julia, hoping to find his dear friend back in the world with him again. But the sight of her hypnotic eyes dropped him back inside his attic box of dreams.

Julia was sleepwalking, though obviously awake. She was dreaming, though incapable of sleep. He saw the night in her lavender eyes—the dark inside the crate, the fear inside his own heart. She lingered, looked expectantly across the mesa. “I flashed back, Henry. The door has been left ajar. The light from the LENS has been left on. All the dreams I’ve had are back as strong as ever, walking around with me, following me like headless Holman.”

There was the light of day, but without any reassurance it was hard to believe. They stood propped upon their feet like cadaverous stalks. The enormity of the dome could not deny the desolation. Henry turned toward Tony. “Speak of the devil. Look at him. Our leaking Lester agrees with you. He’s been there too. Now he knows.”

She did not look, but recited instead, “Like living my life in deep slumber and all the while the beasts are circling. I’ve finally awakened from my illusions to my nightmares.”

“Do we not beg them come?” He paused to inhale the brisk morning air. “Julia, my mind’s a maze. I’m seeing what I’ve been, where I’ve been, perhaps what I’m becoming, but it’s a senseless mosaic. It is frightening. I fear I’m going crazy.”

She was uncustomarily oppressed, sullen and stolid in her carriage. “You’ve looked into the mirror maze and seen a sight for sore eyes.”

“It’s not like that.”

“I meant—”

“I know what you meant. I’ll tell you what I meant. I am shattered into little bits of clay and glass. I’m inside the dome mural, but not alone. It is I, not Lester that plays the attic marionette. I can feel the pressure on my back ... the hump I know is the head with that single glow-green eye. It is a plotting, conniving cancer that grows diabolically.”

“The LENS has illuminated the pieces, but left it up to us to solve the bigger puzzle.”

He inquired ruefully, “So ... have you solved it?”

“No ... I believe there’s one more piece to find and fit, ironically—”

“Julia, how can I go back? I’m as lost as the snails and worms inside the Panopticon.” He shook his head. “It is ironic ... our choice of that word for darkness we’ve concocted.”

“Can we go?” asked Tony. “Can we leave now?” He had managed to slow the flow of blood.

“I truly wish we could.” Henry forced a glance into her eyes. “Julia, tell me what you see. Let the poison out.”

She fished the contents of her pockets. Her hands shook as she spoke: “Visible inside that darkness is a gallery of ageless souls, wily ghosts with countless faces.” She turned toward the silvery panels. “Some I see as clearly as I see the two of you. Some are concealed so deep inside the battlements that it would take your catapult of time to bash them out.” An introspective pause. “I may have committed the gravest error by scouring for the worst.”

“And the soul that Lloyd has sent us. Is he the best or —?”

Julia answered, “The brightest, though the most enigmatic of the bunch.” She looked past him shielding her sensitive eyes from the light. The sun gleamed from the geo-dome like a tear shed by God. In the distance the Zuni Mountains were plainly visible and golden on a blue horizon. She touched the honey peaks with her eyes as if she beheld them for the first time—a blind woman embracing for the first time the miracle of light and sight.

“Can we go?” Tony repeated with mounting distress. “... This palaver ... and now ... standing here in pain ...”

“He’s right. We ... er ... I had better go,” answered Henry enigmatically.

She refocused and gathered in his attention with eyes that dissected. “Henry, you were right with what you said. You must not go. Leave the final piece to someone else.”

He shook his head slowly in agreement, but his eyes revealed the painful truth.

“Foolish man,” she replied.

“Yes. Let’s go,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We going?” asked Tony close to keeling over. “We finally going?”

“Henry, he’s seriously hurt. See how his face swells.”

“Yes, Tony we’re leaving now. We’ll see you get medical attention.”

Julia unzipped her blue denim jacket and then tested her new hairstyle.

Henry frowned, then smiled apologetically, as if he did not know which feeling, which manner was appropriate. “Can you meet me at my apartment tonight?” He then asked Tony: “And what about you?”

“That will depend. I could sleep forever.”

“That’s what I thought. But sleep is the last resort.”

“I’ll take him to East County Emergency,” said Julia. She took his elbow and led him to where their vehicles were parked.

“Okay,” Tony replied with a wince, apparently resigned to his fate. “What are we going to tell them? What story will we use?”

Henry reached into the pocket of his coat and found Bill Hagerty’s handy gadget ready for use. He sampled the keypad’s dozen buttons. Like the padlock, its dislocation had been easy, perhaps too easy. Henry felt more and more the joker in a wild game of cards he did not comprehend.

That Evening in Henry’s Apartment

“If you’re intent upon this madness I must go along,” she stubbornly advised. It was as if she had uttered the unspeakable. The few yards between them became a deadly minefield, a gap Henry could comfortably ignore.

He nodded no. “We need you here by the phone.” The absurdity of taking a woman was too clearly outlined on his face. “Tony will go. He’ll be fine.”

Tony lied, “I’ll be fine.”

“Ha! You don’t look so fine,” she replied with irritation.

Tony stammered, “I told you I’ll b ... be fine.”

“You can’t be serious,” replied Julia. “You can barely walk. Your face’s a mess ... makes a baboon’s butt downright handsome. You were told to rest. You should rest here. I’ll go and keep Henry out of trouble. Just like before.”

“No!”

“But Henry, I know what I’m doing. If I didn’t you’d be ...” She would not speak these words. He would only stubbornly refute them.

They huddled in Henry’s sitting room converted from a spare bedroom. Its off-white walls were lined with shelves, with books and binders, with an occasional paperback, with “whatnots” and “whatchamacallits,” an omnium-gatherum for all occasions. Something had been recently added to his collection, a hard-won trophy, an object turquoise blue and corduroy, a land shell once a glow coil now glowless.

Some refreshments had been set out, the obligatory liquids and solids that they barely touched.

Julia nibbled nachos, a momentary, nervous distraction. She was visibly angry with Henry and with an impractical attitude as stale as his snacks. It came to her swiftly like a cold, autumn wind. She shivered in the pseudo-cold. Her anger froze and fell away. She stopped nibbling. She started thinking and scrutinizing from a remote region of consciousness she had never used before. She felt the powerful presence as if an angel

had sat down beside her, had embraced her lovingly with ample and open arms. This angel watched and occasionally whispered. Julia knew the thing she had to do, though she kept it from her porcelain face, uncharacteristically calm and pale.

She suggested, “Tony can man the vicom™ same as me, can notify Karrell same as me ... if he has to that is. But he can’t help you where you’re going and you know it. Only I can help you there. I’m not defenseless. Do you want me to elaborate?”

Henry leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped solemnly behind his head. He muttered something inaudible. His eyes stubbornly said no, said no to any thought of her going with him, said no to any elaboration.

“Who or what has come through the gap?” asked Tony—that same question he had asked every few minutes since he had arrived—the one that no one dared answer. “It would be nice to know who holds the winning cards.”

“I have no ace of cubes up my sleeve if that’s what you mean. When the time comes I’ll have to play the cards I’m dealt.”

“Henry, a bluff won’t work,” replied Julia. “You’ll need a queen to take a knave.”

“The solution to this riddle seems right in front of me ... written in my memories like you said it was, but written in a language that I can’t decode. Julia, in your dream scan, in your encounter with Tony’s nightmare, you must have learned ... She must have told you something that we can use.”

“For Tony’s sake I’ll keep it brief. But yes, I learned. I learned a lot from her. We embraced using a kind of pictorial logic, so a name-sound I can’t give you, or a true time, or a real place. There is no convenient answer to your questions that I can supply right now. Certain answers, I think, you already have at your fingertips. None that I could give would serve you any better. Though I will make you a counter offer, one not so bad really, given the position you’re in ... with no cards to play. I’ll lend you one ... a good one too ... the trump card ... the wild card!” She waited. “Henry, do you accept?”

“Damn it! You offer nothing I can accept, no real choice.”

“What did you expect from your tampering? It is a fragile reality you fuddle with. You’re in deeper than you know ... or perhaps you do ... finally ... really ... know. It would be nice to watch from a safe place ... to enjoy your predicament safely and smugly out of harm’s way, amused with mind and matter unconfined. So many dreams ... so many possibilities ... so many eventualities. Like reading the pages of a book in the safety of your bed at night ... eh? But Henry, remember. There’s no reading without the living.”

Time passed like molasses through the eye of a needle.

Henry coaxed, “As that expression nearly goes, if you will tell me yours I will tell you mine. We have the time. It’s early. Not time to leave. You promised that you would tell me your secret dream ... that other one.”

"I thought you didn't want to hear any of my secrets," she said.

"I think for your sake, not mine, it would be best for you to tell."

Julia relived a chiseled moment, an accident of history, one graved in her heart and memory. "Yes ... it does appear that it must be lanced to let the poison flow."

"If you will tell me yours," repeated Henry, "I will tell you mine." To Julia he was the child that played with his father's loaded gun.

Tony looked at her apprehensively, but admitted none of the pain he felt, returning compulsively to his private torments, to a world turned topsy-turvy mad.

"But you must tell yours first," she said. "Then I'll tie my tale around your tender neck." She held tight to the dark blue beret. The night blue of her sweater and slacks very nearly matched its color. It was a perilous look unlike her.

Henry rose to sit alongside her on the sofa, though he permitted her sufficient space. The Swiss cuckoo began to chime. "I'll chance it and tell my story," he said. "It has little or nothing to do with the attic niche, you may be relieved to hear. I believe this particular dream, one I've had more and more often the past few weeks, was started by the book. I found it in a bargain lot by accident. Odd, about that book. Now, it's quite unfound."

She asked, "Oh ... that book?" Her pellucid, empurpled eyes searched his unbalanced shelves, his untidy desk and his cluttered coffee table. "Didn't know you actually owned a copy of that abomination."

"You must mean the *Oneiros*. No, it's not that. It was a more thoughtful postulation. Odd, but I can no longer find it. This lost tome described a burial cave uncovered in central Turkey ... late Neolithic if I remember it correctly. The details do not matter now, except I was there in my dream, many times, suddenly the author and archeologist, gazing upon the rocks. These cave paintings were remarkable in their own way ... with a lesson to be learned if one really wanted to learn it."

"Is it a lesson that we're equipped to understand?" she inquired.

"Julia, it's one we must if we're to fiddle further with space and time. As I recall, the wall art was well done, not primitive at all like you would think. Of course in spite of the realistic treatment the figures of the men and beasts were locked inside the rock, just like your vision of an ageless gallery of souls."

"What else would you expect." Her voice betrayed a dire edge beneath simple words.

"I didn't expect what happened next. One of them ... I mean one of the wall figures, a half-naked savage, a flat man the same as all the others, snatched me into that cave wall like there was nothing at all to it. Julia, it happened so fast that I hardly knew what had happened. I was now their prisoner and as flat as they ... a captive in thinspace ... a prisoner of war ... locked in an asylum for the dimensionally insane."

"What war?" asked Tony risen from his trance. He was finally, really listening.

“I’m talking about perpetual war between the flatlanders and man ... each determined to destroy the other. This, I learned as their hostage. They also told me of the godlike Klicks, a race of supermen that made us Kwoggs, as we were called, look very flat and dumb. The flatlanders called themselves the Kind. But they were not so kind as to warrant that name or claim. Their flatness made them mean and unpredictable.”

With only a blackened face, Julia would have made the perfect night commando. She asked him, “Do you think this war actually happened?”

“It does happen ... in a remote, but possible plane.”

“I would think,” reasoned Tony, “that any conflict between these races would be over before it started. Man would destroy the Kind just as surely as the Klicks would destroy us Kwoggs. Surely it would be no contest.”

“Not so sure about that,” argued Henry. “The Kind seemed to think there was some fatal vulnerability that went with a need for the thicker spaces ... for the higher dimensions ... those abstractions they called the **netherfaults**.”

Henry’s eyes twinkled darkly. Tony asked, “Fatal? How fatal? Pardon me ... I mean ... why fatal?”

“They were pretty definite about this. A Kindman called Keezer, a war chief of some considerable rank, claimed some too-clever Kwoggs had in real time learned the trick of invisibility. These smart Kwoggs attacked a peaceful super-race of Klicks. The latter were forced to flee to the farthest reaches of space-possibility-time.”

Adjusting his bandages, Tony inquired, “How did mankind manage this invisibility, and with what device could we threaten superior beings of the next dimension?”

“They managed it in the same way the Kindmen would. These evil Kwoggs, now mindful of possibility, had learned to rotate and aim their space-time plane. They could slip past the Klick’s defenses edgewise, and were therefore totally invisible. Man’s existence in four space-time dimensions was a real advantage in the struggle against those thoughtful and needful of five.”

Tony, with dark and anxious eyes, with shaky hands, leaned forward to ask the question he already knew the answer to: “And man’s ultimate weapon?”

“Their invisible assault was directed by a great machine that fired missiles ... missiles that vibrated in the time-possibility plane. These woeful Klicks had no choice but to flee to a remote realm where the machines of the ruthless Kwoggs could not threaten them.”

Julia ventured an opinion: “A story chocked full of symbols. But your cave is more than Plato’s allegory ... it’s Nettie’s maze ... and the machine is our LENS launching deadly beams of light.”

“Of course ... I know this.”

“But how did your dream finally end?” asked Tony.

Henry smiled, but there was no mirth. “Oh ... but it didn’t.”

They both asked almost simultaneously: “What?”

“Goes on like the LENS in my head, like the dreams in yours. I’ve had to learn to exhort it out of the way. But I’m still a prisoner in Kindland, embedded in their space-time bedlam. I am my own reflection in the mirror. Now you know why I avoid them. And you are both inside with me. You just don’t know it. Well ... enough of this Kindness. I’m done, now quite finished. Now ... Julia ... tell us of the poison that festers in your dreams. Lance the pain to let it out.”

Julia stalled. “Each of us is the reflection of a higher-dimensional being. The LENS has proved as much. We are much more than alive and never really dead ... just the words or reflections of a greater life ... each consciousness the page of a book.” She deeply inhaled. “But it’s getting late, near time to leave, to save the world from these evil Kwoggs.”

“Come on,” Henry exclaimed. “You’ll not get off that easy. We have plenty of time,” he insisted. “Tell us your tale before we rupture from scientific curiosity.”

“Nothing scientific about it.” She removed her shoes, crossed her legs. “Don’t let me prattle on all night about this elusive nightmare when we’ve real history to unmake.”

Julia paused briefly before the telling. They waited, said nothing. All but what she was about to say had already been said.

“Here goes,” she announced as she stared into those two expectant faces, one grievously battered and one anxiously eager.

She began, “I am aware of an odor, not unpleasant, just different ... a kind of earthy scent covering over something sour. Do visions have odors? Well ... this one did.”

Tony needed a drink. He limped rubbery-legged to the table where there was only lemonade and some flat, soda pop—nothing stronger, nothing braver.

“It is indeed a murky beginning,” she said. “Besides the odor there is the murmur of strange voices, though there is nothing for sure that I can make out. A curtain parts and a quaint, old English tavern is revealed. I’ve a tankard of ale set in front of me. I’m nearly snookered. I can feel even this ... as real as the smell.”

Her listeners did not smile, too intent upon their listening.

“Out of the corner of my eye I notice the patrons. They’re not right, but I can’t put my finger on exactly what their real problem is.”

“Are they like my Kindmen ... thinned out and pale?” piped Henry.

“Yeah ... funny about this. Maybe they are, but they look perfectly normal most of the time. Except they seem to wink in and out. Hard to picture. Harder to explain. They disappear here, then reappear there. Most unnerving. And they chortle maddeningly in

some foreign tongue ... birdlike, zealous and threatening. I don't appreciate their tone, particularly since I've convinced myself they're discussing my health.

"I can tell I'm a big problem for them. They're suspicious. I'm much despised. Something cuts through me. I sense my own demise. Then the tavern door opens and I hear the reassuring sound of human voices.

"I am joined by Lloyd Baumer, Leopold Hardan and a third man. Unlike the former, he is a young, handsome fellow that I don't know ... but would like to."

"Perhaps he is Lloyd's ace of cubes symbolically revealed."

"Revealed?" She almost laughed. "Not revealed at all. The three of them sit at the table next to mine ... their faces almost in mine. I have every intention of ignoring them, but of course this is impossible with them gawking at me so stupidly.

"Lloyd wears a deerstalker cap and smokes a fancy, carved pipe. He's clearly meant to represent my stereotypical notion of Sherlock Holmes.

"Hardan is dressed for Halloween. He wears a top hat, a black cape, carries a black cane and white, silk gloves. He's Bella the vampire soon to sprout wings and bloody fangs.

"The quiet, young man is impeccably dressed in old-fashioned tweed ... nicely fitted and tailored ... nice in every way. Naturally, their egos won't easily accept being ignored. I'm wrangled into joining them. I don't really mind being introduced to the good-looking fellow who I learn is a prominent physician. His name I can't recall.

"He was once a promising surgeon that has recently suffered a career-ending injury. The injury's nothing visible. I'm not given any of the details. As for the slime-ball he is disgustingly amicable. I'm having a ghastly time his being so close and smelly. I expect his full transformation into madness at any moment.

"Hardan mentions that he has grand plans for me. The creep smiles ghoulishly. This unsolicited bit brings to mind my earlier premonition of catastrophe. We sit there grinning at one another for the longest time. Eventually our small talk turns to the other individuals clustered around us, huddling and whispering in their little alien groups. Lloyd and Leopold crack ugly jokes about these sullen, simple folk.

"And though they may not fully comprehend our words, these sullen, simple folk easily comprehend our venom. In no time they are enraged. They are popping in and out of space like fireflies. I worry that Baumer and Hardan will start a brawl with these blinking creatures, a brawl we're certain to lose, since we can never be sure where they'll pop up. Inside our own skins for all I know. They are by now so mad they're shining with rage. I'm anxious to leave with all possible speed.

"I remind Lloyd of the late hour, the urgency of my departure. The young man offers to accompany me, but I respectfully decline with my thanks. 'It's not far,' I tell him. I've actually no idea how far it is.

“They don’t seem to mind that I desire to leave. We bid adieu and I exit the tavern in a hurry. Once outside in the dark I soon wonder why my big hurry.

“Nothing is familiar. The cobblestone streets, dark and narrow, meander without discernable pattern or destination. Storefronts, dives and dosshouses are sprinkled among tawdry apartment flats. I’m lost and alone in a slum called Dorsett Street with just a trace of former class.

“Even the ghouls in the tavern were better than this, so I try to retrace my steps. But each time I turn around, take a step back, the street turns pitch black. I’m driven forward like it or not and there is nothing I can do. There’s a Gahan Wilson picture that comes to mind—those two spelunkers in a cave filled with monstrous fangs, wondering if maybe they’ve taken a wrong turn. I have. I’m instantly stone cold sober.

“As if this isn’t enough, the sky opens up with a clap of thunder dumping buckets of icy rain. I step into a slightly recessed doorway, but this is no protection and I’m soon soaked to the bone. My hair becomes a suffocating, living mat around my face. It’s not easily disentangled. I curse my long hair.”

“Cursed and now tragically gone,” lamented Henry.

“I feel like a broiled trout about to be swallowed up like someone’s fish ‘n’ chips.

“The downpour subsides after another thunder clap. With no options left I risk the side streets hoping for a friendly and familiar face. I find myself on a lane named Buck’s Row. Pausing beneath a gas lamp, I am revolted by my disgusting reflection in a gutter pool of black water. The pool is almost as low and black as my miserable self-esteem.

“Suddenly a second reflection appears beside mine in the black pool. I am startled, but cannot cry out. A woman, trimmed and painted like a harlot stands next to me. I guess as harlots go her style and manner are anachronistic, but then again perhaps not considering that all I’ve seen so far is so consistently passé.

“I wonder why she would accost me ... a naive question. I mumble a few words to her, but she will not respond, returning instead only a hungry stare. The image of me served as broiled fish returns. I force a look into her cold eyes ... cruel with no life in them.

“Reluctantly I study her face heavily painted. I soon reach an improbable and disturbing conclusion. It is the young doctor from the tavern decked out in full drag. Too frightened to speak I back-pedal to escape possible harm at his arm’s length.

“This maneuver fails and provokes a swift reaction. He grabs my neck with a hand phenomenally strong, the pain rendering me nearly senseless. I see pinwheels, skyrocketes and shooting stars ... my too-short life passes instantly before my eyes.”

Tony and Henry sat silent, but spellbound by her tale.

"I have some fight left. I wrestle his other hand that is painfully busy. Never mind how. He brings it up to deliver a hammer blow to my face. The horror and the pain knock me limp. Without any morsel of hope I resign.

"He knows I'm finished. All the while he's smiling and mumbling something under his breath. Have either of you dreamed of your own brutal murder?"

"No, Julia."

"No," whispered the other almost inaudibly.

"The maniac now traces a slow line from my throat to my stomach with the forefinger of his hammer hand. Ironically it's concealed in a white, lacy glove. He completes this ritual by tracing another line across my breasts just below the nipples."

"A cross?"

"No, a cut line. The preliminaries completed, he places the gloved hand to his pale, taut lips. Firmly holding a few of his fingers with his teeth, he does something remarkable. It ices my heart. The fiend executes a sharp tug. This removes his hand to expose a long, shining, steel blade ... like an autopsy knife. Or perhaps it's the filleting knife for me, the fresh trout. The blade is somehow firmly connected to the stub of his arm.

"The false hand drops to the ground which he adeptly covers up with his foot, I assume to prevent it being kicked out of reach. He seems well practiced in this nighttime art.

"I sorrowfully cry out, 'Is that you, Jack?'

"Jack pays this no mind and brings the blade to my chin. He angrily explains, 'I'm Hell's surgeon. And whore, it's time to cut and gut.'

"He follows this declaration with a quick and deft slice across my throat. The rip is quite spectacular. But something is missing.

"I remember thinking that this doesn't really hurt. It's like a steel comb was raked across my neck ... a prickling resistance as if he's used a local anesthetic. Time grinds to a halt. The next thing I'm conscious of is the unpleasant warmth flowing over my neck, chest, and down into my armpits already slippery with sweat. There is the telltale, coppery smell of fresh blood mixed with the strong smell of adrenalin ... of stark terror.

"The maniac applies the blade once more with a great thrust to my stomach. His plastic face fades away. But as it fades there is the slightest hint of others ... many other faces ... ageless, soulless, all somehow part of him. One or two of them I think I recognize. Then darkness ... the eternal, fathomless void. But there's actually something even worse ... something I've struggled to comprehend. It's the sound. It's eerie and really not anything like I've heard on this Earth. It's a very high-pitched wail, but that's the best I can do.

"And that's how it ends ... my bedtime story. Now it's out and out of me ... lanced I'm afraid ... forever."

Henry asked, “Why have you kept this awful thing inside yourself?”

“Wouldn’t you? It’s not considered polite conversation to describe your own grisly murder. And if saying the words could make Jack come back, I’ve just committed the gravest possible error. They all did ... Mary Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Cathy Edowes, Mary Jane Kelly and finally ... now, me.”

Tony said, “But could this evil reach you ... reach you here?”

She lamented, “It already has ... in one past life ... perhaps in another now past due.”

Was it a Dream?

Was it a dream or was it worse?

Oddly, the loneliest man in the world was also the most worried over. How could both be true? But both were true. Just ask the angel in the white mask. His angel worried over him, never ever seemed to sleep. But the man worried as well, over many things. He worried over his wife, over his two boys, and over his latest obsession.

What would they do without him? How could he go on without them? Could he get things written down? It was all in his head. Could he get things written down? The creative fires had been spread and tamped out cold. And what did it matter—now that his heart had been ripped from his chest and hurled to Hell?

The loss permeated every sinew of his being. Could he tell the angel? Would the angel listen? The angel cared. The angel worried. But would he care enough to stop worrying and just start listening?

It was like being in and out. He knew the reason for his anguish. Sooner or later everyone takes his or her turn, only his later had come a little sooner. But he was beginning to feel hungry, really hungry. So how in this land-in-between could a man feel hungry?

It begged the questions: Was it a dream or was it worse? Was he alive or was he dead?

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Alter-End of Time

That Same Evening in Henry's La Sierra Apartment

The night was unseasonably warm with a gentle breeze whispering in the limber limbs of the trees and the suppler shoots of the amber grasses. Outside, the atmosphere had braced against the storm. A thick and murky brew gathered to the north of the white palisades.

Inside, the atmosphere was heavy in Tony's chest, as if he had lost his earthly buoyancy and sank in a strangling miasma. The more he tried to forget, the more he remembered. It was that same phobia he had carried with him all of his life, that same desperate lesion of the mind, his personalized *Macula Obscura* acted out less than twenty-four hours earlier.

It was not much different for Julia Moffett or for Henry Kincaid, perhaps less graphic, but no less real, no less threatening to their mental and physical well being. The light from the LENS had failed to penetrate Julia's black pool or touch Henry's netherworld of Kwoggs and Klicks. In spite of all of Julia's Faustian tricks, the light had failed to reveal Lloyd Baumer's peripatetic epistoler or any clear reflections from the alter-end of time.

After the telling of the dreams, there had been little else to say. They had separated to separate rooms. Each waited silently and separately inside his or her thoughts, but not without some unwanted distractions.

Laughter from the adjoining apartment interrupted their contemplations, nothing terribly loud and nothing that would normally give much thought. But on their side of the wall nothing was normal, nothing was safe. There was no mirth in this cackle of satisfaction, a hunger near the brink of satiation.

If a violoncello could laugh during the *Danse Macabre*, this is how it might sound. If a leopard climbing a tree with a gazelle in its mouth could laugh, this is how it might sound. If a hollow point round whistling toward a man's skull could laugh, this is how it might sound.

The wall clock tolled nine. Henry had changed his clothes. Squinting at himself in the bathroom mirror he wondered why he bothered. The man inside the glass glared back wantonly. He contorted Henry's grimace into a demonic grin. The man inside knew he was better off. It was possible that Kindman Keezer had been right. A vulnerability came with the thicker side of things. But any fool thick or thin knew that. And now that the crux of the LENS had arrived, Henry wondered if he might trade places with his doppelganger.

Julia made calls. In her words, "Eleventh hour pleas meant to forestall disaster." Reporter Art Karrell confirmed himself as ready. But all of her attempts to contact any of the gang

of four, including Max Cole in Los Lunas, were not getting through. She had even tried to reach Lloyd Baumer's cabin at Pines' Roost. She had finally given up. She turned off the vicom™, left the kitchen barefaced and barefoot for the next room.

Henry placed Hagerty's security device in his right pocket, the two rings in his left. As he pocketed his wallet, keys, a fresh handkerchief, he ran the plan, such as it was, through his mind. If there was anything else he needed he did not have it, nor would he find it now. He buttoned his shirt as his hands shook. It had to be the three cups of coffee. He returned to the sitting room where Julia and Tony waited. The injured man had tried to fill his time by browsing Minerva's databases using Henry's new lociputer, but even this had been too much. Henry and Julia had finally agreed after much debate that she would go in his place. Tony would remain behind.

Henry slipped into his prized NASA jacket then turned to inform Tony of their decision. The latter spoke first. "I'm nearly ready," said the lop-jawed man as he pushed back from the terminal. "Just need a sec. I feel like I've been dejuiced. There is a worrisome fullness in my throat that I can't seem to swallow."

Henry knew this feeling well. "You're scared shitless. I'm the expert."

Julia slipped on her light, blue parka, her hat and her shoes. She was content to let the self-proclaimed expert handle Tony. She had problems of her own. Her disclosure of the dream had not closed the wound made by Jack's filleting knife.

Then it sounded again, that same charnel knell, that same shrill peal of laughter uncoiling and intruding from the adjoining apartment. There would be no closure without looking into the black pool one more time.

Her eyes latched on to the tension radiating from the eyes of Henry Kincaid. "If you are going anywhere," he said to Tony, "it will be to the hospital. We've talked it over, decided it's best for all if you stay by the 'com. You are not up to this. Try to get some rest ... but don't fall asleep either ... not till this business is over."

"You don't have to worry. Afraid I'll dream," Tony admitted. "I will stay here, but you must promise me not to take chances. If you see a gray van you must promise me you'll go to the police." He looked to Julia for confirmation.

"I don't think we'll see it," she sighed. "It's a dark night. It's a dark vehicle. Do you remember what to do if you don't hear from us?"

"Yeah," he winced. "Just don't dawdle. If I don't get a call by midnight, a commode will burst, Lucy's or mine." Not even Henry smiled at this. The two men eyed one another grimly. The former reset Henry's lociputer (Lucy) to communications mode. He asked, "Henry, do you have the new vicom™ code?"

"Sure ... 6104," answered Henry slowly pronouncing each digit.

“No ... 6014!” corrected Tony, grabbing his padded, swollen jaw in pain. After a prolonged pause, he added, “You see that I’m still good for something. Don’t forget that number. It’s our only link.”

“Tony, I can’t remember my own name. I’m walking around in a fog. I’m here and somewhere else at the same time. Everything’s all out of place ... all out of synch. But I’ve got to do this thing whether I want to or not.”

As Henry and Julia prepared to leave, Tony asked guilelessly, “Henry, is this expected, you think ... your going back?”

A guffaw from the next apartment answered his question and transfixed them for a timeless instant at the threshold. For several eye-blinks nothing was said. These watery windows conveyed volumes, saying more than words ever could. The pain in their eyes slipped down and puckered their parched and parted lips. There were questions you did not ask, even when cold logic said you must.

Henry and Julia left without farewells. Tony locked the door behind them. “I’ll drive,” Henry said phlegmatically. She could not disagree with him. Her truck came apart faster than she did. Besides, Henry’s svelte sedan was larger, more comfortable, more reliable.

They lingered awhile under an old lamppost, not much different from that linchpin of her nightmare, waiting for someone to call them back to real life, to tell them that everything was okay, that Lloyd was okay, that his time trekker was okay too, that black pools and gray vans were merely bad dreams and not vehicles of darkness. But all the whisperers of hope and salvation could not reassure them. Henry took her shoulders in his large hands, looked sadly into her irrevocably saddened eyes. He had no words to speak that could promise a thing. In a heartbeat it was over, but not lost, not gone. A bright orb suspended high overhead seized their attention.

On this festooned night an old March moon played hide and seek, peddled its portents and potions on pale filigree. Limpid moonbeams settled upon the damp leaves and damp ground. It clung to man-things like glass and masonry. It burned ethereally in the things that man could never know. It burned like sapphires in Julia’s lavender eyes.

They crossed the short distance to Henry’s Lynx sedan, trying, but failing to soften their steps. His pockets jingled annoyingly, surely harkening, riveting, every eye in the complex on them, on their journey into the dark and dead of night. A loud thump from the direction of a parked car halted them in their tracks. It resumed—thump, thump, thump, followed by girlish laughter from a van, but not the van. Julia looked up and smiled like poor Mary Surratt must have smiled on that hot summer day in 1865. Julia had discovered the photo of the infamous hanging of the Lincoln conspirators in one of Henry’s table books.

He unlocked his car. They slithered inside and across the front seat like two, slippery eels. Henry started up his Canada Snow Lynx’s 7-liter, V-12. The computer-controlled engine belched several times before the oil started to flow, before the valves and cylinders started to purr. He drove from the lot with an eye out for vans, especially gray

vans with black, bubble tops. After several minutes of nervous silence, Julia asked, “You have it worked out ... what we’re to do once we’re back inside the nightmare?”

He seemed to be waiting for her to answer. Finally, “Of course not.” He exhaled. “I’ll do my best to size things up. If you’ve good ideas ...”

“Just one. Turn around and forget the whole accursed thing,” she recommended.

“Can’t do that,” he replied pathetically. “Thought you came along to help me ... to guide and protect me.”

“From yourself. I thought I just tried.” A pause. “You want to talk?”

“No, unless you’ve a surefire, practical solution.”

He followed the Old McDunty Pike, concentrating as well as he could on the twists and turns of the sunken road. He searched and found a stick of gum, unwrapped it, stuffed it inside his cheek. He chewed it in circles like a goat. His attention was diverted to the moon hanging like a jack-o’-lantern in the trees. He forced a steely glance into his rearview mirror. This time nothing, only darkness behind him. From the north, from the mountains ahead, came a flickering light without any rumblings of sound.

Heavy clouds gathered into a distant storm. There were several more flashes of faltering light, defining thunderheads like balls of dirty cotton with trailing threads of smoky filaments. The yellow ignition hollowed the clouds, revealing chambers where then should be no chambers, glowing labyrinths inside murky cocoons.

“The wind is picking up. If that front’s headed our way ... well, Henry, if you’ve ever seen the water roar down those foothill roads, you won’t ever want to see it again ... feet, not inches of water in minutes, enough to float this big sedan as easily as a leaf. It’s pretty scary.”

“I hope it stays north of the river,” he said. “It’s still pretty far off. We should make it.” The old pike, lined with aspen, had straightened. He crossed the tracks of the old Santa Fe line. Intermittent intrusions of illumination poked through the darkness. Seconds later he turned on to Freemont, a rough road paved with sand and ruts. The surrounding terrain was flat with dry, sparse vegetation and few trees. He passed the red cantina, the shacks and rusting wrecks clustered around it. In the distance they could detect the beckoning dome, a ghostly pale pearl on the mesa, a moonlet setting over a black sea. It was easy to imagine that they traversed an intergalactic world in a starship’s shuttlecraft.

“Gad ... I can hardly bear to look at it,” he croaked spasmodically.

Their moon above disappeared behind a cluster of flickering clouds. “You won’t have to that much longer.”

They had made this drive together many times, but never at night, never with a storm threatening. She added, “I never appreciated before how lonely it can be out here ... beautiful ... I guess, but so intensely remote.”

He swerved to avoid a dead animal in the road.

“There must be something loose in back,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Probably just the spare. I had the jack out the other day.”

She shivered not from the cold, as the inside of the Lynx was, if anything, too warm. She begged, “Please, don’t ...”

It dawned on him what he had said. “Sorry, Julia, it’s a bad night for me too. I’d like to turn around. I really would. But it’s not possible. We’ve gone too far. We’ve got to finish what we both have started.”

He approached the geo-dome complex. He turned on to Acoma Drive, then continued carefully across Anasazi Circle. He searched the grounds for anything that might be out-of-place. If he could have been an owl his head would have been swiveling in circles like the anxious road. He had all but stopped the car. He suddenly applied pressure to pedal, accelerated, and the orange dome receded into the night. Julia could feel him recover just a little, so thick was the air between. She herself was a swallow away from throwing up.

They headed north toward the mounting threat of rain. They passed the tip of Tarpley, passed its outdated and dying industries and warehouses, passed the once-thriving Sleep-Ez Caplet Company. They passed the infamous Tarpley Manor, the fleabag motel, and the reporter Art Karrell’s home away from Albuquerque.

“Hmm ... no one’s out on the highway tonight,” he whispered with a ghoulish titter.

“Nothing to be amused about. Dead here after dark. What does that tell you?”

“But not O’Flattery’s ... I’ll bet that dive is jumping.”

“Nope. Didn’t you hear ... they closed down the joint.”

“Why? Goings on?”

“Naw ... nothing like that at all. The guy ... what’s his name ... something ‘enhard ... up and died with no competent sons or daughters.”

“Without that tawdry-house what’s left of normal?”

“Yes ... what’s left?”

“A long ride down this dark road,” he said.

“How much farther?” she asked for no other reason than something to say. Julia found herself thinking about Nrczxa, concerned over the well being of their Sorelean Queen, their pilot light inside the darkness. Was she all right? What was her mood? What was she image-weaving now?

A powerful switch was thrown at this moment of empathy. Julia felt the thick, dark light rise like icy water inside a deep well. Pictures filled her head, ideas with

multidimensional connections, a tapestry of darkly luminous tesserae like those of their prophetic mural.

Henry had been talking. "Fifteen ... maybe twenty minutes," he repeated. "Are you with me? Do you know Snake Road?"

She did and she didn't. "The foothills ... yes. Too rich for me."

"It's at the end of the road ... near Indigo Lake."

Black clouds gathered over the rich foothills. Henry found the steep drive that led to the high-rent palisades of El Rasigo Blanco. This part he struggled to remember. He nervously tapped the wheel. Then as if by sheer luck, good or bad, he spied Snake Road and made the tight turn just in time at much more than a safe speed. "Won't be long," he predicted.

The drive up the ascending snake seemed to take forever, to take all of his concentration. There were times he thought he would lose the twists of the road entirely. He clicked the beams to high, squinted over the dash searching for the elusive tail of the serpent road. Julia anticipated him. "I see the lake ... there ... the deep blue," she directed with a voice that startled him. A distant flash of lightening further tantalized its ghostly iridescence.

"Yes, I see it too." He slowed the car. An imposing black, steel gate loomed before them. It was exactly the way he remembered it in his dream, flanked by the high concrete wall that disappeared into the darkness of the ponderosa pines. "Well, no better than I dreamt."

A remote camera mounted atop the gray wall and a searchlight mounted just above the camera sprang to life. The beam panned the road back and forth several times before it stopped and came to rest, framing their car for the moment at this gaunt threshold. They both lowered their eyes, sat listening, waiting, barely breathing, afraid to make a sound. The dark light in Julia's head in time absorbed the powerful glare. The instantaneity of the beam cast thick shadows on the junctures of her possibilities that mere eyes could not expose. The thickness in her head collected and concentrated in her throat, which made it hard for her to talk much less understand what was happening.

"So much for secrecy," said Henry. He reached into his pocket and removed the keyless remote that he had decoupled from Bill Hagerty's space-time. He hesitated with his finger poised over one of the small buttons that Hagerty had crudely labeled using a thumbnail swatch of masking tape. Staring at his trembling hands, at the letters "MG" in blue ink, he tried to will them still, but failed. With no warning the spy beam went out.

"So much for the red carpet," she whispered.

"Maybe the frequencies have been changed and we won't get in," he said hopefully. There was that force to his voice that the wish itself would make his words come true.

"That metal's wrought like the gate to Hell. I'm betting that evil device will pick the devil's lock. Then we'll have no other choice than to waltz with the Master."

He sighed, “Yeah ... suppose so. I got the feeling he wants us more than we want him.”

She shook her head as if resigned. She looked plaintively at Henry but was loath to speak, possessed paralytically by her ever-deepening reservations.

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Say it!” He waited, not patiently.

Finally: “There’s something, Henry, I probably shouldn’t mention. I’m having an ugly thought. Worse than earlier if you can believe that.”

“You’re kidding.” He snorted, “What could be worse?”

“You really want to know?”

“Just say it,” he repeated. “Get it out.”

“Out ... in the open?”

“Yes, of course. It’s better for the both of us.”

“It’s not. No way. It’s a bad feeling at a bad time and place.”

“Bad or not, what are you getting at?”

“It’s the feeling I get when I’ve left for a long, long trip. My bags are packed. I’m thinking of what I’ve packed and of what I haven’t. Do you know what I mean? Any inkling where I’m coming from?”

“Could be Nrczxa’s crate for all I know.” He gazed at her, poised, but totally unprepared. “I don’t quite understand what this has to do with—”

“I guess I don’t either, but it’s there ... what I’ve packed and what I haven’t. Both are close ... things we’ve missed in our anxiety and haste.”

“Missed? I still don’t know what you mean. I had the creeps driving over. To be expected. Didn’t want to say too much ... alarm you any more than you already were. But Julia we’re okay. There are no bullets ... or storm troopers at the gate. We’re just going up to talk to Lloyd.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think that our problem’s directly in front of us. Do you know? Henry, do you know what I’m thinking? It’s not in front.”

“Not in front? What? Something in the past ... something from our dream machine? I’m thinking about the dream scan, but don’t remember—”

“It’s all behind us, Henry.”

“Definitely not. Besides, I checked all that out coming over. No van ... no mud-mobiles ... rest assured. I checked that out.”

“I’m thinking we should have checked out the back seat of your car before we got in and drove off. I didn’t ... in too big a hurry. Did you? Did you check it out? Say you did ... please ... and I’ll be forever grateful.”

“You think something’s in the back seat of my car? Why ... for crying out loud? You hear something? Damn this shit. This ain’t funny, Julia.”

“Not trying to be. It just feels strange ... kind of a prickly premonition on the back of my neck and shoulders ... like we should have looked before we got in your car. That thump back there ... a delayed shift when you swerved the car. I heard something ... something large ... something more than dead weight.”

“I heard it too. It was only the loose spare tire bumping around inside the well.”

“No ... I’m not just talking about that. I thought I heard a sound ... a sound like a voice ... well, really a groan or grunt when you swerved.”

“Jesus ... this kind of shit has got my head unscrewed.”

“We gotta do it ... one of us ... you know that we have to do it.”

“But why? The car was locked ... remember?”

“So is that gate. That mean anything?”

“Damn! Just check the back ... will you. I’m not sitting out here all night, especially with you scaring my brass clangers off. Don’t need your help for that. Jesus! This ain’t getting any better.”

She turned and peered over the back of the seat. She sighed. “Well ... so much for that. I can’t see a friggin’ thing.”

“That’s good ... eh? So ... let’s try the gate.”

“No ... I mean it’s too dark. Flip on your courtesy lights.” She leaned over the seat back as far as she could just as he hit the switch. There was instantly plenty of light both front and back, both past and present. Julia stared into the expanding spaciousness of Henry Kincaid’s back seat.

All the pieces of the puzzle were brightly lit. She recalled the day in the compulab and what Minerva had told her about the Klein bottles, about Nettie’s error when modeling the continuum. She recalled the day with Pandora, the gaunt tower and the raining shards of mirrored glass. She recalled painfully her dear father and the horror of what he had done. She recalled the night spent with Ivan, Lester and the druid. She recalled his dagger and his curse, the second quarvine, glowing and throbbing. She recalled the day spent with Jean Phillips, the stopover in Bingham, the migraine headache and the silly nursery

rhyme. She recalled the night and her nightmare under the fertile cloud. She recalled Nrczxa and her three seeds. But most of all she recalled Jack.

“Hello there ... Miss Moffett,” croaked a frog-voice from purgatory. “We meet under the light like two, old friends.” Nightmare Jack sprang from the gutter pool that runs thick and red along Mayhem Lane of Whitechapel.

Julia screamed. Henry swallowed his gum. The tattooed apparition grabbed Julia firmly under her chin as he pressed his eight-inch dagger against her naked throat. Eddie “Roundhead” Reed brayed, “I’m Hell’s surgeon and I’m here to cut and gut.” The skin-headed man chuckled as if he had just prescribed that age-old, surefire remedy for life and death.

High-powered beams of energy exploded suddenly, blindingly, behind Henry’s big Lynx. Roundhead instructed Henry: “Kindly open the gate or your lady friend here’s havin’ herself a nice little tuck.”

Henry, his vocal chords paralyzed, shakily aimed and pushed the button that was tape-marked “MG.” He had no idea if it would work, but the heavy, bar steel jerked to the surge of the motor, retracted slowly, gratingly, metal on metal opening their gate to Hell. “Drive in slowly,” ordered Eddie. “I will tell you everything, when to breathe and when to stop.”

Henry did his best to do what he was told, though he barely found the strength for a breath, much less for the pedal. He proceeded slowly through the gate and up the gravel drive. They were followed by the dark van, its lights powered up for battle, projecting streams of blinding pain. For a few hundred yards they crept up the winding snakelet, the van following so close that one bumper tapped the other, close enough that Eddie’s knife grazed Julia’s soft, white neck. The sprawling, Spanish mansion came gradually into view through the dense evergreens. Lightening flashed high over the trees and the sprawling mansion. Thunder was heard a few seconds later, a low rumbling in the northern sky that shook their frail parcel of earth.

When they reached the end of the road, Eddie barked, “Stop!” There were no other vehicles, no indications that they were expected.

Henry pulled over into the pine needles, stopped the car and killed its lights and engine. Eddie held the knife blade firmly to Julia’s throat, increased the pressure on Julia’s head, bent it back as if he intended to break her neck. Her whimpers gave way to trembling sobs of pain. Henry stared ahead, not seeing, not knowing what it was that he could do.

They sat speechless in front of the mansion’s entrance, a formidable, metal door like the perimeter gate. Henry and Julia sat for time enough to reflect upon their likely fate. The rear door of the car was flung open.

They were joined by Ralph Seiper, his purple scar glowing in the blaze of the orange radiation emitted from the headlights of the van. His brass alloy pick twinkled, bobbed lazily between his pale, thin lips. He brandished a silenced 0.38 and a noisier 0.357. He

handed the former to Eddie. Eddie kept the knife to Julia's throat as he accepted the revolver. He flicked away her blue beret with its silencer.

Julia and Henry were prodded from the Lynx into the moonlight. The tall pines cast shadows that transected the earth like the spokes of a wire wheel. With each flash from the north the lines faded only to return. A cry rang from the forest, answered by childlike screams that resounded like wooden chimes.

They stared at their objective, the dimpled, metal door. Rain fell in large drops. The chorus of night creatures and the reverberation of timber for a time abated, as did the distant lightening and its thunder.

Ralph said coolly, "Dr. Kincaid, you are to use your transmitter again. And pray that it works ... for you've two choices ... in the mansion or in the ground. I've no time and no reason to argue."

Henry was certain they were finished, that all of their problems were finally solved, though not like he had hoped. This idea took control of the muscles of his face, sagging his cheeks around his chin. He had no idea if the door would open, if the little button labeled "R" with its peeling masking tape would work to save their lives. His eyes locked on Ralph's purple scar. The gaunt-faced Poxer ordered them forward.

There was one, low-wattage bulb marking the entrance to Lloyd's fortress of reinforced windows and walls. The steel reinforcement was skillfully ornamented where it poked through the masonry. The end of each rod had been fashioned into a spitting cobra head and a probing, lance-like tongue. The two Poxers urged them closer to the door with the barrels of their revolvers. "Dr. Kincaid, open it and be quick." Henry prayed for the first time in his life, mashed the R-button as hard as he could. Nothing happened. A warm, acid flux bubbled up, flooded his hollow gut. He swallowed to drown the acid and the pain. The talking scar reminded him: "I'm waiting Doctor ... with all the patience of a loaded gun."

Henry tried again. Nothing, but more acid. He heard Julia whimper. He was drenched in buckets of cold sweat. It sloshed inside his shoes and plastered his shirt to his skin. He quavered, "no good ... I ..."

Life's many episodes flashed through his brain. Snippets of forgotten memories were displayed before his eyes. Henry had come at long last to the end of that long and winding course called life. He shed his prized NASA jacket and let it drop lamely to the ground. Again he depressed the single button without success. Ralph placed the blue barrel of the magnum firmly against Henry's ear. He screamed in pain. Through all of this he was aware of Julia's futile scuffle with the tattooed brute she knew only as "Jack."

Ralph reminded him, "If that thing don't work soon, this thing will. I promise." Lightening returned like wildfire. Thunder crashed as the earth heaved a futile sigh. The heavens had filled with moribund, ink-stained clouds to blot the moon. The storm had been ushered in. They could not go and they could not stay. The lightening again lashed out to urge them through the gate, past its Hell-wrought steel.

Henry tried all of his buttons. He prayed that the label “R” had fallen off. He prayed that the tape had been hastily and erroneously reapplied. He prayed for a bolt from the blue. He prayed for a miracle. But nothing he did relaxed the buttons and released the steel. He had no more strength and no more options. It was over. He crumpled to his knees. “Okay then,” Ralph announced as if he was enjoying it. “We’ll do the lady first as etiquette recommends. I warned you guys that we weren’t kidding.”

“Time’s up,” announced a leering Eddie, alias Leather Jack, as he took a butcher’s hold of Julia’s head and prepared to cut her throat from ear hole to ear hole. The man was phenomenally strong, but perhaps not strong enough. His grip was suddenly abandoned as if his fingers had been buttered. He listed backward as if rendered blind staggering drunk. He let loose both the knife and the revolver, though neither fell to the ground as they were supposed to do. Instead, they hung weightlessly in space, not falling, as basic physics would require, as Sir Isaac himself had proclaimed that they must.

Ralph yelled something that could have been instructions, but it did not help Eddie or his staggers. A surge like a high-voltage current coursed through him from his bald, painted dome to his splayed legs. His skin rippled like water in vibration. His eyes swelled, went completely white, filled up to his lids with the improbable sight of Panarachne Baumeri.

Julia was still Julia to everyone but Eddie. For Eddie, she was Tony’s eight-legged bristlesack, the Permian queen, Nrczxa. His effort to remain firmly on his feet had him dancing a maniacal tarantella. Perhaps she had brought along her hatchlings for good measure, for he appeared to be fending off a host of attacks from every possible direction at once, from all angles above and under his clothes. After one convulsive counter punch he vomited a long, green projectile across the hood of Henry’s prized Lynx.

Ralph tried to fire, but something was seriously wrong. His weapon was no longer there where “there” was supposed to be. Like Eddie’s knife and 0.38, the magnum was now a hole in space that floated weightlessly, of no good use in any four dimensions as thick as theirs. Eddie was lost and sinking fast. Perhaps Ralph was seeing Nrczxa too, but he fought the illusion better than Eddie. Ralph screamed, “Magic ... Eddie ... it’s their machine ... it’s not real ... shake it off ... or you’re done for.”

Ralph grabbed Julia by the shoulders and shook her violently. This seemed to weaken her debilitating effect, for Eddie Reed immediately ceased his quaking and retching. Once his synapses regained minimal functionality he perceived the holes in space and reached for the elusive knife and gun repeatedly, but to his amazement without one penny of profit. When he recognized Julia once again as the mortal, two-legged woman, he bellowed, “Damn you bitch ... your bag o’ tricks. You’ll pay like hell for this.”

The gun and knife holes floated unerringly, magnetically toward the light, catching one by one the powerful beams of Ralph’s high-tech van. Each hole exploded like grenades of compressed ice, discharging soundless salvos of blue fire into the trees, into everyone and everything. It was an answer to Henry’s prayers, perhaps his bolt from the blue. All four dove to the deck as the timeless beams of thicklight passed harmlessly through everything in its wake—frangible flesh and blood, durable earth and steel.

Henry, huddling and hunkering down, looked up and noticed the door or where the door of the mansion had once been. The others had noticed too. By some odd exception its steel had not withstood the cannonades of fire, for it was completely and totally gone. Every molecule had vanished into thinspace. “Come on, Eddie,” Ralph commanded, “let’s get inside before the lights start up again. We’ll deal with these two later.”

The two Poxers pushed Henry and Julia into the semi-lit vestibule of the mansion. Footfalls resonated against the hardwood like hooves on corduroy road. What lay beyond the vestibule was so far unseen in the shimmering darkness. Ralph ordered Eddie, “Get your light ... shine it in there. Hurry man! We’re running out of time.” The clouds dipped lower as another salvo shook the earth. It was by now raining too hard for them to retreat.

Eddie unpocketed his flashlight and flicked on the switch. The light expired as its bulb popped harmlessly. “Damn!” he cursed. “Won’t work, Ralphie. We’re sunk.”

“You’re a certified moron, Eddie. I never should have—”

“What’ll we do now? We really going in there? What if—?”

“Not in the fucking dark. Not that nuts ... not in that tight with Hardass or his millions ... no. I’ll watch these two. You pull the van up to the door. We’ll use our headlights on the darkness ... even better.”

Ralph had barely issued his order to Eddie when the house lights came on brilliantly accompanied by the roar of: “Surprise!” from a clamoring, milling host of crazed partiers. The foursome was irresistibly drawn inside.

Passing under the arch they encountered a throng of revelers inside a room readied for a barbecue. In contrast, the two thugs stood unreadied and unarmed, their hands dangling at their sides through wet, loose sleeves—their jaws, their knees as slack as their mugs.

Henry failed to conceal his astonishment. Apparently the two bewildered thugs were the distinguished guests of honor. Above the red sandstone hearth, fastened to the halberds, was displayed a banner that read: “Payoff Day for Ralph Seiper and Eddie Reed.”

Julia and Henry did not recognize the guests. Men and women were costumed in all manner of getup. Few of their outfits really fit, but no one seemed to care. Most of them looked as if they had been pulled in off the street at the last possible moment. Henry could not believe there were this many folk in the entire town. Nevertheless, they were all having a delightful and inebriated time at the expense of Seiper and Reed, at whom they laughed too openly for comfort or common sense. The only thing clearly real about this farce were the rows of tables heaped with food and drink.

The short, fat Eddie said, “We’re gonna have to ... we’re gonna have to ... Jesus Christ ... I’ve got no idea what we’re gonna have to. We’re—”

“We’re screwed,” mumbled the tall, thin Ralph with eyes pried wide like manhole covers.

Seiper and Reed did not have a clue. Moffett and Kincaid did not have a clue. Like the Panigma Machine, it was contingency run amuck. The two thugs repeatedly asked the brazen partiers, “We are here to see Lloyd Baumer. Have you seen him? Do you know him? Do you know Max Cole?”

No one knew anything. They were only there for the food and the fun. Through all the craziness Eddie and Ralph kept Henry and Julia between them in spite of the efforts of the multitude to separate them. Someone Julia recognized stepped out of the crowd. He was a tall, distinguished looking man with short, white hair. He said to them, “Hello ... I’m Russell White. Can I be of some service to you gents?”

White said he could take them to Max Cole. White was Jean Phillips’ old nemesis, the private dick, the friend of Bill Hagerty. The party parted as White led them silently to an unmarked door in one of many identical alcoves on both sides of the wide, assembly hall. They followed him obediently. Henry relaxed several beats. He did not know why. Soon reminded of his pain, he cupped a hand gingerly over his battered ear.

The wide-eyed Poxers were gradually coming apart. Henry could see that Ralph was genuinely scared from that primal look of fear, possibly felt for the first time. It clearly required a lot to scare a man like this. Henry knew they faced an extremely dangerous situation.

Apparently White recognized this too, for he suggested, “Mr. Seiper, there is no cause for alarm. I promise you that no one here is armed. You are in control. I’m going to tell you exactly what I’m going to do. Maxwell Cole is expecting you in the Red Room. He is prepared to make a deal ... to give you what you came here for. I just ask you both to remain calm as I lead you to him. Beyond this door there is another that will lead us to the basement, then to the Red Room. It is a short trip. I will go inside with you. No one will attempt to harm you, so please keep your heads so that we may keep ours.”

Ralph exhaled. “Okay, Mr. White, if that is your name. We’ll play your game.” Ralph added with a quaver to his voice, “But remember we can snuff the three of you faster than you can blink.”

Ralph’s assessment of the situation told painfully on Henry’s face, in Julia’s dark eyes. The two thugs keep them tightly in-between. They had no choice but to wait for White’s next move. White maintained his poker face. “A deal,” he replied as he opened the dark-stained door. It all happened the way he had promised. Russ White led them through a trap door, down stairs to a hall punctuated by a door splashed with a mortal shade of red.

They followed single-file, finally stopping in front of the enameled door. The white-haired man placed his palm on the pad and the metal door clicked open. A blue light spilled ethereally from the room. White said, “He’s in there waiting for you. Anxious to see you ... actually. Shall we go in?”

“Miss Moffett ... Mr. White, Dr. Kincaid, please, if you’ll lead the way,” crowed Ralph the Rail, disagreeably polite and precise.

White seemed eager that they oblige and ushered Henry and Julia to their marks inside the chamber awash in blue. The two Poxers filed in next, but to their dismay found that they had been cleverly isolated by transparent partitions. This “Red Room” was conspiratorially lit, dark as midnight everywhere, but in the center which was ablaze as if illuminated from Heaven. The source or nature of this radiation could not be ascertained from what could be seen. The group had been assembled into two distinct lines. Eyes slowly focused in a light of almost blinding intensity. They expected Max Cole, but there was no Max Cole. The swastikas on Eddie’s head seemed to revolve in the blue light like purple planets around the sun. It lit Ralph’s glistening scar revealing a long, blue, varicose vein. There was movement under the cathedral light plus a pitiful groan. Leopold Hardan sat rigid in a straight chair. He was tightly gagged, his wrists and ankles tightly bound.

“A double cross!” yelled Ralph.

Eddie blurted, “Boss, what ... what should we do?”

A muzzled Hardan could not answer, nor could he turn to look at them. A taut rope that descended untraceably in the brightness of the room had immobilized his head. This rope appeared nailed or screwed into his head. His neck was stretched to break. His eyes were fired with pain and rage.

The outward confidence of both Ralph and Eddie had wilted as limp as Henry’s shirt. To further complicate their predicament a painted goliath stepped purposefully from the darkness into the dazzle. The astonished Poxers withdrew several paces as Julia correctly identified: “The Gaul!”

The Gaul was almost too much man for the room. He was indeed the Gallic Roschief, Vercingetorix. He had brought with him his finely crafted sword emblazoned with golden chimera and serpents that he promptly raised to six impressive feet of shoulder height. The Gaul tested its balance as he took the full measure of Hardan’s long, outstretched neck. With this clear provocation Ralph and Eddie reached down to their ankles, into hog leg holsters, extracted and raised their concealed Lugers and opened fire.

They emptied their 9-millimeter parabellums to an earsplitting racket. Henry and Julia immediately fell to the floor. Smoke and flash filled the room, then the acrid smell of burnt powder. None of this appeared to bother the Gaul, nor the marble intermediary, the enigmatic shamus, Russell White.

The Gaul stood tall with his sword cocked and ready. The giant winked at the sweating Hardan. Eddie shouted something, dropped the empty pistol and bolted full-tilt for the door. It was closed. The sound of his head hitting the metal, a crush like that from a dropped melon, was nearly as loud as the bark from the Lugers. Eddie was cold-cocked and indefinitely out of the match. It was not hard for Henry to imagine Eddie’s swastikas twisting round and round like thrashing snakes in the throes of a fiery death.

Ralph launched the empty gun that missed the Gaul with a loud crash. Vercingetorix then delivered a blow that cleaved Hardan beneath the chin. His mouth gag was knocked free

and flew toward White. The lump of flesh at the end of the rope swung menacingly toward Ralph Seiper and bounced a little as it swung foolishly, as if the lump was still alive and yammering, and cursing those two cretins, Ralph and Eddie, for their colossal stupidity. It swung on the long rope in a wide arc back and forth, back and forth like a pendulum. It counted the seconds in red spurts from the lashed down torso that had not moved one inch from its original mark at the center of the execution chamber.

Ralph's legs buckled. And although he dropped to his knees, he refused to go down, swaying to and fro, choking, spitting, with red eyes exploding. Ralph had swallowed his trademark, false-gold pick and like his partner, Eddie, he was indefinitely out of the match. But Russell White made sure.

He stepped from behind a partition of clear Lucinite, recovered Eddie's spent pistol and took careful aim. Reaching deep from ankle height he slammed Ralph's jaw with the gun barrel. The Poxer's bluish cheek collapsed, the bones crushed, a home run. Ralph's head pitched back then forward with a sharp, sapling snap. He crashed to the floor, skull bouncing solidly against the hard concrete. He entered that never-never, never-again land of serene and mindless tranquility.

For the first time the deliberate White moved fast. He flipped on the lights. Julia and Henry rose cautiously on shaky legs with Henry nursing his bruised ear. There was no head on the end of a long, swinging rope, no blood, no headless corpse, no trace of Hardan, no Gaul either. It had been smoke and a maze of mirrors from the beginning, a show of lights from Allen Polk's bag of laser tricks. The man had outdone himself.

The small contingent of Cole, Hagerty, Kato and Polk entered the Red Room, each stepping carefully over the back of Roundhead Reed. The black swastikas burned into his dome had collected red blood. Each man was in his own way as methodical as White. Hagerty assisted with the taping of Seiper and Reed's wrists and ankles while Allen "Sloe" Polk fussed with his panoptolasers. Through all of these practical concerns Larry Kato smiled as he had not smiled for weeks.

Hagerty said to White, "No need to worry about this one, Russ. We'll bag him up and ice him down."

Max Cole apologized: "Sorry to put you two through that. We went over it long and hard. It seemed the best all around plan, though I'll admit I was worried that the scheme was too complicated and just plain too dangerous, but Bill and Sloe assured me that it would work." He added as he tapped the bulletproof shield for reassurance. "... that it would—"

"... that it would be great if I must say so myself. It was my very best work," gushed Sloe Polk. Some credit I must reluctantly extend to Mr. Fuller in the computer room. Joe set up the lasoptoscope ... worked on the laser calibrations non-stop for two days."

"I suspected that it might be the 'scope," said Julia, "but I was never really sure. It was so incredibly real. It must have taken weeks to merge all that code. And the sound effects ...

Allen, you deserve an Oscar ... and a kiss,” which she applied eagerly to both his blushing cheeks.

“Don’t we get some of that?” cried Larry. “Besides, I like your new ‘do. It brings out the predatory animal in your killer eyes. You are the panigmatic, purple avenger ... and a little scary ... I might add.”

She proceeded to smooch each man with sometimes sloppy kisses. Max seemed to relish most her attention, flashing a tough-won smile after a seriously sensual hug.

Henry, beaming, joked, “Sorry ... my friends ... but you’ll get no hugs and kisses from me. You had me ready to plug my designer shorts. All kidding aside, I am relieved and forever grateful for your ingenious intervention.”

Strangers in gray coveralls solemnly entered. They did not speak as they carried the two Pox-gangsters to their final destination. There eagerly burst forth from several dry throats and relieved hearts a genuine, but slightly muted cheer.

“Can’t say I’ll miss those two all that much,” said Julia.

Henry agreed, “Nor I. Fondless adieu and the worst of all possible dreams.”

Larry noticed Sloe Polk fiddling with his equipment. “He’s worried about his projectors ... took a few hits, but kept on ticking ... kept on running as the bullets flew.”

“I think I can salvage them,” he earnestly replied.

Max quickly changed the subject. His expression turned deadly serious. “We were expecting the two of you of course. When Bill’s keyless remote disappeared into thin air we knew what you had in mind. And we knew that it had to be tonight. You guys’ve been busy. Took real guts, I admit. No one appreciates this more than I for all you’ve done.”

“Well ... perhaps, Tony,” offered Julia.

“He’s okay ... I hope.”

“His body will heal. The rest may take a while.”

Wrinkling his brow, Max asked, “Julia, you might ask Queen Fang to replace our front door. We may have some need of it against the storm. There’s still an archfiend to defeat. This will be the straw that snaps him. No telling what he will do, though you and I hope that he follows his tendencies and voices. You’ve managed the first maneuver. But have you managed to arm the critical bait and switch?”

The men beside Max were rendered a trifle pale as their imaginations slipped into high gear. They looked at her as if she would suddenly sprout extra arms and legs. “I have a disarming consequence to offer you,” she said. “What do you fellows have to offer me?”

“Nothing we can readily part with,” asserted Larry.

Henry inquired, “So Max, when are you gonna tell us what this intrigue was all about?”

“You’ll get it all soon enough ... too soon, I’m afraid. While you were having your problems, we were having ours in cicabytes. Nothing worked the way we’d planned. Nothing!”

“If you had said this was planned—”

Max interrupted, “Henry ... I’m truly sorry. I must tell you that Lloyd is dead ... his heart killed him shortly after noon today ... in his sleep. We ... we did everything we could to revive him.”

Henry slumped in spite of a worthy effort to steady himself. He tilted his head forward, looked painfully down at the floor. He stuttered, “I ... I feared as much. He looked very bad, very ill that night I dream-scanned his ambulance escape.”

“Panigma Gate ... that diabolical warp ripped him apart,” Max explained. “His final dream ... ironically his one victory of sorts ... was the final, fatal blow. Owen did all he could of course. He is crushed. We are all ... crushed. Henry, I know this hits you hard, but it was a price he was willing to pay ... whether right or wrong I can’t say. Time will tell.”

“I’ve brought him back his ...” He could not finish, but instead fished through his pockets and handed Max the soft gold ring, plus the brass imposter attached to Joy Baumer’s jade shamrock, Lloyd’s good luck charm.

Max wheezed, “Good not to have to see that quarvine again. Henry, I’ll tell you what he said the last time I spoke with him. But later ... later.”

“Of course ... later,” said Henry. “Let’s hope there’s later. I admit I thought we really screwed the pooch. We seemed hell-bent like the devil for a permanent light’s out.”

“Oddly, through it all, even as it grew worse, I had no resolve to stop it. To me, looking back, this is the strangest fact of all. But enough of this. Henry, aren’t you brimming with questions. After all, like us you’ve survived a long and difficult trip.”

“Questions? Forgot them all ... every one. Not important now. I can’t—”

“Henry, we have the gravest responsibilities. Nothing can ever be the same again.”

Larry reminded, “We still have the head of the snake to kill.”

Bill Hagerty interjected, “The loss of those two creeps won’t stop him. He’ll be more determined, more ruthless than ever. By now I’m sure he knows or must suspect that we’ve double-crossed him.”

“Then he’s light-years ahead of me,” Henry moaned.

Max said, “He’ll want his revenge. Hope we’re up to it ... hope our expensive Gibraltar is up to the shock of what could happen next.”

Larry stated the cruel fact: “He has Nettie. He can access the LENS, perhaps the entire Light System. It’s what he wanted all along. And we handed him the blueprint, all the right buttons to push.”

“He has the LENS passwords?” asked Henry incredulously. “All of them? If that’s true and he has the slightest talent we can still be beaten. It could still be light’s out for us yet, not him. We must seal off the Institute. It’s too great a risk to take.”

Max opined, “He may not have Lloyd’s Gateword. We don’t really know ... unless Julia—”

“I only know that F3 is viable ... and given the state of the LENS ... unpredictable. But one thing is as certain as the pile of poop we’re steeping in.”

Max knew what she meant. “Julia’s right,” he added wryly. “He’s in it too ... up to his pointy nose at least ... though he may not yet smell the awful stench.”

“He must go there,” she said slowly. “To do anything more than just read Minerva’s databases he must visit the Panopticon itself. His lociputer taps into the OnNet 210 won’t do him any good and he knows it.”

“Yes ... that’s right. And it’s his right to go and do his stuff,” Henry agreed. “He’s paid good money for it. This man deserves what he pays for.”

“For once we can all agree on something,” Max suggested. “No more fighting one another. A welcomed peace ... if it’s not too late to enjoy it.”

Allen “Sloe” Polk changed topics. “Not to alarm you Henry, but that ear of yours looks pretty nasty. Must hurt like hell ... eh?”

“Almost feels good,” Henry lied. “Small price to pay for a second chance, though I realize it isn’t over yet.”

“Never know by looking, said Max. “But now that you’re here, what can we do for you ... show you that would interest you? This isn’t just a social call ... I presume.”

“I ... we came to see Lloyd. I knew from the LENS scan that he was in serious trouble. I thought we might help him. Well ... maybe not help ... but understand why he did what he did ... before it was too late. Now ... it is ... too late ... at least for him and perhaps for ourselves as well.”

“Maybe not. There is a man who might help you understand all this ... the reward and the risk. Would you like to meet him?”

“Yes, of course ... if he meant this much ... if he meant Lloyd’s ... (a stammer) life.”

“Then you’ll have the nickel tour while our fortress still stands against the storm.”

They left the laser room not reluctantly. They climbed the stairs and returned to the great hall. All the guests had left, the food and drink totally exhausted.

They were led through a door much like the first, through a series of decontamination stages known by their colors—yellow, green and blue. They were subjected to various indignities, to a vigorous scrub, to a change of clothes, to an ultraviolet beam, then to rays a little stronger. Max assured them that all these rigors were necessary. “Owen insists,” he said, “and you know Owen.”

Julia and Henry admitted that they were impressed by the attention to detail, the competence and the number of well-trained operators.

Max explained, “It would make no sense taking any chances now.”

“But this is not like Lloyd,” remarked Henry, “to have all these people involved so closely with his secret ambitions.”

“No,” said Max. “It’s not. It’s Owen. And he’s the boss when it comes to medical procedure. It’s no microbes or mistakes allowed.”

Henry naturally wondered, “Is this man of yours ill?”

“Has been,” Max responded, “but he recovers rapidly ... a real nasty bacterial infection. Owen thinks he has it under control, but he’ll take no chances. We could not just fill him up with antibiotics either. Too risky. So Owen had to be cautious ... and make no assumptions about treatments ... tolerances to drugs ... or to food ... or even to us. We certainly can’t afford a mistake with what’s been paid.”

From the “Blue Room” they were ushered along a short corridor that led to a vestibule with triple-pane glass on all three sides. Some simple, Spartan benches had been provided, though no one in their weary party sat down.

Max announced gravely, “Finally ... the White Room.”

“It truly is,” marveled Julia, “like white sails in a snow storm.”

They were surrounded by white. Across the glass they recognized Owen Klein in his white, surgical gown. He was not alone in the room, but standing near a man in bed, a man sitting up and reading. The man chattered more than he read. No sound penetrated the thick layers of safety glass. Their bedfellow was wired up to a display monitor. Tubes dispensed fluids into both arms and into other available sites amply covered.

“He’s going on furiously about something,” observed Henry.

“Been like that since this morning. He simply won’t shut up. Must be feeling better. His doctors, loosely speaking, were bleeding him. You know ... phlebotomy it is called. It would have killed him in not much time.”

“What’s he yammering about so intensely?” seconded Julia.

“Don’t know. If Owen thinks it’s okay we might find out. He speaks enough English to be understood.”

"I don't recognize him," said Henry. "For all this fuss ... who the devil is he?"

Their patient was not good-looking. His cheeks were too puffy, his eyes runny, his nose a little too large for his face. But it was an interesting face, nonetheless. His age, given his state of health, was hard to estimate. He had a look of youth masked by illness or tragedy. The eyes suggested a kind of wisdom derived from much suffering.

"You should know. You've been carrying it around with you for days ... and recently, near your finger tips, virtually in the palm of your hand."

Henry looked quizzically at Max, took a seat on the bench in order to think.

"The ring. Did you bother to even look at the ring?" quizzed Max.

"Yes ... well ... no. But you make it sound so—"

"It's in the gold band." Max handed him the ring. "Try reading the band," he repeated. "Too simple ... really."

Henry complied. "Three initials ... two dates, I think." His expression communicated more confusion than understanding.

"It was the second date that did it ... proved it genuine beyond any question. It is early by one day ... just one day. According to all accounts it is wrong. But Lloyd and the LENS proved the ring right, all the accounts, the so-called experts wrong."

Henry handed the ring to Julia. He was reminded of her history lesson and Caesar's dagger. But somehow this was different and not the lethal dagger. Julia studied it, then spoke the name that matched the three initials.

Her three words appeared to knock Henry off his perch. He stood up and paced, then took a seat. "Remarkable," he repeated over and over. "It takes my breath away. So sad it took Lloyd's life when it did, when his bird of paradise was at last set free."

Julia returned the ring to Max, who returned it promptly to Henry. "It's yours. Lloyd wanted you to have it."

Henry politely declined. "No ... he should have," proposed Henry with a nod toward the White Room. "It's his. He's here with us."

"But is there a place for him in our world?" asked Allen Polk.

"Yes, finally," said Larry, "but was he ready for anything like this ... for us ... and for what comes next?"

"Lloyd was convinced this man understood. One of the few who came to understand his possibilities, though it will remain for him a challenge more than life itself."

"Lloyd's challenge too and final impossibility," added Henry sadly.

Julia asked, "Max, what is going to happen next?"

“What a question! I wish I knew. But at the very least we must erase every trace of this. We must disassemble the Machine, shut down the Institute. It was Lloyd’s final wish. We’re not ready ... not yet. And we must convince Kovrani and Moss to cooperate.”

Julia said, “I think they’re more than ready to scuttle Lloyd’s ark. So, it’s to be the bread line. But we all agree there’s no place in this world for the Panigma Machine. Probably not ever as long as there are Hardans.”

Henry nodded stoically his agreement. “There will always be Hardans.”

Max asked discerningly, “Henry, can you wipe it all away ... all the inspired work?”

“It won’t be easy. It’s part of me. And him. But it must be done ... and done quickly.”

“But Henry,” Julia reminded, “don’t you remember. There are a few loose ends ... one or two frayed ropes that we’ve left untied. They will be worried.”

This jolted Henry out of his trance. He rechecked the time—now 11:57 P.M. “Damn, we must call Tony, call him soon, and Karrell too, or we’ll be up to our asses in cops and reporters.”

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Man That Might Have Been

Inside the Dome during the Early Hours of March 17th

It was a moonbeam sifted through quivering fronds. It was nearly impossible to tell what it was or from whence it came, a single quaver trapped inside rustling leaves, a whisper from nothing, his longstanding, but veiled visitation, the demon he called, *Vox ex Nihilo*.

“Beware,” counseled Vox, his voice suddenly rendered faint, though still resonant like a penny dropped at the far end of an empty, aircraft hanger. It urged pitifully, “Attend only the door to light and to life. It opens from the inside out, never from the outside in. Listen carefully! I tell you it must be the inside out and never the outside in. Inside, I say, for the light outside will crush you. The vastness is madness. Its door is oblivion’s gate. Don’t be deceived by enticing signs or things you have been told by others. Our vengeance depends on you. Eternity waits impatiently.”

So did he. And for long enough. Like dire Vox, his time had come.

Never mind that he had not slept for days, that there was not one iota of light or heat—never mind that Lloyd Baumer had betrayed him, that Seiper and Reed’s bumbling had betrayed him too. He knew it would come down to this, to his compensation for their flaws and to his own relentless will. “This was to be the final retribution,” Hardan cried out loud, his thick, fish lips quivering in the cold air. The dome’s acoustics hollowed out his words and enfeebled his verdict. His bloodshot eyes stared straight ahead. Like a blind spelunker, too long underground, he was lost in a cave of his own frantic excavation.

The blinking consoles had all but hypnotized him. The light speckled his dark peacoat, his khaki trousers, and his deeply grooved face. In this light the deep, vertical lines in his cheeks and chin looked to have been filled in by a concentration of midnight—a murky, asphaltic mire permanently bonded to his livid flesh. Hardan leaned uncertainly over the navcon of isocon two. He repositioned the powerful Ultralux lamp to better illuminate his workspace. He placed his hard-won and hand-worn notes under the bright light and opened them to page one of Dr. Kato’s instructions. Leopold had thought of everything. He had even taken the lucidity drug, mercolidine, as they called it. There was nothing that would stop him now. “Nothing!” he shouted to the pinnacle.

One thing maybe. Upon this thing he would not dwell. Such thoughts had power, especially inside this vast reservoir of so many possibilities.

Aching, he could stand no more and took a seat at the control panel. The instructions had been memorized. His notes would not be needed now. That persistent voice would lead

him through each difficult step of the procedure. Vox must not fail him. But neither must he fail the tireless demon, Vox.

He had had to power up the OHM computers from the compulab. There had been no need to power up dark Nettie. It was not pleasant being near her, for she radiated an organic, though alien intellect that he felt in the isocon a hundred feet away. Of course he knew she still burned coldly, if invisibly, in the stratum beneath him. Hardan paused to look around the triangular room half-expecting that some dome ogre might poke its head from inside its penumbral shadows. This compelling uncertainty reminded him of his cornfield maze. He nervously searched his pockets. The device was protrusive, but it was nice having it handy, especially now that so much depended on him. If only he was not so cold and so alone, and the chamber was not so desperately dark.

He had fastidiously prepared the isocell, the couch, the headset and SBI. The LENS and CIC parameters seemed satisfactory, the AI logic less so. But it was past the time for worrying about that. He typed one keystroke.

Voiceless Minerva requested:

ENTER GATE PASSWORD>

Hardan typed five letters: WAMAX. He paused to consult a dog-eared page torn from a kid's high-school math book. He looked up the sine of sixteen degrees and entered the digits 2756. Why Trigonometry? With Lloyd one could never figure why—or anything. No matter about Dr. Physic now. Lloyd Baumer was not so clever after all. Hardan smiled at how clever he himself had been. He recalled how he had discovered the Gateword doodled in the margin of notes left in Lloyd's office trash.

He was about to enter the Gateword when Vox, his voice inside, howled: "It is the seventeenth of March, not the sixteenth! It is precisely 12:47 A.M." A glance at his watch confirmed this. He had lost track of the exact date. This was something he must never do.

After reconsulting the trig table he entered the new digits 2924—the sine of seventeen degrees. He had come close to making the biggest mistake of his life. He must be careful and think clearly before he did something unforgivably stupid. Otherwise he would give Lloyd and the lean and latent Dr. Faust an easy and unearned victory.

The thinspace, as he verified hissingly, was after all: "No joke." He issued the new keystrokes and the thing was finished. After a pause the navcon mechanically responded:

REQUEST ACCEPTED; PLEASE STAND BY>

The monitor began spitting numbers—pages of numbers, the initial scaling and amplification factors for the LENS paracube, plus vectors and tensors that meant nothing to him. Finally he was asked:

SELECT SLEEP INITIATION PROCEDURE>

Hardan selected procedure number six from his list of options. He knew this set of patterns best matched his own brain waves. Minerva confirmed the selection. After interminable seconds she issued:

CIC TWO ENGAGED AT 0.025 CICABYTES AND READY:
 PANBUTTON ENGAGED AND READY:
 PANGATE ENGAGED AND READY:
 SLEEP STIMULUS PROCEDURE 6-2349:
 PARAMATRIX STARTUP SET LP-405:
 NO RED FLAGS:
 ONE YELLOW FLAG: SEE AI ANALYZER PAGE 383
 SUBJECT NOT CONNECTED:

HOLDING AND READY FOR CAMERA SBI ACKNOWLEDGE>

It was at last his turn to take. All the computational necessities had been completed. He rose sluggishly, carried his Ultralux into the isolation of the isochamber. His sneakers squeaked gratingly against its hard floor. The critical Gate Key was heavy in his pocket. He noticed the many cushions strewn about the room. He replaced the pillow on the couch with one of these, one far more substantial. The headset and mask he attached. The SBI he engaged. Hardan stretched out on the couch for what would be the dream of his life. He closed his weary eyes and waited.

It did not take Nettie long. The Gate Key and all his meticulous compumetrics worked flawlessly. Space-time reality tilted back, revealed what was and what might have been. Time's arrow tilted with it, bent back so far there was no future to be gained at all. The window of the past had accumulated all its possibilities, had traded the window of the future for all that might have been. At this parangle through the invisible aether time lost its arrow of direction.

Hardan experienced what he had only heard about, but had never tried till now. He attempted to match Nettie's insinuating rhythms with his own. He felt the space-possibility plane just begin to tilt. This part was the hardest. Focusing was difficult. He knew from the pain in his head that his cicabytes climbed rapidly. The gravelly, but fatherly Vox whispered at the end of the long, dark tunnel. "You must reveal us both inside the maze. You must release us both from inside our pain."

This grim voice went on to plead: "But beware! Trust only the light of your own inner strength. Be mindful of the outside, of its subtle lure. Remember what I told you." There was more advice too low, too hard to hear. At times this voice seemed confused, coaxed one course, then the opposite with equal passion. Could the problem be Vox himself? Or was it the dark convolutions of his own drugged brain—the mercolidine, an oily succubus sucking him out? Paraspaces should not be this empty, this unfathomably black.

The long, dark tunnel that had amplified the pleas of *Vox ex Nihilo* had aligned with the space-possibility plane. Vox was beneath him now seemingly whispering from deep inside a well. Vox beckoned him to the rim. Hardan looked down into the dark abyss with no restraining wall, with no safety barrier. Hardan saw despair inside. He listened too and heard that same clamor heard so many times before. With the many voices came:

Thump, thump, thump—the hammer of blood surging inside his own, dark, arterial recesses.

The singular voice of Vox was now legion. He heard the whispering, though he no longer cared to listen. Made dizzy by the din and his throbbing, Hardan miscalculated, lost his mental footing and toppled headfirst into the chaos. The abode of demon Vox, the inner space, embraced him, closed in around him like the cold putrefaction of once living flesh.

Though locked in deep slumber, Hardan screamed to wake the dead if not the beast inside. Soon these screams commingled with the din, with the dead and their rancor as he plunged ever deeper into the lightlessness. He perceived timelessness and spacelessness like what he imagined weightlessness would be. He tumbled through the aether with no impression of his being. This quality had ceased to be. There was left only the vague possibility of his ever having been.

The deeper he fell the faster he fell like a star receding in space. It was a terrible descent from a mountainous height. He seemed to fall forever while waiting for an impact that would never come. And all the while murmuring voices would surely rupture his skull from the rising pressure of their unmitigated hate. When impact did finally come it came painfully. He landed hard enough to kill many times over, though he had lived through this nightmare many times over. It was the same as always only worse. It was his familiar field of corn, his unfathomable harvest—alas, his inscrutable maze and ancient curse.

Only now the earth and sky had been painted in flame a fiery red. A strong wind rose to feed the roaring inferno, to incinerate the field of corn as it bent low the bleeding stalks to caress the smoldering earth. The hot zephyr for a time relented, but not the incursion of dry and burning rain. The atmosphere continued to expel ash and soot. Hissing cinders fell upon the field. The holocaust descended in broad sheets of flame that burned and billowed like bolts of cotton broadcloth soaked in gasoline. These writhing conflagrations reminded him of a choir of burning angels shot from Heaven. Each one would crash to the ground, splash and spread like gallons of oil, explode like gallons of napalm on a field of dead men.

The explosions thundered: “Ka-toosh. Ka-ka-toosh!”

Hardan scooted pathetically along the parched and desolated earth. He tried futilely to cover his ears and to protect his watering eyes. This effort would be to no avail, for the fiery rain of ash and soot quickly blackened his face. He attempted to brush away the hot ash, but it clung to his skin, filled in the deep chasms of his chamfered face like molten lead. It smelled alarmingly like roasting flesh. Hardan struggled awkwardly to his feet. It seemed that his right arm had been shattered. His right leg was not much better. As he rose he tasted blood, felt it trickle warmly in his mouth.

He stood upon a broad swathe of smoldering, flattened stalks. It was that familiar panoscene of a thousand nightmares. Only now he was ringed by a firestorm, a nightmare ignited in Hell itself. But he knew that it had to end like this. Why else had the maze of corn tormented him for so long if not to confront him now. “You must resist,” warned

that same morbid voice. Vox was now so near he could feel his presence. Had Vox always been this close? He looked at last upon the earth and conceived a bleeding wretch.

Vox, his face obscured by a loathsomely thick and sickening mucous and his own dark blood, was consumed in excruciating pain. Everywhere his body had been ravaged as if his pack had turned savagely against him. His deep wounds bled copiously. Burnt blood ran and mixed disgustingly with the snotty concoction to render a coal-black slime. “You must comprehend the truth,” gasped this hideous wretch over the roar from the choir of corn singing like Harbingers from Hell. But Hardan would not listen. He thought: “Once again, I have been betrayed ... and ultimately by Vox himself. What despicable treachery!”

Hardan turned his back on Vox, turned one hundred and eighty degrees as if he did not hear his voice. In fact he dared not. For Vox had lied. He was not the Dire Wolf, but an unscrupulous imposter. Hardan searched the field. He must find the Gate if he was to save his benefactor. It was an outer, not an inner door that he must seek, a door that opened one way, a door suspended in a space-time discontinuity that opened from the outside in. This search was dangerous. But he must find the Gate nonetheless. Vox would deceive him no longer with his preposterous inside outs and his outside ins.

He scanned Hell’s conflagration for a firebreak. Inside the immensity of space-possibility-time, Hardan found no escape, no way out, no door to safety or rescue of that evil genius. Choking from the pungent fumes he was near to giving up when at last he spotted his own reflection. Luminosity had unfolded like a flower from a charred field. It grew larger as if fed by the power of his relentless will. Thankfully, the possibility in front was not the same as the reality behind. The power and the parangle of the light from the other side revealed the field in its depth and its unerring rotation through time. Hardan turned with it, changed with it, reverted to his youth, to his birth, and eventually beyond what must be paradox to that puzzling realm of never was and never would.

Suddenly looming before Hardan was the despicable, Vox, on whom he had callously turned his back. It appeared that Vox beckoned that he should come through and join him on the other side. Vox cried, “You must ...!” But his scream abruptly expired. There was something lethal in Vox’s eyes, something that Hardan could not detect through the dense, black smoke. A spasm propelled the demon to his feet, but his legs would not support him. As he collapsed to earth, his arms outstretched, Vox stretched his voice in one last appeal to Hell. “Behold the inner light and all you are and ever will be!”

The wind lashed the fiery corn. The man unleashed the impassioned scream of the damned before he fell limp and choked to his death on an eruption of bile and blood. Vox evinced a dire glare—a look not of a merciful end, but of a merciless eternity.

Hardan swiveled on his left knee. In his haste and hate, he had failed to properly evaluate the demon’s final appeal, his subtle gesture of the hand. Hardan drew whisker close and placed his palm upon the peepdoor. He pushed. A dark light exploded from the outside in. A cold concentration of thick space flooded the field, extinguishing the inferno. Hardan poked his head and shoulders, then the rest of him through the flood of black

liquor to the other side. The deluge ebbed to a trickle. Sweet vapor seeped through the emerging crags revealing a glimmer of life and a scintilla of hope.

He stood with his feet firmly planted in a room tastefully furnished. Vases of flowers and such were precisely arranged for balance, for feminine delicacy. There was careful coordination with a flair for details. Sofa and chairs matched the mood and colors of tapestries and carpets, of idyllic scenes of everyday life, of town and country portrayed in knickknacks, needlework and watercolors. It was warm, but at the same time it was that chillingly familiar scene that had haunted him his life. He easily understood why.

There were a few artifacts of another quite different personality. There were, for example, horses, perhaps champions captured on canvas, though with some carved in bronze relief. There were figures of strong young men and women enwreathed in oak leaves or braid, wearing or holding helmets, their heads tilted proudly to the gods. There was a very dark, very large portrait of Siegfried slaying the dragon. These things did not surprise him. These things too were chillingly familiar.

It could have been a room anywhere, well almost anywhere. But it was not. There were a few telltale signs to this effect. For example, there were window curtains with no windows, china cabinets with no china. Perhaps there had once been china, for Hardan noticed here and there a few unswept chips. The electric lights flickered constantly and dust fell like loose snow after a winter storm. The chalky substance formed little mounds on the furniture and floor, on the two people sitting together inside their sanctuary.

His gaze brushed the back of the man, but fell like a hammer upon the soft face of the woman. She wore a black dress decorated with pink roses, a perfect fit. In a strange way everything fit. He knew her face as well as he knew his own, better than he knew his own. Until this moment, although he may have suspected, he had never truly accepted. He spoke that lyrical name given by him to her so long ago. He could not speak the other one, not here and now inside this discomforting place.

Hardan turned his attention to her faceless companion. The man, dark and trembling, sat on a sofa covered with white flowers, his back to Hardan. He spoke softly to the pretty brownette seated near him. She listened to his words tearfully as they sipped a steamy beverage from delicate china cups arranged on an ornate, though small teapoy.

The man never showed his face, though he displayed one small, quivering hand. From the little finger of his left hand he removed a gold ring with a large, green crystal—a pellucid quarvine—perhaps that same quarvine of the LENS. The man placed the ring solemnly upon the teapoy. Its keystone glowed with renewed power. The man picked up the ring, then put it down, then picked it up again. He repeated this thrice then placed the object in his breast pocket. The woman appeared relieved that he had finally decided. She nearly smiled. Reminded of the purpose of his key, the device in his pocket, Hardan drew closer. He silently called upon the man to come with him. As he approached near enough to touch, the woman suddenly stiffened. Why this reaction? He was surely invisible to both the man and the woman. What did she see?

Hardan intuited that he must work fast. He touched and turned the key. The man sitting motionless folded like a box and disappeared like a point into an invisible dimension. It had been easy. Okay so far. The dislocation left behind a hole that shimmered like the sheerest mirror glass. This was okay too. He knew to expect the vacuum continuum, the thinnest chance. What happened next was not foreseen.

The hole in space seemed to have the wrong polarity, for its void curved from the outside in and not the inside out. It pulled like the bottomless pit and with a gentle, but irresistible force that required that the hole be filled, but filled just right, filled with the proper spatial, temporal and eventual energy. Had he miscalculated? Or was it that damned Machine?

Hardan thought of Nettie. Was something wrong with Nettie, with the Panigma Machine? And what happened to his concentration? It seemed as though he had aged a million years. Was it the CIC? Was it was the yellow flag, AI analyzer page 383, now turned deep red?

Hardan could not resist the pull and took a seat on the sofa next to the woman. There was a change in their space like the flip of a switch. The room was subtly different. He heard and felt a sharp, concussion from above. Other dull sounds followed like aftershocks.

Hardan nearly dropped his dainty, china cup. He took a sip from it, though he struggled to understand what had happened or why it had. When he finally risked a look into her brown eyes she screamed as though she had seen a ghost. But he was no ghost. He could feel this place, hear this place, taste the tea and smell her rose water. This was no dream. He was no dream. He was here with her. She was here with him.

He tried to reassure her, but she would not be reassured. He tried to cover her mouth. By this he meant no harm, but it had terrified her even more. She would not be calmed. The worst of all things had happened.

He managed only the words: "Mother, I am sorry."

With his left hand he removed the gold Walther PPK from his pocket and pressed it gently against her temple. He applied firm pressure to the trigger just as two wide-eyed, wide-nostriled, armed men burst through the door and into the bunker. It all happened too fast to comprehend. With volition not his own he squeezed the trigger spattering her brains against the far wall. The men opened fire with their automatic weapons. The stream of bullets pommeled him, knocked him backwards over the sofa and into oblivion. The LENS convulsed. The deadly room collapsed to a point then to nothing in less than one beat of his bursting heart.

A man hurled through the mindless Grundlespin, backward through the well of space and time. He fell seemingly forever before landing firmly upon hard earth—a flattened field of ripe grain consumed in flames.

This man rose painfully to his feet. He could barely stand. He looked around warily, for he recognized this place as the deadly maze. He looked for her. She was not there. He

looked longer for the boy. The boy was not there either. He stood alone on the nether side. It was perhaps too late for her or for the boy, but it was never too late for him.

All that mattered was his escape through eternity's gate. It must be found and found quickly, for the flames decimated the field. He searched for the door that opened from the inside out. He searched, it seemed, for a very long time. He felt the heat of fire upon his face. Eventually he came to perceive a frigid breeze tickling his back and neck. He turned full circle to reflect upon his not-so-frozen past.

It had been there all this time—the gateway to eternity, following him, his every step through the cornfield. Its door was now within his grasp, standing rigidly in the field, a gate so sought and fought for. Few knew his obsession. Few had lived to know. For he was the Dire Beast, the ancient Malefactor, traveling through the ages, growing stronger and stronger with each agonizing incarnation.

In his breast pocket he found the Ring, the key to space and time, the key to his eternity. It would be used many times. He was sure of that. He would survive as long as time itself. He would eventually reach the stars. But first there was the doorway itself, reflecting life like the brightest mirror. He did not want to look, but he did. He knew it was not a good thing to look through the door to eternity-space. He saw them all flash by. But this was good. He would soon be safe.

Vox ex Nihilo, alias the Dire Wolf, approached the door, placed his frail hand bearing the Ring gently against it. He pushed only barely and the door swung open on silent, salient hinges as if eternity had a hunger of its own. He stepped intrepidly inside expecting to join them, but there was no in and no out, no glowing Eva, no young boy, no stars, no eternity, and no escape from the burning maze. Too many things were missing. There was no warmth. By now this did not matter. There was no cold. This too did not matter. There was no air. This did not matter either. Nothing of this sort mattered now—only her fathomless eyes, so many and so darkly lit now resting hungrily upon him. So this was his reward. He inhaled a final, useless breath as the door of light closed silently behind him, as the golden key, the famous and fabled *Ring of the Nibelungs* slipped from his shrinking finger and returned swiftly to the mortals.

The one called Nrczxa uncoiled her limbs, sank deep her fangs, pumped her poison, held tight the biped till its weak heart burst. It was indeed a cruel twist of fate that suspended this creature forever at the moment of agonizing death. It was ironic—this temporalizing of the thing itself by itself. There was much more than just biology between the older and the younger entity, the so-called man and boy. There was a timeless eventuality that bound them tightly together, this biped and its unfortunate offspring.

The demonic creature had shrewdly comprehended the subtle nature of its being. Even so, its splendid trick of reincarnation to pull its venom through time over and over again had been just a picoparad, just a picoquin miscalculated. Not bad, really, for the counsel of that remarkable, biped female had been right. This juice-bag was remarkably tasty.

In the Morning

Lou Konnick cursed his rotten luck. Why him? Why was he selected to reopen this hellhole of a place? Of course, Joe Fuller's schedule was a week old. Lou regretted that he had not called Joe to argue the point, to insist on some help.

After all, they had made the whole place a dump. And what were all the seashells doing here? It made no earthly sense. And what had happened to the lights? It was the first thing he must attend to. But it meant a nasty trip to the subbasement, one taken by one's self.

He carefully negotiated the stairs, his Supralux Beamer recharged and blazing the way. It helped him deal with the darkness, but it did nothing to unstink the awful smell. What on earth could smell this god-awful? What had Fuller done? Had the jerk putrefied the entire floor? Lou gagged, had to seriously talk himself out of barfing up his Kellogg cornflakes.

Something moved across his path—like rustling leaves at the bottom, then just beneath the stairs. It even sounded the same. Naw, it couldn't be. It was only his heebie-jeebies as he passed underneath Nettie, that ugly, that awful Nettie. It's what Lawrence Kato had called a bio-lumino-something-or-other.

He entered Fuller's sublevel. He heard it again: Critters scurrying across the floor. Rats! They now had rats! That was it. He would set some traps. Later. He hated varmints, bugs and furry rodents more than anything. Maybe he'd call in the local exterminator. They could handle anything. Later. He would call them later.

Lou clopped down the dark corridor. The place was even worse than he remembered it. Crates and packing were scattered everywhere.

He would have a devil of a time making it over to the circuits. More shells. And some kind of oiliness on the floor—a nasty cleanup job. And the stink was getting worse. Phew! This was the last time he'd ever come down here. He smiled. He savored this pleasant thought.

Then he saw the crate, darkly stained like the one from his worst nightmare. But no! This one was bigger, heavier, and in the way. He put his ear to it. Why? What did he expect to hear? He did hear something like venting gas. He waited. It stopped. He noticed that the lid had been pried loose. If he stood on something, a box for instance, he might shine his light in there and see for himself what had made those nasty, hissing sounds. This is what he did. Lou found himself a sturdy box and stood on it, shined his flashlight into the crate. Konnick saw clearly what had made those nasty, hissing sounds.

It clambered out of the crate and into full view, suddenly everywhere, hissing and getting larger by the second. It tickled the subbasement ceiling with black, furry wigglers. Lou's brain had no fear left. Incredibly, his fears had long since fled, leaving behind only a childlike wonder at the thing he saw. He stood and stared with his mouth gapping wide, boldly moving the strong, Supralux beam along the black beast's long and lumpy torso.

There was something attached, kind of plastered to its belly by glistening threads. It was a man and crawling! Little versions of the monster crawled all over the man, came out of his collar, his coat sleeves, other places too. Lou hoped the man was dead.

Lou approached cautiously. The man's shredded clothes exposed pale, shriveled limbs as if the guy had been sucked bone-dry. One bare limb dangled free. This unglued arm swung back and forth, back and forth like a pendulum marking time. The guy had all the time in the world now. And though he was mostly covered with a thick mucous and his own clotted blood, his face could be made out in the powerful beam of Lou Konnick's Supralux.

The dead guy's sunken eyes were as blood red as the feet and claws of the huffing beast that towered over him. Lou figured some kind of real bad joke was going on. Real bad! For the poor, pathetic wretch was the spitting image of that long-dead madman, Adolph Hitler.

Chronicler's Note:

What happened next will not be described. Decorum advises against revealing the more graphic details of this unpleasant episode.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The End by Jove

Vienna, September 8th, AD 2007, CCV 811977.942

She watched the people as they arrived. She watched for the slightest glint of anticipation. After all, this was to be a gala night.

This was Julia's first visit to the storied city. The city was fine, but it was her story and her host that had made this visit special. She had delivered a package that Max Cole had been unable to deliver for himself, for their friar suffered from the same malignant hypertension that had snatched the spirit from Lloyd Baumer.

For Julia, the unknown in Dr. Baumer's panigmatical equations was the incalculable Nicolaus Hunczovsky. Nicolaus was more the mystery than Nettie and her x5 light processor. He was the first historian to apply scientific method to the interpretation of historical fact. It was a doctrine the old man expounded religiously, lecturing at major universities around the world. It is anecdotal that students affectionately addressed him as that "great Hari Seldon," the fictional psychohistorian of Asimov's Foundation trilogy.

Anecdotes were legion. The famous iconoclast preferred chalk and a blackboard, which was always provided at his insistence. When excited he would attempt to smoke the chalk like a cigarette. Julia had met the man for the first time just three days ago in Linz where he had just celebrated his 80th birthday. Owen Klein had warned her. Julia felt as much the center of attention as the famous histographer. This would have been the case even if she had not brought her gift. At a private, deeply moving meeting she had presented Nicolaus with Lloyd's special letter and priceless manuscript.

Max had carefully bound both documents in a leather book. The book had been deposited inside a special pouch used by museums for transporting their precious works of art. These mysterious and lost papers, these rumored runes of the dead kings, had seen their last of OHM cartons and hasty handling. Nicolaus was not as surprised by the letter as he was by the manuscript. This was an odd twist. Among the so-called "experts" only he believed in the letter while every know-it-all believed in the manuscript. But the letter itself was no small measure of the unbelievable.

Nicolaus had spent three days studying the letter and dissecting the manuscript. As an historical scientist he had subjected both to the most rigorous tests of their content and material. Julia understood. This was no expression of his distrust. It was his habit of many years. Nicolaus took great pride in his habits. He had not so quietly filled nearly as many pages with furious scribbles. The man had been totally absorbed. Mercifully after only an hour he had acknowledged her anxious questions. He had offered the appraisal,

“Sublime ... and equal to the Master. My dear Julia, the manuscript is everything that Max Cole said it was ... plus a great deal more.”

The apparent age of the papers (more precisely their lack of it) made authentication unlikely given conventional wisdom. But conventional wisdom would soon be put to the ultimate test. Dr. Hunczovsky was convinced. And he was certain that others would come to the same conclusion once they had seen things for themselves. The gift of the sacred manuscript had moved Nicolaus beyond words of gratitude. The old gentleman had been a gracious host, but had grown mysterious as the days wore on. She began to suspect that the old gentleman conspired with ghosts.

On this her final night she sat next to him in the auditorium. Chattering patrons milled about the hall and auditorium and reluctantly took their seats. She had tried to bury any thought of returning home to the real world. On this her final night she had been rudely inattentive. Nicolaus had of course noticed. In spite of this, but more precisely because of this, he had kept up a lively monologue all in the vain attempt to draw her out of her deep funk. He had promised her this evening would be something to remember.

“Something to tell the grandchildren about.”

“What grandchildren can you possibly mean?” she asked.

Of this he said no more. “I cannot believe you have said nothing about tonight’s program,” he observed. “I thought this evening would provoke a thousand questions. But you have said nothing. My dear you are sleepwalking through this. Please, Julia, you must have this night to remember. I doubt I will ever see you again. This performance is my parting gift, presented with my deepest affection.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Hunczovsky. I truly am.”

“Please ... Nicolaus,” he corrected.

She smiled respectfully. “I’m sorry, Nicolaus. But the thought of going back shrivels me. I think it has finally reached my brain, though it is upsetting my stomach. Please ... sir, I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality well-beyond the requirements of duty.”

“What Duty? Pish! Duty has nothing to do with it. How could I ever begin to thank you?”

“No need. I played only a minor part. But you must know I have not failed to appreciate your bringing me here ... and on opening night. I do love it so ... always have since I was a little girl.”

“A big girl now with a great gift for the world. My dear, I’ve come to love you as much as your gift.”

She touched his hand. “No! His. But I appreciate your kindness, Nicolaus. To my loss, in my anguish, I guess, I have forgotten love or anything remotely close. You see ... there can be no one now.”

He did not agree and said so with the most fatherly of eyes.

She absorbed the historic room and its rococo splendor. She sighed deeply. “There is magic in this place ... I admit. But tell me the truth. You are up to something ... some devilish concoction simmers deep inside those large and wonderful eyes of yours. Yes?”

“Yes ... no ... not me. I had nothing to do with it. Just another opening night. The only difference is you are here with me to enjoy it.”

She winked at him naughtily. He returned it like the bright-eyed child, not the world famous histographer. She opened this evening’s program. It aroused powerful feelings. She thought of Lloyd, Max and Henry. They aroused powerful feelings too. She had to constantly remind herself to relax. This was not easy. The rumors and tabloids buzzed wildly concerning the Panigma Project in New Mexico. Julia had been the unwelcome focal point for most of it. She had not been able to hide like the others. She had to live, had to work. Henry Kincaid had dropped out of sight somewhere in the Midwest. The pressure and publicity were too much for him. He did not even call her anymore.

The reporter, Art Karrell, had helped Jean Phillips and herself through some tough times with a crazed media and a relentless government probe. He had quit his job on the Sun-Times to help. His experience with the civil machinery had been invaluable. He was better than all of her high-priced attorneys rolled together. But in spite of all of her problems it was Ivan Kovrani that was probably the hardest hit by the feeding frenzy. Like Max, he had been on her side from the beginning. Ivan had been the anonymous staff member who had told Jean Phillips of the one insider that could and would help her.

Ivan slowly recovered. He had convinced himself the whole could be regenerated from the smallest part if that part was strong. But it had been difficult since his two doctors and five lawyers had been unable to keep the media opportunists at a respectful distance.

Karrell’s freelance tactics were simple enough. He attempted to divert the public’s attention away from her to the bizarre machinations of the Senator Thomas Emsley and his alleged misappropriation of funds. He was now rumored to be living comfortably in Bogotá or Quito or Caracas. On this thing, in particular, she had kept silent.

Nevertheless, the strong scent of money, scandal and corruption had prompted a congressional investigation soon to begin. Julia had been subpoenaed as one of many, material witnesses. The long government register had reached all the way to Lester Holman and his parents. By some quirk the committee had missed Lou Konnick. But nearly everyone missed Lou Konnick. She guessed the strain had been too much. No one knew what had become of him, though there was one who might. They might talk to Nrczxa herself, probably the only one who could explain. But they would need Nettie to untangle her cosmic wisdom, and unfortunately, their brilliant biocomputer was no more.

Luckily, the reporters had not traced Julia to Vienna. At least she prayed this was true. The story of the manuscript would break sooner or later, but she did not want to be here when it did. Tomorrow she would return to Berkeley where rumors ran rampant. A great breakthrough in physics had been reported by the press. It was a pressure pot ready to explode. The invention of a time machine had been reported. It had generated a kind of mass hysteria fomented by reports from Stanford concerning the existence of a living

fossil—a giant, prehistoric, spider. Impressive pictures of the Panarachne Baumeri and its offspring had been exhibited. The tabloid banners read: “No more homicides in California after CDOC announces its new lethal injection machine.”

This had infuriated her. Dr. Mosley Macke had promised that Nrczxa and her children would be well cared for, would be kept from the public eye, that the cheap appeal of sensationalism would not be indulged. But this was not the worst. The brutal confiscation of the three Lamia stones had been the worst affront of all, for by now, Nrczxa was almost totally blind, the three Lamia stones her only viable seeing eyes.

Fortunately with Art Karrell’s help the release of additional “news” had been contained, at least temporarily, dulling the public’s interest in time machines and giant arachnids. Both the public’s and media’s attention spans were fortuitously short. Nevertheless, she knew the mania could easily be reignited. There were many fires that still smoldered and burned in memories and documents.

And they smoldered in her dreams. What did they mean? There were ghosts—vague forms and recollections of the things that ought not to have been, of evil men and evil deeds committed in her past-possible existence, in other variants of that vast Cosmic Calendar. Were they ghosts or were they real? She could not dismiss these disturbing memories. She knew as well as anyone the basic truth about the theory of continuity. There was none. There was no continuity. Continuity was a figment of the mind, the result of neural architecture. Humans remembered things nice and neat—one neuron connected chainlike to others, one event connected to the one before and the one after, held together by threads of cause and effect. But it was no more real, no less a fantasy than Santa and his reindeers. She silently recited Baumer’s second law of continuity:

If an independent discontinuity is manifest in the continuum—either in space, time or eventuality (or in some combination), the dependent discontinuity manifest in the complimentary continuum will be perceived as the minimum compensatory tensor whether or not the original forcing tensor was exophenomenal or endophenomenal.

So where was the answer? Who knew what this meant? Did it even matter what it meant—when no one could tell their maximums from their minimums—when there was nothing absolute—when there was nothing that anyone could hold true or anything anyone could depend on.

Especially painful had been the ugly business with her Nettie. Julia had been there when they had burned away her vast forebrain biotesserae by biotesserae. It was murder in a way her own. It was a not-so-well-known fact that she had initialized Nettie with her own brain engrams.

Luckily, Nicolaus interrupted her thoughts. “What are you thinking? This evening’s performance is soon to begin.”

She looked at him sheepishly. “Woolgathering, Doctor Hunczovsky. Old memories. I’ll get into it once things get started.”

“Julia, I have no doubt you will, but I still worry about you.”

Julia could see the injury of addressing him so formally. She winked and said, “Nicolaus, I suspect foul play. This night has been diabolically rigged.”

“Rigged?” he repeated. “I’m wounded. I do not know what you mean.”

“Oh ... yes ... yes, I think you do.”

She perused the program for tonight’s concert to be performed by the well-respected Vienna Philharmonic in the auditorium of the refurbished *Musikverein*. The gala evening was dedicated to a local favorite. It was an unusually long program. Two symphonies, two piano concertos and a two other pieces were listed without a single program note. Julia recognized all but three of the selections, and though she knew this composer’s music well, she was not at all surprised by the inclusion of unfamiliar works. She wondered what the many music aficionados must think.

Julia looked at the man beside her, his eyes twinkling. Nicolaus’ face exploded into an uncontrollable grin. He whispered, “Magic!”

The Viennese applauded as their renowned maestro, Klaus Zimmermann, strode confidently to the podium. He solemnly addressed a whispering and uneasy audience: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I welcome you to our first concert of the season. Our program tonight speaks for itself. And as you know I would normally conduct, but for a special opportunity for me and for all of us. Tonight we are very privileged to have as our guest conductor a brilliant composer and local favorite. Please extend to him the warmest possible welcome.”

Klaus Zimmermann extended his arm. A much younger man arrayed in an appropriate, period costume nervously joined the maestro at center stage. There were muffled exchanges from the gallery with some uneasy ripples through the concert hall. Maestro Zimmermann continued his introduction of the uncomfortable, little man standing by him at rigid attention. The distinguished Zimmermann handed the baton to their surprise, guest conductor. He concluded, “Fine people of Vienna and the world, we bring to you at a great expense and from a great time and distance, conducting his own Jupiter Symphony in C Major, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.”

Zimmermann stepped back to give Mozart his time and space.

As one said later: “I never remembered hearing the place go quite so still, quite so scary,” for the sophisticated Viennese were taken by complete surprise. For almost a minute there was total silence. Then the young man took one sweeping bow and the audience went wild. The auditorium was in one instant complete pandemonium. As unbelievable as Herr Zimmermann’s introduction was, the Viennese had apparently believed it or wanted to. They stood, uncharacteristically applauding, calling out the name “Mozart” progressively louder as if this was a soccer match and the man a great soccer star.

A few patrons of weaker hearts and constitutions never made it to their feet, though most tried valiantly. There began a general melee as the aisles filled with people attempting to

rush the podium. Zimmermann and the many ushers assembled for the occasion took control and calmed the concert hall so that anarchy and injury could be avoided.

Wolfgang Mozart seemed in fine health and humor. He quickly warmed to this splendid reception, for he certainly understood the epical nature of this moment soon to be history. Mozart was obviously reminded of his early years in the city when he could do no wrong. He tipped his plumed, velvet hat to the crowd. The orchestra, who had until now shown remarkable restraint, rose to surround and lavish Herr Mozart with expressions of their affection. There were few dry eyes, among them Julia Moffett and Nicolaus Hunczovsky. The entire house expressed their joy without restraint or embarrassment.

Julia mused: If only Lloyd could see this. But he probably could. He probably had the LENS trained on them at this fateful moment from his watchpost somewhere inside eternity's vast Panopticon.

This love fest would have gone on unabated if not for Mozart himself. With Zimmermann's help he persuaded the orchestra to return to their seats. Zimmermann appealed to the audience, shouting that Herr Mozart would speak. It took another minute or two to quiet the house. There came finally the expectant hush as no one dared breathe.

Mozart said, "Dear people, thank you from the bottom of my heart." He bowed gallantly. The audience exploded again, but this time it required only seconds to calm them, members of both the audience and orchestra appealing for self-control.

Mozart spoke again: "I am grateful for the opportunity of being here with you, though you understand that all this comes with mixed feelings. Excepting my life, everything that I have ever known and loved are suddenly erased with a single, blinding stroke. Imagine this if you can. Not one thing, but everything gone at once. Nothing is certain. Nothing is the same. But I promise that I will do my best." A sympathetic murmur rose from the hall.

"We live in a remarkable time," he said, "but it is one requiring great courage in so many ways. Much is expected of you and me. I must grasp the span of more than two hundred years and you must grasp me. Which presents the greatest challenge, I should never, ever know.

"It is wise to be skeptical in the face of shocking impossibilities, but I can see you have dared to keep an open mind and an open heart. Actually, I do not ask that you accept me for any more than what I am ... a man struggling to express himself in the only way he knows. And I would never ask that you worship the past or the mystique I have heard so much about, though I must deal with it for better or worse. I only ask that you let tonight's music speak for itself."

Someone shouted, "Speak to us, Mozart!"

There rose a second, soon many tumultuous cheers, then a thunder of unanimity from the house.

“Yes, I babble too much. It is a fault I will bear in any time and place ... in any century ... as I have been so often reminded.

“But let me say this: I feel an ambivalence about the many years that have separated us. I do not presume to understand any part of history, but let me say something about the music.”

The tearful, joyful audience burst into applause.

“I’ll mention no names,” he shouted boisterously.

More laughter and applause from the audience.

“Much of it is marvelous, but so much of it is merely dreadful. The former cannot help but influence my approach to composition. I am eager to learn. As for the latter it only strengthens my resolve to get back to work.”

The audience now cheered without restraint.

Mozart had to shout: “I have added three new compositions for tonight’s program. Two would be considered classical given today’s standards, but the symphony, tonight’s final piece, employs new sounds for me and hopefully for you as well. I pray that all the music, both the old and the new will please you.

“Wait ... wait ... one more thing ... “I also promise a new opera to open in this city in April. I’ve been strongly advised to say no more, though good advice has never muzzled me before.”

Laughter. More cheers as Mozart raised his hands.

“Enough talk. So here is the Symphony in C Major, Baron K’s 551. Thank you, lovers of music.” He bowed, turned to the orchestra, tapped, and then raised the baton. Jupiter was about to begin!

Backstage After the Performance:

They had combined two dressing rooms into one. Still, with the baby grand, there was not a lot of space, not with the extra wardrobe trunks and the large drawing table set up for scoring his latest compositions.

He could have been any twenty-first century man. His hair had been cut close and combed straight back. He wore a plain white shirt—top buttons unbuttoned, faded powder-blue jeans, floppy sandals, and no socks. He was trim and brown, looked to be in excellent shape for a man two hundred and fifty-one years old.

They sat and talked. There was no one else to disturb them. At the moment there was no one else in the world. He sipped from a glass of red wine, then brushed his lips with the back of his hand. He looked appraisingly at her, his piercing eyes twinkling slyly.

"I apologize," he said. "My English improves, but not fast enough to make any real difference. It has been a long time since my London tour." In the timid light he beamed using the two compelling magnets of a soul no less gripping than hers.

She said, "No apology required. You will make another ... probably many London tours. But I should apologize, for my German is very bad ... second grade level at best."

"Yes, I agree that it is quite bad. But all today is bad. The mother tongue is very different. Many strange words ... borrowed ... the things of this century ... all the machines and things they do. How does one live in a time like this? So fast. The world passes everyone by so fast."

"In one sense the world has shrunk," she said. "But when it comes to information, what one must know just to stay on one's feet it's staggering."

He chuckled. "You make the motion with your shoulders and say this like it was ... I do not know the word ... event ... eventful."

"Yes, but I think you mean, 'inevitable,'" she suggested. "But as to both ... it's yes and no."

"But my dear, I will admit that I do not miss the coach rides ... not any more. Now ... I just travel high in the air like a big bird."

"Not just any bird. It is an expensive corporate jet with a military escort."

"I have corporate patrons now ... I mean sponsors. I wonder if you can imagine what I feel. I am so often convinced that I died that night and went to one place or the other. But which is it? Do you know?"

"You live ... always will. But as for Heaven and Hell ... this world is the best and the worst of both. We conceive our Heavens and Hells on the playing fields of Earth."

"Not all of them," he disagreed, looking askance. He was now anxious to change the subject. "But I finally get to meet you, my Queen of the Night. I missed talking to you the night you came to visit me. But I would know you anywhere ... even in my dreams."

Julia could have been anyone's queen, of the day or the night. She wore a tight-fitting, short-fitting, low-fitting, lavender gown that showed her eyes and other less subtle assets to advantage. Her chestnut hair was once again long and free. Her skin was golden tan.

"I have heard so much about you," he said.

"None of it is true, Herr von Mozart."

"Please ... please ... call me Wolfgang."

"I'll try. But really ... Wolfgang? Is this what you want?"

He laughed boyishly. “You think I am no Wolfgang. Maybe Wolferl or Wolfgango or maybe Amadeo ... or even better just a simple Johannes Chrysotomus Sigismundus Profundus Wolfgangus Gottlieb Mozart. This would be enough respect ... you think?”

She nodded disapprovingly. “It’s true. You are a nut after all.”

“Hmm ... I know this nut too well. He is overripe ... a nut that no one wants to eat. He give bellyaches not belly laughs. But what should I call you? Is it ... yes ... Brunnhilde? No, no ... too bad a joke at your unfortunate expense?”

“Yes ... I mean no, Wolfgango. You heard the Valkyrie stuff ... as if I’m the slayer of heroes ... of indestructible men ... their pride maybe. But please, just call me Julia.”

“And not the Countess Juliana? You are more than just a Julia to me. You are the purple sky just before the dawn.”

“I’ll settle for just Julia Moffett. It’s better than Queen Bitch.”

“Harsh ... harsh ... harsh. You have yourself too wrong. You are the purplish nectar of deepest passion.”

Julia felt surprise and embarrassment at these not-so-subtle remarks, though she tried to conceal it. She was always self-conscious about the way she looked. She both liked the effect of this attention and she did not. At this moment she thought of herself as a large and purplish Popsicle to be devoured.

Mozart was embarrassed too. “Maybe I said it wrong ... my English, you know.”

“Your English is fine, Amadeo. Perhaps too fine for your own good.”

He was quick to change the subject. “I was told you presented my Requiem Mass to Nicolaus Hunczovsky. Was he pleased by it?”

“Oh, so very much. More than he could say. He was ecstatic that you completed it ... and the way that it was completed.”

“Ecstatic. What is that ... an unmentionable illness or the light buzzing in all the tangled ropes ... that nightmare of rubbery knots?”

“Electric, yes. He loved it. It is beautiful. A wonderful gift for him ... for everyone today and long into the future. I’m sure it will be performed many, many times.”

“Nicolaus is a good man. I knew his so-many-times great grandfather, brother Johann Nepomuk. He helped me with my ring. He hated it. But he still helped me. True ... it was a very ugly ring. I did no favors with it ... for myself or for anyone else.”

“Bad dreams?”

“Hmm ... yes ... that other queen, not so nice, the Queen of Darkness. Not like you at all, though I see you both in some way connected?”

“She is an ancient one. I feel a bond with her even now that it is over.” A pause. “But I doubt that it is truly over.”

He asked sincerely, “How can the impossible ever be over once it is let loose?”

She sighed, asked the question she needed to ask. “Do you still have them?”

“Queens or dreams ... my dear lady?”

“Dreams ... Wolferl ... dreams.”

“Of course, but these dreams you would not like.”

“You can tell me. I have nightmares of my own.”

“My dear Juliet, you should not trouble yourself with my troubles. I have two centuries and you are so young and beautiful, so vulnerable.”

“But remember I’m the Queen of the Night ... and so wise. And I must reluctantly confess somewhat older than you ... than you think.”

“Measured in years or in pain. You cannot understand. It is hard for me to believe I still live when everyone and everything I know are dead and gone. I think of Stanzi ... and of course ... my boys. I compose. I survive. I compose just to survive, but ... sweet Julia ... that Gate of yours ... do not try it. It is no blessing. It is no gift. But I blame myself. I was tempted by promises in stone.”

“But Amade, you still do not understand. You said I do not understand myself, but neither do you understand yourself. You can never die so long as there is the music. You are the light in the labyrinth of our melancholy—you and the others like you. What would we be without the music? It is impossible to imagine our lives without it. Try to comprehend the awe and admiration we hold for you ... for the creative spirit ... for the celestial music ... too good for us.”

“My ... my, I thought I talked too much.”

“I give up on you. You’re quite hopeless.”

“I never learn much real sense. What about you? Do you play?”

“No ... I just listen.”

“Then you are a rare human being. Given that you can listen I have something for you ... a little thing at most ... at best.”

“I would be highly honored.”

“Well ... you do not know what it is. But close your eyes and take a chance. With your permission.”

“For just what, Herr Mozart?”

He had a wonderful laugh. “I have just days ago written a sonata for piano. I have not yet performed it in public. If you deem it worthy, I would dedicate it to you, to the noble Juliana who should give herself more credit. As I said, I will play it with your permission.”

She managed only, “Yes, pl ... please ... play. You have my per ... my entire permission.”

He took a seat at the baby grand. He immediately commenced playing his newly composed sonata. Mozart played to catch her glowing spark, her heart and soul. For this moment she could keep the rest.

Could such sounds come only from a mechanical contrivance like the piano—from the mind of man, mortal or not? Or were they the stitches in the universe holding it together, the one and only dimension? There was the way she felt at this moment that recalled one other day. It was that day in her office—that day with the graceful elephants dancing to Lloyd’s cosmic attractor. Julia remembered what Minerva had told her:

Generate 3.5 cicabytes Bio-Mem and then recreate the S-T-X continuum.

It was a long time before Julia had understood what Minerva had said, what had really happened that day. It was the way things happened for everyone, even for the gods. Did anyone actually believe that God had created Heaven and Earth with malice aforethought? No, of course not. No way! It had just happened that way, by accident so to speak. But this seemed somehow insignificant in the presence of such celestial beauty. Julia had seen for herself the bundles of infinity packed inside the finite mind and had marveled at the implications. Of course, there was only one way this was possible. The only way that it could happen was if the mind was not so finite after all, but connected to everything all at once, timelessly, spacelessly, past, possible and future, to anything and everything that mattered. It was not the LENS that proved this. It was the man that proved this—here and now. Listening to the music made by this man the proof was never made clearer.

In a brief span of time the music was concluded. For once he said nothing—but at the same time more words than he could ever know.

It had always been difficult for Julia to express her true feelings. Now, she uncorked a bottle corked too long, nevertheless a fine vintage. Tears welled and cascaded in sparkling rivulets down golden mounds.

Julia walked to the piano. She touched him in the way that he had touched her, in an equivalent place below his right eye where a single tear had come to rest. Her finger lingered upon his wet cheek. She had at last found the thing she could hold true, the thing she could depend on.

He said, “I am lonely. I am ... lonely.”

Reaching out with all she was and would ever be, Julia replied, “I love you.”

They kissed, their tears commingling forever.

Postscriptus from the Inis:

This eldritch tale of the worst and the best is now concluded. I've just closed and archived the file. Some, including our "best" cosmographers, are inclined to dismiss or deny it due to its very low Eventuality. But it happens in spite of what they may think. I might return to it someday, recast a key variant or two. I'm using my new **Infinity** computer, an optical, neural, network processor well beyond the power of Nettie.

You may not yet have heard of the **Infinity**. It links instantaneously a hundred billion galaxies giving me an Avogadro's equivalent in neural stellar-bits. In spite of all the power, I often transmit my stories at finite, albeit slow speed so as to accommodate a bio-conscious receiving window. I guess I'll conjure scenarios on my **Infinity** till the light in my labyrinth goes out. Sweet dreams.

Sincerely, the Chronicler,
T'lil n' Skara of Tarelona
(Once Lloyd Manley Baumer)

Glossary

What follows is not intended to suggest a theory of cosmology. With a few exceptions it is only Fantastica Mathematica, added for those (but mostly for the author) that enjoy the beauty expressed in concepts, numbers and formulas.

AI (or Artificial Intelligence)

AI is the branch of computer science concerned with making computers behave more like humans, particularly the cognitive and learning capabilities. John McCarthy of MIT first used the term in 1956.

The OPM or Optimal Program Machine of the OnNet 210 uses neural architectures to approximate artificial intelligence, storing, retrieving and using information in much the same way as the human brain, therefore teaching itself or building upon its database of experience much like the human brain.

An important function of the OPM is pattern recognition for synthesis. It is essential that the OnNet AI "adapt" or formulate new rules beyond that for expert systems. This is valuable since the topology of space-possibility-time is linguistically, mathematically, and geometrically undefined in regions near or inside a discontinuity. (See Discontinuity)

The AI language used by Julia Moffett to "preprogram" the OPM is known as LIAR® or Logic in Adaptive Reductionism.

Anticube

The anticube is an m-dimensional cube or hypercube that encloses the complimentary or mirrored m-dimensional continuum (with m = a positive integer). The anticube and posicube combine to form a dyad or dualistic coordinate complex.

Julia Moffett uses the word to identify the antiquin or light pump, the five-dimensional hypercube that encloses negative space-possibility-time. The antiquin requires the reality and accessibility of a six-dimensional universe believed to be the eventuality or uncertainty in time, which is independent of the eventuality or uncertainty in space. The latter is a consequence of the intrinsic variable velocity of light.

Artful Jack

This "Jack" refers to Julia Moffett's nightmare of the tavern with blinking patrons, of the black pool, of the filleting artist wandering the twisted, back streets of Dorsett and Buck's Row. The nightmare warned of the forgotten horrors locked deep inside her past-possible.

The Attic

The "attic" is Henry Kincaid's dream of the man-bird, of the tapestry, of the Klein bottles and other parametric wonders. The dream revealed his attic "key" that unlocked thinspace or so he thought.

Biocon

The biocon is the isocon technician's control panel for the dreamer's vital signs and key dream signs such as spindles and K-complexes (brainwaves). The biocon monitor could also be accessed from the compulab or lumitorium, either locally or remotely.

Camera (or Camera Extrema)

In this context, camera means the LENS viewing chamber. It is a synonym for the Panopticon's isocell, an isolation chamber for scanning paraspaces by means of a connection to the paracube of Panigma LENS.

CEP (Computer Enhanced Panoptography)

CEP is the acronym for the field of Computer Enhanced Panoptography perfected by Dr. Allen Polk in 1997 from advanced computerized holography and lasoptotronics. It is claimed that Polk thought of CEP while dreaming of a Hinton cube, the shadow of a four-dimensional cube cast in three-dimensional space.

"The cube was vibrating, moving, and space was deforming with it. It came to me that I could actually see the next dimension," he said. "Space burst open like an exploding kernel of popcorn. And there it was ... all eight cubes were perfectly joined side-to-side ... with the angles all ninety degrees. I was surprised the solution to the problem of the hypercube was so easy."

This experience allowed Allen Polk to do more than project the shadows of four-dimensional objects on to a three-dimensional space. Using his "imagineering" he was able to simulate 4-d objects with linear and angular distortions of less than a half percent using the revolutionary spectrostereoscope.

Cicabyte

The "cß" or cicabyte is the mnemonic unit equal to the memory capacity of one CIC or Cybernet Interface Computer. It is equivalent to 3.5 yottabytes or 3.5 teraterabytes.

Compset

This device is a local "smart" terminal for the OnNet 210 computer with several gigabytes of Omni-RAM. The compsets are used to run Minerva and the OnNet UT. It is not possible to operate the LENS using a compset terminal. (See Minerva)

Compulab

This is the Panopticon's cyberplex that supports the OnNet 210 neural network computer. The floor of the compulab is constructed of an ultra nontoxic, strong, clear plastic known as Lucinite. Below the Lucinite is the 210-core or neurostratum for the Panigma Machine's biotesserae.

The Cornfield Maze

The "Maze" is Leopold Hardan's nightmare of the field and his father's beckoning hand. It was the cornfield maze that first brought Hardan to the attention of the Baumer group for consultation and discovery. The latter launched his ill-fated Gate obsession and the collision of two time bending forces.

Cosmic Brake (Momentum Brake)

This term refers to a relativistic momentum balance application of Newton's second law containing second order tensors.

It is the solution to the momentum balance yielding the Einstein Tensor of sixteen terms (four-dimensional and second order) that quantifies the momentum or inertia of time, first solved by Henry Kincaid in 2005. (See Tensor)

Cosmic Calendar (See Eventuality)

Unlike the typical linear Earth calendar, the Cosmic Calendar shows the primary branches or major occurrences (CCVs or cosmic calendar variants) with each (x,y,z,t) coordinate branch assigned an "Eventuality" expressed in units of time or space. This vast information is (or will be) stored in the neural Infinity-1 series computer. There is the longstanding dispute over what is "real", the calendar or the cosmos itself, with many "experts" taking the position they are necessarily the same and indistinguishable. They believe that a change in one is equal to the change in the other (allowing for the uncertainty delta).

Cragworm

This is not a true worm, but a blind, primitive land-dwelling chordate with teeth and crude book lungs. They are known to attack and eat the normally impregnable porcupine worms, which are true worms or annelids.

Discontinuity

In the context of the theory, this is a rift or flaw in the fabric of space-time with infinite uncertainty in which adjacent events have no apparent connection or causal link.

It also describes a phenomenal break (warp or tear) in paraspaces where determinism and causality breaks down. (See Warptear)

Space-time is discontinuous at an event if the approach from the past and the approach from the future yields two nonequivalent events.

Dreamspace and Dreamtime

Either term refers to the sleep-enabled exploration of paraspaces by a temporary transfer of the sleeper's brain engrams to the LENS biocomputer, the neural, mosaic computer that molds to fit the mind. By this process the sleeper may perform certain low-energy Eulerian rotations of the space-time continuum. (See Eulerian)

Dyad

In this context the dyad is a dualistic universe with both positive and negative characteristics, described using two, mirrored, multi-dimensional, rectilinear coordinate systems.

This pair results from the coupling of two m-dimensional cubes across m+1 dimensional paraspaces. The paracube (dyadic quar) is a dyad of two, space-time parallel quars (the posiquar and the antiquar). The dyadic quex is a dyad of two, space-possibility-time parallel quins (the posiquin and the antiquin). The latter is referred to as the queth of a quex (one-sixth of a quex or two parallel quins).

Eventuality

This is a principle of continuity somewhat analogous to quantum theory's uncertainty as expressed by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The most often used pseudosynonyms are: possibility and uncertainty. A break or disruption in eventuality is measured in the units of quins, but more practically, microquins or picoquins, etc.

Although eventuality, uncertainty and possibility express the same concept, there is a considerable difference in point-of-view. Let's say that you are given the opportunity to select a wife from a bevy of ten beautiful women. If you were a graduate of the Possibility school, you would relish the thought of having up to ten beauties to choose from. However, if you had matriculated at the Uncertainty school, you would worry that you faced a 90% chance of selecting the wrong woman. Having preferred the halls of Eventuality, you would quickly realize that you would eventually end up miserable no matter which choice you made. If you prefer, change the example from women to men. It doesn't matter. One sex is just as miserable and confused as the other.

The uncertainty or possibility dimension can be thought of as a kind of space. We could plot the location (either the depth, width or height) of a person (S), the time for the person (T) and the uncertainty for the person (X) on three Cartesian axes for S-T-X.

Assume the values we measure are: S = +72 inches, T = +8:30 A.M., X = 0 inches. From this, we can conclude with no uncertainty that our person is exactly six feet tall at 8:30 in the morning.

But what if we measured: S = +72 inches, T = +8:30 A.M., X = -0.5 inches and +1.0 inches. We must then conclude with chagrin that we can only estimate this person's height at 8:30 in the morning as 72 inches, -0.5 inches, +1.0 inches. Therefore, the height of the man or woman is somewhere between 71.5 and 73 inches, most probably closest to 72. We should also conclude that we probably need a new tape measure. Actually, if the variation in height was more than just random measurement error, but true uncertainty, the best tape the world would make no difference.

Of course, if there is uncertainty in height, there could just as likely be uncertainty in depth, width or even time. Because the Panigma LENS can only contain one, maybe two extra dimensions during a rotation, the uncertainty in the spatial dimensions have been labeled 5x, 5y and 5z; the uncertainty in time the scientists have labeled the sixth dimension. Uncertainty in the spatial dimension is determined along the direction of relative motion. The uncertainty X for the other two spatial axes is therefore a dependent variable and is not "contained" by the LENS.

This, of course, does not change the fact of eight dimensions, only what they are labeled. The eight dimensions Lloyd Baumer labeled as follows: (Where δ = the uncertainty operator for the common dimensions - (x,y,z,t)

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | linear space | = x (length) |
| 2 | linear space | = y (width) |
| 3 | linear space | = z (height) |
| 4 | linear space | = t (duration) |
| 5x | uncertainty space for x | = $\xi = x + \delta x$ |
| 5y | uncertainty space for y | = $\psi = y + \delta y$ |
| 5z | uncertainty space for z | = $\zeta = z + \delta z$ |
| 6 | uncertainty space for t | = $\tau = t + \delta t$ |

The uncertainty (δ) operator is a function of (x,y,z,t, χ) where χ is the variable speed of light. Using the conventions of paradigmical relativity, ξ would be the uncertainty space for x, and δx would be the uncertainty or the uncertainty function. The other uncertainties are similarly defined.

The linear or perceptual dimensions (phenomena) and the uncertainty dimensions (noumena) rotate with respect to each other. Perception and uncertainty constitutes a continuum as long as both are finite variables (i.e., there is continuity). The assignment of x , y , z , t , ξ , ψ , ζ and τ to the continuum of complex space is actually arbitrary. It is merely convenient.

Any single space is transformable into any other. For example, length is transformable into width, time transformable into space, uncertainty transformable into certainty, certainty transformable into uncertainty, etc., by the mind space of an "observer" (fixed, subjective container).

Baumer acknowledged that the continuum "might" contain more than eight dimensions, that the number need not be limited to eight, though he found no need for more. In fact, it could be argued that even eight are too many, that there are really only four, but the four we rarely see, the four dimensions of uncertainty, the four we transform everyday into certainty, that is, all but one part of time, the future part that remains as uncertain τ .

Our worldly "window" to the dimension of possibility is the peephole of the present. It is the point where uncertainty collapses into certainty. A rotation of the possibility or uncertainty axis a full 90° forward will provide a window to the future-possible. Likewise, a rotation of the possibility or uncertainty axis a full 90° backward will provide a window to the past-possible. (See Thintime)

Eulerian

These are the angles of precession, nutation and pure rotation of one coordinate system with respect to another. The Eulerian variables may be parangular in nature, meaning they may be angles measured in multi-dimensional space.

Faust Pill

The "Pill" comprises the compumetrics for thinspace invented by Henry Kincaid in 2006. The computer-encoded version is code-named F3.

Gateword

This is a Gate start password that hopefully avoids branching to the Faust Pill (or ultra thinspace). The Gateword was secretly installed and "controlled" by Lloyd Baumer.

Glowsnail

This is a relatively large pulmonate or air-breathing mollusk capable of producing cold light or bioluminescence. These snails are highly nutritive though they are often infected with dangerous parasitic organisms (Rickettsia).

Grundlespin

This Gothic word coined by Cartovanius (in 390 A.D.) refers to the Eulerian experience of transition to multi-dimensional space (first quantified by Baumer in 1992).

It produces a "falling" sensation attributed to the rotation of the space-time plane about the spatial axis brought on by the disorientation of uncertainty. Rotation of the space-time plane about the spatial axis

(i.e., the rotation of time) produces a relative thinning or thickening of time.

Hell Stoker

The "Stoker" is Julia Moffett's nightmare of Hell's furnace and the fuel for Hell's fire. Unknown to her, this symbolic nightmare was shared with at least one other victim.

Histogramphy

This is the mathematical language of historical science suggestive of Asimov's fictional psychohistory. (See his Foundation Trilogy)

Hypercube

The hypercube is a multi-dimensional cube or hexahedron of m dimensions.

Inquanta (often quanta)

Inquanta are the encodes or descriptions of matter (called solidus) by ordered packets of energy.

Quanta (phenomena) are the sensory manifestations of space-possibility-time, just as antiquanta (noumena) are the extra-sensory manifestations of space-possibility-time. Examples of the former are matter (gravity), antimatter, virtual matter, electromagnetic energy, weak nuclear force, strong nuclear force, warptear, mind, ESP (the sensory part of the extra-sensory), etc. Examples of the latter are a little harder to come by, since by definition they are imperceptible. However, we could include in this category: the human soul, good and evil, Satan and God, etc.

IPPR

IPPR is the Institute for Physico-Psychic Research in El Rasigo, New Mexico, completed and ready for equipment testing in November of 2004. Much later, Max Cole remarked, "It was the worst thing we could have called it. The place drew every nutcase for hundreds of miles. In my opinion a better name would have been the Sanitation and Health Institute of Technology or SHIT for short or for shorts ... whichever."

Isocell ('Cell)

The 'cell is the heavily sound-insulated room for the LENS sleeper or dream scanner. Like all rooms in the isochamber, the isocell has three walls, not four. The equipment in the room was kept to a minimum to avoid distracting the sleeper.

Isocon ('Con)

The 'con is the control room adjacent to the isocell. Together with the anteroom and isocell it makes up one of Institute's four isolation chambers.

The Kind or Kindmen

These "men" are a paranoid race of two spatial-dimension beings and were often depicted on Neolithic cave art as gods, devils (space travelers).

Klein Bottle

This bottle is named after the German mathematician, Felix Klein, (no relation to Owen). The Klein bottle is a bottle of only one side or surface with no edges, giving it no outside or no inside. Cutting the

bottle into two mirror-symmetrical halves will yield two Mobius strips. Any two points on the Klein surface may be joined by an unbroken line.

Its general shape matches that of the perfect Baumer universe, i.e., no discontinuities with the exception of the intersection or Big Bang. Each dyad is a perfect Mobius strip. (See Continuity and Dyad)

Klicks

According to Keezer, this was (or is) a race of beneficent four spatial-dimension beings. They are reputedly the natural enemies of the ruthless, self-centered Kwoggs of three spatial dimensions. (See Kwoggs)

Kyr power

Kyr is the natural ability to thin or thicken paraspace by the mnemonic power of mind. The result is the observation of distortion, contraction or dilation of time or space.

Kwoggs

According to Keezer, they are a jealous race of three spatial-dimension beings, the natural enemies of the Kindmen and Klicks. (See the Kind)

LaBerge Number

This is a scale (1-10) indicating the mnemonic power of any lucid dream, named after the dream researcher, Stephen LaBerge. (See Lucid Dream)

Laikani

Laikani is the island home of Leopold Hardan located near Palmyra in the central pacific. The US Navy used it as a secret base during WW II, since the island did not show up on any known chart.

Lamia

Lamia was the daughter of King Belus who could remove her eyes, leave them in places to see what happened in her absence. All of her children with Zeus, but Scylla, were slain by a jealous Hera. Her face made a nightmare's mask, she joined the deadly and seductive, bloodsucking witches known as the Empusae.

Lamia's removable eyes quite later came to be known as Lamia stones.

Lamia stones

These stones (quarvines) were given the occult power to see things for themselves or to connect by remote control with a seer. Their shade of green varies, as does the chatoyancy often reported.

Lasoptopak

These are the panoptolasers and prelasers used to activate and "empower" the panoptoscope.

Lasoptoscope

Allen Polk and Joe Fuller at Michigan State University constructed this forerunner of the panoptoscope in 1996.

Lasoptotronics

This is the field of laser optics pioneered by Allen Polk from 1980-1995.

Light Shell

This is a synonym for the UNILINX® operating system used by the OnNet 210 computer.

Locibration

This is a planar and angular calibration of the panoptoscope that is used to match the output parameters of the LENS. During the startup of Pandora in May of 2005, it was noticed too late that the navitor controls were wired backwards. The result was that Allen Polk nearly locibrated himself into the next dimension.

Lociputer

A "Lucy" is a local, OHM computer used as a node of the OnNet 210 system. The Lociputer LT4, the Institute's upgrade for the Compset 900Z, provides several terabytes of Omni-RAM memory and the new LINX® neural processor.

A Lociputer LT4 is used to align and orient Pandora. (See Navitor)

Locus

The locule is a deceptive, compartmentalized box, for example, Julia's Padauk wood puzzle box or Henry Kincaid's dream box from his mansard.

Lucid Dream

This describes the once thought rare state of consciousness whereby the dreamer manipulates his own dreams. It is discussed in Aristotle's "On Dreams" and Kartoffan's "Oneiros."

Lumitorium

The theater for the panoptoscope is sometimes called the laserium or laser theater. A Mirrexed™ dome ceiling supports the illusion of being inside or a part of the ensuing panoptograph.

Macula Obscura or Macula in Articulo Mortis

The "Big Mac" is literally a hidden spot or dark blemish, a lurid type of nightmare. The M. Obscura was first mentioned in the "Oneiros", the incunabulum by Eliso Kartoffan (Cartovanius) of Lauriacum in Noricum believed to have been written in 390 A.D. According to this infamous alchemist, the Macula is supposed to tempt the dreamer with a peek into his own demise, thus insuring it as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Martoff Number or Martoff Scale

The double contraction of the Martoff tensor of order four yields a new tensor of order 0 or a scalar, a pure number. It indicates the overall penetration power of a dream scan. (See Tensor)

Merc or mercolidine sulfate

This was the world's first dream lucidity drug. Possible side effects are drowsiness, loss of muscle control, blurredness of vision. The latter two could become permanent. Since banned. (See Lucid Dream)

Minerva

Minerva is the name given to the queriable, interactive mode of the OnNet 210 computer's operating system or Light Shell. For example, Minerva's Max runs parametric S-T-X simulations.

Mnemonic Power

This term traditionally pertains to memory or to mind.

In this context, it refers to mind space power. The mind space aperture is usually measured in terabytes or cicabytes. It is the measure of a space-time "window", either real (the noumenal universe) or perceived (the phenomenal mind).

Naja

The word in Sanskrit means cobra. It is the name given to Leopold Hardan's mother and later to his remote mountain chalet in Colorado. Naja and her young son emigrated from Paraguay in 1955. Their history before coming to the US is mostly unknown.

Navcon

The navcon is the isocon's navigational panel for a dream scan.

Navitor

This is the lumitorium's navigational panel for the locum or lead car of the panoptoscope's viewing train. The navitor (actually three monitors) uses the Lociputer LT4, LINX® computer.

Netherfaults

This is the name the Kindmen supposedly give to the abstraction of multi-dimensional space.

Nettie

Nettie is the nickname for the OnNet 210, a neurally architected computer using both optical memory (OHM) and a mosaic of neurodendrites know as biotesserae.

Nrczxa

She is the living Queen of the Sorel and the daughter of old King Kust. The many pseudonyms are: Weaver, Timeshaper, Bete Noire, Nyct-Mistress, Dark Light Keeper, Queen Fang and Nerscha. Nrczxa in her old time was a leader and example for her race. Her leadership was the result of her intelligence, her title was the result of her fertility.

OHM

The neurally configured OnNet 210 computer and sub-computers like the Normalizer or Panigma Button use optical High Memory (OHM).

The Oneiros and other Apocryphies

Eliso Kartofan's incunabula (written in 390 A.D. in Lauriacum of the province of Noricum concerning the subject of dreams) were sometimes called the Black Apocryphies, due to their dark visions of the Macula. (See Macula)

OnNet 210

Nettie is an optical, neural, networked computer pioneered by Dr. Lawrence Kato of UltraNet Inc. The number 210 stands for 2 to the 10th power or 1024 yottabytes.

OPM

The Optimal Program Machine (OPM) for artificial intelligence is linked to the OnNet 210. It receives its input from the Cybernet Interface (See AI or Artificial Intelligence)

Pandora

This is Joe Fuller's name for the eighty-foot diameter panoptoscope.
(See Panoptoscope)

Panigma

A panigma is a conundrum of cosmic proportions, a term coined by Lloyd Baumer in 1992. In this context, "cosmic" refers to the continuum of space and time.

Panigma Button

PB is the scientists' derogatory name for the OHM program that initiates an automatic shutdown of the LENS, most commonly triggered when the probability for a superwindow exceeds a certain critical value. The use of the term gradually became appropriate.

Panigma Gate

Julia Moffett's Hell's Gate was "invented" by Lloyd Baumer and Henry Kincaid. It is a break in phenomenal causality created by focusing the Panigma LENS at high aperture (measured in cicabytes) across a warptear. When the superwindow of the target equals the superwindow of the source, a space-time dislocation of inquanta (matter or energy) may occur spontaneously.

Panigma LENS

LENS is an acronym for Light Enhancement by Neural Synthesis. Lloyd Baumer first introduced LENS compumetrics or the rotation of the four-dimensional space-time "plane" in 1983. The rotational perspective may be isographic (constant tie-lines of optical parallax) or isopotential (constant tie-lines of eventuality) or isotropic (tie-lines of 45° or the components of the Martoff tensor are invariant with respect to the rotation the coordinate system). (See Tensor)

Panigo

Panigo is the intense vertigo or "out of the body" feeling produced during the dream observer's panoptographic insertion into paraspace. More appropriately due to the transfer of brain engrams it is an "out of the mind" experience. (See Panoptoscope)

Panigma Machine

The Machine is the collective term for the CIC, OPM, OnNet 210 computers and panoptoscope. It is thought to be a convenient "twist" on the enigma machine, the infamous German cipher machine of WW II. Lloyd Baumer was a famous code breaker for the Navy during the Korean War.

Panopticon

In this context the Panopticon is the geodesic dome of the IPPR. Also called Panigma Dome.

Panoptogram

The byte-content or byte-map of the panoptograph is a panoptogram. (See CEP)

Panoptography

This is the holographic process whereby multi-dimensional space is rendered "viewable." (See CEP)

Panoptoscope

This is the eighty-foot diameter lumoscope also known as Pandora. Pandora presents the observer with the illusion of being placed inside a giant kaleidoscope, of being an interactive component of the multi-dimensional panoscene. (See CEP)

Panoscene

This is the simulated view of multi-dimensional paraspaces available through panoptography.

Panutopia

This was taken from Senator Thomas Warren Emsley's passionate appeal to the Senate's Science Committee. It refers to a state of utopia fostered by the Panigma LENS, a world freed of half-lies, full-lies, high crimes and misdemeanors. The US Congress reluctantly and secretly approved the funds for a research institute to be built in New Mexico.

Paracube

This 'cube is a dyad of two quars, a posiquar and antiquar. It is equal to the quinth of a quin. As the "containable" centrum of the LENS, the paracube is the heart, if not the soul of the Machine.

Paradementia

PD is the permanent dementia that results from CIC exposure to a superwindow. The latter is ultra high possibility mind space produced by ultra high aperture paraspaces.

Parangle

Parangle is the trajectory through paraspaces (thinspace or thickspace) measured in parads (parameter-seconds) or microparads that defines the apparent velocity of light. The greater the parangle, the lower the velocity of light. Given that the intrinsic light pressure is inversely proportional to the parangle, the apparent velocity of light is equal to the light pressure of paraspaces divided by the parathickness of time. By definition, the parathickness of time is equal to the reciprocal of its parathinness.

Paraportation

This is the translation through paraspaces enabled by mind space and/or aperture. (See Vermis Kinesis)

Parascan

A parascan is a LENS expansion of paraspaces during a heightened state of lucid dreaming often assisted by the infamous lucidity drug, mercolidine sulfate.

Paraspaces (or Hyperspaces)

This is multi-dimensional space as viewed through the Panigma LENS. If space and time are finite, but unbounded, it is necessary that space-time bend around a centrum or focus as does any convex solid, for example, a sphere or a polyhedron. The interior of the convex solid resides in the extra dimensional space. (See theory of continuity)

A proof for multi-dimensional space cannot exist, (See Gödel's theorem) though it does help to explain the wave behavior of light and action at a distance.

PPI

PPI is the Power Proficiency Index or the ratio of output to input power, i.e. the mnemonic ratio of the aperture of the mind (mind space) to the aperture of the available paraspaces.

Posicube

It is a posiquin or five-dimensional hypercube that contains forward space-possibility-time. The size of the posicube is a measure of the total positive S-T-X. Negative S-T-X is determined by the size of its mirror-image anticube or antiquin. (S, T and X are respectively space, time and possibility/uncertainty.)

Poxgang

This is a gang of neo-Nazis lead by the Poxer, Ralph "the Rail" Seiper.

Purbrown

Purbrown is the unique brown-lilac color of Julia Moffett's eyes, the relative intensity of each extreme depending upon the intensity of the light and its angle. The closest thing to purbrown is the color of the Pacific Ocean during a brief period of summer sunset. Similar to Green Flash, it is often called Pacific Purple Flash.

Quar (or quarahedron)

A quar is a four-dimensional hypercube containing 8 normal cubes.

Quarvine

A quarvine is a rare, hard, semi-translucent, round, water-worn pebble of sedimentary type found in the alluvial deposits of Carinthia. A single specimen was found with a hardness of 7, specific gravity of 3.6, refractive index of 1.60-1.65, birefracton value of 0.008, surface luster of vitreous to pearly. Some chatoyancy is claimed.

The composition is a complex, hydrated, iron vanadium silicate. It is the odd characteristic of the quarvine that its crystalline structure exhibits an unexplained, motile morphology. Ancient accounts by Cartovanius of Noricum claimed the stone was one of the fabled Lamia stones of Greek mythology. Only three specimens are rumored to exist. (See Lamia stone)

Quex (or quexahedron)

A quex is a six-dimensional hypercube containing 12 quins.

Quin (or quinahedron or cuquin)

A quin is a five-dimensional hypercube containing 10 quars.

It is also a unit of measure for the size of any hole or discontinuity in space-possibility-time.

Ring of the Nibelungs

According to an old Germanic legend, this was a ring of power forged by the Nibelung, Alberich, from a sacred Rhine treasure, then cursed by him when extorted by the envious gods. Though rumored to offer the power to conquer the world, the Ring instead brought misery to all who possessed it. After much intrigue, the destruction of Valhalla and the gods, the Ring was eventually returned to the Rhine waters.

The *Ring of the Nibelungs* was the basis for the libretto of Richard Wagner's cycle of four operas by the same name.

SBI

SBI is the acronym for the Svyadoshch-Budzynski Interface used to connect the sleeper with the Cybernet Interface Computer or CIC. The SBI is an interpreter of brain waves and other parameters.

The Snag

The Snag was Larry Kato's moral dilemma and Ivan Kovrani's nightmare of the blighted forest, of a foul threesome, of what he was, of what she was and what he/she would soon be.

Sorel

The Soreleans were an aeonian race of timeshapers threatened by their own creation, the Xenonadir. Their societies, though highly advanced and creative were unusual for the lack of governments, police, judges, civil machinery of any kind. They were individuals ruled by the pure laws of logic, of mathematics and a telepathic, Kyr. (See Kyr and Xenonadir)

S-T-X or S-T

These letters indicate space (S), time (T) and uncertainty (X).

Superwindow

This "window" is mind absorption of space or time aperture dangerously larger than normally experienced. This varies with the individual from 0.3 to 0.6 cicabytes. It sometimes refers to the S-T-X aperture itself.

Tarelona Inis

The Inis is the home of T'lil n'Skara, the self-appointed Chronicler of the LENS. The Inis is conveniently (or inconveniently) located at the intersection of three major warptears known as Asopus, Ladon and Styx.

Tensor

A tensor is mathematical notation for measurements in space, often used to describe mechanical and electrical stress and strains, moments and products of inertia, electrical and magnetic fields. A simple, three dimensional, second order tensor is the result of multiplying one vector by another.

A tensor is an object or quantity in which a scalar or vector is a special example. In general, an m-dimensional tensor of order n has m to the nth power components that transform under translational or rotational changes of the coordinate system according to a set of linear algebraic laws. The zeroth order, three-dimensional tensor (or scalar) is specified by one real number. The first order, three-dimensional tensor (or vector) is specified by three real numbers. Riemann's metric tensor that quantifies the curvature of space-time (four-dimensional and second order) requires sixteen real numbers to describe it of which 10 values are unique.

The Martoff tensor used by L. M. Baumer is a four-dimensional, fourth order tensor of 256 numbers describing the amount of the observed uncertainty, the fifth-dimensional curvature at any given event in four-dimensional space-time.

Tesseract

The tesseract is a four-dimensional cube unraveled in three dimensions to reveal eight normal cubes arranged in a three dimensional cross. Charles Howard Hinton, a nineteenth century mathematician who also invented the baseball-pitching machine, coined the word.

Theory of Continuity

The theory describes the universe as unfettered mind where the amount of determinism depends upon the perspective and power of the observer.

It is a very unpopular theory of cosmology that asserts that **all** events are causally connected, that space-time is finite, but unbounded, that light velocity and possibility are unbounded. The term used to describe the latter is transfinite. This idea was first advanced by Lloyd Manley Baumer in 1994 and based upon analogies to the architecture of the mind.

Analogous to the measurement of a constant velocity for light is the measurement of the sum of the angles in a plane triangle. In hyperbolic geometry (a concave surface), the sum of the angles is less than 180 degrees; in elliptical geometry (a convex surface), the sum of the angles is greater than 180 degrees. For relative thintime, the velocity of light is greater than 186,000 miles per second; for relative thinspace, the velocity of light is less than 186,000 miles per second.

What is constant in one space is not necessarily constant in all. The fact that a constant in m dimensions is not always a constant in $m+1$ dimensions is illustrated in our 4 dimensions (x,y,z,t) in the following way: Suppose we measure the velocity of light c and plot it versus any two of our four dimensions -- $(x,y), (x,t), (y,z)$ and so forth. The velocity of light (c) is always found to represent a plane parallel to any possible dimensional plane made from (x,y,z,t) . However for a dimension outside of our experience, say α , the velocity of light may be plane parallel to (x,α) or (y,α) , for example, but it is also possible that this plane could be tilted. In other words, the velocity c would not be constant in the (x,y,z,t,α) space.

Baumer's model of the universe is remarkably similar to the shape of the Klein bottle for which space, time, and observed or measured uncertainty can be represented on the single side of the bottle. Any two of the three $d(s)$ are selected at a time. For this purpose space, time and uncertainty are each counted as a single dimension. The passage of the neck (infinitely narrow) of the bottle through its side is illustrative of space, time and uncertainty equal to zero (the Big Bang/Big Crunch).

Thinspace (Faust Space)

This is the tilt to the container of the cosmos that permits an enhanced perspective (window) of space, first described by L. M. Baumer in 1990.

It is a relative term for a path or parangle through paraspace such that the velocity of light through real space-time is perceived as less than 186,000 miles per second. This is accomplished by an **isographic** rotation of the space-time plane about the temporal axis (i.e. the rotation of space) to produce a relatively large real-space window due to parallax.

Analogous to all future possibilities being theoretically available in the "real" plane, a forward or backward tilt of 90° makes all of "real" space theoretically accessible to the tilter due to relative shrinkage.

Therefore for the "Tilter" (if c = accepted velocity of light, i.e., 186,000 miles/sec)

Real Time is = Tilted Time (or dreamtime)

Real Space is > or = Tilted Space (or dreamspace)

Velocity of Light in Real Plane is $< \text{ or } = c$ (When units are Tilted Space/Tilted Time)

Velocity of Light in Tilt Plane is $= c$ (When units are Tilted Space/Tilted Time) – same as the second postulate of relativity

Therefore for the Observer in Real Space (if $c =$ accepted velocity of light)

Tilted Time (or dreamtime) is $=$ Real Time

Tilted Space (or dreamspace) is $> \text{ or } =$ Real Space

Velocity of Light in Tilt Plane is $< \text{ or } = c$ (When units are Real Space/Real Time)

Velocity of Light in Real Plane is $= c$ (When units are Real Space/Real Time) – same as second postulate of relativity

Note: An isographic rotation produces a true parallax view such that the tilter's viewing angle is always perpendicular to the tilter's plane. For a non-isographic rotation (isopotential, for example, or a constant event) the viewing angle is always perpendicular to the real plan, hence a rotation about the temporal axis would produce a relative **thickspace** and an apparent velocity $> \text{ or } = c$ for the tilter. Space is "thick" in the sense of conducting light analogously to the conduction of sound in a fluid, the greater the density, the greater the speed of sound.

The interesting thing about all this is that even though the velocity of light is variable with respect to the tilt of the plane, it's velocity relative to the tilted space remains constant at 186,000 tilted miles per second, identical to value measured in the "real" plane.

Thintime (Temporal Shrinkage)

This is the tilt to the container of the cosmos that permits an enhanced perspective (window) of time, first described by L. M. Baumer in 1990.

It is a relative term for a path or parangle through paraspace such that the velocity of light through real space-time is perceived as greater than 186,000 miles per second. This is accomplished by the **isographic** rotation of the space-time plane about the spatial axis (i.e. the rotation of time) to produce a relatively large real-time window due to parallax.

Analogous to all future possibilities being theoretically available in the "real" plane, a backward tilt of 90° makes all of the "real" past theoretically observable for the tilter due to the relative shrinkage. Conversely a forward tilt of 90° reveals the "real" future.

Therefore for the "Tilter" (if $c =$ accepted velocity of light, i.e., 186,000 miles/sec)

Real Space is $=$ Tilted Space (or dreamspace)

Real Time (Fast Clock) is $> \text{ or } =$ Tilted Time (Slow Clock or dreamtime)

Velocity of Light in Real Plane is $> \text{ or } = c$ (When units are Tilted Space/Tilted Time)

Velocity of Light in Tilt Plane is $= c$ (When units are Tilted Space/Tilted Time) – same as second postulate of relativity

Therefore for the Observer in Real Space (if c = accepted velocity of light)

Tilted Space (or dreamspace) is $=$ Real Space

Tilted Time (or dreamtime) is $> \text{ or } =$ Real Time

Velocity of Light in Tilt Plane is $> \text{ or } = c$ (When units are Real Space/Real Time)

Velocity of Light in Real Plane is $= c$ (When units are Real Space/Real Time) – same as second postulate of relativity

Note: An isographic rotation produces a true parallax view such that the tilter's viewing angle is always perpendicular to the tilter's plane. For a non-isographic rotation (isopotential, for example, or a constant event) the viewing angle is always perpendicular to the real plan, hence a rotation about the spatial axis would produce a relative **thicktime** and an apparent velocity $< \text{ or } = c$ for the tilter.

The interesting thing about all this is that even though the velocity of light is variable with respect to the tilt of the plane, it's velocity relative to the tilted time remains constant at 186,000 miles per tilted second, identical to value measured in the "real" plane.

The Timeshaper of Carinthia

The Timeshaper is revealed in the dread, Lloyd Baumer nightmare shared with his father and some other unfortunates. The Timeshaper appears in different forms or guises to different people. This dream was at the centrum of Kartofan's *Oneyros*. Kartofan suggested that the Timeshaper often visited Plato in his Cave.

Transfinite

This represents a greater degree of infinity, going beyond infinity, the summation of all lesser infinities or subsets of infinity, i.e., the transfinite denumerability that is used to describe the velocity of light and unmeasured possibility (eventuality or uncertainty in space or time).

The concept was borrowed from the theory of denumerably infinite sets, which looks at subsets of infinity, lesser infinities analogous to the denumerably infinite subsets of cardinal numbers. For example, there is the intuition that there are fewer odd or even numbers than natural numbers, when in fact the number of natural, odd, even, squares, etc. are the same. This is equivalent to saying the transfinite whole is **not** equal to the sum of its denumerably infinite parts.

Though light velocity and possibility are not cardinal numbers, Henry Kincaid proved the applicability of the algebra and induction of transfinite numbers in 1985.

Translocation

TL is the complex displacement of time and space requiring the use of the sixth dimension. This kind of displacement would normally require tremendous energy or mnemonic power.

With respect to the LENS, it is a paradimensional dislocation involving an articulated dyad, a low-uncertainty dyadic quex, a posiquin coupled with its antiquin or light pump. (See Dyad)

UltraNet Inc.

This trillion dollar, global cybernation company was founded by Leopold Hardan and incorporated in 1979. UltraNet built military computers, large and small, for about 25 different governments, not all friendly.

Vercingetorix

He was the great Roschief of the Arverni, a leader of the Gallic revolt against the Romans in 52 B.C. Vercingetorix was defeated by Julius Caesar at the siege of Alesia in today's France. He was led in chains to Rome where he paid for his defeat with his life.

By 51 B.C, the long war with Gauls was over. All Gaul eventually accepted subjection to Rome that lasted more than three hundred years.

Vermis Kinesis

VK is that structure of the brain's anatomy capable of experiencing paraportation, i.e., psychic propulsion through paraspace. The VK is a wormlike structure, hence the name, a part of the cerebellum absent or diminutive in certain individuals. (See Paraportation)

Vicom™

This is a videophone of the visicom type that became popular in the military around 2001. Vicom™ can be installed on almost any computer. The one unfortunate glitch for the Vicom™X2001 is that it can be difficult to tell whether one's video side is on or off, often with embarrassing consequences for the user.

Warptear

Warptear is a rift or flaw in the fabric of space-time of infinite uncertainty in which adjacent events have no apparent causal connection. This flaw is a hole or gap, not a fold, crease or cusp. The size of the hole can be measured. The warptears revealed by the LENS can be as large as a gigaquin per cubic meter-second. These tears occur due to the expansion of space-time. The cracks or non-uniformities act like Trojan points ingesting great concentrations of quanta. Along major tears immense space-time "vacuums" may develop called black holes.

Inside a space-time "hole" it is impossible to know where something is or when something is. Therefore, uncertainty approaches infinity as an observer approaches the hole. What is really inside the hole? It is probably the stuff of creation itself, infinity or something perhaps as big.

Wave Function

This is the name given to Schroedinger's equation that describes the probability of an observation of a particle in space and time due to the fact that all matter has the dual character of both waves and particles.

Xenonadir

This nadir meant death or nihilation (never having been) for the Sorel.

It results from the ultimate (or macro) collapse of the Wave Function with the condensation of all possible realities into one, thereby setting probability, uncertainty or eventuality equal to zero. (See Wave Function)